The Elusive and Yet Irrepressible Modernist Self: Formulating a Theory of Self-Reflexivity in Kurt Schwitters' Hanover Merzbau Through the Vitalist Philosophies of Georg Simmel and Henri Bergson

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The scholarly work contained within, and the inspired efforts that engendered these pages, I hereby dedicate to my three maternal patronesses: The Most Holy and Blessed Virgin Mary, Carmen Mérida Descartes, and Alba Socorro Reynaga.

Non nisi te.

Thesis Abstract

Kurt Schwitters decisively established that Dada was indeed more a state of mind than a collection of creeds. Spurned by Berlin Dada, he was compelled to construct for himself an alternative Dada existence, and this he accomplished in the one-man movement he christened "Merz". Hundreds of Merz artworks were produced by the tireless Schwitters, but the *summa summarum* of his oeuvre was the Hanover Merzbau (circa 1923-1943). As it transcends architecture, sculpture, and assemblage, I have taken the distinctive approach of analyzing it first and foremost in terms of a theory of self-reflexivity.

The first and second chapters of this thesis are dedicated to the writings of Georg Simmel and Henri Bergson. The former contributes an understanding of the psyche of the modernist metropolitan and how it is that the subjective spirit that resides in this enlightened individual substantiates its existence by producing forms and objects with which it continuously comes into conflict. As witnessed in Schwitters' Merzbau, the self-conscious "I" constitutes a centripetal force that organizes and directs the objects it encounters and thus exerts a unifying influence over its environment. In the Bergson chapter, I pursue an in-depth investigation into how self-reflexivity is predicated upon the search for true *duration* and the manifestation of the *élan vital*. I also include an in-depth analysis of Bergson's treatise on laughter, for the theories contained within go a long way towards explicating Schwitters' brand of humour and how the comic artist is a self-reflexive figure *non-pareil*. The third chapter, devoted to Schwitters and his place in Dada, takes into account the vitalist philosophical underpinnings of the Merzbau and asserts that self-reflexive art operates under an *enantiodromic* law; the presence of the artist must be effaced as thoroughly as possible before the creative self achieves materialization in the artwork it has engendered.

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"Adjuvante Deo labor proficit."

The realisation of this doctoral thesis is evidence enough of this truism: every success is, perforce, a collective one. I have long since held, by virtue of fortunate experience, that the efforts of many have determined my achievements. It is in this spirit of gratitude that I hereby extend my sincerest expression of appreciation to those who have rallied on my behalf in the profoundest of familial, amicable, and professional capacities.

How can the self-denying love of my mother be characterised, other than to say it ascends from depths stirred by the Divine? The simplicity of her devotion threatens to cloud the difficulties she quietly bore, but to be sure it had to have been far from easy to rear such a precocious child. Her informed emphasis on scholarship, which she steadily employed to motivate me from my earliest years, resulted in stoking an ambition that demanded development. When it came time for me to seek admission to Yale, she launched such a remarkable effort on my behalf that I still marvel at what was her relative inexperience with such matters. Through the tribulations and glories of my undergraduate days, she was the most steadfast of sentries, maintaining her maternal vigilance while allowing me the critical space to develop socially and academically. Enviably patient and exceedingly supportive, my mother welcomed me home after my graduation in May 1998, never pressuring me to assume responsibilities, financial or otherwise, beyond my means and abilities. When I decisively left home in 1999 to pursue postgraduate study in Nottingham, she endured her anxieties with fortitude, and when I returned to America in 2003, she tended to me with supererogatory devotion. Without her support, these pages would never have materialised, and it is with the greatest enthusiasm that I look forward to meting out rewards harvested from the successes she so graciously helped me attain.

As if the unfaltering beneficence of my mother was not blessing enough, I was graced since birth with the patronage of a Descartes, *id est* my grandmother, Carmen Mérida Descartes. She relates to me on occasion the story of how we first met (no less at my beloved Yale!), and the tangible connection she describes having witnessed and sensed endures to this day. I confess that I never had reason to apperceive as a child the absence of a father, for she nobly and consistently filled the requisite roles and many others besides. In addition to serving selflessly as a grandmother *par excellence*, she performed the duties of caretaker, tutor, Catholic saint, personal stylist, Parcheesi and Chinese Checkers opponent, guardian angel, psychiatrist, gourmet chef, personal physician, advocate, best friend, fair critic, intercessor, and financial benefactor. Such a litany enforces my continued wonderment that a frame as diminutive as hers could harbour so much goodness and warmth. It was enough for her that I graduated the university of which she so presciently dreamt as a girl, and now I hope she can accept one final distinction – that of having earned a Ph.D.

The arduous last months of my thesis were not without episodes of comic relief. To this end, my grandfather, Aurelio Cardona, was gracious enough to punctuate my strain with his inimitable humour. How many times did he inquire as to the status of my "tay-sis", and in spite of my measured

assurances, he always seemed rather insecure over my progress. Such gentle pressure was useful, however, as I found myself labouring for the fulfilment of his expectations, promising him as I did that his insistence would someday soon be met with a finished project. When it finally was, I triumphantly offered the text to him and granted him "first access", and then it was my turn to insist that he read the work whose progression he had so long questioned. True to form, he smiled sheepishly and declined in favour of reading only the 300-word thesis abstract. We eventually agreed that I would content myself with his pride and he, in turn, would content himself with the fact that I had finished the "tay-sis" of his expectations.

In the interest of brevity, I cannot detail here all of the instances of support and encouragement I received from my family. Nevertheless, I remain eternally grateful to my aunt Nadja and uncle Warren, who kindly oversaw the majority of my undergraduate expenses. Their contributions are not to be underestimated, for their generosity ensured that I had all of the books I required (and for an English major, this number was substantial). My cousins Cindy, John, Michele, and Krystal were never short of complete confidence in my capabilities, as was Mike Nazario and his family. Titi Doris and Titi Alba, my great-aunts who reside in Puerto Rico, offered prayers and good wishes. Likewise, Obitelj Šavor, my extended family in Croatia, contributed more to my success than they will ever know, or more than I can ever disclose. Iva, Zlatko, Marta, Baka Sonja, Baka Olga, Deda Krešo, Marica, and Uli are the closest and most sincere family I have ever had the fortune of meeting, and I am pleased to offer these pages in homage to their enduring kindness.

I often quip that too frequently I rely on the kindness of Democrats. Whether or not this observation is empirically true (I would rather not investigate), there is one who has spent many long and surely frustrating hours on this thesis besides me. Tim Klassen, my favourite Canadian-American, took on the task of scanning and finishing the remarkable colour illustrations that adorn this work. I shall repay his contributions with almost any gesture but a vote for Kerry or some Libertarian.

There are those who would challenge the devotion I have towards my pets, but anyone who did so would, by necessity, be ignoring their unassailable place in my life. I recall with great fondness and nostalgia the little bichon who would see me off and welcome me with sincere and uncomplicated enthusiasm every time I returned from England. We had been friends since 1989, and unlike so many false acquaintances and relatives, she never wavered in her devotion. It was a tragedy of sorts when she died, just a few months shy of seeing me complete my studies, but I came to realize that her frailty had more of a claim on her than my love. On 22 May 2004, she fell asleep for the last time in my arms. Rest in peace, my dearest Gigi.

Her death was preceded by that of another beloved family pet, Nicki. Forever gentle, loyal, and sweet, this standard poodle was anything but in terms of his disposition. He has been very much missed, and he always will be. I also fondly remember Paco, my grandfather's dog, who joins the esteemed ranks of Gigi and Nicki in his gentleness.

In spite of these difficult losses, I continue to be blessed with three wonderful little parrots, Pikachu, Richard III ("Birdy"), and Inka. I acquired Birdy the year I left for Nottingham, and it was always a special pleasure upon

my visits home to hear him chatter and welcome me in near perfect diction. Inka provided great company during the last few months of my thesis, when I was confined to my inner sanctum and tethered to my desk. Most of all, my dear Pikachu was undoubtedly heaven sent, as she came to me (via my friends at Beeston's Pet Mart) during some of the darkest months of my time in Nottingham. My loneliness would have been unnegotiable had it not been for this charming and clever little creature who relied upon my company almost as much as I relied upon hers. With some luck and no doubt a great deal of divine assistance, she followed me back home during the summer of my discontent and kept watch over me as astutely as she had done for the long months prior. She remains an indispensable character in my life.

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capabilities to the finest of lustres. Of special significance is Professor Benjamin Harshav and his course "The Age of Modernism", in which I learned of Dada and its legacy. If any one class directed my interests to where they now lie, it was his. I sincerely hope that someday I shall have the opportunity to teach the subject as brilliantly and compellingly as he did.

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Pro Deo, Pro Patria, Pro Yaliensis.

Introduction

"Surely all art is the result of one's having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, to where no one can go any further. The further one goes, the more private, the more personal, the more singular the experience becomes, and the thing one is making is, finally, the necessary, irrepressible, and, as nearly as possible, definitive utterance of this singularity.... Therein lies the enormous aid the work of art brings to the life of the one who must make it, –: that it is his epitome; the knot in the rosary at which his life recites a prayer, the ever-returning proof to himself of his unity and genuineness, which presents itself only to him while appearing anonymous to the outside, nameless, existing merely as necessity, as reality, as being –."[1]

Something entirely distinctive and inimitable suffuses Sir Joshua Reynolds' "Self-Portrait", circa 1747. Squared away from his easel towards the viewer, the artist's gaze drifts slightly leftward, while a tremulous hand hovering over his brow casts an inverted chevron over his eyes. The blank canvas to his right and his painter's instruments held in balance suggest that he has captured himself in the moment just prior to the creation of the titular self-portrait. Unto itself the pose and the method of its depiction are not particularly remarkable, but when considered in the context of the genre to which it belongs, self-portraiture, the painting unfolds as an intriguingly early piece of avant-garde work.[2] I qualify it as avant-garde, or more specifically "Romantic avant-garde", based on the distinction Matei Calinescu employs when he seeks to demarcate Olinde Rodrigues' usage of the term in conjunction with contemporary art from the earlier, stylistically concerned usage Etienne Pasquier intended (97-101):

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[1] The quotation is Rilke's, extracted from a letter dated 24 June 1907. The punctuation is entirely his, and the passage appears in Briefe über Cézanne (Letters on Cézanne 4).

[2] And so Renato Poggioli's rigid historical parameters begin to face erosion: "it is by now an undoubted fact that the term and concept of avant-garde art reach no further back in time than the last quarter of the past century" (Teoria dell'Arte d'Avanguardia, The Theory of the Avant-Garde 13). He does, however, immediately concede that some traces are to be found in "the preromantic epoch of crisis, ferment, and transition which preceded romanticism, when the modern critical classical tradition dissolved" (14). Against this background of shifting definitional boundaries stands Reynolds' self-portrait, at once preciously neo-Classical and brazenly modern.

> if we compare what Rodrigues has to say about the avant-garde mission of the artist with the rather narrow significance of Pasquier's stylistic figure, it becomes clear that a very important shift has occurred in the function of the avant-garde metaphor as well as in that of related military analogies. The major change consists in the implication that the avant-garde is – or should be – *conscious* of being in advance of its own time. (104)

Extending generally from the Romantic to the current postmodernist era, self-consciousness in art has come to be a defining characteristic of the aesthetic avant-garde; it is the watershed of self-criticism and especially the origin for that self-undermining laughter that challenges the primacy of the artist and the legitimacy of his craft.[3] As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane lament in their introduction "The Name and Nature of Modernism" (Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930), Romanticism, in spite of its own shortcomings as a hard and fast category, is still identifiable as a fairly distinct movement and "serves as a broad stylistic description of a whole era" (23). Not so with modernism, however, and perhaps its most notorious sub-category, the avant-garde, suffers even more from definitional problems by virtue of its inclusion in a category the bounds of which are consistently challenged. Romantic introspection, which soon problematized itself into conflict-ridden self-consciousness and ultimately moved into the nebulous realm of self-reflexivity, is responsible for the uncertainty we so profoundly sense today whenever we attempt to uncover what makes contemporary art modern or avant-garde. Once artists and writers began to unhinge themselves from the requisite artifice of representational art, they engendered a legacy of self-doubt that came to impinge upon the viewer as well as upon the artist.[4]

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[3] Calinescu: "self-consciousness – or the illusion of self-consciousness – is absolutely crucial to the definition of the more recent avant-garde" (100).

[4] Patricia Waugh cites William H. Gass' quotation pertaining to the "Manichean war" underway in art, a conflict he identifies as being between communications "as a means" and the "impulse to make an artefact out of the materials and so to treat the medium as an end"

For this reason, we find in Reynolds' self-portrait a parable for self-conscious art and a springboard for a discussion of its more extreme manifestation, self-reflexive art.[5] To begin with, Reynolds adopts the familiar gesture of the lookout, but as the immediate target of his stare is left undetermined (we may infer it is a mirror illumined by a candle), the pose is abstracted and thus leaves the viewer with the more general impression of a man in search of something. The profundity of the composition is revealed when we realize that the "something" for which he is searching is himself, or perhaps more appropriately the image of himself he wishes to harness and portray. Once we have attained this realization, the various internal dialogues of the work become audible. We find, for instance, that the artist *qua* subject, as he purports to address his own essence in the unseen mirror, articulates with the artist, the viewer, and of course with himself. He articulates with his creator (read: the artist) in that he seems to be searching for him as he prepares (in the context of the fiction of the painting) to paint himself. The viewer, similarly, is drawn into an exchange when the gaze of the subject falls upon an audience obviously external to the composition. The absence of the mirror in this regard is especially crucial, for the viewer comes to supplant it as the agent of reflection. How the subject articulates with his own being is merely implied by the anticipated presence of the mirror. There are then three

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(Metafiction 14-15). Waugh holds that this tension is distinguished in "contemporary writing" because it is "the *dominant* function" rather than just one of many functions (15). Later on she proposes that "modernism only occasionally displays features typical of post-modernism" (21), and her observation is typical of those who believe postmodernist art and literature to be the fruition of the self-conscious germ contained in modernism.

[5] There are parallels to be drawn between the relationship of self-conscious art to self-reflexive art and modernism as it relates to the avant-garde. Calinescu finds that the avant-garde is in every way more extreme than modernism, not only in its insistence on self-assertion but also in its doctrine of self-destruction (96). Similarly, self-reflexive art could not have developed outside of self-conscious art, but at the same time it has carried itself so far from its Romantic origins that on occasion it appears as a phenomenon without precedent.

basic dialogues at work when we take as our point of departure the artist as he manifests himself in the autobiographical subject. When we consider the artist *qua* artist, we discover three lines of dialogue which, for the most part, follow the three we have just traced. The portrait, by virtue of its status as an artwork, constitutes the forum in which the artist may engage his audience. In addition, as he labours through the execution of his piece, the artist enters into a communion with the work at hand and with his craft in general, reaffirming as he does his status as an artist. Most importantly, by moving outside of himself and undergoing an aesthetically governed externalisation, the artist achieves a more informed knowledge of his own being.[6] The path he traces is circuitous and perhaps even confusing, hence the quizzical, uncertain look that plays across the face of Reynolds' subject. Even the inverted chevron casting the mask-like shadow over Reynolds' eyes attests to the necessity for the artist to shrink behind coverage and assume a disguise as he treads the route back to himself.[7]

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[6] As more modern instances of the dialogues presented in Reynolds' composition, Egon Schiele's self-portraits merit attention as Expressionist paintings that exemplify the fragmentation and reunification of the artist through the medium of his work. Reinhard Steiner, in his introduction "The Artist's Self", cites Ernst Mach and Hugo von Hofmannsthal as proof that the modernist ego was undergoing dissolution and reformation, and he relates their writings to Schiele's work:

> Schiele countered the sensory fragmentation of the self by means of a multiple self which came little by little to form a visual concept which reconstituted his unity with the world in a visionary way. Photographs taken in 1914 and 1915 show that the man of conflict constantly threatened with fracture had changed decisively. True, Schiele was still interested in the doppelganger or alter ego; but photography prevented total depersonalisation. His new self-confidence, which was reinforced by private circumstances, meant that in the work of Egon Schiele's last years of life there were but few self-portraits, and in those the unity of self and self was almost seamlessly restored. (Egon Schiele 1890-1918: The Midnight Soul of the Artist 18)

[7] David Grossvogel states in his article entitled "The Depths of Laughter: The Subsoil of a Culture", "modern man is distinguished by self-consciousness: he is both conscious and afraid – afraid that he will be, or appear to be, less than conscious" (63). This incisive characterization is exceedingly applicable to the self-portrait under scrutiny and to Romantic art in general, as well as to its inheritors. I propose that this uncertainty or fear is responsible

Like Ortega y Gasset's technician in his essay "The Self and the Other", which appears in Las Deshumanización del Arte (The Dehumanization of Art), the conspicuously self-conscious artist struggles with the world external to him and enlists in that struggle the essence of his being that marks his individuality and renders him distinct from anything he encounters beyond his own bounds:[8]

> man as a technician is able to modify his environment to his own convenience, because, seizing every moment of rest which things allow him, he uses it to enter into himself and form ideas about this world, about these things and his relation to them, to form a plan of attack against his circumstances, in short, to create an inner world for himself. From this inner world he emerges and returns to the outer, but he returns as protagonist, he returns with a *self* which he did not possess before – he returns with his plan of campaign: not to let himself be dominated by things, but to govern them himself, to impose his will and his design upon them, to realize his ideas in that outer world, to shape the planet after the preferences of his innermost being. Far from losing his own self in this return to the world, he on the contrary carries his self to the *other*, projects it energetically and masterfully upon things, in other words, he forces the *other* – the world – little by little to become himself. (169)

When the self-conscious gaze or act of introspection becomes part of "the campaign", that is, when it is actively employed, it matures into the phenomenon of self-reflexivity. The terminology is critical here, as "self-reflexivity" or "self-reflexiveness" (as Roger Shattuck prefers to call it in The Banquet Years) immediately connotes an active exchange in the form of an interaction or set of interactions, and so contrasts with its more passive

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for the recurrence of shadows, masks, clowns (understood here as professional disguise artists), mirrors, and reflecting pools in self-conscious literature and art.

[8] At the same time his very act of taking up his individuality against external struggles reinforces that individuality, for he becomes acutely aware of his essence only when he can judge it against things that are not part of that essence. In a similar way Schopenhauer writes of becoming "conscious of the frailty, vanity and dream-like quality of all things", and he concludes that by matter of repeated contrasts with the external world our own eternity is emphasized. There is more than a little irony involved then when we acknowledge the necessity of leaving ourselves in order to find ourselves: "because it is only in contrast to this that the aforesaid quality of things becomes evident, just as you perceive the speed at which a ship is going only when looking at the motionless shore, not when looking into the ship itself" ("Zur Lehre von der Unzerstörbarkeit unseres wahren Wesens durch den Tod", "On the Indestructibility of Our Essential Being by Death", from Essays and Aphorisms 68-69).

predecessor, self-consciousness. In self-reflexive art we find a concentrated effort on the part of the artist to fragment himself and dissolve into the medium of his work.[9] Thus, self-reflexive art often reveals itself to the viewer (initially, at least) as radically depersonalised, or at the very least devoid of any obvious and tangible authorial presence.[10] Furthermore, it is often *reluctant* art, for the artist must suppress or even oppress his individuality if he is to attain an understanding of himself via this indirect (but spiritually more significant) route.[11] This reluctance is a symptom of the more problematic ailment Poggioli calls "agonism", which he defines as "tension", "sacrifice and consecration: an hyperbolic passion, a bow bent toward the impossible, a paradoxical and positive form of spiritual defeatism" (66).[12] The tension inherent in the agonistic posture is one of the most notable hallmarks of the

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[9] Hugo Ball also found evidence of the fragmentation epidemic affecting contemporary art. In his entry for 5 March 1916 in Die Flucht aus der Zeit (Flight Out of Time, 1927) he writes, "The image of the human form is gradually disappearing from the painting of these times and all objects appear only in fragments. This is one more proof of how ugly and worn the human countenance has become, and of how all the objects of our environment have become repulsive to us" (55). And in his lecture on Kandinsky delivered in April 1917, he states unequivocally, "The artists of these times have turned inward. Their life is a struggle against madness" (225). It is ironic and yet poignant then that so many of them courted madness and frequently succumbed to either actual dementia or the equally pernicious *affected* dementia they had cultivated for themselves. Atlas Press' book, Four Dada Suicides, compiles work by Arthur Cravan, Julian Torma, Jacques Rigaut, and Jacques Vaché under this principle.

[10] We shall see in the chapter devoted to Schwitters how collages and the readymades, in spite of their cultivated anonymity (or rather because of it), are some of the most self-reflexive pieces of artwork ever produced. On the other hand, self-reflexivity, particularly as it functions in much postmodernist literature, hyper-emphasizes the author's presence while dissolving the fabric of the text. Kurt Vonnegut's Breakfast of Champions provides a particularly inspired example of this process.

[11] That searching, doleful face worn by Reynolds' in his self-portrait would later, in works of the twentieth century avant-garde, give way to self-deprecating or even mutilated faces, such as the disturbingly whimsical, soap-encrusted visage Duchamp sports in his "Monte Carlo Bond" (1924).

[12] Following this characterization, Poggioli refers the reader to Mallarmé's legendary "Coup de dés", "thrown...almost as an ultimate gesture of defiance at the instant of supreme tension" (66). So it is that chance and its ironic cultivation (it used to be the enemy of all artists and artisans) come to be incorporated into avant-garde art. (Note that Duchamp had a particular affinity for Mallarmé.) In Theorie der Avantgarde (Theory of the Avant-Garde), Peter Bürger distinguishes between true (accidental) chance and "manufactured" chance. In the case of the latter, "there lies a renunciation of the subjective imagination in favour of a submission to the chance of construction" (67). The exploitation of chance by Dada is so well documented that

twentieth century avant-garde in general and of Dada in particular, whose members often fashioned themselves into some of the most insistent defeatists of the era.[13]

As suggested above, Poggioli's theory of agonism relates to self-reflexive art in that the artist reluctantly struggles against his craft but feels nevertheless condemned to produce. There is, however, a more profound way in which the agonistic gesture engenders (or is enforced by) self-reflexive art. Poggioli:

> the agonistic attitude is not a passive state of mind, exclusively dominated by a sense of imminent catastrophe; on the contrary, it strives to transform the catastrophe into a miracle. By acting, and through its very failure, it tends toward a result justifying and transcending itself. (65-66)

That "passive state of mind", the mind of the catastrophist, is given over to self-contemplation and finds fulfilment in the self-regarding gaze; it shares its passivity with self-conscious art. Agonism, although predicated upon that catastrophist mind-set, stands in relation to it as self-reflexivity does to self-consciousness. The distinction is more than a matter of action (action on the part of self-reflexivity and relative inaction on the part of self-consciousness), for according to Poggioli in the above quotation, the kind of action under scrutiny is not the kind undertaken to avoid an impending catastrophe. In fact, the action that characterizes agonism and self-reflexivity is an action engaged in spite of itself. Poggioli clearly states that the agonistic gesture not only

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it does not bear mentioning here, but further information may be obtained, in a concise form, in Hans Richter's Dada: Art and Anti-Art.

[13] Poggioli observes that the artist, "alternating between the extremes of self-criticism and self-pity", may exalt (or degrade) himself to the status of a victim. Such an observation is at times so self-evident it seems a commonplace unworthy of analysis, particularly in discussions concerning postmodernist art. Too often "the artist comes to be conceived of as an *agnus dei*, an expiatory scapegoat, almost as if he were the innocent creature upon which society transfers its own sense of sin and guilt, and whose sacrificial blood redeems the sins of the

accepts the imminent catastrophe but also seeks to affirm its action through the failure of that action. Hence the tension that marks the agonist, and hence the tension that characterizes self-reflexive art. This tension ultimately derives from a struggle of the self against the self, and in a lesser way it plays itself out in the struggle of the artist with his work and its reception by the public. The most tragic and yet necessary of all struggles is precisely that fought within, but what is it about this embraced and sought after failure, this most wearing of tensions, that produces the self-affirmation and even more importantly the transcendence of which Poggioli writes? The transcendence attained by the agonistic path is of the same species as the kind, already explored, that explains why the self travels outside of itself at all. Only when facing itself through a haze of externality is the self able to ascertain its essence, and only through denial does transcendence come.[14]

And here we arrive at the crux of self-reflexive art. Self-reflexivity involves, or rather is predicated upon, a restless exchange not just between the self and the external world, but also between the real self and the ideal counterpart to which it aspires.[15] It is a dialogue between the self as it is and

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whole tribe" (111). The strains of aesthetic Romanticism in these lines are too obvious to be ignored (65).

[14] In his book Von romantischer Ironie zu postmodernistischer Metafiktion, (From Romantic Irony to Postmodernist Metafiction), Christian Quendler addresses the same issue and concludes, "the breaking of aesthetic illusion as a self-reflexive introspection on the poetic limitations" is not a "destruction" but rather "an opening up of a space" (53). The constructive possibility is established because the self-reflexive gesture brings about an investigation of "the relation between the real and the ideal" (53). The ideal, or the absolute, knows no limitations, aesthetic or otherwise, and so by exploiting the limitations of say, painting, the self-reflexive artwork suggests a path towards the absolute. Drawing upon Friedrich Schlegel's theories concerning romantic irony, Quendler localizes the "transcendental" in this vacillation between the real and the ideal, and credits self-reflexivity with being the vehicle by which the real moves towards the ideal (52-53).

[15] There is much to be said for the religious aspects of self-reflexive art, and a study addressing these would be able to draw heavily upon the diaristic accounts of Ball. In his entry for 13 October 1915, he approaches a question very similar to the one posed above: why is the self condemned by its own stubborn insistence to depart its sphere only to return? He questions, "For why is it that I seek life for its own sake? Is there so much death in me or in

the self it becomes once it gains consciousness of its existence. Furthermore, in pondering the term "self-reflexivity" we find two additional kinds of exchange that contribute to self-knowledge. The objection has been raised that the term is irreparably redundant, for "reflexivity" by definition only ever could have recourse to its ultimate predicate, the "self". Upon closer consideration, however, we find that through its very redundancy another possible route opens. Self-reflexivity comes to refer not only to a gesture or mode in which the self discourses upon its own being, but also to a way for reflexivity to address reflexivity in (what else but) reflexive terms. The complexity and abstractness of these interactions may elude focused concentration, but analysis in the context of modern art facilitates comprehension. Shattuck evidently thought so as well, for in his chapter entitled "The Art of Stillness" he writes,

> The form of a work of art can imply this inward direction and stand for the fact that the work itself becomes the means, the locus of the search. Twentieth-century art has tended to *search itself* rather than exterior reality for beauty of meaning or truth, a condition that entails a new relationship between the work of art, the world, the spectator, and the artist. (326)

Art is not the only forum in which to study the complexities of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity (philosophy usually fulfils that role). However, we may imagine that we are following the natural tendency of the self-conscious spirit when we move outside of philosophy and seek the

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my environment? Where does my motive force come from? From darkness or from light?" (Flight Out of Time 33). Ball, who came to shun his Dada years as wayward folly and who embraced with great sincerity the Catholicism of his youth, concludes that the impetus to move comes from the desire to beat a path towards God. "I seek your image, Lord. Give me the strength to recognize it" (33). Is the reason he provides much different than Quendler's?

essence of self-reflexivity in its object (art) rather than its subject (the metaphysical self).[16]

Arthur Danto, in a passage from his critical study The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, offers some enlightening commentary on the issue of self-reflexivity as it informs the long-standing relationship between art and philosophy:

> the philosophical question of its status has almost become the very essence of art itself, so that the philosophy of art, instead of standing outside the subject and addressing it from an alien and external perspective, became instead the articulation of the internal energies of the subject. It would today require a special kind of effort at times to distinguish art from its own philosophy. It has seemed almost the case that the entirety of the artwork has been condensed to that portion of the artwork which has always been of philosophical interest, so that little if anything is left over for the pleasure of artlovers. Art virtually exemplifies Hegel's teaching about history, according to which spirit is destined to become conscious of itself. Art has reenacted this speculative course of history in the respect that it has turned into self-consciousness, the consciousness of art *being* art in a reflexive way that bears comparison with philosophy, which itself is consciousness of philosophy; and the question now remains as to what in fact distinguishes art from its own philosophy. (56)[17]

A nexus of philosophical factors has often resided at the core of art, but as Danto observes above, that core has swollen so much in recent times that in much modern art it has become the fruit, often rendering the "artistic" portion

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[16] I liken the distinction between philosophical and aesthetic contemplation of self-reflexivity thusly. Philosophy, particularly metaphysical philosophy, harbours within its bounds self-reflexivity in its natural habitat, but the murkiness of these profound depths requires great external illumination. In contrast, art is like a diorama illuminated from within, and although what we witness may be self-reflexivity removed from its usual domain and yoked into serving a purpose beyond itself, we do gain significant insight into its functioning and effects.

[17] Bürger also looks to Hegel's writings, where he finds "the dissolution of interpenetration of form and content which was the characteristic of classical (Greek) art" to be predicated upon "the discovery of autonomous subjectivity" (92). Hegel attributes this discovery to Romanticism, which Bürger indicates was considered at that time to extend from the Middle Ages to the period contemporary with the philosopher. In addition, Hegel connects this Romantic development to "the contingency of external existence", and so "for that reason, romantic art is both an art of subjective inwardness and one that portrays the world of phenomena in their contingency" (Bürger 92). Most importantly to Bürger, Hegel perceives that a Classical focus is inadequate for interpreting the new art, and so by extrapolating a theory from "Dutch genre painting", he predicts a "shift of the form-content dialectic in favor of form" (93). The inference at which the philosopher arrived has been proven entirely prophetic.

little more than an ornamental skin.[18] One could take as a point of departure any number of avant-garde movements in which these theories may be revealed, as everything Danto writes above regarding self-reflexive art is exemplified by major works of several twentieth century movements. Many investigations have focused primarily on the ways in which postmodernist art has taken advantage of and ultimately come to determine the methodology behind aesthetic self-reflexivity, but recent scholarly study has recognized the injustice of such a narrow focus. Modernism – not just "high modernism" but also those extreme avant-garde movements which are much more easily dismissed than intellectually engaged – built upon the self-consciousness it inherited from the Romantics and polished it into the vibrant self-reflexivity that would soon enough become arrogated by postmodernism.[19] This thesis seeks to uncover in the most strident of those modernist avant-garde movements, Dada (and by association, Merz), the methodology and impact generated by self-reflexivity. This theme receives surprisingly scant attention in critical studies of Dada, perhaps because the issues of nihilism or the manipulation and incorporation of chance too often take precedence. There is room for speculation as to why Dada was so predisposed to the production of

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[18] Tellingly, Ball in 1917 was noting the conversion art was undergoing as it sacrificed its usual appeal to the blossoming of its own philosophy: "art is being changed into philosophy and religion in its principles and on its very own territory. The conversions from artistic circles will increase. Art itself appears to want to convert" (20.II.1917, Flight Out of Time 99).

[19] The Dada scholar Richard Sheppard, whose relatively recent contribution to Dada scholarship is entitled Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism, emphasises this point in his concluding chapter, "Dada and the Last Post of Modernism". He lists self-reflexivity, among other developments, as being one of those themes too long ascribed exclusively to postmodernism (356).

self-reflexive artwork, but for our purposes we shall not dwell upon reasons but explore instead the manifestation of the phenomenon.[20]

A brief comparison of two entries from Ball's diary enlightens us as to the applicability of a theory of self-reflexivity to Dada:

> Art is beginning to concern itself with ascetic and priestly ideals. [...] There is a wooing of art where it glows with most life, a taste for the definitive expression of things and of life. And this interest is dictated by the time, not by inclination. It is an interest in the threatened self. (4.XII.1916, Flight Out of Time 94)
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> Self-assertion suggests the art of self-metamorphosis. The isolated man tries to hold his own in the most unfavorable circumstances; he has to make himself unassailable. Magic is the last refuge of individual self-assertion, and maybe of individualism in general. (9.I.1917, 96)[21]

Throughout his inestimably valuable diary, Ball writes of the social and spiritual decay in which he finds himself immersed.[22] The falling away of bourgeois ideals and conventions, the acceleration of mechanical production, the explosion of metropolitan centres, and most significantly the terror and shock of the Great War all conspired to threaten the sovereignty of the individual and undermine his faith in the certainty of his existence. At the same time, scientific progress made in subatomic physics was challenging the individual's concept of the solidity of his being and of all reality. These factors coalesced in the crucible that was 1914 Europe, and as Ball implies

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[20] There is a very handy list provided by Sheppard that details the major points of social contention experienced by the modernists (17-18). These eight diagnoses, ranging from the inheritance of a decaying bourgeoisie to the negotiation of perceived "anarchic powers", may be applied quite easily to a study of Dada in an effort to uncover the pressures that engendered its proclivity towards self-reflexive art.

[21] We may infer that "art" in these lines signifies Zurich Dada, as the opening of the Cabaret Voltaire, under Ball's direction, occurred just a few months prior in February 1916.

[22] When Ball returned to the strict Roman Catholicism of his youth, he revised his written work, no doubt editing material he considered threatening to his newfound attempts to reconcile himself with the Church (Introduction to Flight Out of Time, Elderfield xli). Thus, it is nearly impossible to maintain that all of the observations penned when he was a Dadaist survived the religiously inspired redaction. Surely, in the days of the Cabaret Voltaire, Ball was at least somewhat complicit in the fostering of the decadence he would later come to decry.

above, a shift occurred from self-awareness to a studied self-interest in what constituted "the threatened self". This observation dovetails with the second quotation, in which the self-conscious individual (read: the Dadaist) begins to toy with his own boundaries, resorting to magical and mystical endeavours in order to preserve his individuality.[23] Herein we find the reasoning behind the Dadaist predilection for primitive cultures, fabulous or historical, and further evidence that a journey outside of the self and its familiar environs must be undertaken in order to grasp the essence of that self.[24] Ball retreated into the "inner alchemy of the word", but Kurt Schwitters sought to retrieve his elusive ego in the one-man movement he was forced to create because he was denied affiliation with Berlin Dada. John Elderfield, who has composed the most exhaustive study of Schwitters since Werner Schmalenbach, notes that "a 'hankering after the primitive' had been noticed by Huelsenbeck even in Schwitters' earliest work, a desire to get away from 'the complicated, overcharged, perspectively seen present" (198).

In Merz, and to the greatest degree in the Hanover Merzbau, we encounter all of the conditions of self-reflexive art thus far proposed. Schwitters occupied a problematic space in the Dada realm, as he was clearly avant-garde in method but not officially recognized as such, at least not by

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[23] Ball's "magic bishop" episode was precisely this sort of magical engagement, but as he details in the diary entry for 23 June 1916, such courtship of magic comes with a price, namely, that one may lose all touch with the individuality one is trying to preserve (Flight Out of Time 70-71).

[24] Ball:

> Seek the image of images, the archetypal image. Is it pure symmetry? God as the eternal surveyor? The Egyptians took their measurements from the stars; the earthly topography is a copy of the divine. But does our art, abstract art for example, act in the same way? Are our images not gratuitous, and do they live on more than the memory of other images? And in language: where do we get the authoritarian, style-forming sequences and ideas from? What constitutes our mind and spirit? Where do we get belief and form from? Do we not steal the elements from all magical

Richard Huelsenbeck, the self-proclaimed leader of the Berlin Dadaists (more on the dispute to follow in the chapter on Schwitters). Everything Ball observes above then applies twice over to Schwitters. Whereas many of the other Dadaists left the provinces and flocked to major metropolitan centres, Schwitters remained based in bourgeois Hanover, his relationship to which was too muted to be classified as "love-hate" (although he was critical of the city at times and its myopic character).[25] Virtually isolated from his more stringently political Dada contemporaries, Schwitters experienced the threats on his being and his work at the hands of those who were meant to be in sympathy with his trials. Whereas the Zurich Dadaists, diverse in vision as they were, could at least find suitable company in one another, if only for a short while, Schwitters was isolated without recourse to integration into the one group whose parameters were elastic enough to absorb his esoteric personality and methodology. Marginalized as he was, he began to construct for himself a universe that would contain all of his preoccupations, aesthetic ambitions, and artwork. And as if he were consciously heeding Ball's program voiced in the quotation above, he ensured that his Merz universe was mystical enough to offer refuge for his threatened self. The cynosure of Merz, in theory and in practice, was the Hanover Merzbau, the first of Schwitters' major architectural projects, and its conception (and execution) marked it as the modernist descendant of the Romantic *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

In order to construct a sound contextual basis for my theory of how the Hanover Merzbau may be interpreted as a triumph of self-reflexive art, I have

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religions? Are we not magical eclectics? (7.V.1917, Flight Out of Time 111)

incorporated the contemporaneous writings of Georg Simmel (1858-1918) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941), both of whom form the basis for the vitalist philosophy to which Schwitters subscribed.[26] We shall rely on Simmel's theories concerning the psychic life of the metropolitan individual as we seek to contextualize the Dadaist (or Merzist) in the urban milieu in which he developed and laboured. The writings on culture, which define the phenomenon as the result of the struggle between the subjective spirit and the objective forms it is condemned to produce, will serve to explain the mechanism behind artistic production and how the self-conscious "I" exerts a centripetal force over its objects.[27] This mechanism behind self-reflexivity is analysed in this thesis in terms of Heraclitus' concept of the *enantiodromia*, a concept that I shall repeatedly employ as the principle model of the functioning of self-reflexive artwork. In my chapter devoted to some of Bergson's major contributions, I shall demonstrate how the self-reflexive gesture is informed by Bergsonian *intuition* and how the search for true *duration* is the same path the artist pursue as he meanders through his self-reflexive work on his journey back to himself. Finally, I shall prove how the materialization of the *élan vital* occurs most successfully, at least in the domain of aesthetics, in artwork that is consciously developed according to the

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[25] Richter dedicates two chapters of Dada: Art and Anti-Art to Hanover and Cologne, cities that "possessed independent Dadaisms of their own, which were less noisy, perhaps, but no less important than Berlin Dada" (137).

[26] The connection between Schwitters and these two philosophers is more a matter of affinity than concrete influence, for I know not of any writings by Schwitters that address either Simmel or Bergson directly. His work, as we shall see, is clearly vitalist, however, and furthermore, his organicist tendencies, which became ever more pronounced in his final years, owe much to the intellectual climate Simmel and Bergson helped established. It is likely, though, that Schwitters had read at least some of Bergson's work, for his De Stijl connections would have pointed him in that direction: "At the time, Van Doesburg was also espousing Bergson's formulation of the intuitive nature of space and time, an esoteric philosophy that may have also piqued Schwitters' interest" (Gamard 148).

tenets of self-reflexivity. In conclusion, I shall prove that the artist must, counter-intuitively, suppress his authorial presence and dissolve himself in the fabric of his work before he can attain the critical self-consciousness his existence demands.

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[27] This centripetal force will be explored in conjunction with Coleridge's notion of the esemplastic power as described in his Biographia Literaria.

Chapter I

Simmel's Vitalist Philosophy and the Conflict-Ridden Cultivation of the Self-Conscious Ego

"Life is at once flux without pause and yet something enclosed in bearers and contents, formed about midpoints, individualized, and therefore always a bounded form which continually jumps its bounds. That is its essence."[1]

Introduction

In her article "Out With the Old, In With the New", Sue Hubbard examines the various efforts put forth by seminal modernist and postmodernist artists in their negotiation of the late twentieth century cultural crisis. The crisis to which she refers is of course multi-faceted, but the essence of it is the reluctance and ultimately the inability to espouse, "any consensual system of belief that allows for allegiance to anything beyond the self" (53). The resulting doctrine, manifested as the uncompromising individualism that lies at the core of Dada, led, in Hubbard's opinion, to the pervasive cultural emptiness that marked the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one. She envisions the great modernist triumph of the individual as having significantly contributed to the commodification of art in the postmodernist age. Initially, the modernists' doctrine of the self was the logical corollary to the enforced purification of art; to free art from the jesses of tradition was, in equal measure, to free the artist from the confines of the academy. In doing so, however, the artist was now in the precarious position of having to cultivate increasingly distinguishable personae, and to this end the cult of the new flourished. It brought with it the enslaving desire to be

[1] The quotation is from Simmel's "The Transcendent Character of Life" (1918), which originally appeared in Chapter 1 of Lebensanchauung: Vier Metaphysische Kapitel (A View of Life: Four Metaphysical Chapters, 1918). The essay is translated and reproduced in Levine's Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms (1971).

fashionable (53), and from that point art quickly degenerated into the basest of forums, where self-promotion became the *modus operandi*. The haunting spectre of the academy had been defeated, but in its place rose the even more pernicious collectivity of the herd, which vociferously demanded that in order to be acceptable, an artist had to prove himself exceptional. His merit was to be judged by the variability and frequency of his attacks on his audience. It is to this reversal that Hubbard speaks when she remarks, "For art to be more than another investment, another diversion, in the next century, it needs to reconnect itself to its transformative potential" (56).[2] The term she employs to describe the progression from the modernist triumph of the individual and the "new conservatism of weary cynicism...in danger of taking its place" (56) derives from Heraclitus; it is the concept of the *enantiodromia*, which is defined in the article as "the law of history...which claims that once one state reaches its zenith it then collapses into its opposite" (56).[3]

Although Sheppard does not use the term in Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism, he refers often to Heraclitus and his influence on the Dadaists:

> In his uncompleted doctoral thesis on Nietzsche of 1909 and 1910, Ball had approvingly cited Nietzsche's own endorsement of Heraclitus's "*Lehre vom Gesetz im Werden, und vom Spiel in der Nothwendigkeit*" (*doctrine of law in the process of becoming and of play in necessity*), and it was undoubtedly Heraclitus's paradoxical understanding of the flux of Nature that made Diels's edition so important to Arp. Tzara, too, almost certainly got to know Heraclitus's writings through Arp, and although he was less mystically inclined than either Ball or Arp, he would, in 1948, link Zurich Dada with that philosopher's "dialectic". (275)

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[2] As the article was published in 1999, the century to which the author refers is, of course, the present one.

[3] The word would roughly be translated as "the opposite road" or "contrasting way".

Heraclitus's dialectic concerning the flux of the cosmos drew the attention of the Dadaists because they too understood their world as one marked by constant flux. It is this appreciation and embrace of the philosopher's theory of flux that inspired Ball to write, "Dandyism is a school of paradox (and of paradoxology). Heraclitus deliberately tells miraculous stories. He is therefore...a paradoxologist" (17.IV.1916, Flight Out of Time 61-62). Ball's appraisal of Heraclitus need not be addressed at length for our purposes; what matters here is the appreciation this Father of Dada held for the philosopher whose name came to be synonymous with the doctrine of flux. Of course, once the figure of the dandy enters into the equation, his most notable biographer, Baudelaire, does as well.[4] In the ninth section of "Peintre de la vie moderne" ("The Painter of Modern Life", 1863), which appears in the collection of the same title, Baudelaire describes the dandy as one who is "rich and idle, and who, even if blasé, has no other occupation than the perpetual pursuit of happiness" (26). Further on, he concludes that the doctrine responsible for influencing such increasingly ubiquitous characters is

> first and foremost the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality, bounded only by the limits of the proprieties. It is a kind of cult of the self which can nevertheless survive the pursuit of a happiness to be found in someone else – in woman, for example; which can even survive all that goes by in the name of illusions. It is the joy of astonishing others, and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished. A dandy may be blasé, he may even suffer; but in this case, he will smile like the Spartan boy under the fox's tooth. (27-28)[5]

What soon became apparent in the world of the European avant-garde, populated as it was by dandies of this sort, was that such strident individualism

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[4] Elderfield, in his introduction to Ball's Flight Out of Time, emphasizes the fact that Ball "had been reading Baudelaire", and that his own appraisal of the dandy was predicated upon the figure's assessment as laid down by that author (xliii).

dissolved rather than solidified a community of like-minded individuals. Such one-upmanship stirred barbarous competition, not just between movements (the Dadaists' denouncement of all things Expressionist, for example), but between members of the same group as well (Huelsenbeck's dismissal of Schwitters is a particularly notable case in point). Ball, in his diary entry for 25 November 1914, testifies to the fact that outrageousness soon enough becomes outdatedness:

> Even the demonic, which used to be so interesting, now has only a faint, lifeless glimmer. In the meantime all the world has become demonic. The demonic no longer differentiates the dandy from the commonplace. You just have to become a saint if you want to differentiate yourself further. (Flight Out of Time 12)

Ball alludes here to an *enantiodromia* which is similar in scope to the one Hubbard identifies in her article. At one time all that was necessary to secure notoriety was to prove oneself demonic. According to Ball, however, the entire world has proven itself so, and therefore, in order for a figure like the dandy to distinguish himself in the modern era, he must (ironically enough) prove himself a saint.

In brief summation, the modernist cult of the self, which stressed the merits of uncompromised individualism, released the artist from the burden of tradition only to enslave him to public taste. Art lost its "transformative potential" and instead became the decree by which the artist proclaimed his individuality. Thus, the modernist condition gave rise to a postmodernist one in which artists were no freer than they had been at the outset of the avant-garde rebellion. In fact, individualism soon became unquestioning obedience (to the dictates of society), and in this way the cult of the self collapsed, via an

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[5] Vehement Dadaists like Huelsenbeck or Picabia would have challenged the notion of being "bounded" by "proprieties", yet the public personae they flaunted corroborate Baudelaire's

enantiodromia, into its opposite. As noted earlier, the term derives from Heraclitus and is situated in his doctrine of flux, which (as Sheppard states) found a ready audience in Ball and his disciples. For them, the age revealed itself to be one massive paradox, and therefore philosophers who were sympathetic to or who actively espoused a doctrine of flux drew the attention and praise of the Dadaists.[6] Simmel's all-encompassing philosophy (or sociology as it is more often recognized in American academia) drew much inspiration from flux theory, particularly as his work matured and tended more towards a metaphysically inclined *Lebensphilosophie*. In "Soziologische Aesthetik" ("Sociological Aesthetics", 1896) he recalls, "To Heraclitus, all being was in continuous flux; the processes of this world were given form in the variety of unlimited contrasts which continuously transformed themselves from one into the other" (Etzkorn 68).

I shall presently explore the concept of the *enantiodromia* and how it is that Simmel's philosophy provides the theoretical ground on which to construct a theory of self-reflexivity that acknowledges, and is indeed predicated upon, the flux/fixity dialectic. In this chapter, I shall review several of Simmel's essays, including "Die Grosstadt und das Geistesleben" ("The Metropolis and Mental Life", 1903), "Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur" ("On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture", 1911), and "Der Konflict der modernen Kultur" ("The Conflict in Modern Culture", 1918), all of which go a long way towards explaining how and why self-reflexive art

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characterization.

[6] Baudelaire had, in his own time, recognized that the decadence of the period was directly responsible for the proliferation of dandies ("The Painter of Modern Life" 28-29).

became so dominant during the Dada years.[7] These essays bring to fruition Simmel's theories regarding the mental composition of the urban individual. His seminal tome, Philosophie des Geldes (The Philosophy of Money, 1900) contextualizes (with great intellectual dexterity) those same theories by investigating how the capitalist money economy gives rise and support to such individuals. In order to comprehend fully how the issues raised by modernism articulated with the socioeconomic conditions that influenced their development, it is useful to consult a sociologist contemporary with the period under scrutiny. Donald Levine, in his introduction to Simmel's On Individuality and Social Forms, characterizes this period as one of "great cultural ferment": "Central Europe from the turn of the century to World War I witnessed the birth of psychoanalysis, relativity theory, logical positivism, phenomenology, atonal music, and several milestones of literature and humanistic scholarship" (ix). Simmel's social commentary, coming as it does from one who was a denizen of a major metropolis, impresses the reader with its authenticity. Ralph Leck, in his introduction to Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology: The Birth of Modernity, 1880-1920, identifies Simmel as a philosopher who was "one of Berlin's leading exponents of

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[7] These three essays have also been selected for the progression in thought they display. It is of great interest that Simmel moved increasingly towards vitalism, and his contributions in this regard are especially useful for the premise put forth in this thesis. In her "Preface to Georg Simmel's *Fragments, Posthumous Essays, and Publications of his Last Years*" ("Vorwort" to Georg Simmel, *Fragmente und Aufsätze aus dem Nachlass und Veröffentlichungen der letzten Jahre*, 1923), Getrud Kantorowicz (a close friend of the philosopher) underlines this point:

> Beyond their particular substantive concerns, Simmel's last essays show the applications and ramifications of his central metaphysical idea. Not only, however, do the sweep and fertility of this idea thus become apparent; not only does it become clear that here we have the conception of a world view which is capable of focusing on the whole variety of appearance: the profundity of the idea itself comes more clearly to light. (Georg Simmel 1858-1918 3)

Geisteswissenschaften" (Leck 64).[8] Dedicated to interdisciplinary study, Simmel's breathtakingly vast area of research and interests cuts across nearly all fields of the humanities, and it always yields constructive observations and analyses. In this vein, Simmel proves invaluable for the same reason he proves difficult to manage; it is a challenge, or an impossibility for some, to focus on a particular passage or theme in his writings without becoming distracted by the wealth of information surrounding it.

The details of Simmel's biography have been sufficiently documented elsewhere (for example, in Leck's book cited above), and so I shall not dedicate an undue amount of attention to the matter. Still, I wish to draw attention to the points which most significantly influenced the maturation of his philosophy and sociology, particularly with regards to the theory of metropolitan life. Born in Berlin in 1858, Simmel lived most of his life in the heart of that metropolis, that is, until his move to Strasbourg University in 1914, four years before his death.[9] He thus had extensive first-hand experience of urban living, especially as it unfolded in one of the greatest metropolises of the modernist period. Religiously, he was exposed from an early age to the three most prominent faiths in Europe. His mother, Flora Simmel (née Bodstein), was born into a Jewish family but had been baptized a Lutheran, while his father, Eduard, had also broken from his Jewish heritage

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[8] *Geisteswissenschaften*, for which Leck provides the literal translation of "science of spirit or intellect", equates to the discipline recognized in the Anglophone world as "the Humanities" (Leck 64).

[9] The locale of Simmel's birth is of notable importance. In explanation Leck writes,

> Simmel's birthplace is illustrative of the experiential wealth that contributed to his sociology of modernity. His house was located at the north-west corner of Leipzig and Friedrich streets. During Simmel's lifetime, these two streets emerged as two of the most important commercial corridors in Berlin. This location was also adjacent to the heart of old Berlin or *Stadtmitte* (literally, city-center). [...] Furthermore, his home on the corner

when he converted, as an adult, to Roman Catholicism (Leck 29). Simmel himself was baptized in the adopted faith of his mother. Eduard Simmel's lucrative business allowed the family of several children to live quite comfortably for a while, but an ill-judged reorganization of his business interests began to sap the financial strength of the Simmels; his death in 1874 only exacerbated the strain.[10] Fortunately for all concerned, Flora remarried well, and Simmel's stepfather, affectionately known as "Uncle Dol", brought financial relief to the family. He, like Eduard, had made his wealth by appealing to the epicurean tastes of the Berlin upper classes, as he was the founder of a music company named Peters (30). All of these details are notable in that they contribute to an understanding of why Simmel's scholarship betrays a seemingly all-encompassing knowledge (or at the very least experience) of life.

The Forging of the Metropolitan Psyche

Simmel's most famous essay is undoubtedly "The Metropolis and Mental Life".[11] An inspired and vivid investigation into urban living and how it affects the individual, the essay was first published in 1903, just when many of the Dadaists were approaching early or mid-adolescence. The essay begins by unequivocally identifying what Simmel imagines to be the origin of "the deepest problems of modern life", problems which

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of Leipzig and Friedrich streets placed him within walking distance of most of Berlin's cultural meccas. (33-34)

[10] Leck reports that Eduard Simmel, whose own father was a prosperous businessman, established himself in Berlin as an importer and distributor of fine French jams (29). In addition, he and his partners founded Felix and Sarotti, a chocolate company that gained the respect (and official business) of the Prussian royal family (30).

[11] All quotations from this essay refer to the translation provided in Donald Levine's edited version of Simmel's On Individuality and Social Forms.

> flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life. This antagonism represents the most modern form of the conflict which primitive man must carry on with nature for his own bodily existence. (324)

When we turn our attention to "The Conflict in Modern Culture", we shall see how this conflict manifests itself as the struggle between the flux of life and the forms it distils. For the time being, let us consider and explore the tenacity with which man holds onto his individuality.[12] As he often does in his essays, Simmel briefly investigates the history of the issue at hand, and in this case he begins with the eighteenth century, which he summarises as a period in which the "liberation" of man from political, religious, and historical convention was the governing ideal. The nineteenth century, he writes, sought not only to sever such ties but also to recognize the individuality of each man (324). Simmel refers to the division of labour as society's acknowledgement of every man's individual talents, but he also draws attention to the fact that once man becomes part of a system to which he is responsible for his own contribution, he renders himself dependent once again, this time to the "complementary activity of others" (324). In both the Nietzschean and the Socialist interpretations of the individual we find, according to the author, "the same fundamental motive...namely the resistance of the individual to being

[12] The vitalist philosophies of Simmel and Bergson proved critical to their contemporaries in the (ironically) collective effort of determining individuality. In his essay "Conception of the Individual", Matthew Lipman offers a concise summary of how the two differed in the "epistemological frameworks" around which they constructed their theories of individuality. Lipman suggests that Bergson was much more preoccupied with time and *duration*, while Simmel looked more to the space and the stability of the object (Georg Simmel 1858-1918 120-121). The comparison is somewhat oversimplified, but the main idea behind it is justified.

levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism" (324).[13] In putting forth his thesis for the essay, Simmel writes the following:

> When one inquires about the products of the specifically modern aspects of contemporary life with reference to their inner meaning – when, so to speak, one examines the body of culture with reference to the soul, as I am to do concerning the metropolis today – the answer will require the investigation of the relationship which such a social structure promotes between the individual aspects of life and those which transcend the existence of single individuals. It will require the investigation of the adaptations made by the personality in its adjustment to the forces that lie outside of it. (325)

We have then before us a study which takes into account not just the individual's existence as it pertains to his place in society, but also an investigation into the impressions the metropolis stamps onto the collectivity. As a philosopher who tends increasingly towards vitalist metaphysics, Simmel often concerns himself with the reciprocal nature of man's relationship to his society, perceiving as he does in that relationship a dynamic which embraces both society and its constituents. In the case of this essay, the "adaptations" under investigation lead the author to a socio-psychological examination of the unique mental faculties that evolve in the citizen of the metropolis.

Simmel observes that man functions by discerning differences in stimuli, and these differences are the perceived discrepancies between the intensities and frequencies of those stimuli (325). Furthermore, the memory of past impressions influences the perception of present impressions.[14] Simmel distinguishes between "lasting impressions" which "consume…less mental energy" and impressions which abruptly and "violently" make themselves known to the senses (325). The former occur at a much slower

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[13] In Simmel's estimation, Nietzsche envisioned the individual's struggle "as the prerequisite for his full development." Eventually, Socialism "found the same thing in the suppression of all competition" (324).

[14] We shall return to the importance of memory and sensory perception in the next chapter, as it is one of the seminal points of Bergson's philosophy.

pace, and so the mind, in whose domain the perceptions are interpreted, has more time to ascertain the nature of those perceptions and to prepare itself for what it anticipates may be a series of similar or identical impressions. If, for example, we consider the ringing of a telephone, we find that we may, in a state of rest, be jolted by the first ring. By the time we hear the second and third rings, however, we have already formed a hypothesis based on the evidence our senses have gathered from the first ring. We expect to hear a series of rings similar if not identical to the first, separated by equal intervals. Hence, we quickly acclimatize and do not start at each successive ring, and overall we have spent only a modicum of mental energy. Reflect then on another series of rings in which each ring differs from the preceding one, not only in volume and frequency but also in the length of the intervals. With such a series, the mind has only just begun to interpret the first ring when the second, with entirely different tonal properties, breaks in with its impression. The individual, confronted with what may be more appropriately termed a cacophony rather than a series, is forced to invest much more mental energy in attempting to understand the nature of the sounds, and to be sure there is no time for his mind to acclimatize to the noises. Consequently, each ring startles him. The model provided is admittedly a gross simplification of Simmel's theory, but what I wish to illustrate is the profound difference in perceptual reception between stimuli occurring in regular intervals and frequencies, and those which are discontinuous and dissimilar. The crux of the matter, as Simmel points out, is how much energy must be expended in the perception and mental interpretation of the stimuli.[15] As we soon learn with regards to

[15] There is much to be said for contemporary theories of sound perception, particularly

the metropolitan, the mind cannot continuously be subjected to such over-exertion, and no individual's mind is more focused on stimuli than that of the urban dweller:

> To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions – with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life – it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent on differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural experience. (325)

Carefully distinguishing as he does between the ruralist and the urbanite, the author characterizes the former as being more reliant on "feelings and emotional relationships", by virtue of the fact that the "latter are rooted in the unconscious levels of the mind and develop most readily in the steady equilibrium of unbroken customs" (325).

In contrast, Simmel presents the "locus of reason", which he identifies as residing in "the lucid, conscious upper strata of the mind" (325). The faculty of reason, he observes, "is the most adaptable of our inner forces" (325), and for this reason it is rather impervious to shocks and disruptions.[16] Consequently, in order to endure the barrage of stimuli that assaults the mind of the metropolitan, a "protective organ" has been created, behind which the

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Simmel's, and how they relate to the *bruitist* poems being composed and recited around the same time. Ball, commenting upon Huelsenbeck's sound poetry as it was being delivered in the early days of the Cabaret Voltaire, writes, "His poetry is an attempt to capture in a clear melody the totality of this unutterable age, with all is cracks and fissures, with all its wicked and lunatic genialities, with all its noise and hollow din" (11.III.1916, Flight Out of Time 56). Some Dadaists (like Huelsenbeck) seemed to welcome that metropolitan din, while others (like Ball) found in it "The Gorgon's head of a boundless terror [smiling] out of the fantastic destruction" (56).

[16] At the same time, however, its malleability renders it less than the ideal faculty for those who must be sensitive to their environs, i.e. artists. Bergson seemed to recognize what was becoming, for the metropolitan, the dominance of reason, and in response he offered the faculty of *intuition*. In spite of this significant contribution to modern thought, Bergson has since come to be criticized for attempting to eradicate rationality from human judgment. Such an interpretation is entirely false, as Bergson himself concluded that the two must work

mind may continue to function without being worn down or desensitised. That protective organ is, ironically, developed through the same "intensification of consciousness" in which it results; there is here a positive feedback mechanism at work. The continuous influx of stimuli heightens the consciousness of the metropolitan, for that individual must (initially) invest more mental energy in perception and interpretation. However, because the faculty of reason is highly adaptable, the metropolitan soon learns to employ that "inner force" as his first line of defence against the onslaught of stimuli. In doing so he begins to react "rationally", "thus creating a mental predominance" which aids him in his battle to maintain composure in the face of such over-stimulation (326): "Thus the reaction of the metropolitan person to those events is moved to a sphere of mental activity which is least sensitive and which is furthest removed from the depths of the personality" (326).

Before the author defines this "protective organ", he proposes that the "intellectualistic quality" of the metropolitan mind is influenced by the dominance of the money economy. The connection between this economy and the city is based upon commercial exchange:

> The metropolis has always been the seat of money economy because the many-sidedness and concentration of commercial activity have given the medium of exchange an importance which it could not have acquired in the commercial aspects of rural life. But money economy and the domination of the intellect stand in the closest relationship to one another. (326)

There is a "purely matter-of-fact attitude" which manifests itself in both the intellectual approach to city living and the money economy, and Simmel argues that such an approach (and the "protective organ" which develops as a result) is inspired by the exchange of money and its value. "Money is

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together, not in opposition, if modern man is to negotiate his modern life as productively and

concerned only with what is common to all, i.e., with the exchange value which reduces all quality and individuality to a purely quantitative level" (326), and therefore those accustomed to handling money on a regular basis begin to adopt that levelling effect in their interactions as well.[17] Simmel argues that the metropolitan, who "is thrown into obligatory association" (326-327) with so many others, begins to interact with his fellow man the same way he interacts with money, that is, he ignores what is unique in the individual and focuses instead on how that individual is but "one of many":

> All emotional relationships between persons rest on their individuality, whereas intellectual relationships deal with persons as with numbers, that is, as with elements which, in themselves, are indifferent, but which are of interest only insofar as they offer something objectively perceivable. (326)[18]

In contrast there is the ruralist, the man who has the luxury of relying more on his emotional perceptions than on his intellectual ones.[19] Simmel characterizes the social sphere of the ruralist as comparatively small and thus bound by familiarity rather than by impersonal relationships. In such a

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fully as possible.

[17] Language, in so much as it is composed of "signifiers" which on their own hold no tangible value, is similar in that it seeks to generalize and reduce complex thoughts to readymade phrases which can be easily uttered and comprehended. The primary difference to note here, however, is that the value of a given word is much more mutable, while one hundred pence will always constitute a pound. Still, when thinking of abstract value, money and words remain, perhaps uncomfortably, similar:

> And if we say we exchange the things for each other because they are equally valuable, it is only that frequent inversion of thought and speech by which we also say that things pleased us because they were beautiful, whereas, in reality, they are beautiful because they please us. (Simmel in "A Chapter in the Philosophy of Value", The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays 61)

[18] Again, a discussion on the enumeration of individuals and the contradiction which arises out of such a practice is discussed in the next chapter with regards to Bergson's theories.

[19] Not all metropolitans pined for the relaxed atmosphere of the rural area, however. The Dadaists welcomed the urban fever of their metropolises, although even they on occasion organized retreats into more pastoral areas such as the Tyrol region. Joris-Karl Huysman's novel, En Rade (Becalmed, 1887), is an astoundingly poignant book about the true deracination of modern man; the city is oppressive, but the countryside is uninhabitable. The protagonist, Jacques Marles, and his wife Louise leave their severe Parisian difficulties behind them only to find that the country is "a haemorrhage of ordure", where the company of peasants is even more intolerable than the press of the crowd.

reduced arena of interaction, the customer engages with the producer and is, by virtue of that familiarity, emotionally tied to him (327). In contrast, citizens in the metropolis exchange payment for goods usually through the medium of at least one "middle man", thus creating a network of impersonal relationships strung together simply on the exchange of goods.

"Furthermore," Simmel writes, "this psychological intellectualistic attitude and the money economy are in such close integration that no one is able to say whether it was the former that effected the latter or *vice versa*" (327). He continues: "What is certain is only that the form of life in the metropolis is the soil which nourishes this interaction most fruitfully…" (327).[20] The penetrating effect of this economically induced psychology is primarily that "the modern mind has become more and more a calculating one" (327).[21] The seemingly endless proliferation of impersonal relationships in the metropolis requires a hitherto unknown level of punctuality and exactitude, by which the slightest aberration leads to the collapse of the entire system.[22] The observations made here are entirely within the realm of a sociologically minded economist, but what distinguishes Simmel's thought is the fact that he perceives beneath the impersonality, exactitude, and punctuality of metropolitan living a highly vital force which is moulded, but not suppressed by, the rigid demands of the city:

> But here too emerge those conclusions which are in general the whole task of this discussion, namely, that every event, however

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[20] Simmel elucidates this point by remarking how London has never been "the heart of England" but rather "its intellect" and "money bag" (327).

[21] The author adds, "The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the ideal of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula" (327). It is precisely this rigid scientific approach to life which Bergson's philosophy seeks to redress.

[22] Simmel illustrates the point by musing on the chaos that would ensue if "all the watches in Berlin" simultaneously malfunctioned (328).

> restricted to this superficial level it may appear, comes immediately into contact with the depths of the soul, and that the most banal externalities are, in the last analysis, bound up with the final decisions concerning the meaning and the style of life. Punctuality, calculability, and exactness, which are required by the complications and extensiveness of metropolitan life are not only most intimately connected with its capitalistic and intellectualistic character but also color the content of life and are conducive to the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits and impulses which originally seek to determine the form of life from within instead of receiving it from the outside in a general, schematically precise form. Even though those lives which are autonomous and characterised by these vital impulses are not entirely impossible in the city, they are, none the less, opposed to it *in abstracto*. (328-329)

There is then a conflict which emerges between the internal, "vital" force of life, which strives to interpret perceptions and direct action from some inner knowledge and/or impulse, and the external form which attempts to assert itself over that vitality.[23]

The Introspective Character of the *Blasé* Outlook

The "impersonality" of metropolitan life impresses itself upon the metropolitan's mind as "an influence in a highly personal direction" (329). Simmel presents the concept of the *blasé* "outlook" as "the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves which are thrown together in all their contrasts and from which it seems to us the intensification of metropolitan intellectuality seems to be derived" (329). The unending influx of new sensory information overexerts the nerves, and the metropolitan finds himself unable "to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy" (329). In combination with this desensitisation is "an indifference toward the distinctions between things", a condition deriving in no small part from the highly developed money economy that flourishes in the metropolis

[23] The conflict between the vitality of life and the rigid forms in which life manifests itself is addressed in "The Conflict of Modern Culture", to which we shall soon turn our attention.

(329). As already discussed, the levelling effect required in monetary transactions informs the commercial interactions of metropolitan citizens, so much so that they eventually disregard one another's individuality and focus instead on what they have in common. Simmel theorizes that the "concentration of purchasable things", to be found in the complex nexus of metropolitan commercialism, "stimulates the individual to the highest degree of nervous energy" (329). In order to elucidate the author's theory, let us turn briefly to The Philosophy of Money, which contains a chapter entitled "Money in the Sequence of Purposes".[24] Simmel writes, "As a rule, the blasé attitude is rightly attributed to satiated enjoyment because too strong a stimulus destroys the nervous ability to respond to it" (256).[25] The mind is stimulated not only by desire for the object, but also by the mental investment required to procure it. The act of acquiring the object, which always involves some effort, serves as further stimulation. Yet the repeated acquisition of objects through the impersonal exchange of money, or "the more the acquisition is carried out in a mechanical and indifferent way", the more the mind is stimulated to the point where it reacts indifferently to all exchanges (256-257). Simmel describes this *enantiodromic* process as follows:

> Through the mere quantitative intensification of the same conditions this achievement is transformed into its opposite, into this peculiar adaptive phenomenon – the blasé attitude – in which the nerves reveal their final possibility of adjusting themselves to the content and the form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them. (330)

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[24] Section II of said chapter contains the passage of interest, "The blasé attitude" (located in what is termed the "Analytical Part" of the book).

[25] Simmel goes on to explain how the subjective value of an object is coloured by the methods by which it is attained: "The attraction of things is not the only cause of practical activity intent on gaining them; on the contrary, the kind and amount of practically necessary endeavors to acquire them often determines the depth and liveliness of their attraction for us" (256).

A given phenomenon, in this case the stimulation and over-stimulation suffered by the senses of the metropolitan man, collapses into its opposite when pushed to an irreconcilable extreme. Those senses are toned down in the interest of not having to devote so much mental energy to the conscious perception of the surrounding stimuli.

According to Simmel, the adoption of the *blasé* outlook is an act of unwitting self-preservation. It is at this point in his essay, when he begins to contextualize the *blasé* individual in the social milieu of the metropolis, that he addresses what is for our purposes the salient point of the work: how the metropolitan individual becomes an increasingly introspective figure. The citizen of the metropolis is governed (again unwittingly) by his reserved attitude vis-à-vis other metropolitans. Simmel explains that this attitude is as necessary as the *blasé* outlook, for the city dweller encounters thousands of his fellow citizens every day, and if he were to interact with them with the same amount of attention as the ruralist devotes to his neighbours, then he "would be completely atomised internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition" (331).[26] It is, however, this very peculiar form of interaction with one's peers that provides the individual with "a type and degree of personal freedom to which there is no analogy in other circumstances" (332). In Simmel's estimation, the basic unity of all social groups, the small but well-defined "circle" of like-minded individuals, evolved in an effort to keep "antagonistic groups" at bay. The dynamic which directs the interactions within such a small group is influenced by that same "distanciation" effect the individual employs against his peers. Once that small society begins to grow,

however, that "first jealous delimitation" is softened by repeated interaction, and the natural hostility between individuals is softened (332). At the same time, the individual gains a freedom hitherto unknown to him, and thus he is given much more leave to develop himself according to his whim:[27]

> so today in an intellectualized and refined sense the citizen of the metropolis is "free" in contrast with the trivialities and prejudices which bind the small town person. The mutual reserve and indifference, and the intellectual conditions of life in large social units are never more sharply appreciated in their significance for the independence of the individual than in the dense crowds of the metropolis because the bodily closeness and lack of space make intellectual distance really perceivable for the first time. (334)[28]

It remains somewhat unclear how Simmel envisioned the connection between "bodily closeness" and a heightened awareness of one's individuality. The link is most likely based on that "distanciation" effect introduced and discussed just prior to the above quotation. In order to tolerate the existence of others (a concession made in the interest of social cohesion, from which the individual stands to benefit), the metropolitan becomes increasingly reserved and intellectually distant from his peers; the constant flow of cash in the metropolitan money economy conditions him further in that reserve. His *blasé* outlook, which helps him to carry out his quotidian affairs with the utmost economy of mental energy, distances him from his peers. However it does not, as Simmel is careful to note, result in mental hebetude, for he is still impacted, physically and mentally, by those who surround him. The more the

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[26] The author further qualifies the urbanite's relationship to his peers by observing that there is for him "a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion", which functions as a "distanciation and deflection", without which society could not be maintained (331).

[27] Simmel illustrates this development in human society by looking at "small town life in antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages". He sees in the ancient *polis* the crucible in which repressive "de-individualizing" factors warred against "incomparably individualized personalities". In this crucible was forged the ancestor of the modern metropolitan individual (333-334).

[28] Simmel at this point addresses the commonplace that one never feels so alone as one does amidst the thronging crowd of the metropolis. He observes that this truism is simply the obverse of that same freedom which liberated man from the confines of the small social circle.

urbanite is immersed in the metropolitan crowd, the more his "protective organ" (his *blasé* outlook) must labour to conserve his energy and insulate his nerves against the storm of stimulatory impulses assaulting his senses. In this way he is said to be reacting "intellectually" rather than "emotionally", and thus the physical proximity to which the urbanite is subjected results in an intellectual distance. Only in the modern metropolis does that intellectual distance coalesce with the *blasé* outlook, with the result that the new modern man is truly an individual, both unique and free.

Simmel ascribes to the metropolis a momentum of its own, a momentum responsible for the development of "cosmopolitanism". The metropolis, unlike the small town, exerts its influence far beyond its borders, and it attains a level of existence which supersedes the summation of all of its great individuals. The individual's influence, Simmel observes, is not bound by the physicality of the body, for one's influence extends far beyond one's person. Likewise, "the city exists only in the totality of the effects which transcend their immediate sphere" (335). The essence of freedom, therefore, is more than "mere freedom of movement and emancipation from prejudices and philistinism" (335). Rather, the measure of such liberation should be sought in the expression of one's "particularity and incomparability":

> That we follow the laws of our inner nature – and this is what freedom is – becomes perceptible and convincing to us and to others only when the expressions of this nature distinguish themselves from others; it is our irreplaceability by others which shows that our mode of existence is not imposed upon us from the outside. (335)

If the metropolis extends beyond itself to impact the international arena, and if man in his strident individuality contributes to the vitality of the metropolis in which he lives, then by transitive law the modern individual is capable, more than ever, of making his impact on the world, and thus he is truly a

cosmopolite. This formula is also useful in constructing theories concerning the division of labour which, Simmel notes, reaches its fruition in the modern metropolis (335-336). Furthermore, the author does not simply address the division of labour as individuals performing specialized tasks according to their talents. Rather, he suggests that competition for customers hones the individuality of the citizen who needs to distinguish himself from his peers (336). Even then, it is not enough to create for oneself a niche in which one may cultivate his individuality for commercial reasons. The true metropolitan "must seek to produce in the person to whom he wishes to sell ever new and unique needs" (336).[29] The countless fleeting encounters which occur every second in the metropolis lead the citizen seeking distinction to develop improved methods of seizing attention. Due to the fact that the average encounter is so brief, there is no time for an emotionally informed exchange, and so the urbanite must "appear to-the-point, clear-cut and individual" (337). The necessity of going to great lengths to ensure one's individuality is emphasized by the fact that one's peers have also succumbed to the *blasé* outlook. It is this need to "sell one's self" that strikes Simmel as "the most profound cause of the fact that the metropolis places emphasis on striving for the most individual forms of personal existence – regardless of whether it is always correct or always successful" (337).

It is in the final paragraphs of the essay that we encounter the vitalist thrust which characterizes the author's later work. He posits, as in other

[29] We recall then the beginning of this chapter, in which it was observed that the modernist cult of the self became the postmodernist commercialism of art. On page 336, Simmel notes the tendency of the modern urbanite to distinguish himself by adopting increasingly bizarre "eccentricities".

pieces, the struggle between the objective and subjective spirit, and he sees in modern culture the "predominance" of the former over the latter (337):

> in language as well as in law, in the technique of production as well as in art, in science as well as in the objects of domestic environment, there is embodied a sort of spirit [*Geist*], the daily growth of which is followed only imperfectly and with an even greater lag by the intellectual development of the individual. (337)

He finds in the case of the nineteenth century ("at least in the upper classes") a "regression of the culture of the individual with reference to spirituality, delicacy and idealism" (337). This regression, he suggests, is inversely proportionate to the "vast culture" which "has been embodied in things and in knowledge, in institutions and comforts", and the increasing discrepancy is attributed by the author to the "success of the growing division of labor" (337). The over-extension of one side of the personality results in the atrophy of all the other sides, for the individual must repress (or at the very least neglect) the divergent facets of his personality not immediately employed in the task assigned to him by the division of labour. He is rendered "a single cog as over against the vast overwhelming organization of things and forces", and he has become, for Simmel, evidence of modern society's tendency towards the objective over the subjective: "In any case this overgrowth of objective culture has been less and less satisfactory for the individual" (337). Of course, nowhere is this cultural development as readily apparent as in the modern metropolis (338). For the conglomeration of "concrete institutions" to flourish in the super-society that is the metropolis, it is necessary that the needs of the masses, not the individuals, be addressed; thus the subjectively-minded individual is relegated to the recesses of the objectively-prone society of which he is but a "negligible quantity" (337). The irony of the metropolitan's situation is to be found in the fact that the same social

machinery which looms over him at a safe enough distance to allow for the unique expression of his individuality is the same machinery that ignores his proclamations that he is indeed an indispensable member of society. Even the individual is in danger of losing sight of his own individuality: "extremities and peculiarities and individualizations must be produced and they must be over-exaggerated merely to be brought into the awareness even of the individual himself" (338). In the modern metropolis we find, then, the product of the eighteenth century's demand for liberation and the nineteenth century's search for individuality. It is the tension between these two aspiring ideals of the individual that informs social life in the metropolis, the "function" of which is

> to make a place for the conflict and for the attempts at unification of both of these in the sense that its own peculiar conditions have been revealed to us as the occasion and the stimulus for the development of both. Thereby they attain a quite unique place, fruitful with an inexhaustible richness of meaning in the development of the mental life. They reveal themselves as one of those great historical structures with equal legitimacy. (339)[30]

In summation then we may conclude the following. The modern urbanite, by virtue of his metropolitan surroundings, is subjected to thousands of external pressures which place themselves at odds with his desire to assert not just his freedom, but his individuality as well. The capitalist money economy, which finds its fulfilment in the metropolis, accustoms the urbanite to quantitative, as opposed to qualitative, exchanges. Under the influence of financial exchange, he begins to look upon his peers not as the individuals they are but rather as members of a social organization which transcends the

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[30] Kurt H. Wolff's translation of "The Metropolis and Mental Life", which appears in Frisby and Featherstone's Simmel on Culture, renders the final sentence of this quotation thusly: "The metropolis reveals itself as one of those great historical formations in which opposing streams which enclose life unfold, as well as join one another with equal right" (185). It is

individual existences of which it is comprised. At the same time, the endless influx of stimuli which assaults his senses alters his mental life in that he forms, in a self-preserving gesture, the "protective organ" known as the *blasé* outlook. This development works on an *enantiodromic* principle, as the urbanite is initially much more sensitive to the stimuli he absorbs from his surroundings. Ultimately, the *blasé* urbanite is not impervious to sensation, but his ability to recognize "the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith...the things themselves" is greatly reduced, if not nearly eradicated (330). At the same time, the natural aversion with which men react reciprocally in a small social circle is lessened in the metropolis. The quotidian contact between individuals in a large society softens that initial aversion, and the *blasé* outlook provides a much needed buffer that nourishes indifference rather than hostility. All of these factors grant the individual the space in which to cultivate his freedom and singularity, and so only in the metropolis do we find the greatest eccentricities and peculiarities of character unknown (or, more properly, not tolerated) in the small town or rural area. However, Simmel is quick to point out that such hitherto unexperienced freedom is not entirely positive.[31] The division of labour increasingly demands that individuals utilize only one feature of their personalities, and so the rest is left behind to wither. In this way objective culture has triumphed

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worth noting this alternative translation, for it makes use of the vitalist terms Simmel utilized with increasing frequency in his final years.

[31] Huysmans' Jacques Marles, upon leaving the disaster of his country retreat for the imminent disaster of Paris, speaks to the negative aspect of metropolitan life which Simmel surely had in mind:

> He was heading into the unknown; the only step that could be reasonably foreseen was this: as soon as he arrived, he would have to get cracking, renewing contact with all the people he despised, visiting one, waiting for another, in the hope of procuring a decent job or a position. What snubs and humiliations I shall be subjecting myself to, he thought; ah! atonement for my disdain of utilitarianism is nigh! (Becalmed 151)

over subjective culture. Yet the victory is far from secure, because the individual, sensing no doubt the pressures which threaten his newly found freedom, battles fiercely for the individuality which took him centuries to achieve. A financial impetus further informs his struggle, for it is clear to him that if he is to prove a success in the metropolis (and success so often is measured in the acquisition of wealth), he must overcome that same *blasé* outlook which has enveloped his peers. We are left, in the final analysis, with a kind of shifting *enantiodromia*, which defines the dynamic between the individual and the expansive social sphere that is the modern metropolis. The urban man, having finally earned the rights to a free and individualized life, truly is, as Sartre famously stated, condemned to be free, for now an enormous effort must be made daily if he is to hold out against the objectifying forces which relentlessly press against him in the city. When we consider these conclusions in light of the modernist artist, we can understand how it is that such enthusiastic and voluble declarations of individuality adumbrate the postmodernist commercialism which continues to exact conformity just as much (if not more) than any of the institutions to which artists had previously been enslaved.[32]

The Conflict Inherent in Cultivation

The struggle of the subjective against the objective is viewed from another angle in "The Conflict and Modern Culture", an essay written in 1914 but unpublished until Simmel's death in 1918 (Davis 321). In keeping with

[32] Artists like Salvador Dali perhaps came to realize that the influence and power of the new academy of commercialism could not be shaken off the way other institutions, such as the Church, had been. Dali's adoption of the anagrammatic pseudonym "Avida Dollars" testifies to his surrender and subsequent embrace of such brazen commercialism.

his trend towards a more pronounced vitalist philosophy, the piece is an investigation into the dynamic between the life force and the objects it produces.[33] Through the medium of the subjective/objective dialectic, Simmel discovers what constitutes culture, and how it is that cultural forms generate cultural history. The essay begins with a brief commentary on how cultural forms distil from life and how they come to stand in opposition to the life (and culture) which created them. Before we delve into this crucial work, let us first turn to Simmel's "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture", an earlier essay which prefigures "The Conflict in Modern Culture".[34] The author commences with what he identifies as the dualism between man and "the naturally given order of the world" (27).[35] There is, as a result of the oppositional stance man adopts, the eruption of a "never-ending contest between subject and object, which finds its second round within the realm of spirit itself" (27). It is the spirit which continuously engages itself in the production of "innumerable structures", structures which break free from their spiritual origin and demand autonomy.[36] It is the nature of the spirit, which is recognized as the embodiment of the subjective world, to give rise to objects which coalesce into an objective uprising with which the subjective (as we

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[33] In his outstanding article "Georg Simmel and the Aesthetics of Social Reality", Murray Davis observes, "One of Simmel's most important contributions to social thought is his discovery of the growing autonomy of all social forms" (324). According to Davis, Simmel's emphasis on these independent social forms is in keeping with the contemporary view that "cultural forms", like art, existed independently of the society which produced them. Furthermore, Davis writes that Simmel is "generalizing Karl Marx's assertion of the growing autonomy of economic processes, to all social and cultural processes" (324).

[34] Davis comments that this essay is "crucial and brilliant, but unfortunately difficult and neglected" (322). It would seem that at least some of the ideas posited in the piece were polished and presented in final form in the complementary later essay. I propose that an extensive comparison of the two essays would go a long way towards revealing the extent to which Simmel's later work was informed by his increasing tendencies towards metaphysical vitalism.

[35] Quotations from these essays derive from K. Peter Etzkorn's book Georg Simmel: The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays (1968).

learned in the conclusion to "The Metropolis and Mental Life") constantly battles. The crux of the struggle is to be found in the fact that the spirit is fluidity itself, and the objects it produces become fixed at the moment of their distillation:

> Spirit, most deeply tied to spirit, for this very reason experiences innumerable tragedies over this radical contrast: between subjective life, which is restless but finite in time, and its contents, which, once they are created, are fixed but timelessly valid. (27)

Simmel unfortunately does not explain what he means by the finitude of the spirit and the infinitude of its contents, but I would argue that he is drawing attention to the fact that contents, in spite of the distance they achieve from the spirit which produced them, forever bear the mark of that spirit. They remain "timelessly valid" because they will forever be recognizable as products of the subjective spirit (27). We may, for example, scoff at what we perceive to be the impracticability or unattractiveness of an ancient art form, but we nevertheless are forced to acknowledge that the creator, at least at one point, deemed it an endeavour worthy of his effort. The subjective life (on the individual level at least), as far as it is capable of engendering said contents, is only as finite as the lifespan to which it is bound. Perhaps it is the desire to promote itself beyond its demise that prompts the spirit to generate social forms.

Although he does not employ the term, it is a self-reflexive act which governs this complex dualism, in the middle of which Simmel finds his titular concept of culture (27). The soul for Simmel "is never only what it represents at a given moment, [but rather] it is always 'more', a higher and more perfect manifestation of itself, unreal, and yet somehow eternally present" (27-28).

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[36] The structures which Simmel envisions as distilling from the flow of life fall under the

He analogises that culture is the medium through which the soul travels "to itself" (27).[37] Unlike inorganic objects, the organic being holds within itself its history, and it is this past which "circumscribes" the future of the organism (28). In L'Evolution Créatrice (Creative Evolution, 1907), Bergson (to whom the concept of memory proved essential in his philosophy) similarly states, "the very basis of our conscious existence is memory, that is to say, the prolongation of the past into the present, or, in a word, *duration*, acting and irreversible" (20). Simmel goes as far as to write that life's "fundamental destiny" is to "contain its future in its present in a special form which exists only in the life process" (28). There is, in his estimation, a vital impulse which compels life to distil itself into forms, and rather than one particular avenue of development taking precedence over the others, it is instead the unification of the all the *potential* directions which constitutes cultivation:

> But man does not cultivate himself through their isolated perfections, but only insofar as they help to develop his indefinable personal unity. In other words: Culture is the way that leads from the closed unity through the unfolded multiplicity to the unfolded unity. (29)[38]

The closed unity to which Simmel refers is the unity of those potential directions, which may be characterized as closed in that it has yet to be realized in action (here understood as form). Once life embarks on the journey to self-realization/actualisation, the possible avenues unfold before the vital impulse. They do not yet, however, exist as a unity for the very reason that at

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rubrics of art, law, religion, technology, science, and custom (27).

[37] Simmel at this point addresses the concept of neotony: "The later form of an organism which is capable of growth and procreation is contained in every single phase of organic life". At the same time, he discredits the common belief that "organic evolution" is merely potential energy unfolding into kinetic energy: "The inner necessity...is far profounder than the necessity that a wound-up spring will be released" (28). Bergson's influence, particularly as derived from Creative Evolution, is clearly evident.

[38] These lines are absolutely critical not only to Simmel's philosophy of culture, but also to our interpretive investigation of Schwitters' Hanover Merzbau. Thus, we shall return to them in the final chapter.

this stage they are divergent. Man, or life in general, is incapable of tracing every path, and therefore certain avenues become preferable to others. In the final stage of cultivation, man collects what was formerly the "unfolded multiplicity" under the umbrella of his personality, and thus he achieves a unity, informed by his individuality. In order to illustrate and elucidate these difficult concepts, Simmel cites a more typical example of cultivation. A fruit-bearing tree producing unpalatable fruit may be recast by man's ingenuity into a garden tree yielding esculent treats. In this case the wild specimen has become cultivated (29). Conversely, if a sail mast were to be fashioned from the same tree, one would not speak of the tree as having been *cultivated* into a mast. Deductively, we may conclude that the wild type fruit tree was cultivatable because it already contained, *in potentia*, the garden variety; the operative concept here is that the potential it held was naturally occurring, whereas the same tree could never spontaneously transform into a sail mast.

> It is in this sense that we will not credit a man with genuine culture on the basis of knowledge, virtuosity, or refinements which only act as additives which come to his personality from an external realm of value. In such a case, then, man is the possessor of traits of culture, but he is not cultivated. A man becomes cultivated only when cultural traits develop that aspect of his soul which exists as its most indigenous drive and as the inner predetermination of its subjective perfection. (29)

There exists, of course, the possibility for the soul to negotiate the chasm between itself and intrinsic self-knowledge, and Simmel suggests as much when he writes that "a multitude of movements can lead the soul to itself" (29).[39] However, one may not speak of cultivation in the true sense of the

[39] The author specifies some of the ways in which the soul may reach such a condition: "religious ecstasies, moral self-devotion, dominating intellectuality, and harmony of total life"

word unless the soul reaches beyond itself and generates forms which then impact the soul on its journey to self-knowledge: "from the highest perspective these processes of perfection are perhaps the most valuable" (29-30). The conclusion he draws is that "culture is not the only value for the soul" (30). The crux of Simmel's conception of culture is to be found in these passages, for cultural forms are the means by which man arrives at cultivated individuality, and culture thus defined is the synthesis of "the subjective soul and the objective spiritual product" (30).[40] He does stipulate, however, that such forms must retain their spirituality (for they originate with the spirit) if they are to hold any significant import for the life which generated them. Likewise, the "subjective spirit", although compelled to depart briefly from its subjectivity, must not forego its own spirituality (30).

Towards Metaphysical Unity in the Tragedy of Culture

In the opening paragraphs of both "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture" and "The Conflict in Modern Culture", Simmel addresses the tension that exists between life and the forms it engenders.[41] A cursory reading of his introductory statements would lead one to the opinion that the forms, or cultural objects, which life produces aggressively vie for eminence against the originating force. However, as already proven, these forms are essential to

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(29). In other words, the methods yielding the most immediate results are with little exception beyond the reach of the average man.

[40] Simmel observes that the "paradox of culture" rests with this immutable fact: "the subjective life which we feel in its continuous stream and which drives itself towards inner perfection cannot by itself reach the perfection of culture" (30).

[41] "Frequently it appears as if the creative movement of the soul was dying from its own product" ("On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture" 27). Compare this statement to that contained in the only footnote to "The Conflict in Modern Culture": "Since life is the antithesis of form, and since only that which is somehow formed can be conceptually described, the concept of life cannot be freed from logical imprecision" (26). In the latter

life, for they are the means by which it comes to realize itself in an ultimate gesture of self-reflexivity. Davis speaks to this shifting condition in the following lines:

> Throughout Simmel's thinking runs an ambiguous – sometimes tragically ambiguous – conception of the human predicament: at times Simmel sees man as the creator of the forms of culture and of society – forms man creates in order to satisfy his needs and serve his purposes; at other times Simmel sees man as having to endure those forms which he had previously made – forms which now neither serve nor satisfy, but which now master him. (321)

"On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture" addresses this dilemma by specifying the real problem as being not one between life and forms, but between forms and the way in which man perceives them:

> The discrepancy which exists between the normal states of our inner life and its contents becomes rationalized and somewhat less palpable whenever man, through his theoretical or practical work, confronts himself with these spiritual products, and views them as a sphere of the internal, independent cosmos of the objective spirit. (31)

It is only by virtue of the "stable substantive order of values" that the forms maintain a connection to the life which produced them (31).[42] Although not explicitly stated in this essay, it would seem that the values function as intermediaries between objective forms and subjective life in that they more closely follow the flux of life (and more specifically that of social culture). In support of this conclusion is the fact that values are commonly held to be subjective. Still, they articulate with objects or social forms only through the intercession of man. Simmel is cautious, however, in characterizing these values as positive or negative, for what matters is "that the subject has produced something objective, that its life has become embodied from itself" (30). He takes the example of the work of art, which impresses and delights

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quotation it is clear that Simmel's theory has matured significantly, to the point where he even questions the legitimacy of theorizing about life at all.

us because we recognize in its form a "vessel" into which life has briefly poured but a drop of its total vitality (32). It is, furthermore, a form which is particularly poignant because the creative forces of the artist are more readily apparent in it; it would prove, for example, much more difficult to uncover the creative spirit which informed the development and institution of a law. With great insight, Simmel distinguishes between the impressions made on a spectator by a work of art and by natural phenomena (32-33). The latter "appears as a continuous contiguous whole, whose undifferentiated character denies its individual parts any special emphasis, any existence which is objectively delimited from others" (33). In contrast, "it is only human categories, that cut out individual parts, to which we ascribe meaning and value" (33). Nature, he writes, "has no other holiness than the one which it evokes in us", and it is only when we isolate certain features and construct around them "poetic fictions" that we arrive at "meaning and value" (33).[43] It is only when "the human soul, the source of all value" invests itself in the objective world that we perceive the relevant objects as having enriched our existence (33).

Here is the second method by which the creative spirit self-reflexively expresses itself. According to Simmel, the "spectrum" is as follows. On one side we find that "all meaning and value" derive from that "purely subjective life" that has been the basis of these investigations, and on the other side value

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[42] The values of which Simmel writes are tethered to various categories, namely, the "logical or moral, religious or artistic, [and] technical or legal" (31).

[43] Simmel provides the example of a sunrise, which stands outside "categories of value" because it "does not increase the value of this world or make it more sublime" (33). However, when the same sunrise is artistically interpreted by a painter, it is infused with his unique perceptions, and thus it may become a valuable piece of artistry which promotes "an increase in the value of existence as a whole" (33). The fact that the individual's eye has fallen upon this otherwise neutral natural phenomenon, and that the creative force of the human mind has

becomes equated with "objectification" (33). The latter position points to the necessity for the human soul to produce forms by which it manifests its significance: "Even sentiments and the personality obtain their significance, in a good or a bad sense, by belonging to a realm of the super-personal" (34). The path from the self to the self, in either case, is forged through "objectively spiritual realities", the spiritually infused forms which distil from life (34). Once again, the emphasis lies with the observation that the soul must move outside of itself and travel through its products before it can attain the heightened state of cultivation (34). Just as forms must be qualified by value if they are to retain their connection to the spirit that created them, value likewise must be "a value within some other context, promoting some interest or some capacity of our being" (34). Returning to the issue of a metaphysical unity, Simmel stipulates that the "total self" must come "one step closer to its perfected unity" if the value under consideration is to be termed "cultural" (34).[44] In seeming anticipation of what would have been a worthy modernist (and even more so, postmodernist) objection to this theory, the author acknowledges that in certain epochs, some phenomena may undeservingly be classified as cultural values. In his estimation, it is when life is rendered

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refashioned it into a "vessel" of the spirit, leads one to conclude that indeed it is man's interpretive power that ascribes a value not naturally given.

[44] For all of its contradictory protestations, Dada was preoccupied with the struggle to uncover (or forge) a unity out of the mire of modern life. For this reason, among others, vitalism found a ready audience in many of the satellite Dada groups, particularly those which inherited the neo-Romantic proclivities of German Expressionism. Ball testifies, in his diary entry for 12 June 1916, that the Dadaist does not naïvely seek a conventional panacean unity, but rather one that admits of the fragmentation and disintegration which suffuses modern culture:

> He no longer believes in the comprehension of things from *one* point of view, and yet he is still so convinced of the unity of all beings, of the totality of all things, that he suffers from the dissonances to the point of self-disintegration. (Flight Out of Time 66)

Elsewhere he cites the necessary invocation of a "creative force" to "solve" the "oppositions" of life (23.VI.1916, 70). The influences of Bergson and Simmel are clear.

devoid of meaning that resulting forms are transitively disconnected; they "are merely schematic", and so cannot perform their required function:

> In such a case individual development is capable of deriving from social norms only the socially correct form of conduct, from the arts only unproductive passive pleasures, and from technological progress only the negative aspect of the reduction of effort and the smoothness of daily conduct. The sort of culture that develops is formally subjective, but devoid of inter-weaving with those substantive elements so essential to culture. (34-35)

In such periods, an overwrought emphasis is placed on social manners and other "refinements" which really do not possess any "transformative potential" (Hubbard 56).

With regards to the artist *qua* creator, Simmel identifies "a twofold force…at work" (35). On one side we find "the expression of his essential powers", and the delight he derives from channelling his life into the objective forms he moulds into existence. The other side is predicated upon his "passionate dedication to the cause", according to which he feverishly labours on the details of the objective form; in the process he loses himself in his work. Only in the figure of the genius are these complementary sides unified: "To the genius, the development of the subjective spirit for its own sake and compelled by its own forces is indistinguishable from the completely self-negating devotion to an objective task" (35). At this point Simmel elucidates the distinction between synthesis and unity. Culture, he writes, "is always a synthesis", but that synthesis is to be distinguished from unity, for it "presupposes the divisibility of elements as an antecedent or as a correlative" (35).[45] In order for the unity of the creative genius to be recognized as

[45] With characteristic perspicacity, Simmel observes that only an age as "analytical" as his would see synthesis as "the most sublime of formal relationships between spirit and world" (35). Bergson, at around the same time, was levying the same critique against modern analytical programs of thought.

cultivation, the constituent subjective and objective realities must be "divided [so as] to be resuscitated in synthetic form" (36). It is this small but critical distinction which explains for Simmel why an "interest in culture" is not commensurate with "pure self-development of the subjective spirit or with pure dedication to a cause" (36). We are reminded here of what Simmel suggests on page 29, which is that the soul may reach itself through such profound experiences as "religious ecstasies" without attaining cultivation.[46]

The titular tragedy is explained at length when Simmel identifies and analyses the "paradox" inherent in the "subject-object-synthesis" of culture (39). In the life of the form or object, internal laws evolve which refuse to yield to the purposes and intentions of their creators (39). It is often the case, particularly with such cultural forms as language and religion, that the logic inherent in them develops its own momentum which carries the form further and further from the spiritual impulse which bore it:

> Indeed, everything objective possesses its own individual logic. Once certain themes of law, of art, of morals have been created – even if they have been created by most individual and innermost spontaneity – we cannot control the directions in which they will develop. Although we generate them, they must follow the guidelines of their own inner necessity, which is no more concerned with our individuality than are physical forces and their laws. (39)

The tragedy extends, however, beyond that between the forms and their spiritual origin. The soul inclines towards a unified organization which grows outward from a central point, and this esemplastic model forms the basis of the soul's tireless endeavours to arrange the "contents" it encounters in the same

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[46] As already proposed and explained, culture works through the institution of value to achieve a synthesis between the subjective world and the forms it creates. A subject can engender an inestimable amount of forms, and it is also capable of identifying and responding to objects created by other subjects. Thus, "to be cultivated becomes a task of infinite dimensions" (38). There is a danger, however, when such an overabundance of forms makes itself available. "Over-specialization" marks the academic as the possessor of knowledge and skill, but it does not render him cultivated (39).

fashion. This organizational model was instituted, according to Simmel, at man's first instance of self-consciousness, for it was then, when he "began to say 'I' to himself and became an object beyond and in comparison with himself", that "the contents of the soul" aggregated around the self-conscious germ.[47] However,

> the contents with which the "I" must organize itself into its own unified world do not belong to it alone. They are given to it from some spatially, temporarily idealized realm outside; they are simultaneously the contents of different social and metaphysical, conceptual and ethical worlds. (40)

Herein we find the intractable will of forms to dominate life. As Simmel puts it, "They aim to break up the centralization of cultural contents around the 'I' and reconstitute them according to *their* demands" (40). He resorts once again to the example of religion as a cultural form, for in spite of the fact that religion derives from seminal vital impulses, it has asserted itself to the point where man often feels himself torn between "freedom" and "subordination under divine order": "we are entangled because our life ideals are inevitably subsumed under other circles than those of our own 'I'" (40). In an attempt to maintain his primacy, man envisions himself as the locus through which "objective forces and values" pass, and in his estimation he selects and organizes these otherwise conflicting spheres of existence (the subjective, the objective, and the values of the latter) around himself in accordance with "the logic of his personality" (40).[48] It is still the responsibility of culture, however, to keep these spheres in "extremely close contact" so that "the development of the subject" remains "conditional on the assimilation of

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[47] The model is redolent of pearl formation, for both processes begin with a central entity around which secondary layers concretise. Of course, in the case of the pearl the initial irritant is external to the animal, while the soul's impulse is entirely its own.

objective material" (40). What initially appeared to be a resolution between the subject-object dualism (the synthesis offered by culture) is but a mirage, because on an even more profound level there rises in place of the initial conflict one "between subjective and objective developments" (40). As previously observed, the synthesis given by culture is relatively futile when what is really required for the transcendence of the dualism is a unity.[49]

Simmel's belief in the dominance of objects admits, in his own words, of Marx's concept of fetishism (42). He contextualizes his theories in the examples of technology and the development of the fine arts, and in the latter he finds that

> technical skills have developed to such an extent that they are emancipated from serving the cultural total purpose of art. By obeying only the indigenous material logic, the technique at this point develops refinement after refinement. However, these refinements represent only *its* perfection, no longer the cultural meaning of art. (43)

A similar case has, we are told, unfolded in the technological world, and each example serves to demonstrate the immutable truth uncovered herein. Forms may (and with increasing frequency do) dissociate themselves from the spiritual impulse which begot them, and over-specialization irrefutably attests

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[48] Schwitters is precisely this sort of creator, and we shall soon see to what extent he fulfils the general characterization offered here.

[49] At this point in the essay, Simmel cites the division of labour as evidence that "the object can step outside its mediating role...and break up the bridges over which the course of cultivation has been leading" (40). The interpretation of objects may be made on a "scale" which measures the degree to which the "unity" of the object "stems from the unified intellectual intention of one person", or from many (41). Simmel considers the case of the city, which comes into existence not through a concerted effort of thousands of individuals, but rather through "accidental needs and desires" (41). A factory, he writes, has localized areas of production overseen by a limited number of individuals, but there is a central organization, ultimately a single will, which dictates the products to be manufactured and the means by which they are. He gives the example of a newspaper as an intermediate between the two, for one "leading personality" presides as the director of "mutually accidental contributions of the most diverse form and of diverse individuals who are complete strangers to one another" (41). These cases, and others given on pages 41 and 42, prove that the "objective spirit" often transcends individual wills, and that it even contains within it "an independent chance of becoming re-subjectivized after...successful objectification, even when it was created by a subjective spirit" (42).

PAGINATION AS IN ORIGINAL

to "this very general cultural predicament" (43). The tragedy of culture, then, rests with the fact that man becomes subjected to objects initially intended as markers on the path leading back to the subjective life. Simmel tells us that this wayward process is similar to the one by which man becomes enslaved to logic with the result that "our thoughts are led into theoretical consequences which are far removed from those originally intended" (43).[50] The situation is much more than unfortunate or sad, he writes, because the destruction is enacted by the self against the self. The entire process is set in motion by a well meaning but perhaps misguided creative spirit (43). We may surmise, as Simmel does, that the predicament would not prove so dire if it were localized to one individual. Perhaps the spirit would be able to find itself again, for there would be only the forms to which it gave rise, and it is possible to imagine that the ratio of subject to objects would remain manageable. However, when millions of subjects are producing trillions of objects, "without any consideration for other contributors", cultural development soon enough overwhelms the individual (44):

> There is no reason why it should not be multiplied in the direction of the infinite, why not book should be added to book, work of art to work of art, or invention to invention. The form of objectivity as such possesses a boundless capacity for fulfilment. This voracious capacity for accumulation is most deeply incompatible with the forms of personal life. (44)

The soul, centred on the notion of self-consciousness, organizes all it encounters according to a centripetal force, as evidenced by the fact that we always interpret objects and concepts in terms of how they serve us. For the simple reason that the multiplicity of objects is too expansive to be

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[50] Bergson's pejorative view of an excessive reliance on concepts and logical analysis entirely concurs with what Simmel concludes. We shall, in the next chapter, follow Bergson's

An investigation into what was then the burgeoning culture of youth is not, however, the primary focus of "The Conflict in Modern Culture". The little Simmel does write about the vitality of youth is meant to complement his conclusions about vitality in general, and the shying away from formal constrictions is most evident in the young. The same holds for Ortega y Gasset, who writes about youth culture in order to underline his concerns about the violence inherent in modern society (140). (Simmel refrains from infusing his essays with such emotive language, but he does put forth conclusions that would later be corroborated by those of Ortega y Gasset.) Concerned as he is with the subject/object dualism of modern life, Simmel focuses his attention on the issue of originality, and it is at this point in the essay that he pauses to digress, in typical Simmelian fashion, upon a tangential matter. He finds in the philosophy of Pragmatism, particularly the American version, substantiation of that doctrine of originality so critical in modern culture. What Simmel takes away from Pragmatism is its refusal to recognize the "independence of truth, which has been presupposed throughout history" (19). He is not interested in supporting or denying its claims, but rather he wishes to note that the philosophy arose at a "particular stage in history":

> Pragmatism, as we have seen, deprives truth (*Erkennen*) of its old claim to be a free-floating domain ruled by independent and ideal laws. Truth has now become interwoven with life, nourished by this source, guided by the totality of its directions and purposes, legitimised through its basic values. Life has thus reclaimed its sovereignty over a previously autonomous province. (20)

The emphasis here is clearly on life and its transformative potential. Following this passage, Simmel writes that in the past, truth functioned as one of those cultural forms described at length in his essay "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture". It "provided a fixed frame…for the total world of our

thoughts and feelings", and in this way it claimed triumph over the subjectivity of life (20). The salient difference in modern philosophy rests with the reversal of the primacy of truth over life, for now "thought and feeling are being dissolved in and by the stream of life", and each object is interpreted in terms of the spirit which gave rise to it (20). Such conclusions are but a short step away from Bergson's metaphysical philosophy, as evidenced by Simmel's suggestion that once *intuition* is employed over "logic and rational intelligibility", we arrive at a point where "only life is capable of understanding life" (20).[65] Life becomes the referent that informs the interpretation of all objects, and thus form is dissolved in spirit, object in subject. These tenets are consistent with the doctrine of *Lebensphilosophie* (21), and they herald the conquest of classicism and its emphasis on formal constrictions.[66]

Lebensphilosophie, Simmel tells us, is predicated upon two basic principles: the eschewal of "mechanics as a universal principle", and the rejection of "the claim of ideas to a metaphysical independence and primacy" (21). Ruminating upon these conditions, one soon arrives at the issue of self-contemplation. If life refuses domination by ideas, then how legitimate are notions of self-consciousness, which are by necessity postulated in concepts and ideas? In his only footnote to the essay, Simmel addresses the logical impossibility of absolute self-consciousness, an exalted state of self-awareness and self-knowledge unperturbed by the rigidity of conceptual thought. Having already established that life and form exist in opposition to one another (but nevertheless are mutually dependent), Simmel posits that "the concept of life

[65] The passage is entirely redolent of Bergson.

cannot be freed from logical imprecision", precisely because "only that which is somehow formed can be conceptually described" (26). He continues,

> The essence of life would be denied if one tried to form an exhaustive conceptual definition. In order for conscious life to be fully self-conscious, it would have to do without concepts altogether, for conceptualization inevitably brings on the reign of forms; yet concepts are essential to self-consciousness. The fact that the possibilities of expression are so limited by the essence of life does not diminish its momentum as an idea. (26)

The tragedy inherent in life's self-expression is, in Simmel's estimation, unavoidable, but life continues to aspire to that initial unity which is the fountainhead of self-consciousness. In addition, the "internal opposition" between life and its primary method of realization, the generation of forms, "gets more noticeable the more self-conscious life becomes" (21). Simmel understands the modern age to be highly analytical, as evidenced by his conclusions in "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture", and he also characterizes it as an epoch abounding in forms, both commercial and cultural. The burden of all these forms (and attendant concepts, which at least in this case may be interpreted as a different species of form) prompts life to struggle more than ever in the interest of maintaining its independence and importance. At the same time, the more strenuously life asserts itself, the more apparent the obduracy of forms becomes. More profoundly, Simmel may be referring to what is in essence the positive feedback mechanism by which life seeks to assert itself over and beyond the forms that mediate that process of self-assertion.[67] As he expressed in an earlier passage, tragedies are tragic because

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[66] As defined by Simmel, "Classicism...is the ideology of form, which regards itself as the ultimate norm for life and creation" (21).

[67] Fortunately, positive feedback mechanisms are, physiologically speaking, rather rare. The self-regulating clotting of blood is a common example of a positive feedback mechanism, and the danger inherent in such a process is obvious.

they are self-begetting, and this is no less the case than with the tragedy of modern culture.

Conclusion

So it is then that Simmel was, in the final analysis, a philosopher of life, and only in this capacity can his sociological contributions be fully understood and appreciated.[68] It becomes clear through even a cursory comparison of his earlier and his later essays that he moved towards a philosophy that proposed the vitality of life above all other considerations. His writings on culture came to be coextensive with his *Lebensphilosophie*, and Frisby cites as an example of this progression the fact that in The Philosophy of Money, Simmel interprets the social fragmentation symptomatic of the money economy "as a consequence of the division of labour". He would later come to view the matter "as part of the general human predicament" (27).[69] For this reason among others, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" is an intriguing essay in which the theory of the individual Simmel proposes straddles economic considerations as well as vitalist ones. What begins as the struggle of the individual to resist the social tide in which he finds himself immersed, ends with the more critical struggle between his inner self and the self he must put forward in the context of the metropolis. The *blasé* outlook is the precursor of the positive feedback mechanism we identified in Simmel's essays on the conflict of culture. It is a development of life for the preservation of life, but like the tragedy of culture it turns upon its

[68] Weingartner: "Upon his philosophy of life and experience, Simmel builds his philosophy of culture" (55).

origin and cannot help but undermine it. Otto Gross, who like Simmel served as an alternative to Marxist readings of contemporary society, arrived at a theory of the individual that closely resembled that formulated by Simmel six years earlier in "The Metropolis and Mental Life". Summarized by Arthur Mitzman in "Anarchism, Expressionism and Psychoanalysis", Gross' theory is as follows:

> The inevitable conflict between society and the inborn predispositions of the individual, he argued, results in pathogenic injury to the individual. Since individuals internalize the standards of society, conflict does not, in general, occur openly between the individual and society, but rather within the individual psyche. (91-92)[70]

The perception of the metropolis as a Sodomic wasteland was hardly anything new by the time the German Expressionists were in their ascendancy, but when the carnage of World War I was factored in, it came to be, more than ever before, a parable for the condition described above. The new battleground on which the modern individual had to fight was sprawled out in his own mind, particularly as he strenuously tried to assert his individuality in the increasingly depersonalized milieu of the metropolis. Elderfield expands upon this common distinction between the inner life of the metropolitan and the brash external world with which it conflicts, and finds somewhere between

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[69] Frisby attributes this trend to Simmel's "growing interest in Bergson's philosophy", and proceeds to note how "after the *Soziologie* of 1908 and until 1914 all Simmel's volumes of published work are upon philosophy and aesthetics" (27).

[70] Gross and Simmel's conclusions are pictorially realized in many Expressionist paintings of the period, particularly in the metropolis paintings of Georg Grosz in which the fetid city assails the anaemic and frail citizen. The greatest of these works is undoubtedly "Widmung an Oskar Panizza" ("To Oskar Panizza", 1917-1918). Grosz's commentary on the piece emphasizes the rupturing chaos of the city that the Berlin Dadaists were soon to exploit in their aesthetically political agenda:

> At night, down a strange street, a diabolical procession of inhuman figures parade by, their faces eloquent of alcohol, syphilis, plague. One is blowing a trumpet, another yelling hurrah. Death rides among this multitude, in a black coffin, symbolized straightforwardly as a skeleton. (Kranzfelder 24)

the two a working resolution that the most successful of the Expressionists (with Schwitters being perhaps the most successful in this regard) explored:

> More relevant and important, however, to that sense of opposition between a public and a private world, which is central to Schwitters' art and psychology, and a more basic link between Schwitters and his contemporary Expressionist background, is his ambivalence towards his immediate environment and to its urban bourgeois culture. [...] As the literary historian Richard Sheppard well puts it, the most striking Expressionist literature emerges when the writer is sufficiently within the city to appreciate its forms yet sufficiently detached so as not to be overwhelmed by them. (169)[71]

Upon reading "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture", we find that Simmel abstracts this struggle further and takes it from the domain of the individual to that of a cosmic, Manichean conflict between the subjective vital force, which he simply calls "life", and the forms and objects it begets. These forms sustain the legacy of the life that engendered them, but they also, by virtue of their rigidity, erode its potency and the very vitality that defines it.[72] In A View of Life: Four Metaphysical Chapters, Simmel encapsulates his *Lebensphilosophie* in the terms "Mehr-Leben" ("more-life") and "Mehr-als-

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[71] In this regard, the work of the Expressionist August Macke offers an intriguing and unexplored parallel to Schwitters' position vis-à-vis Hanover. Schwitters had a difficult time waging war against his beloved city, but Berlin Dadaists like Huelsenbeck found it irretrievably provincial and employed its petty bourgeois reputation in the charges against Schwitters. His response, which was far more measured (but hardly indifferent), was similar in effect to Macke's:

> The chaos and scintillating attractions of the city, which stimulated and agitated so many of his contemporaries, do not appear to have interested Macke as much. His descriptions are always limited to his own, ordered, middle-class surroundings; beyond that, sociological analysis is a topic which evidently remained foreign to him. Macke's towns and their inhabitants tend to be more provincial in character – not loud and uncontainable, but contemplative and self-contained. (Meseure 61)

[72] Again, Frisby points out how far Simmel streamed towards Bergsonian metaphysics, departing as he did so from his former sociological standpoint. He cites Kracauer's comment that "the affinity between Simmel's doctrine and that of Bergson is unmistakeable" as further proof that Simmel finished as a vitalist (Sociological Impressionism 28). The fact that his vitalist years coincide with the advent of Dada, particularly the German Dada phenomenon, would lead one to believe that his aesthetics would be plumbed for the contemporary insight they would contribute to theories of Dada. Strangely enough this is not the case, and more often than not Simmel is cited sparingly in books on German Expressionism and only footnoted in books on Dada. Sheppard is the most notable exception in this regard, of course.

Leben" ("more-than-life"), and it is on these terms that I wish to conclude this chapter. Weingartner summarizes "more-life" as follows:

> By saying that life is more-life, Simmel declares life to be a process. Life is a motion; specifically, it is a motion which constantly reproduces itself, pushes beyond itself. Unlike mechanical changes, life is truly continuous; it "is an irreversible current in which every moment dissolves in the next." In contrast with the mechanical motions of inorganic things, life is fully temporal. (36)

"More-life" is a "self-perpetuating process" in that it begets vitality (it creates *more life*), and it is very close conceptually to Bergson's *duration* (53, 36), which will be explored in the next chapter. It refuses temporal and even spatial partitioning, for it constantly "transcends its present". Only life can sympathize with true temporality, that is, time as it truly exists in endless protraction, where the present moment is founded on the past and converges with the future. As we now know, however, life also coalesces into forms that challenge its vitality, and in this sense life is also "more-than-life". Weingartner writes that Simmel's theory of experience is what links life and the forms to which it gives rise, as experience is structural but is capable of structuring at the same time: "In their being experienced in some mode, contents are formed in one of many possible ways. In being formed, they become objects and independent of the process of life itself" (54). This notion of experience is seminal, for "if life is an experiential process, it cannot help but be creative" (54).

It is, furthermore, in the realm of creation that the articulation between these two species of life is exposed, and more directly we may witness the application of Simmel's theory in Schwitters' linked concepts of "Entformung", "Eigengift", "konsequent", and "Urbegriff". The first term, "Entformung", is one of those Schwittersian neologisms that echoes a familiar

word but is transposed slightly and thus given a new meaning. Elderfield suggests the possible translations of "metamorphosis" and/or "dissociation", but admits that exact translation is impossible. "Formung" corresponds to the English "forming", and the prefix "ent-" is akin to the prefix "un-" (237). The term was applied by Schwitters to characterize the mysterious process his found objects underwent when they were exported into his collages (237). The emphasis here is not so much on a reassignment of objects than on a deconstructive purification:[73]

> It meant, then, making something timeless and primeval – art, that is to say – from something temporal and modern, from the perishable fragments of the present. And in order to achieve this esthetic transubstantiation, the materials and fragments that Schwitters used needed to be purged of what he called their *Eigengift*, their inherent vice or personality poison. The image is of esthetic cleansing. (237)

"Eigengift" embodies an idea similar to the one Duchamp worked against, "taste", and in both cases the artist proved intent on erasing this "poison" from his work. It was perhaps not so much an exercise in "cleansing", for plenty of the items found in Schwitters' collages and assemblages remain in "rough" form, but it was more an exercise in imposing his design, his creative spirit, on an object that formerly served another (and another's) purpose. Elderfield relates that Schwitters considered art (read: Merz) to be "the antidote to the "Eigengift" that the world's objects contained", and it was, in his estimation, the reason why Schwitters produced abstract art, for "abstractness and purity

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[73] Harold Rosenberg's observation, "the unity of collage lies in the metaphysics of mixing formal and material realities through introducing the concreteness of the paste-in", points the way to another possible metaphysical interpretation of collage (61). There is a restless exchange, as already indicated, between life and its forms as well as between multiplicity and unity, although in the case of the latter dualism the arrows of the equation flow more towards unity. Within the collage work there is evidence of the vital flux, not only in the forms that have been selected, but also in the very process of assembling those forms. That "paste-in" process is, ultimately, "concrete" in that the final work is finished, static, and thus, in its rigidity, like the forms it originally resurrected ("Collage: Philosophy of Put-Togethers", in Collage: Critical Views).

were one and the same thing" (237). From "Eigengift" we move to "konsequent" ("consistent, rigorous, logical"), and here we encounter, in the most definite terms thus far, the self-reflexive crux of Schwitters' art. The selection and subsequent resurrection of objects, following a necessary period of purgation, had to be executed in the context of an art that was "subject only to its own autonomous laws" (237):[74]

> Moreover, since the "laws" of art were in fact the invention of the artist – since "the artist has his laws within himself, and this is why he can be so consistent" – to "dissociate" materials from the external world was also to associate them with a world of the artist's own making. (237)

Finally, the result of the "Entformung" process, the effacement of the "Eigengift", and the "konsequent" application of the purged object in the artwork result in the triumph of "Urbegriff", defined by Elderfield thusly:

> Art was a "spiritual function of man, which aims at freeing him from life's chaos (tragedy)." This was what Schwitters called an *Urbegriff*, a primeval concept, not a modern one; and the creation of art was the creation of timeless order out of temporal chaos, and the creation of a private retreat from the remains of the outside world. (238)

The struggle the individual faced against the collectivity of the metropolis, a struggle that Gross and Simmel tell us was relocated to the inner domain of the individual, was a struggle that became increasingly apparent in the aesthetic realm. After all, it was in this realm that self-consciousness, which had contemplated and sympathized with "more-life" and "more-than-life", became (through the concepts and processes of "Entformung", "Eigengift", "konsequent", and "Urbegriff") the self-reflexivity of Merz.

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[74] And as one of life's forms, art naturally developed its own laws, placing it in the perilous position of losing its connection to its original vitality. Dada art in general, and Schwitters' art in particular, may be read as a grand modernist project of straining to reconnect art with life, a project that had its earlier (although less successful) champions. The ironic thing was, however, that many Dada artworks pursued this ideal by cloaking themselves in banality

rather than inventiveness, but then again that irony was part of the methodology to which Dada subscribed.

Chapter II

Intuition, *Duration*, and the Manifestation of the *Élan Vital*: The Self-Reflexive Metaphysics of Bergson

"In Bergson's philosophy, every expressive medium, whether it be plastic, literary, or musical, is the end of a process whereby the inner, manifold self becomes spatialized through the process of self-representation."[1]

Introduction

Scholars familiar with Simmel's *oeuvre* consistently acknowledge that his later work, particularly A View of Life: Four Metaphysical Chapters, was heavily informed by contemporary vitalist philosophy.[2] Bergson was the most influential vitalist of the modernist period, and his significant contributions to philosophy were already in wide circulation prior to Simmel's death in 1918. As Frisby notes in Sociological Impressionism,

> Simmel, who was sometimes termed 'the German Bergson' and who encouraged the translation of Bergson's work (*Evolution créatrice* was translated by his close friend Gertrud Kantorowicz), would have readily concurred with Bergson's characterization of 'the rare moments of artistic creation' that signify 'this supra-individual life, this supra-consciousness of the *élan vital*'. (159)

Besides publishing his Bergson essay in 1914, Simmel recommended the philosopher's work to Edmund Husserl.[3] Sheppard suggests it was his ultimate propensity towards metaphysics that relegated Simmel to the recesses of the twentieth century academic canon (22), an accurate but somewhat ironic conclusion considering that the source of that brand of metaphysics, Bergson

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[1] The quotation appears in Mark Antliff's book Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde (48).

[2] In "Form and Content", Weingartner notes that although Bergson is never mentioned in Simmel's final book, the author was certainly guided by his influence. The link is proven by the fact that Simmel composed an essay entitled "Henri Bergson", which was included in the posthumously published book Zur Philosophie der Kunst. Philosophische und Kunstphilosophische Aufsätze [On the Philosophy of Art. Essays on Philosophy and Philosophy of Art] edited by Simmel's friend Gertrud Simmel (Georg Simmel 1858-1918 55).

[3] I am indebted to Professor David Frisby (University of Glasgow), who has kindly provided me with information on the scholarly connections between Simmel and Bergson.

himself, enjoyed a great deal of popularity – at least during his lifetime.[4] In this chapter, Bergson's theories concerning the role of metaphysics, the value of *intuition* over conceptual thought, the quintessence of *duration*, and the function of the comic will be probed with the aim of understanding the importance of introspection in the creative act and how it elucidates the question of self-reflexivity in the art of Schwitters.

Cultural History of Bergson's Influence: Problematic Popularity

In his highly informative study, Antliff vividly illustrates the contemporary popularity of Bergson, whose

> fame as a speaker was matched by his eminence as a writer – all his major works had been translated into English, German, Polish and Russian by 1914. At its height, the Bergsonian vogue even led to what the historian R.C. Grogin has called "mystical pilgrimages" to Bergson's summer home in Switzerland where "locks of his hair at the local barber's were treated as holy relics." (4)

This fanatical devotion to Bergson, which extended beyond academic circles to the general public, made his philosophical treatises highly accessible to contemporary artists within and beyond the bounds of Paris. Following his 1910 preface to the authorized translation of Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience (Time and Free Will – An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness, 1889), F.L. Pogson lists in his bibliography twenty-one German, thirty-one English, and fourteen Italian publications concerning

[4] Leck provides an appraisal of Simmel's academic career and suggests in his first chapter, "The Avant-Garde Origins of Sociology", what factors were responsible for the antagonism levied against Simmel by his peers. Pages 35-38 in particular examine that same antagonism, which Leck holds responsible for Simmel's lacklustre academic career.

Bergson's philosophy.[5] Ball, in his diary entry for 9 September 1917, ties Bergson to Zurich Dada with the following entry:

> In *Die Weissen Blätter* [*The White Leaves*] there is an essay "Das Erlebnis der Zeit und die Willensfreiheit" ("The Experience of Time and Free Will"). The essay is on Bergson. [...] At the time of the cabaret we were very interested in Bergson, and in his simultaneity. The result was a purely associative art. (Flight Out of Time 134)

And in his Memoirs of a Dada Drummer,[6] Richard Huelsenbeck recalls:

> ever since Bergson made us aware of the creative nature of our era, we have regarded (for the first time in history) simultaneity as creative, a simultaneity encompassing both man as a whole and the totality of milieu. A poem thus becomes something total or universal. [...] When I wrote *Phantastiche Gebete* [*Fantastic Prayers*], I knew nothing about his modern problem of simultaneity, which plays such an important part in physics now. But poetry and art did anticipate the scientific rejection of cause-and-effect logic. (168)

Huelsenbeck's quotation corroborates Sheppard's conclusions regarding the relationship between the arts and sciences in the immediately pre-modernist and modernist periods. Sheppard cites Ernst Mach as having acknowledged "the extent to which disciplines other than physics had moved from an objective to an energetic view of reality within a general climate of interdisciplinary ferment" (36). Throughout Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism he draws attention to the general conclusion, reached by many contemporary philosophers and physicists alike, that there was a non-Newtonian "metaworld" or "fourth dimension" where the traditional laws of cause and effect did not necessarily apply. According to Sheppard, "one of the central ideas of Mach's physical theory was that isolated things do not

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[5] Of course, the polyglot capabilities of most Dadaists would have allowed them to read Bergson's works in the original French. The primary point here is the readiness with which contemporary artists took to Bergsonian philosophy.

[6] The majority of this book was originally published as Mit Witz, Licht und Grütze. Auf den Spuren des Dadaismus (1957). It was later translated by Joachim Neugroschel and published in English as a volume of Motherwell's Documents of Twentieth-Century Art (1974). The edition consulted in this thesis is edited by Hans J. Kleinschmidt and includes a foreword by Rudolf E. Kuenzli (1991).

exist" (36).[7] Huelsenbeck's quotation cited above supports this conclusion from the vantage point of the poet. In his introduction to Huelsenbeck's Memoirs of a Dada Drummer, Kleinschmidt writes, "Bergson's philosophy emphasized the irrational intuitive aspects of mental functioning. We are, therefore, not surprised to find in Huelsenbeck a lifelong fascination with creative irrationality…" (Kleinschmidt xlii). What is said here of Huelsenbeck applies equally well to most of the Dadaists and particularly to Schwitters.

The Dadaists, however, were far from alone in their appreciation and fascination with Bergson. Undoubtedly, he was a philosopher who sincerely understood the modernist condition. His vitalist theories were related to the scientific advances being made during the time immediately preceding and contemporaneous with the modernist era, advances Sheppard would describe as having opened the window of consciousness onto the fourth dimension:

> But advances made in the areas of subatomic and astrophysics during the high modernist period by Mach, Max Planck, Albert Einstein, Louis de Broglie, Niels Bohr, Erwin Schödinger, and Paul Dirac (which almost certainly owed something to the more global cultural and sociopolitical upheavals that were taking place as well as the impact of vitalism, especially in its Bergsonian form) showed that, beyond the apparently stable and harmonious world of classical physics, there lay a "metaworld" or "fourth dimension" that was not describable in Newtonian terms. (36 and *passim*)

While physicists and biologists were probing the depths of the "fourth dimension" in their respective disciplines, contemporary artists like Duchamp were exploring the "metaworld" in the newly unfolded realm of the psyche,

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[7] Such a position is absolutist, and so it partakes of the belief that "if we knew all about anything, we would know all about everything" (Baylis 13). In practice, this theory prompted many avant-gardists, particularly the Futurists and Dadaists, to pursue *bruitist*, simultaneous, and static poetry. The Atlas Press editors of Huelsenbeck's Dada Almanach (Dada Almanac, 1920) provide an excellent summary of these three poetic modes (47). Charles Baylis' chapter on absolutism in his edition of Metaphysics challenges some aspects of this metaphysical doctrine, if only in an attempt to reconcile it with idealism.

which in turn was continuing to come unravelled in the work of Sigmund Freud and his fellow psychoanalysts. In The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp, Jerrold Seigel relates the blossoming studies of motion in science and technology to

> the world human beings carried inside them, the vital and fluid world of the mind. [...] Bergson's attention to such transforming events made his philosophy appeal both to traditionalists interested in upholding the independent power of the soul or spirit and to radicals in search of human powers capable of bringing about fundamental change. (56)[8]

Tisdall and Bozzolla's Futurism makes frequent reference to the impact Bergson's vitalism had on the Italian Futurists, particularly Marinetti and Boccioni. The authors state that "in Bergson, Marinetti recognized an anti-determinist philosopher proposing a future formed not by the unchangeable forces of the past, but by the action of men in the here and now: a voluntarist philosophy as expressed in Creative Evolution" (21). Also, "The notion of 'states of mind', like 'universal dynamism', reached Boccioni by way of Bergson's Matter and Memory [Matière et mémoire, 1896], and was another shared theme among the Futurist painters and many others of their generation" (43). Bergson's influence, as suggested in Futurism, may have found its most dedicated pictorial representation in the paintings of the Futurists, but it must be noted that his theories were so readily absorbed by modernist artists that traces of Bergsonian philosophy are detectable in nearly every modernist movement.[9] Should we begin now to pursue those traces of Bergson's theories, whether in pure or digested form, or even in just the major art

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[8] In the fourth chapter of Seigel's book, there is an extensive discussion of the critical role the fourth dimension played in Duchamp's "La Mariée mis à nu par ses célibataires, même" ("The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even", 1912, 1915-1923). It suffices to note for our purposes that "Duchamp's fourth dimension is a kind of utopia of aesthetic existence, where imagination never has to give way to the conditions and limits of real life" (105).

movements of this period, we are in danger of dedicating volumes to the topic. Let us then return to Antliff's book, which not only presents an exhaustive study on the role Bergson played in the evolution of the Cubist movement and in particular his reception by the Puteaux Cubists, but also explores the political atmosphere of the period between the turn of the century and World War II.

As has been noted and thoroughly analysed in many secondary texts on modernism, the period was particularly rife with struggle in Europe and many temporary alliances were forged and ruptured, contributing to the turbidity of the modernist experience. Antliff provides a detailed account of the various political and accompanying literary factions operating in France during the early 1900s, and because his description is so thorough it would be pointless to reproduce it here in its entirety; rather, I refer the reader to its location.[10] It is necessary, however, to provide a cursory assessment of the political environment during the era immediately preceding the first World War in France, as it is coextensive with Bergson's most active and influential years as well as with the formative years of many Dadaists such as Duchamp and Breton. Firstly, we encounter on both sides of the political spectrum an antipathy to the French Republic (6). Those on the right aligned themselves more or less with the highly conservative monarchist Charles Maurras, who founded the Action Française in 1899. Martin Conway, in Catholic Politics in Europe: 1918-1945, identifies the Action Française as one of several groups "representative both of the increased engagement of intellectuals with politics

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[9] Christopher Butler's Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe 1900-1916 is an excellent source of information for those inclined to further pursue this point.
[10] The account is to be found in the introductory chapter of Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde, pages 3-15.

and of the renewed interest in Catholicism in French intellectual circles during the pre-1914 era" (25). Working strenuously on the left were the "anarcho-individualists, anarcho-communists, and anarcho-syndicalists", the last of whom "founded the Confédération Générale du Travail (C.G.T.) in 1895 in order to organize labor in strike actions against the Republic" (Antliff 6). Some of the main figures on this side were "the socialist Gustave Hervé, editor of the incendiary *La Guerre social* (1906-1915), and the anarcho-syndicalist theoretician Georges Sorel, who celebrated the violence entailed in class struggle, [both of whom] led autonomous factions within the anti-republican movement" (6). What complicates the matter further is that several ephemeral allegiances were forged when the self-interest of the various group leaders could be served by aligning with the opposition. There were, then, transitory pacts made between Sorel and the Action Française, as well as between Hervé and the same. Threading through all of these bonds was an anti-Semitism directed not only against large Jewish business establishments like the Rothschilds, but also against Jewish culture in general. The formation of the Camelots du Roi, "a gang of militant thugs whose direct-action tactics against state institutions, parades, and individuals initiated a series of public scandals", elicited some unlikely support from Maurras, who is quoted in Antliff as saying that working-class militancy was less of a threat to France and French interests than a government sympathetic with "Jewish big business" (8). Eventually, however, the outrageous attacks by the Camelots du Roi prompted Hervé and Maurras to put greater and greater distance between their respective groups and the violently racist Camelots. Hervé was becoming increasingly concerned that he was alienating valuable support from

the Left, while Maurras feared driving away Catholics and his fellow royalists. Philosophical rumination was not far from all of this turbulence, for "Sorel's antirationalist theory of class consciousness...was particularly abhorrent to Maurras...who founded his philosophy on the rationalist tenets of the French positivist Auguste Comte" (9). In contrast to Maurras' philosophy, "Bergsonian ideas were at the heart of Sorel's revolutionary doctrine" (10). The differences extended into the realm of aesthetics as well:

> Such conflict also led to disagreement among literary exponents of Maurras's ideology. Although united in their condemnation of the Symbolist movement because of its "anarchic" individualism, Maurras's literary interpreters differed in their judgment of what exactly constituted Symbolism's anarchic component. More doctrinaire followers, such as Lasserre and Jean-Marc Bernard, the founder of *Les Guêpes* [*The Wasps*] (1909-1913), supported Maurras's association of French art with a rationalist tradition rooted in the Cartesianism of the seventeenth century and the Greco-Roman culture of classical antiquity. They pitted their neoclassicism against the anti-intellectual and Bergsonian tenets of the neo-Symbolist movement [...]. (10)

Bergsonian philosophy, as Antliff reports, was contorted to fit the agenda of the party at hand, a tendency that has marred Bergson's legacy to this day. Nearly every secondary account of Bergson and his work is now mindful to distinguish between the carefully posited tenets of the philosopher and the distortions that have occurred since they were formulated.[11] It was, perhaps, the appropriation of Bergson's vitalism by Sorel and the militant Left that contributed, more than anything, to Bergson falling into disrepute after such a

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[11] For example, Alexander's first words of Bergson: Philosopher of Reflection are dedicated to this issue of severe misinterpretation. The stakes are high, to be sure, as Bergson's vitalism came to be unfairly linked to Fascist irrationalist thought:

> On the one hand, in the process of penetration and diffusion, his thought has been altered beyond recognition; between 'Bergsonism' and the actual philosophy there is often but a mere nominal link. On the other hand, this power of renewal is of the very essence of a philosophy that claims above all to be 'open'. (7)

In the article "Bergson and the Politics of Vitalism", Sanford Schwartz addresses the issue of the charge of irrationalism on pages 290-291 (The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy).

sustained popularity. His vitalist philosophy has, in the past, been linked to Nietzschean vitalism, and both have been accused of spurring on and reinforcing twentieth century fascism.[12] Bergson moulded his theories out of the same milieu that informed the artwork of the Parisian avant-garde, and Antliff has already explored the profound influence his philosophy held over the Fauves and the Cubists. Considering that each segment of Dada – Zurich, Berlin, New York, Paris, *et cetera* – incorporated, or at the very least revolted against tenets of the preceding avant-garde movements, it is fair to suggest that when it comes to Bergson's influence, what impacted the Fauves and the Cubists impacted the Dadaists. We need not rely on this observation, however, to justify our examination; the testimony of individual Dadaists (some of which has already been given) and the salient vitalist tendencies of many Dadaist artworks proves the links are there, awaiting critical exploration.

The Terms of Bergson's Philosophy: The *Intuition* of *Duration*

Before we continue with our investigative attempts to link Bergson's theories with our theory of self-reflexivity, let us take some time to define some of his most frequently employed philosophical terms. The logical place to begin a survey of his philosophy is with Introduction à la métaphysique (An Introduction to Metaphysics, 1903), which concisely puts forth some of the signature theories of *intuition*, *duration*, *memory*, and *mobility*. The book begins by identifying two different ways of "knowing a thing": the first by way of moving around it and observing it from the outside, the second (and

[12] Like Simmel, however, Bergson is currently enjoying a comeback, and pioneering works like The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy offer insightful re-examinations of his contributions to the diverse fields of philosophy, aesthetics, and even physics.

the one favoured by Bergson) by way of entering into it, and thus observing it from the inside out.[13] For Bergson, the first method does not move beyond the "relative", while the second is capable of "attaining the absolute" (1). As is his habit (a predilection incidentally that makes his work highly accessible and enjoyable), he proceeds to illustrate his point with vivid examples. The first is the case of an object travelling through space:

> But when I speak of an *absolute* movement, I am attributing to the moving object an interior and, so to speak, states of mind; I also imply that I am in sympathy with those states, and that I insert myself in them by an effort of imagination. [...] In short, I shall no longer grasp the movement from without, remaining where I am, but from where it is, from within, as it is in itself. I shall possess an absolute. (2)[14]

The second example suggests that a reader presented with the character of a novel cannot hope to reconstitute an actual personage from the fragmentary views offered by the author, even if those views are reminiscent of an historical person. Descriptions, whether elementary and non-fictional (such as a news journalist's account) or complex and abstract (as with a painter's depiction of an event composed from memory), fall miserably short of the actual experiences because they seek to equate the perceptions and resulting mental impressions with others already known and understood by the audience (6). Hence the nearly unavoidable peppering of eyewitness accounts with

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[13] For simplicity's sake I shall refer to this work as a book, for this is how it has been published in English since T.E. Hulme's authorized translation of 1910. According to both Pogson's bibliography at the beginning of Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience (Time and Free Will, 1889) and the list of English translations of Bergson's works referred to in Burwick's and Douglass' The Crisis in Modernism, it originally appeared as a long essay in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* as "Introduction à la métaphysique" (1903). It was later reprinted as the sixth chapter in La Pensée et le mouvant (1934), translated in 1946 as his autobiography, The Creative Mind.

[14] Already, it is tempting to make connections between the above quotation and the works, both literary and visual, of Dada. We may draw a parallel with Schwitters, who did not paint cityscapes depicting the ever-evolving heaps of urban rubbish, but chose instead to collect this very refuse and tack it onto his canvases. In this creative act, he was displaying the city with its definite and identifiable by-products, and thus was employing his *intuition* not just to

similes, which serve to provide the hearer with links to familiar memories or concepts already mastered. Metaphor, although by its nature more abstract and creative, still works to the same end. Obfuscating the initial impression even further is the habit or taste of the journalist, storyteller, or artist; there are, in truth, no objective accounts. As Bergson explains,

> A representation taken from a certain point of view, a translation made with certain symbols, will always remain imperfect in comparison with the object of which a view has to be taken, or which the symbols seek to express. (5)

Such a collection of representations, along with the accompanying symbols, constitutes an *analysis*. Our convention of fragmenting the *absolute* into familiar elements and our inability to explicate what is unique about it condemns us to multiply our initial error. Thus, the further we carry the *analysis* the greater the distance we put between the *absolute* and our knowledge of it:

> In its eternally unsatisfied desire to embrace the object around which it is compelled to turn, analysis multiplies without end the number of its points of view in order to complete its always incomplete representation, and ceaselessly varies its symbols that it may perfect the always imperfect translation. It goes on, therefore, to infinity. (6)

There is one method Bergson proposes of gaining intellectual access to an external object or phenomenon. It is the invocation of *intuition*, and it is one of the cornerstones of his philosophy. To gain knowledge of the *absolute*, which is "perfect by being perfectly what it is" (5), one must be prepared to *sympathize intellectually* with the object or phenomenon at hand, and to "place oneself within" (6) so that no translating medium is required. Once we align ourselves with the subject and investigate its unique qualities from within, we

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represent the city but also to present it in a much purer and more immediate form than any painting could.

may grasp it "without any expression, translation or symbolic representation" (7). "*Metaphysics*", the discipline that strives to employ *intuition* over *analysis*, "*is the science which claims to dispense with symbols*" (7, author's italics).[15]

From his theory of *intuition*, we move swiftly to Bergson's theory of *duration*, which itself is invaluable in an investigation into the intricacies of the introspective act:

> There is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time – our self which endures. We may sympathise intellectually with nothing else, but we certainly sympathise with our own selves. (8)

In this quotation, we find the basis of the self-reflexive act as it relates to self-consciousness. Bergson begins by building his case for *pure duration* by carefully distinguishing between time as it is measured by the physicists and time as it is lived by consciousness (Alexander 8). Time as measured and utilized by science is understood to be homogenous, and likewise it is contained in homogeneous space. In Time and Free Will, Bergson debunks the theories of homogeneous space and time when he observes that we frequently mistake qualitative differences in sensations as quantitative ones. The example of how we instinctively recognize the difference between left and right is given: "we ourselves distinguish our right from our left by a natural feeling, and that these two parts of our own extensity do then appear to

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[15] Either the modernist *Zeitgeist* suggested this theory to Bergson, or the theory he formulated led to parallel conclusions reached by contemporary artists such as the Dadaists; the point of exchange probably lies somewhere in between. In his introduction to The Creative Mind, Bergson acknowledges Spencer as having been a major influence with regards to a theory of *intuition* (11). At the same time, Ball anticipates what was to be one of the main challenges to Bergson's theory. He writes, "Intuition, however, is also fantastic. It comes from the five senses and will offer the artist only transformed facts of experience, but not elements of form" (6.VIII.1916, Flight Out of Time 73). Bergson stressed frequently that *intuition* was not to be the only means of attaining knowledge, but its invocation did require greater effort.

us as if they bore a different *quality*; in fact, this is the very reason why we cannot give a proper definition of right and left" (97).[16] There are, then, qualitative differences "everywhere in nature" (97), but our geometrically inclined minds, in a never ending endeavour to economize action in the world of solids, are content with conceiving of space as homogeneous. Such an active (mis)conception "enables us to use clean-cut distinctions, to count, to abstract, and perhaps also to speak" (97). Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that our consciousness is not "clean-cut", and it certainly cannot be divided into autonomous mental states that remain external to one another.

As Ian Alexander explains, *duration* is an "ever-changing multiplicity of interlocking states" (21). It is necessary then to discover what Bergsonian multiplicity is before we continue with *duration*. The second chapter of Time and Free Will begins with a discussion of "numerical multiplicity and space". Number, Bergson writes, is both unity and multiplicity (76). It is unity because "it is brought before the mind by a simple intuition and is given a name", but it is also multiplicity because each number is composed of others, which are in turn composed of yet more numbers (76). Thus, there enters into the picture the question of whether or not those composite units are identical, as we assume them to be, or whether we attempt to overlook the individual object in the counted total in order to arrive expeditiously at a final figure:

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[16] The first chapter of Time and Free Will is primarily concerned with how we are to distinguish quantitative differences in sensation and emotion from qualitative differences. We are accustomed, Bergson states, to ascribing quantitative differences to our emotions: we are more or less angry, we are more or less in love, *et cetera*. However, Bergson disproves this idea:

> an obscure desire gradually becomes a deep passion. Now, you will see that the feeble intensity of this desire consisted at first in its appearing to be isolated and, as it were, foreign to the remainder of your inner life. But little by little it permeates a larger number of psychic elements, tingeing them, so to speak, with its own colour: and lo! your outlook on the whole of your surroundings seems now to have changed radically. (8)

> We place ourselves at these two very different points of view when we count the soldiers in a battalion and when we call the roll. Hence we may conclude that the idea of number implies the simple intuition of a multiplicity of parts or units, which are absolutely alike. (76)

"And yet they must be somehow distinct from one another, since otherwise they would merge into a single unit", Bergson continues. He gives us the model of a flock of sheep, and asks us to consider how individuals may still be "enumerated" even though their individuality precludes us from arriving at a "total" at which we would arrive if we were to add integers to achieve the sum. He suggests that if we were to dispense with the actual animals and rely instead on a mental image of them, we arrive before two possibilities: "Either we include them all in the same image, and it follows as a necessary consequence that we place them side by side in an ideal space, or else we repeat fifty times in succession the image of a single one" (77). So that we may mentally come to rest at the final number, fifty, we are obliged to "retain the successive images which we picture to ourselves" (77). Although we begin, as children, to count by physically noting individual objects (the example provided is a row of balls), we soon move away from our reliance on the objects themselves to a much less cumbersome mental image. Soon after that point we are left with an "*abstract* number", and eventually we come to work only with symbols and words. "Quick calculation" demands that we become adept at mentally manipulating those abstract numbers; otherwise we should constantly have before us the exact objects which are to be counted. We vacillate then between unity and multiplicity. Furthermore, Bergson proposes that what we understand as unit and unity is more complex than it first appears:

> When we assert that number is a unit, we understand by this that we master the whole of it by a simple and indivisible intuition of the

> mind; this unity thus includes a multiplicity, since it is the unity of a whole. But when we speak of the units which go to form number, we no longer think of these units as sums, but as pure, simple, irreducible units, intended to yield the natural series of numbers by an indefinitely continued process of accumulation. It seems, then, that there are two kinds of units, the one ultimate, out of which a number is formed by a process of addition, and the other provisional, the number so formed, which is multiple in itself, and owes its unity to the simplicity of the act by which the mind perceives it. (80)[17]

There are also, according to Bergson, "two very different kinds of multiplicity" (85), and it is at this point that we may re-approach the question of *duration* and how it is that we so commonly misrepresent our states of consciousness.

To "speak of material objects" is to "localize them in space"; we imagine seeing them, touching them, and perhaps manipulating them (85). To count them is easy in this case, for we only need to fix them mentally in the space in which they were initially encountered: "no effort of the inventive faculty or of symbolical representation is necessary" (85). The same does not hold, however, for states of consciousness, or to be more precise, "purely affective psychic states" or "mental images other than those built up by means of sight and touch" (86). We are obliged to invoke symbols when we endeavour to count such abstract impressions, and the medium in which we count them is space.[18] Bergson observes that "impenetrability of matter" and "number" suggest one another, for objects must be distinct and isolated in

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[17] As with Simmel, concerns of "multiplicity" and "unity" occupy much of Bergson's work. Throughout many primary and retrospective Dada accounts, we find very similar concerns being voiced (see Motherwell's anthology, Memoirs of a Dada Drummer, and Flight Out of Time).

[18] Bergson, on pages 86 and 87 of Time and Free Will, invokes the example of a distant bell, whose tolls are counted by an attentive listener. The person may opt to collect the successive sounds reaching him and assemble them into a single impression, or he may actively commit himself to totalling the chimes. Should he decide on the latter option, he must acknowledge the interval between each toll. If he does not, the distinction between the tolls is effaced, and the sounds in merging defy enumeration. Bergson concludes that because the intervals remain even when the sounds fade, it is in space that we count them, and not in *pure duration* (87).

space in order for us to count them. States of consciousness, "feelings, sensations, [and] ideas", cannot be counted because it is their nature to penetrate and colour the states that came before them and those that follow. Should we attempt to isolate and count them, we should then render them precisely what they are not – impenetrable to one another (89). When we refrain, however, from our vain attempts to dissect and count our sensations and emotions, we absorb their totality and allow ourselves a glimpse of the profundity that endures beneath the shallow, geometrically organized surface. In An Introduction to Metaphysics, Bergson produces a schematic map that posits the layers we encounter when we turn our gaze inwards.[19] The first layer is comprised of perceptions that are related to us by our senses and originate in the "material world". Beneath this layer, we have all of the memories that have associated themselves with similar perceptions from the time of our birth and which serve to "interpret them". The "tendencies and motor habits" follow (8). Progressing further, there appears

> beneath these sharply cut crystals and this frozen surface, a continuous flux which is not comparable to any flux I have ever seen. There is a succession of states, each of which announces that which follows and contains that which precedes it. (9)

Consciousness, for Bergson, cannot be isolated from memory for the reason that every sensation, as soon as it makes its impact on the person, is swept up

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Pure duration does not admit of intervals, as it is an "organic whole" which cannot be divided into discrete and thus enumerable units.

[19] The objection may be raised that such a partitioning contradicts what Bergson has thus far propounded, namely the impossibility of dividing states of consciousness into tidy, manageable segments. It must be remembered that Bergson frequently acknowledged the fact that we are most comfortable in the world of solids and geometry, and that analysis, concepts, and the language we employ to arrive at such concepts cannot be easily transcended. Bergson would have been aware of the necessity to make at least some concessions to a more common discourse, if only to elucidate the shortcomings of said method. Furthermore, he says elsewhere that the use of imagery serves to draw the reader to a point where he may then launch his own investigations. It is his belief in that *inner duration* which every man possesses that allows Bergson the confidence to make such seemingly contradictory concessions.

in that "continuous flux", the successive moments of which build on those that came before and influence all the others that will follow (9). In fact, unconsciousness is the only result possible when we eliminate memory, for then each moment would truly be independent of its predecessors and successors; "it would die and be born again continually" (10).[20] The flux of *duration* is, for Bergson, reminiscent of a "myriad-tinted spectrum" (11), although he is careful to admit that this comparison is flawed. As with a spectrum, there is a series of colours and tints that follow one another but remain distinct from their neighbours. Each shade contains within it the preceding one and the one that follows it in the series. *Duration* differs from this model in several significant ways, which Bergson duly notes. First of all, a spectrum is a *fait accompli*, while *duration* is constantly evolving. It is, as the philosopher states in Creative Evolution, "the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances" (Creative Evolution 4). The incorporation of the past and its influence on the future are the signature properties of *duration*, without which "there would never be anything but the present – no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution..."(4-5). The second way in which *duration* differs from the spectrum model is that in the latter, each shade is distinct from the ones immediately surrounding it, no matter how fine the gradation, while *duration*

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[20] And just as critical as memory, at least in Schopenhauer's estimation, is a "known" for the "knower":

> For *consciousness* consists in knowing; but knowing requires a knower and a known; hence self-consciousness could not come about if there were not in it also an element which vis-à-vis the knower is both known and distinctly different. [...] Hence a consciousness which would be, completely and utterly, pure intelligence cannot possibly exist. ("On the Primary of the Will in Self-Consciousness", The World as Will and Idea 88)

Years later, Bergson would arrive at a conclusion that also challenges the supremacy of intelligence. Schopenhauer finds that the germ from which self-consciousness springs is "the

is seamless. Alexander observes that "psychic duration...is a fusion of heterogeneous parts so structured that each moment is absorbed into the following one, transforming it and being transformed by it, with the consequent transformation of the whole" (11). Yet even such a seemingly accurate statement is slightly flawed, for it suggests that "heterogeneous parts" lie beneath the "whole", which is so thorough in its unity that it is fallacious to even speak of "parts". Finally *duration*, which manifests itself in "the inner life", demonstrates without effort a "variety of qualities, continuity of progress, and unity of direction" (An Introduction to Metaphysics 13). It is not representable by images, and concepts are even less likely to render a proper picture of *duration* (13). How then is he justified in attempting to convey the essence of *duration*, and how is it that he can produce significant philosophical works that employ models and images purporting to explain its intricacies? Is it not possible that the generation of multiple analyses may actually harm the reader's endeavours to grasp and internalise the theory he propounds? Does the proliferation of such analyses obscure the original object and create dead-end diversions that the mind cannot help but frantically explore (6)?

Thankfully, Bergson identifies this concern, and his resolution points the way to the integration of self-reflexivity and *intuition*. Bergson's method throughout An Introduction to Metaphysics, among other works of his, is to try and impart working definitions through examples. He realizes, as evidenced by various disclaimers, that a philosopher can only lead the reader towards an understanding of *duration*, but that the reader must then gaze

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will", while Bergson would promote the *élan vital* as the original force behind self-

introspectively and establish for himself – using his own *intuition* – what the essence of *duration* is. He suggests

> No image can replace the intuition of duration, but many diverse images, borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized. (14)[21]

He remains vague as to how exactly a consciousness that is tailored "to a particular and clearly-defined disposition" (14) then assimilates the examples provided and comes to its own personal conclusions regarding the matter. Perhaps his reluctance to define an exact method is in keeping with his insistence that the student of metaphysics can only ever master his own *intuition*, and that he can only be nudged, not escorted, in the direction of a complete understanding:

> We do penetrate into it, however, and that can only be by an effort of intuition. In this sense, an inner, absolute knowledge of the duration of the self by the self is possible. (20)

Through his constant use of simple but effective examples, Bergson presents "various images" that only hint at the complexity of *duration*. The dissimilarity of the examples ensures that the reader will not focus excessively on one image, but attempt to piece all of them together and thus prompt his own consciousness towards understanding. The onus remains on the individual to employ his own unique *intuition*; the only way by which he may discover *duration* is through introspection, or more specifically, a self-reflexive introspection. Once he has grasped it, his own *duration* then informs

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consciousness. Differences in terminology aside, the two concepts are remarkably similar.

[21] These lines are of great import to our theory of self-reflexive art, for just as the artist dissolves his presence in his work (if only to recover it in a more significant way), the work itself is subject to dissolution. Dissolution and fragmentation are not, in this regard, necessarily negative, for at least with some artists, the fragmentation of the pictorial space or the dissolution of conventional dimensions was a positive subversion of the fragmentary nature of the modernist experience. We shall return to the issue of "diverse images" when we enter into our discussion of Merz collage and assemblage.

his judgments about all the observations his senses relay to him. He has achieved a self-reflexive condition which shall permit him to perceive reality – and himself – "without any veil" (14). This process is, however, not an easy one to employ, for it calls us to set aside familiar ways of assessing realities both exterior and interior to us. We are, Bergson repeatedly tells us, accustomed to mistaking "the *elements* of a translation as if they were *parts* of the original" (31).[22] Some psychologists succumb to the same errors, as they feverishly endeavour to reconstruct the personality from a collection of observed psychic states (25). Any given personality is so fluid, so variable, and so permutational that it can never be properly represented by something as comparatively staid as a concept. Furthermore, the initial error is even more pernicious, as we frequently concern ourselves not "with fragments of the thing, but only, as it were, with fragments of its symbol" (25). As he emphasizes so many times in this study, one must commit oneself to reaching an understanding by seizing the object using its own terms, that is to say by employing one's own *intuition*:

> a true empiricism is that which proposes to get as near to the original itself as possible, to search deeply into its life, and so, by a kind of *intellectual auscultation*, to feel the throbbings of its soul; and this true empiricism is the true metaphysics. It is true that the task is an extremely difficult one, for none of the ready-made conceptions which thought employs in its daily operations can be of any use. (31)

Let us pause and consider the example of our emotions, and how our meagre (mis)representations of such emotions actually depreciate the feelings we intuitively understand to be profound and unique.[23] Most often when we speak of love, we overlook its complexity and ignore the psychic history

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[22] Such a flawed "method" is, in his opinion, what Hippolyte Taine and "certain German pantheists" have in common (31).

which has made love possible in the first place. An emotion, or any psychic state for that matter, brings with it the memory of those that preceded it, and is coloured by the current state of mind and the unique circumstances in which that mind finds itself at that moment. Thus "love" is, strictly speaking, never the same emotion twice, and the same may be said for any emotion one wishes to suggest. It would be impractical, however, to denote each of these singular states with its own name, for their generation is exponential, and we would never be able to hint succinctly at what we mean to convey. It is for this reason that we generalize greatly by using the word "love", which encapsulates an idea with which the world is familiar. The sacrifices we make, however, in the name of facilitated communication, hinder our efforts when we attempt to describe the singularity of an object or emotion:

> This substitution is necessary to common-sense, to language, to practical life, and even, in a certain degree, which we shall endeavour to determine, to positive science. *Our intellect, when it follows its natural bent, proceeds on the one hand by solid perceptions, and on the other by stable conceptions.* It starts from the immobile, and only conceives and expresses movement as a function of immobility. [...] But, in doing that, it lets that which is its very essence, escape from the real. (56)

In Bergson's view we must overcome our natural tendency to generalize, and leave behind us the impulse to draw comparisons where very few, if any, exist; we must rely upon a self-reflexive methodology to lead our own consciousness to a more insightful understanding. This conclusion applies not only to the individual, but as Bergson states, to philosophy as well:

> What is really important for philosophy is to know exactly what unity, what multiplicity, and what reality superior both to abstract unity and multiplicity the multiple unity of the self actually is. Now

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[23] Again, I refer the reader to Time and Free Will (pages 8-11), in which Bergson writes of the impossibility of partitioning emotions into intensities of greater or lesser value.

> philosophy will only know this when it recovers possession of the simple intuition of the self by the self. (33)[24]

His critique of concepts and traditional modes of analysis extends to Hegelian dialectics. He explains that concepts, which often can be reduced to a thesis and an antithesis, are difficult to reconcile when an object is analysed. However, should one engage the same object through one's *intuition*, then the thesis and the antithesis easily follow, and their reconciliation is a fluid one (34). The intuitive mind understands that two diverging concepts exist both in opposition and in harmony, and that apparently irreconcilable states are simply different facets of the object's unique interior life (34). *Intuition* acknowledges the "variability" of its accompanying *duration*, and in doing so quickly recognizes the variability of all realities:

> there is no state of mind, however simple, which does not change every moment, since there is no consciousness without memory, and no continuation of a state without the addition, to the present feeling, of the memory of past moments. It is this which constitutes duration. Inner duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present, the present either containing within it in a distinct form the ceaselessly growing image of the past, or, more probably, showing by its continual change of quality the heavier and still heavier load we drag behind us as we grow older. Without this survival of the past into the present there would be no duration, but only instantaneity. (38)

It is critical to note that in Bergson's philosophy, all realities reverberate with an underlying vitality. *Intuition* "places itself in mobility" (40) and accounts for these reverberations, no matter how subtle or imperceptible to the senses they are. *Analysis*, meanwhile, fixes itself and attempts a photographic snapshot of a single moment. *Intuition* seeks the "real *parts*" of an object, reality, or phenomenon, while *analysis* is content to deal with "*partial*

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[24] This passage is very much redolent of the passage we investigated in Simmel's "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture": "Culture is the way that leads from the closed unity through the unfolded multiplicity to the unfolded unity" (29). The "superior reality" on which

expressions" (24). If an overall *intuition* of that same object has already been attained, then a reconstruction of that object from "real *parts*" is possible. Without that original intuitive response, however, an analytic approach can never hope to assemble the "expressions" into the whole. Simply put, an intuitive approach can lead one to *analysis*, but "the inverse operation is impossible" (25). Bergson's illustrative example for this case runs as follows. Should I attempt to "reconstitute" a poem, unknown to me, by assembling the letters of all the poem's words, I should soon – if not immediately – assess the task as impossible for the reason that "the letters are not *component parts*, but only *partial expressions*". If, however, I knew the poem beforehand, I could "at once put each of the letters in its proper place and join them up without difficulty by a continuous connection" (24), although the operation would require a great deal of attention and patience to see it through to its successful completion.

Following this discussion, Bergson addresses another seeming contradiction in his proposed philosophy: "But if metaphysics is to proceed by intuition, if intuition has the mobility of duration as its object, and if duration is of a psychical nature, shall we not be confining the philosopher to the exclusive contemplation of himself?" (47). The answer, which is a resounding no, is based on the fact that *duration* is forever unique, not even in spite of its unity but because of it, and *intuition* is "violently" variable. He invites his audience to explore the multifarious nature of *intuition*, which, as he states, "is not a single act, but an indefinite series of acts, all doubtless of the same kind, but each of a very particular species…this diversity of acts

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Bergson ruminates is equivalent more or less to Simmel's "unfolded unity". The seminal

corresponds to all the degrees of being" (47). The conscious invocation of *intuition* in the attempt to uncover *duration*

> permits us, to go beyond idealism as well as realism to affirm the existence of objects inferior and superior (though in a certain sense interior) to us, to make them co-exist together without difficulty, and to dissipate gradually the obscurities that analysis accumulates round these great problems. (47)

Such co-existence is akin to the reconciliation of the traditional thesis and antithesis, and may be seen as a negation of philosophies concerned with dualistic distinctions.[25] For the very reason that the present state contains within it the memory of all those which preceded it, and because *duration* is irreversible, *intuition* will never tire of uncovering new realities, for they are always there, awaiting discovery. This realisation is especially true in the case of the introspective gaze, for while one may ponder a solid, inanimate object and be struck occasionally with new impressions, the mind is, by necessity, consistently active. No sooner does it lay itself bare to the intuitive spectator than it has encountered some new experience and taken with it a new set of impressions and perhaps even profound emotions that will define and colour the next moment of consciousness. The temptation may arise, then, to conceive of *duration* as a "multiplicity of moments bound to each other by a unity which goes through them like a thread" (50), but in doing so we are repeating the fundamental error of denying the intrinsic flow of *duration*. As we imagine the moments of *duration* strung together on the thread of unity, we condition ourselves to believe that no matter how brief the segment considered, we are still encountering "mathematical points" that extend onwards towards infinity: "looked at from the point of view of multiplicity

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importance of the self-conscious self is clear in both passages.

then, duration disintegrates into a powder of moments, none of which endures, each being an instantaneity" (50). If we opt instead to focus on the unity which binds the moments, we err then by ascribing to the unity the property of immobility; it becomes "an eternity of death, since it is nothing else than the movement emptied of the mobility which made its life" (50). According to Bergson, the difference in the various schools of metaphysics is that some concentrate more on the multiplicity of the moments that constitute *duration*, and others make more use of the "intemporal" version of unity (50). Both models approach the issue from the wrong perspective – they fail by endeavouring to reduce *duration* to concepts borrowed from other (fictitious) realities. Bergson offers a more logically tenable model in the following pages. He proposes that placing oneself in "the concrete flow of duration" (and here "concrete" can only mean definite, not predictable and regulated) will immediately lead the mind to accept that all other *durations* are really just a natural continuation of one's own, or rather that one's own *duration* is at once the encapsulation of all others as well as a "real *part*" of *duration* proper. He elucidates the point with the example of a hypothetical consciousness based on colour. This consciousness may only intuitively know orange, but if it were to "sympathize internally" with the colour rather than simply analyse it externally, it

> would feel itself held between red and yellow, would even perhaps suspect beyond this last colour a complete spectrum into which the continuity from red to yellow might expand naturally, so the intuition of our duration, far from leaving us suspended in the void as pure analysis would do, brings us into contact with a whole continuity of durations which we must try to follow, whether downwards or upwards; in both cases we can extend ourselves indefinitely by an

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[25] It is, however, more profound than traditional synthesis, for the unity of which Bergson writes cannot be dissociated into its philosophical constituents.

> increasingly violent effort, in both cases we transcend ourselves. (53)

This is how a self-reflecting consciousness that diligently employs its *intuition* is able to at once comprehend its own *duration* and the *duration* of all objects external to it; the comprehension of external *durations* can lead it to ever greater understandings of its own interior psychic life. For this reason the invocation of *intuition*, or the giving over to "intellectual auscultation", is the most profound self-reflexive gesture of all. It not only articulates with the interior life obfuscated by the predisposition to practical generalisations, but it also allows for a sympathetic comprehension of the *duration* of the universe, which itself *endures* (Creative Evolution 11).[26] It thus addresses both the individual and his place in the universal collectivity in which he finds himself: "to know a living being or *natural system* is to get at the very interval of duration..." (24).[27]

An *Intuition* Sympathetic with *Mobility*

The reality that suffuses Bergson's *intuition* and *duration* is *mobility*, and the importance it holds in his philosophy cannot be underestimated. He stresses time and again that all things seen and unseen are mobile and are in a constant state of flux; only in death, when the equilibrium of a body's molecular activity has been reached, is rest eternal. In life, absolute rest is

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[26] These conclusions may sound rather pantheistic in conception, but they are in reality far from such a philosophy. In The Creative Mind, Bergson clearly demarcates his invocation of *intuition* from pantheistic philosophy. The latter, he writes, fails when it attempts to move from the *intuition* "into the eternal" in one great step: "For the concepts which the intelligence furnishes, the intuition simply substitutes one single concept which includes them all and which consequently is always the same, by whatever name it is called: Substance, Ego, Idea, Will". He calls instead for "a truly intuitive metaphysics, which would follow the undulations of the real" (31).

only an illusion, and what we perceive as absolute rest is really just a relative slowing down of movement (An Introduction to Metaphysics 55). Mobility is *the* significant reality of life,[28] and because our own consciousness is itself a thing of flux, constantly reworking itself and never resting except in the eternity of death, we naturally sympathize with *mobility* (55). More importantly, the self-awareness our consciousness practises with regards to the "continual flux" in which we exist "introduces us to the interior of a reality, on the model of which we must represent other realities" (55). Flux, for Bergson, is an unending "change of direction", and because reality itself is constantly in flux, then it too is marked by this eternal shift in direction. Whether or not a reality commits itself fully to a new direction is irrelevant; these shifts in direction may remain "incipient", but the immutable fact remains that everything is bound up in *mobility*. Indeed, because Bergson often imagines vitality as an aggressive and even violent condition, it is easy to see why his emphasis remains on changes and not finalities. With regards to the *incipience* that marks all change, Bergson states, "*All reality, therefore, is tendency, if we agree to mean by tendency an incipient change of direction*" (55). The self-reflexive mind will be at home with the notion of reality as tendency, as it sympathizes with *mobility* and understands how it is that all reality is mobile. It is the non-introspective mind, the one that traffics in quotidian affairs, that has difficulty with that notion.[29] It is that superficial consciousness to which Bergson refers when he writes:

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[27] Bergson continues with the observation that "knowledge" purportedly gained by "an *artificial* or *mathematical system*...applies only to the extremity" of the system (Creative Evolution 24).

[28] It "*is a reality that is external and yet given immediately to the mind*" (55, author's italics).

[29] We should go even further and say that the self-reflexive mind *is mobility*, and it explicitly operates in concert with that *mobility* in that it shuttles back and forth between the self and the

> Our mind, which seeks for solid points of support, has for its main function in the ordinary course of life that of representing *states* and *things*. It takes, at long intervals, almost instantaneous views of the undivided mobility of the real. It thus obtains *sensations* and *ideas*. In this way, it substitutes for the continuous the discontinuous, for motion stability, for tendency in process of change, fixed points marking a direction of change and tendency. (56)

The perennial urgency with which we anchor ourselves conceptually to "solid points of support" originates in the comfort we derive from immersing ourselves in the world of "solids":

> We shall see that the human intellect feels at home among inanimate objects, more especially among solids, where our action finds its fulcrum and our industry its tools; that our concepts have been formed on the model of solids; that our logic is, pre-eminently, the logic of solids; that, consequently, our intellect triumphs in geometry [...]. (Creative Evolution ix)

For it is in the world of "solids", where we stand armed with our numerous "tools", that we enact practical "work" (An Introduction to Metaphysics 56, Creative Evolution 5).

If we are, then, to seize with our *intuition* the *mobility* of the *duration* of life, how can we extend ourselves beyond what is natural and practical to us, and think outside our geometry? "As well contend that the part is equal to the whole, that the effect can reabsorb its cause, or that the pebble left on the beach displays the form of the wave that brought it there" (Creative Evolution x). Tethered as we are to the world of solids, we busy ourselves with "forc[ing] the living into this or that one of our moulds", but we soon find that "all the moulds crack. They are too narrow, above all too rigid, for what we try to put into them" (x).[30] "Evolutionist philosophy", Bergson maintains, errs

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form it has begotten (for our purposes, the work of art). The various poles between which this self-reflexive *mobility* unfolds are detailed in the introductory chapter to this thesis.

[30] The notion of restrictive moulds is echoed in Simmel's essays "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture" and "The Conflict in Modern Culture". In the first piece, Simmel writes of the dualism that arises between subject and object because "man, unlike the animals, does not allow himself simply to be absorbed by the naturally given order of the world" (27).

along these lines in that it attempts to reconstruct "all things", even life, by focusing on "a local effect of evolution" and using it to explicate the intricacies of all evolutionary phenomena (xx-xxi). The moulds, or forms, that life constantly produces in its wake become the parameters by which we define our own existence, even though it should be self-evident that the vitality of any given organism is far from being entirely mechanical or mechanistically determined. Adhering as we do to these moulds, we consistently overlook the singular quintessence of the living being that makes it impervious to such dissection. As Simmel notes in "On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture", the synthesis at which we arrive after such analysis is quite distinct from the unity that is the reality; the latter, when dissociated, does not exactly yield the components that fed into it (35-36). The intellect that searches not for constituent parts to the aim of constructing a synthesis, but rather grasps the unity by "feeling its object so as to get its mobile impression at every instant" is infinitely preferable in that "it touches something of the absolute" (Creative Evolution xxi). We run aground when we strain to comprehend and explain the vital in terms of the mechanical:

> Intellectual knowledge, in so far as it relates to a certain aspect of inert matter, ought, on the contrary, to give us a faithful imprint of it, having been stereotyped on this particular object. It becomes relative only if it claims, such as it is, to present to us life – that is to say, the maker of the stereotype-plate. (xxii)

So how do we, then, think outside of these moulds? It is, Bergson maintains, the fact that "other forms of consciousness have been developed" that proves

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Rather, he "places himself in opposition to it, making demands of it, overpowering it, then [being] overpowered by it" (27). Soon enough, that same dualism between man and his products enters the "realm of spirit itself", where it becomes a struggle between the soul and the "innumerable structures" it creates (27). In the second essay, we learn of "certain forms" ("works of art, religions, sciences, technologies, laws, and innumerable others") that distil from life and in which life "expresses and realizes itself" (11). These forms are soon

to us that we need not remain tethered to geometrical thought. These divergent results of evolution, in spite of their shortcomings vis-à-vis our own intellect, are able to "express something that is immanent and essential in the evolutionary movement" (xxii). If these other forms of consciousness allied themselves with the intellect and its faculties, "the result [would] be a consciousness as wide as life".[31] In these lines we find proof that Bergson was not, as his detractors charged, an irrationalist who sought to undermine the necessity of the intellectual faculty; he would later come to decry these unreasonable misinterpretations in his autobiography The Creative Mind (77-78). Instead, he looked towards the possibility of conditioning a consciousness that would admit of the *élan vital* as much as scientific reasoning had structured itself upon the intellect: "And such a consciousness, turning around suddenly against the push of life which it feels behind, would have a vision of life complete – would it not? – even though the vision were fleeting" (xxiii). Acknowledging as he does the objection that we can only meditate upon these other forms of consciousness with our intellect, and that we therefore still remain subject to its myopic view, Bergson proposes that it is because we are not completely intellectual that we can step outside our intellect. The conclusion he reaches – that there resides "around our conceptual and logical thought, a vague nebulosity, made of the very substance out of which has been formed the luminous nucleus that we call the

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transcended by the life which created them, for they "do not share the restless rhythm of life, its ascent and descent, its constant renewal, its incessant divisions and reunifications" (11).

[31] Baylis, in his previously cited introduction, observes that absolutists, diverse as they may be, have often rallied behind the philosophy of absolute idealism, of which the idea Bergson proposes here is an example: "Many idealists have combined the absolutistic motif with their idealism and have concluded that reality is both mental and an absolute unity, either an absolute idea or an absolute mind" (13). This hypothetical consciousness, "wide as life", suggests an absolute idealism predicated on the conception of an "absolute mind".

intellect" – forms the basis of his greatest vitalist treatise, Creative Evolution (xxiii). That nebulosity, vague as it is and thus resistant to analysis, is where we encounter our *duration* at its most profound, and because all living beings have that nebulosity in common, we can progress to a true "theory of life" only when we grasp our own *duration*. In a very telling line that is redolent of certain modernist manifestos, Bergson affirms the following:

> The mind has to do violence to itself, has to reverse the direction of the operation by which it habitually thinks, has perpetually to revise, or rather to recast, all its categories. But in this way it will attain to fluid concepts, capable of following reality in all its sinuosities and of adopting the very movement of the inward life of things. Only thus will a progressive philosophy be built up, freed from the disputes which arise between the various schools, and able to solve its problems naturally, because it will be released from the artificial expression in terms of which such problems are poised. *To philosophise, therefore, is to invert the habitual direction of the work of thought.* (An Introduction to Metaphysics 59, author's italics)

The heightened activity, indeed the "violence" inherent in all gestures of self-reflexivity, appears here to no small degree.[32] The effort involved in such an act is too strenuous, perhaps, to be continuously sustained, and even if it could be, the call to practical work would render such ambitions impractical. Nevertheless, the value of metaphysics is that it reverses traditional modes of thought because it remains unconcerned with practical applications. For that reason "it will indefinitely enlarge the domain of its investigations" (60).

The final pages of An Introduction to Metaphysics explore the relationship between the physical sciences and metaphysics and present a critique of Kant's conception of the latter. According to Bergson, "science and metaphysics come together in intuition" (63), and he cites the case of

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[32] Paul Douglass, in "Deleuze's Bergson", states that Deleuze (in Bergsonism) acknowledges "Bergson's definition of intuition...as an act of willed self-consciousness" (The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy 374). The implications of this "willed self-consciousness" are significant, for they corroborate the observation that self-reflexive art "problematizes" itself, or at the very least is the result of aesthetic problematization.

Galileo as the first instance in which scientists attempted to study motion as *mobility*, rather than falling back on Aristotelian principles which worked through "immobilities" (64). He likens reality to a "moving stream of things" which is traversed above by "an elegant bridge", which he labels modern science, and below by "a deep tunnel", labelled metaphysics (68). Both "artificial constructions" fail to make contact with the true reality of life, but Bergson's brand of metaphysics comes closer than any previous attempts by virtue of its reliance on *intuition* and the eternal pursuit of *duration*. He criticizes Kant for having ignored the role *intuition* plays both in modern science and metaphysics. The result, Bergson opines, of such an extended oversight was that science became entirely "relative" and metaphysics "artificial" (69). Bergson does acknowledge that such relativity is valid when the metaphysics or science being discussed is one that hopes to present "a *single* and completed system of things". If metaphysics and science seek to grasp *intuition* and enclose it in a system "prepared in advance, it becomes a knowledge purely relative to human understanding" (70-71). For Bergson, this is exactly the kind of science Kant envisioned ("universal mathematic"), and for him, metaphysics was "practically unaltered *Platonism*". Once again, the reader is reminded that it is the invaluable experience of *intuition* and "intellectual sympathy" that allows him to discard the traditional thesis and antithesis employed in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.

The example of literary composition illustrates again the inestimable necessity of constantly consulting one's *intuition*. All the books on a given subject might have been carefully studied, and all the notes might have been

assimilated, but no literary integration of ideas can occur without an impulse to fuel the writer's creativity.[33] Furthermore,

> This impulse, once received, starts the mind on a path where it rediscovers all the information it had collected, and a thousand other details besides; it develops and analyses itself into terms which could be enumerated indefinitely. The farther we go, the more terms we discover; we shall never say all that could be said, and yet, if we turn back suddenly upon the impulse that we feel behind us, and try to seize it, it is gone; for it was not a thing, but the direction of a movement, and though indefinitely extensible, it is infinitely simple. Metaphysical intuition seems to be something of the same kind. (76)

In the final paragraphs Bergson does conclude that there is a remote possibility of "obtain[ing] an intuition from reality", but the only instance in which this possibility is realized is when numerous "superficial manifestations" of reality have been collected and studied. Yet even then, just as in the example cited above, a final impulse, a final act of "intellectual sympathy" is required to assimilate all the data (77, 78). "Metaphysical intuition" is altogether different, because any knowledge gained through it is much more than the mere summation of singular experiences or sensations interpreted.

> It is distinct from these, we repeat, as the motor impulse is distinct from the path traversed by the moving body, as the tension of the spring is distinct from the visible movements of the pendulum. In this sense metaphysics has nothing in common with a generalisation of facts; and nevertheless it might be defined as *integral experience*. (78)

The Social Manifestation of Bergson's Philosophy: The Vitalist Theory of Laughter

Having considered Bergson's theories of *intuition*, *duration*, and *mobility*, let us now turn to another of his works: Le Rire, Essai sur la

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[33] A parallel may be drawn here with Simmel's writings about the attainment of cultivation. We recall from the last chapter that the voracious acquisition of knowledge hardly results in a cultivated individual: "A man becomes cultivated only when cultural traits develop that aspect of his soul which exists as its most indigenous drive and as the inner predetermination of its subjective perfection" (29).

signification du comique (Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, 1900). So many works of Dada are suffused with a curious brand of humour which is intrinsically tied to the regular occurrence and unique function of self-reflexivity in the movement. This proposed argument is corroborated by Bergson's theory of laughter, which is closely aligned with his vitalist philosophy.

He begins this treatise by stating that laughter is a living thing, and only when it is treated as such can it be accurately studied (7). He identifies three conditions that must be satisfied in order for it to develop freely. The first is the recognition that laughter is strictly associated with human activity or activities redolent of humanity (9).[34] Also, we must consider "the *absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter": "It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled" (9). "Indifference", which is a necessary ingredient in the cultivation of laughter ("for laughter has no greater foe than emotion"), leads us to the second condition: "the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (11). The comic poet or artist is responsible for "anaesthetising" the emotions of his audience before he introduces his comedy. Thirdly, laughter requires the presence of an audience to "echo" it (11). Throughout the book, Bergson restates his proposition that laughter is itself alive, much in the same way language may be perceived as a living entity existing symbiotically with

[34] Baudelaire, in his essay "On the Essence of Laughter", also begins with the premise that laughter is confined to the human sphere of existence. For him, it is a postlapsarian condition which is predicated upon "the idea of one's *own* superiority" (152), and his conviction that it is "linked with the accident of an ancient Fall, of a debasement both physical and moral" (149) is not too distant from Bergson's own theory.

humanity (109).[35] Therefore, for a study on laughter to approach an understanding of the subject, laughter must be examined from its "natural environment", which Bergson specifies is human society. It "must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification" (13).

Before we can begin to understand this "social signification", we must grasp what for Bergson is the impetus behind laughter and how it is that it comes to occupy such a critical space in society. The basis of laughter, as strenuously emphasized throughout the work, is the Manichean struggle between the mechanical and the living, an endless conflict which extends beyond the individual to society at large. Early on in the book, the reader is introduced to the all-important phrase "mechanical inelasticity", by which the author intends to convey the frequent inability of the body (or spirit) to keep pace with the endless flux of life. "Mechanical inelasticity" often manifests itself in man as "absentmindedness", and while Bergson admits that absentmindedness "is not perhaps the actual fountainhead of the comic…it is contiguous to a certain stream of facts and fancies which flows straight from the fountainhead" (16).[36] He illustrates mechanical elasticity with the example of a man running down the street who suddenly trips and falls. Provided he is not seriously injured (the audience would hardly be able to restrain their sympathy if he were), the man's accident is comic because the stone in his way or the gap in the pavement called for him to change his pace and/or direction, but the tension in his muscles and the rigidity of his attention kept

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[35] "But thought, too, is a living thing. And language, the translation of thought, should be just as living" (109).

him from properly negotiating the obstacle in his path (14). Bergson states that the rigidity responsible for the man's fall is also at the root of the spectators' laughter. Yet it is not clear what, as Baudelaire wittily demands, is

> so delightful in the sight of a man falling on the ice or in the street, or stumbling at the end of a pavement, that the countenance of his brother in Christ should contract in such an intemperate manner, and the muscles of his face should suddenly leap into life like a timepiece at midday or a clockwork toy? The poor devil has disfigured himself, at the very least; he may even have broken an essential member. Nevertheless the laugh has gone forth, sudden and irrepressible. (152)

In order to comprehend the audience's laughter at the misery of another, we must first reach an understanding of what Bergson means by "tension" and "elasticity". These two forces, perhaps more properly recognized respectively as sub-forces of the mechanical and the living, govern both our physical and mental spheres, and it is the rupturing of the delicate balance between these two that engenders the comedy of this situation and comedy in general. Tension and elasticity remain in constant flux with one another until the equilibrium of death is reached, and slight discrepancies in the dominance of one over the other do not result in bodily harm, except when one or both are lacking, and then either physical or mental problems develop and fester (22).[37] Society has a self-motivated interest in keeping its constituent members healthy and functional, and so "what life and society require of each of us is a

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[36] How crucial "absentmindedness" is to Bergson's theory of laughter is evidenced by his observation that "it is situated, so to say, on one of the great natural watersheds of laughter" (16).

[37] The upset of the balance between tension and elasticity, while usually comic, soon begets much more serious consequences. Bergson is clearly very suspicious of the effects of absentmindedness, and his seeming over-exaggeration of the effects may be read as the logical corroboration of his reliance on vitalist principles. If one indeed believes life to be pure flux and mobility to be the most significant reality of all, then surely the antithesis of flux (fixity, or in this case automatism) is to be eschewed as inimical and in opposition to life itself. Thus, if tension and elasticity "are lacking in the mind, we find every degree of mental deficiency, every variety of insanity. Finally, if they are lacking in the character, we have cases of the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the causes of crime" (22).

constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence" (23). If we return to the example of the runner who trips and falls, we see that the tension he maintains in his leg muscles must be alterable and must allow for some elasticity should the need arise to change pace and/or direction. The fact that he fails to adapt to a new situation (that of a crack in the pavement or a stone in his path) suggests he has lapsed in attention and is guilty of absentmindedness. Why the runner's fall is comic is explained thusly:

> Society will therefore be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common center round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity. And yet, society cannot intervene at this stage by material repression, since it is not affected in a material fashion. It is confronted with something that makes it uneasy, but only as a symptom – scarcely a threat, at the very most a gesture. (23)

Baudelaire's theory as regards the audience's laughter (for he also uses the example of a man tripping on the pavement) is centred on a vicious sort of pride and self-entitled superiority, while Bergson's centres on correction through humiliation. The former conjectures that the audience's laughter amounts to the collective belief that none of them would be so careless or clumsy, or at the very least they would manage to negotiate the pavement without calamity (152). Freud, without acknowledging the earlier observations of Baudelaire, also arrives at the same conclusion, except that he imagines it is more the child, or at least the infantile element in the audience member, which leads to such supercilious mirth (Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious 364). Bergson's theory, however, is more profound and enticing

as it looks past the cause and finds the intended effect of such laughter. The preceding quotation continues:

> A gesture, therefore, will be its reply. Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of *social gesture*. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity, keeps constantly awake and in mutual contact certain activities of a secondary order which might retire into their shell and go to sleep, and, in short, softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity. (23)

Indeed, the fear of being laughed at is potent and frequently crippling, and very often it is enough to dissuade the would-be performer from attempting anything that leaves him vulnerable to the derision of the audience. There is clearly a point, however, at which laughter departs slightly from its corrective function and moves closer to an aesthetic one:

> Laughter, then, does not belong to the province of esthetics alone, since unconsciously (and even immorally in many particular instances) it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement. And yet there is something esthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art. (23)[38]

This quotation marks the first instance in which the author asserts, albeit subtly, a connection between laughter and self-reflexivity. When the mind feels itself to be liberated from "utilitarian" pursuits, when it knows it can behave unsociably and still remain within society, it relaxes and even seeks to encourage laughter by searching introspectively for unsociable elements which merit ridicule. It may even be that the individual who no longer fears his neighbours' corrections, who is indeed "freed from the worry of self-preservation", is now at leisure to make an art out of scrutinizing those same elements in his fellow society members. According to Baudelaire, "the man

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[38] In drawing comparisons between Bergson's theory and DeWitt Parker's The Principles of Aesthetics, Kenneth Lash identifies a "higher function of comedy" which he terms "sympathetic insight". He finds that humour is not entirely based on the desire to rebuke (as satire is), but rather "unites us, through sympathy, with the object of our laughter". His

who trips would be the last to laugh at his own fall, unless he happened to be a philosopher, one who had acquired by habit a power of rapid self-division and thus of assisting as a disinterested spectator at the phenomenon of his own ego" (154).[39] Baudelaire, Freud, and Bergson all emphasize a strong connection between introspection, self-fragmentation, and laughter, and we shall return to this point when we investigate the nature of Bergson's figure of the humourist.

Mechanical inelasticity, besides being at the root of laughter (particularly in its function as a social corrective) also forms the basis for comedy predicated upon imitation. Baudelaire and Bergson's theories converge as well on this issue, for both see the comic as intrinsically bound to what can be imitated (Baudelaire 157, Bergson 27 and *passim*).[40] As we have already seen in the example of the runner, it is muscular and/or mental rigidity that precipitates the fall. For Bergson, it is a very small step from mechanical rigidity to absentmindedness; it may even be concluded that the latter is the mental counterpart to physical rigidity.[41] Consider then, as Bergson does, the work of the caricaturist, who through close scrutiny (and no doubt some level of intuitional investigation) discerns the natural "inclinations" of a given face,

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observation, "Humor is more contemplative, hence more esthetic", echoes Bergson's conclusion above ("Theory of the Comic as Insight" 114-115).

[39] Freud, in his discussion "Elements Favoring the Wit-Process", expounds a similar theory: "if I make some one else laugh by imparting my wit to him, I am really using him as a tool in order to arouse my own laughter" (Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious 241-242). Rather than fragmenting himself and forging an audience within, Freud's comic man seeks an audience without, and uses others as the medium by which he may magnify the comic impetus and view its projection on the faces of his audience.

[40] Freud also comments on "the comic of imitation" and how it is utilized in Bergson's theory. For him, "in imitation the source of comic pleasure is not the comic of situation but that of expectation" (338). When we expect to find the fluidity of life in a human face but instead are confronted with palsy (or even just a contortion inappropriate to the context) we laugh, for we are reminded of the occasional inelasticity or absentmindedness that threatens to seize any of us at any time.

inclinations that frequently suggest themselves in spite of the mercurial essence of the human visage (37). Due to the fact that our own *duration*, as previously explained, is part and parcel of all *duration*, our "imagination" has little difficulty in detecting the liberative efforts of our neighbours' souls:

> in every human form it [our imagination] sees the effort of a soul which is shaping matter, a soul which is infinitely supple and perpetually in motion, subject to no law of gravitation, for it is not the earth that attracts it. This soul imparts a portion of its winged lightness to the body it animates [...]. (30)

It is that immeasurable "gracefulness" of being that constitutes the greatest contrast to the comic (31), for the comic "partakes rather of the unsprightly than of the unsightly, of *rigidness* rather than of *ugliness*" (31). Let us illustrate the point by reflecting momentarily on the humour inherent in the machine drawings of Duchamp, who along with Picabia and others took a special interest in the juxtaposition of mechanical drawings with human portraits. If we consider these works in light of the theory proposed above, we arrive at a much more profound understanding of them. For example, Duchamp's "Mariée" ("Bride", 1912) is a Cubism-inspired depiction of an unrecognisable contraption coloured in delicate hues of beige and brown. There is absolutely no discernible representation of a bride or even a woman for that matter, but we know from detailed notes contained in The Green Box that Duchamp often delighted in envisaging sex and sexual relationships as mechanical processes, and his preoccupation with brides found frequent expression in such terms. To interpret the painting as a subversive attempt at inverting traditional conceptions of beauty and ugliness is too simplistic, especially when we recall Duchamp's appreciation of Bergsonian philosophy.

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[41] It is crucial when dealing with Bergsonian philosophy that opposing sides are not harmoniously reconciled, and so in this case it must be noted that the fluidity of life and a

Instead, we may look upon the work as another of Duchamp's "jokes", the humour of which stems from the fact that we have before us a portrayal of "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (39). The artist has looked beyond the conventional beauty versus ugliness dialectic to the more substantial philosophical struggle between fixity and fluidity. According to what Bergson writes in An Introduction to Metaphysics, it is an effort of *intuition* that would lead one's consciousness, which itself is tossed between rigidity and flexibility, to such a profound interpretation of a subject. Duchamp, whose own notes go some way towards elucidating his predilection for machine-inspired art, actively employed Bergson's theories of *intuition* and *duration*, and was, consequently, one of the most introspective of the Dadaists. If we pay heed to the quotation above, there is no reason to doubt that Duchamp's introspective and self-reflexive tendencies are directly related to his reputation as a talented wit and comic figure.

The rigidity of which Bergson writes becomes even more comic when addressed by the spectator who seeks to impersonate it:

> gestures, at which we never dreamt of laughing, become laughable when imitated by another individual. The most elaborate explanations have been offered for this extremely simple fact. A little reflection, however, will show that our mental state is ever changing, and that if our gestures faithfully followed these inner movements, if they were as fully alive as we, they would never repeat themselves, and so would keep imitation at bay. We begin, then, to become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. I mean our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And as this is the very essence of the ludicrous, it is no wonder that imitation gives rise to laughter. (34)[42]

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certain degree of "mechanical inelasticity" are always at play.

[42] One of the greatest Dada spectacles was also one of the earliest. Ball's Magic Bishop episode, performed in June 1916 in his Cabaret Voltaire, is described in the diary entry for 23 June 1916. The costume Ball devised for the performance vividly exploits the concept of "mechanical elasticity" and the laughable essence of the gesture:

Here we have before us another instance in which an unconscious self-division induces laughter in the audience. Automatic gestures ride parasitically on "our living personality", and for this reason they are easily identified and singled out for ridicule by the spectator or perhaps even by the individual himself. By imitating the unsociability of others, the comic employed in the art of imitation wilfully adopts foreign gestures and thus subjects himself to ridicule two times over; he is comic for the unsociability he mockingly portrays, but more importantly he is comic because he has temporarily shed his own nature and clothed himself in that of another. His ability to take the mechanical inelasticity of his subject and wield it self-reflexively, for the amusement of others and for his own entertainment, brands such a comic an artist, for he has successfully fragmented himself and fashioned, within his own person, an artwork of which he is both the creator and the subject.

Baudelaire's theory also supposes that the comic is predicated upon imitation: "from the artistic point of view, the comic is an imitation," an imitation which for him is "mixed with a certain creative faculty" (157). This faculty he appositively qualifies as "artistic *ideality*" (157), and although he does not elaborate on the meaning of the phrase, we may surmise the following from the context. Firstly, the comic is *artistic* in that it is *creative*. He who imitates the gestures of another or pokes fun at common social vices

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> My legs were in a cylinder of shiny blue cardboard, which came up to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Over it I wore a huge coat collar cut out of cardboard. [...] It was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could give the impression of winglike movement by raising and lowering my elbows. I also wore a high, blue-and-white-striped witch doctor's hat. (Flight Out of Time 70-71)

A photograph from the evening portrays a sombre and awkward Ball ensheathed in a costume not unlike that of the Tin Man in "The Wizard of Oz". The rigidity made explicit by the bulkiness of the costume contributes to the humour it evokes, but it is also the incongruence between the improbable gear and its bearer that draws laughter.

adopts for his own means the gestures he observes in his neighbour and is wont to embellish his portrayals in order to achieve the maximum comic effect. Secondly, there is an element of the comic that aspires to reveal an ideal beauty by way of negative reinforcement. As in Bergson's theory, the comedy of imitation presented here also articulates with beauty, or at least with the idea of it. In his essay "Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne" ("The Painter of Modern Life", 1863), Baudelaire reflects upon old fashion-plates and arrives at this conclusion:

> The idea of beauty which man creates for himself imprints itself on his whole attire, crumples or stiffens his dress, rounds off or squares his gesture, and in the long run even ends by subtly penetrating the very features of his face. *Man ends by looking like his ideal self.* [my italics] These engravings can be translated either into beauty or ugliness; in one direction they become caricatures, in the other, antique statues. (2)

The italicised sentence provides further explication of the phrase "artistic *ideality*". Man's ambitious aspirations to perfection compel him to alter himself significantly, and to this end he answers to various and shifting ideas of beauty which we recognize as "styles". However, while that yearning for perfect beauty captivates his attention and leads him forward, his shortcomings attack him from the rear and negatively reinforce his aspirations by way of ridicule. Herein lies the reason why the engravings mentioned above, which in their time were faithful depictions of contemporary beauty, so easily appear to modern-day viewers as comic.[43] Thus, we have before us

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[43] Bergson also addresses the issue of fashion and out-moded styles. According to him, all fashion is laughable in that garments are in direct contrast to the "living suppleness of the object covered" (39). Yet because we so quickly grow accustomed to the fashions of the day, the comic element of such garments eludes us, that is until styles change and the disjuncture between the character and his clothing becomes obvious (39-40). Simmel also attests to this conflict in his essay "Philosophie der Mode" ("Fashion", 1905). On one side we have the desire to conform to the styles stipulated by society, and on the other side we are confronted with the impossibility that arises whenever social forms come up against "the restless changing of an individual life" (Levine 294).

comedy motivated by the ideal of beauty and governed by the art of imitation. If we combine what Baudelaire concludes with what Bergson writes about imitation, we can understand how it is that beauty (or the attempted depiction of it) so frequently borders on the comic. It is the "ideality" of the comic act that weds it to that reprimanding social gesture dubbed by Bergson as laughter. This most common species of the comic, which exists to tame the unsociable elements inherent in man and society, is for Baudelaire "significative", that is it "is a clearer language, and one easier for the man in the street to understand, and above all easier to analyse, its element being visibly *double* – art and the moral idea" (157). Comedy of this sort is opposed to "the grotesque", or "absolute comic", which "comes much closer to nature, [and] emerges as a *unity* which calls for the intuition to grasp it" (157).[44] The salient difference between the two kinds of comedy lies in the question of superiority, which in the case of the latter manifests itself in "the expression of an idea of superiority – no longer now of man over man, but of man over nature" (157). According to Baudelaire, the grotesque is the result of "innocent" comedy being pushed to its extreme, while the significative comic, when exaggerated, becomes "savage" comedy.[45] There is also a distinction to be made along the lines of the primitive versus the modern: "laughter caused

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[44] The language used here is remarkably redolent of that employed by Bergson. Curiously enough, there is no mention of Baudelaire in Bergson's Laughter, although surely he must have been familiar with his predecessor's contributions to a theory of the comic.

[45] Baudelaire suggests that some cultures are more predisposed towards the significative comic, whereas others are more inclined towards the absolute. For example, France, "the land of lucid thought and demonstration, where the natural and direct aim of art is utility", is generally preoccupied with the latter (158), whereas "Germany, sunk in her dreams, will afford us excellent specimens of the absolute comic. There all is weighty, profound and excessive. To find true comic savagery, however, you have to cross the Channel and visit the foggy realms of spleen. Happy, noisy, carefree Italy abounds in the innocent variety" (159). These classifications are perhaps too specious to merit a full investigation. Still, if what Baudelaire concludes about his own culture is true, then it is no wonder Bergson dedicates his study to the significative rather than the absolute comic.

by the grotesque has about it something profound, primitive and axiomatic, which is much closer to the innocent life and to absolute joy than is the laughter caused by the comic in man's behaviour" (157). Unfortunately, Baudelaire refrains from further elucidation of the distinctions between the significative and the absolute comic. Brief reflection upon the boundaries between the two suggests that such distinctions are actually quite nebulous and that it would prove impractical, if not impossible, to label a particular work or artist fully significative or fully absolute. What we take away, however, from the theories Baudelaire proposes is crucial. Firstly, the comedy of imitation, the variety that abounds in human society, articulates with ideals of beauty and thus firmly places the comic in the sphere of artistic creativity. Secondly, the comic artist as such speaks both to "art and the moral idea". Thirdly, the absolute comic is concerned more with man's hubristic conception of himself as superior to nature, rather than with man's superiority over his fellow man. Fourthly, the absolute comic is unique in that it "remains unaware of itself" (164). This final point is the most important for our purposes, and will be examined closely in our discussion of Bergson's figure of the humourist. For the moment, however, let us focus on the significative comic, as it is the brand closest to social satire and thus the one most easily understood with regards to what we have already learned about Bergsonian comedy.

Unsociability, Fragmentation, and the Humourist

We have already seen how the social gesture of laughter aims to rein in the mechanical inelasticity of the individual. What is soon revealed once we acknowledge the link between such inelasticity and corrective laughter is the

more critical connection between the comic and self-reflexivity. To this end we look to Chapter III of Laughter, which begins with a continuation of the investigation into the social side of laughter:

> Comedy can only begin at the point where our neighbor's personality ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact, with what might be called *a growing callousness to social life*. An individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream. (121)

This passage is highly reminiscent of Simmel's theories as expounded in "The Metropolis and Mental Life". The "growing callousness to social life" is equivalent to Simmel's conception of the *blasé*, which he in turn imagines to be a "protective organ" for the metropolitan citizen. In his essay, which is discussed extensively in the preceding chapter of this thesis, the metropolitan's *blasé* attitude is not looked upon as a source of comedy. However, with what has already been explained in Bergson's Laughter, the reader can understand how that "protective organ" has now become the target of society's "corrective gesture". We now have before us the same detached and introspective metropolitan as was presented in Simmel's essay, except that now his very introspection has led to him being ridiculed, for

> each member [of society] must be ever attentive to his social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment; in short, he must avoid shutting himself up in his own ivory tower. Therefore society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social 'ragging'. (122)[46]

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[46] The Bergsonian version of the *blasé*, which functions as a withdrawal from social life, is similar to the absentmindedness which prompts the corrective gesture of laughter. It manifests itself as an "incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy" (Simmel 329), and it derives both from over-stimulation of the nerves and the dominance of the money economy. Absentmindedness, akin to mechanical inelasticity, is not so much incapability as negligence. Although both forms of inattention differ in their origins, what

Bergson writes, "the man who withdraws into himself is liable to ridicule, because the comic is largely made up of this very withdrawal" (125). A withdrawal, unlike the *blasé* outlook, may be consciously invoked by an artist intent on establishing a comic effect.[47] If, as Bergson indicates, a "wet blanket" is thrown upon "sympathy at the very moment it might arise" (126), the comic man (or for the purposes of our discussion, the artist) is then in a position to usher in the intended joke. Two methods to this end are usually employed. The first involves the isolation of the character's flaw, vice, virtue, or habit, so as to make it appear as an alien organism distinct from the true identity of the character. The second method dovetails with the first and is applied in tandem. It involves the creation of a *rigid* characteristic that refuses to integrate itself with the rest of the character's being.[48] To this end, the comic seizes upon gestures:

> By *gestures* we here mean the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching. Gesture, thus defined, is profoundly different from action. Action is intentional or, at any rate, conscious; gesture slips out unawares, it is automatic. In action, the entire person is engaged; in gesture, an isolated part of the person is expressed, unknown to, or at least apart from, the whole of the personality. (129)

Whereas "action is in exact proportion to the feeling that inspires it", a gesture appears disjointed from the character and betrays the presence of underlying mechanical inelasticity; it is executed in absentmindedness. The actions performed in a drama present themselves as natural, for they follow directly

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matters here is that both affect the character by decreasing his sociability to the point where he incurs the gesture of laughter detailed in the quotation.

[47] The *blasé* outlook may be parodied, but because of the unique confluence of physiological and economic influences, it cannot be reproduced synthetically. A withdrawal, on the other hand, may be created, for one can opt to make oneself unsociable.

from the consciousness of the character. They are "intentional", and in their intentionality they "engage" the "entire person". Most importantly,

> action is in exact proportion to the feeling that inspires it: the one gradually passes into the other, so that we may allow our sympathy or our aversion to glide along the line running from feeling to action and become increasingly interested. About gesture, however, there is something explosive, which awakes our sensibility when on the point of being lulled to sleep and, by thus rousing us up, prevents our taking matters seriously. (130)

Thus, in order to achieve a comic effect, it is necessary to display "unsociability in the performer and insensibility in the spectator" (131). Following these two conditions we arrive at the third, which is a reprisal of Bergson's theory of automatism. He reminds us that "absentmindedness is comical" (for reasons already discussed at length) and that the "deeper the absentmindedness the higher the comedy" (132). We may infer from this conclusion (and the conclusion stated above regarding withdrawal) a more crucial one. Due to the fact that it is necessary to delve deeper into the self *in an effort of intuition* in order to uncover the *duration* against which mechanization works, the introspective individual is always in danger of becoming comical. While society ridicules the individual for his "separatist tendencies", the introspective individual – a man who, by virtue of his perspicacity and sensitivity perceives most accurately the constant encroachment of the mechanical on the fluidity of life – in turn is in a position to ridicule society for its fixed "ideas".

It is in these final pages of the treatise on laughter that we encounter the most convincing evidence of the interdependent relationship between comedy, introspection, and self-reflexivity. Considering the importance

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[48] Although Bergson seems to suggest that these two methods are distinct, it would appear that they are really just two approaches to the same end, that is, the lulling to sleep of the

Bergson ascribes to the function of absentmindedness in comedy, it should come as no surprise that we find at the junction of laughter and self-reflexivity that same inattention to the self that we discovered at the outset of this investigation. Mechanical inelasticity, which manifests itself in the mental realm as absentmindedness and in the physical realm as "something mechanical encrusted on the living", is closely aligned with the introspective tendencies of the humourist. By virtue of his nature, the humourist concerns himself with what is comical about society and himself, and his quarry is any gesture, influence, or social code that rides parasitically on his fellow man. He makes an art out of closely scrutinizing what people do and say when they succumb to inattention, for it is in those moments that the foreign elements of a character – the gestures that result in comedy – "slip out unaware". Bergson equates this sort of inattention to the "unsociability" he has thus far described: "The chief cause of rigidity is the neglect to look around – *and more especially within oneself*" (133, my italics). The qualification "and more especially within oneself" establishes what for Bergson is the solid relationship between inattention to the self and laughter.[49] Likewise, Baudelaire acknowledges that in order for "absolute comedy" to take effect, it is necessary that it remain "unaware of itself" (164). He approaches the issue of the professional humourist from a similar angle as Bergson, and observes that although it is usually necessary for at least an audience of one to be present,

> an exception must nevertheless be made in connection with the 'law of ignorance' for those men who have made a business of developing in themselves their feeling for the comic, and of dispensing it for the

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audience's sympathy.

[49] "Rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and all serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in character" (133).

> amusement of their fellows. This last phenomenon comes into the class of all artistic phenomena which indicate the existence of a permanent dualism in the human being – that is, the power of being oneself and someone else at one and the same time. (164-165)

Baudelaire's comic man, once he has fashioned himself an artist, fragments himself in the fashion of his artistic peers, and in doing so is capable of providing for himself his own audience. For Baudelaire, "artists create the comic", and thus they intuitively understand that the comic only may remain so "on condition of its being unaware of its nature" (165). This cultivation of self-ignorance (or to use Bergson's term, "absentmindedness") is related, Baudelaire tell us, to an "inverse law" which stipulates that "an artist is only an artist on condition that he is a double man and that there is not one single phenomenon of his double nature of which he is ignorant" (165). So whereas the comedy of the comic figure is predicated upon the fact that he is "unaware" of his own nature, the professional humourist, or in this case the artist in tune with the humour inherent in his selected subject, occupies a privileged position precisely because he can generate comedy and laugh at it concurrently. The profundity of the difference between the two lies with the artist's self-pluralization. While he singles out the introspective inattention of his subjects and ridicules them for it, he plays a game with himself by which he parodies that same unawareness, all the while knowing that he is the most aware and self-knowing of all. This self-reflexive strategy makes it possible for the humourist to identify those same rigid elements that lie just as much in him as they do in others. It also allows him to reconcile being a comic and the source of comedy at the same time.

From Romantic *Angoisse* to Black Humour

Bergson's conclusions on the self-fragmentation of the humourist are strikingly similar to Baudelaire's:

> When the humorist laughs at himself, he is really acting a double part; the self who laughs is indeed conscious, but not the self who is laughed at. (Laughter 132)

What is the social origin of such fragmentation, commonly identified as having originated with the Romantics and so enthusiastically adopted by many of the avant-garde, in particular the Dadaists? It may be read as a response to the perceived shattering of the cohesive semblance of order put forth by society. Consider the *flâneur*, who loiters through the chthonic morass of the city and is confronted by chaos and disorder, elements that society, by necessity, must repress if it is to function progressively at all.[50] The same social chaos impresses itself upon the artist, who is both mesmerized and actively hostile to its influence. There exists, however, the possibility that the fragmentation of the artist *qua* humourist is a determined exercise in self-reflexivity, devised as a survival mechanism in a technologically minded world forever bearing down on the individual. We are here drawn to reflect upon the theories of Alfred de Musset, who suggests in his work that there are two distinct methods of confronting the Romantic *angoisse*. The first is predicated upon a revolt against that pernicious *malaise* which is forever threatening the artist. The second calls for the artist to envelop himself in his melancholia, to arrogate wilfully his *angoisse*, with the result that he may now

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[50] Various paintings of the Dada period and other contemporaneous movements brazenly illustrate this underworld. What many of these paintings share, particularly those executed by the German Expressionists/early Dadaists, is the employment of Cubist or Futurist technique to portray, in graphic detail, the fragmentary nature of the chaotic metropolis. Such pervasive fragmentation, so easily discernible in the modern metropolis, could not be stopped from impressing itself upon the artistic milieu. The cultivation of alter-egos, such as Duchamp's Rrose Sélavy, is one way in which said fragmentation played itself out amongst the artists of the period. Another is the proliferation of self-portraits which relied heavily upon

draw creative inspiration from what was once a black hole of despair. Richard Cardwell writes in his introduction to Ricardo Gil, La Caja de Música:

> The doctrine of creative despair becomes an ultimate and valid vital attitude characteristic of the superior artist. Insight, though tragic, differentiates the few, the hypersensitive minority, from the mass. Its value lies in the fact that when the resolution of the underlying problem is left open, despair becomes a posture which dissociates the artist from thought and turns malaise into an art in itself. Gide aptly summed this response in 1891 in Les Cahiers d'André Walter in the following terms: "se regarder en souffir sans penser que c'est soi qui souffre." The self becomes the object rather than the subject of their creativity. (xiii)

What is indicated here about the fragmentation of the self describes equally well what happens to the artist who doubles as an humourist. The chaos that envelopes him is too great to be directly confronted, so instead he accepts it by way of self-polarization. While one half is embroiled in angst, the other half plays at desperation. Yet no matter how well nurtured the mock despair may be, it will always remain manufactured and foreign to the true self, and for this reason such despair becomes comic. The artist may in turn choose to put that comic element to work for him, as he did with his despair, because it too will serve to distance him even further from that initial *angoisse* to which he is always in danger of succumbing.

In The Theory of the Avant-Garde, Poggioli corroborates Cardwell's claims when he proposes that the avant-garde cult of laughter, which he terms "humourism", derives from the influence of the technological on modern art and is directly related to the Romantic irony (140). According to Poggioli,

> one of the peculiar or dominant forms of antiscientific humourism is *black humour* or, to use an epithet dear to André Breton, *black bile*. Breton preferred to define this species with the arbitrary term of *umour* (without the initial "h") to underline how new or rare it was, and to separate it from the innocent British humour. This pathetic, grotesque, and absurd type of humourism favoured by certain avant-

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photomontage and/or collage, such as Johannes T. Baargeld's *Self-Portrait* (1920) or Max Ernst's self-portrait of the same title and year.

> garde currents has an obvious kinship with romantic irony and also with the *spleen* of Baudelaire and the decadents. (141)[51]

The aggressive posture described here is simply another affectation adopted by the artist who wishes to distance himself from the melancholia that surrounds him. Black humour, therefore, may be seen as a more highly evolved form of "creative despair", a development which lends a confrontational element to the more introspective despondency exemplified by creative despair. In Breton's Anthologie de l'Humour Noir (Anthology of Black Humor, 1966 edition) there appears a prefatory essay entitled "Lightning Rod",[52] composed in 1939, which assembles for brief presentation some of Breton's observations on the nature of black humour and the history of its study. The importance black humour held for many members of the modernist avant-garde, particularly those of the Dada and Surrealist movements, is underlined by the following quotation:

> Given the specific requirements of the modern sensibility, it is increasingly doubtful that any poetic, artistic, or scientific work, any philosophical or social system that does not contain *this kind* of humor will not leave a great deal to be desired, will not be condemned more or less rapidly to perish. The value we are dealing with here is not only in ascendancy over all others, but is even capable of subsuming them, to the point where a great number of these values will lose the universal respect they now enjoy. We are touching upon a burning subject; we are headed straight into a land of fire: the gale winds of passion are alternately with us and against us from the moment we consider lifting the veil from this type of humor, whose manifest products we have nonetheless managed to isolate, with a unique satisfaction, in literature, art, and life. (xiv)

Bergson stops short of annunciating this particular "species" of humour, but surely he was aware of it and the importance it held in modern aesthetic

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[51] Poggioli misattributes *'umour* to Breton, when in fact it was Jacques Vaché, to whose work we shall presently turn, who is responsible for the enigmatic neologism.

[52] The titular "lightning rod" may very well allude to the dual nature of black humour, for like that particular species of the comic it strikes out of darkness, all the while possessing an unearthly elucidative capability. Like lightning, black humour is dangerous and destructive, but at the same time its beauty rivals all other natural phenomena. The caustic nature of both

culture. Earlier on in Laughter, he carefully distinguishes between irony and humour, an investigation which may be the source from which Poggioli drew inspiration. Bergson writes that irony is achieved when "we state what ought to be done, and pretend to believe that this is just what is actually being done", whereas humour arises contrarily when "we describe with scrupulous minuteness what is being done, and pretend to believe that this is just what ought to be done" (116). Defining humour as the "counterpart of irony", Bergson proceeds by linking irony with the "oratorical" and humour with the "scientific". No doubt his characterization of humour as scientific is predicated on his belief that only through exacting and objective scrutiny can the source of comedy be revealed for what it truly is – a deviation from the fluidity of life.[53] When Poggioli classifies black humour as "antiscientific humourism ", he means to say that it is a brand of humour that aims to undermine the cult of technology and the pernicious hold it has on modern society; he is not arguing against Bergson's theory that humour employs scientific methods in its investigation. Black humour as defined by Poggioli is "pathetic, grotesque, and absurd", and "works, above all, on the formal mechanism of modern life which it serves to annihilate or exhaust, following the usual paradox of comedy" (141). With Bergson, "irony is emphasized the higher we allow ourselves to be uplifted by the idea of the good that ought to be: thus irony may grow so hot within us that it becomes a kind of high-pressure eloquence" (116). Poggioli's definition fits well with the fact that the

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lightning and black humour, as well as the tendency for both to leave "scars", further links the two.

[53] It is in this vein then that Bergson characterizes the figure of the humourist thusly: "A humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist, something like an anatomist who practices dissection with the sole object of filling us with disgust" (117). This qualification leads him to

Dadaists frequently sought out the public and the media they so ruthlessly eschewed in their work. The black humourist, operating within the "usual paradox of comedy", is in a position to make more use of introspection than the standard humourist exactly because he manipulates the oratorical and in doing so uncovers the elements of language, including his own lexical choices, which are foreign to the human vitality they aspire to express. Thus, Bergson's irony is really black humour, albeit in a rudimentary form.

On the Interdependence of Self-Reflexivity and Black Humour: The War Letters of Jacques Vaché

In order to elucidate the theories posited above, let us turn to a particularly fine example of black humour associated with Dada – the war letters of Jacques Vaché.[54] Firstly, I should note that Vaché's case was one more of affinity rather than influence. None of his fifteen "war letters" (published by André Breton after Vaché's death in January 1919) mention the activities of the Dadaists, either in Zurich, New York, Berlin, or any other known site of activity. Nevertheless, Vaché encapsulates in his letters to Breton, Louis Aragon, and Théodore Fraenkel that disillusionment which shook the modernists of the Great War period, and he unabashedly puts forth that nihilistic laughter so characteristic of Dada. Thus, although he was not a "card-carrying member" of any of the Dada satellite groups, he was celebrated by many, such as Breton and Duchamp, as an iconic precursor and a *rara avis*

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conclude that humour, "in the restricted sense in which we are here regarding the word, is really a transposition from the moral to the scientific" (117).

[54] All citations herein refer to the letters reproduced in the book by Atlas Press, Four Dada Suicides (209-235).

who championed, albeit unwittingly, the doctrine of Dada.[55] In the war letters and the accompanying sketches, the distinctive qualities which recur – identified succinctly as self-denying nihilistic tendencies, trenchant wit, iconoclastic irreverence, affected or exaggerated indifference, self-pluralization in the vein of play-acting, and a studied self-reflexive approach to aesthetics – are all to be found, in various combinations and to varying degrees, in Dada.

Motherwell's anthology includes, in the introduction, a description of Vaché composed by Émile Bouvier which merits full quotation:

> the Dadaists – and the Surréalistes as well, as a matter of fact – may trace their descent from the picturesque Jacques Vaché.... His sole concern seemed to be to introduce into real life a little of that humorous fantasy which ordinarily is only to be found in Mark Twain's stories or in insane asylums.... This phenomenal being was very well informed on everything pertaining to contemporary literature; but he was long past the stage of art-for-art's-sake, and preferred to such pretentious and frivolous pastimes the satisfaction that he found in shaping his own existence to suit his fancy.... Little by little, he imparted his secret to his new friends. The secret was nothing more than a definition of humor, carried to its furtherest consequences, to the point of abolishing even the feeling that life was worthwhile. Jacques Vaché's philosophy rested on three principles: First: "Humor is a sense of the theatric and joyless futility of everything, when one is enlightened...." Second: "It is of the essence of symbols to be symbolic...." Finally, Vaché held that there entered into humor a good deal of a "formidable ubique" that is to say, of an element of stupid surprise that is comical and, at the same time, disconcerting by reason of its destructive potentialities, an element which Jarry had illustrated in Ubu Roi. (Motherwell xxx)[56]

As evidenced by this quotation, Vaché's legacy rested upon his discernment of the "frivolity" of bourgeois approaches to art. His commitment to art was incidental, as his primary concern was to fashion himself into a sort of anti-dandy, and the various testimonials provided by those who knew him or knew of him attest to the fact that his personality took precedence over his writings.

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[55] Of course it is difficult, if not impossible, to ascribe any definite "doctrine" to any of the Dada groups; only for simplicity's sake do I make mention of it here.

In this way he strongly resembled his hero Alfred Jarry, who also utilised the vehicle of humour as the means by which he melded his existence with that of his grotesque theatrical creation, Père Ubu. As for Vaché's specialised concept of humour and its "ubique" elements, we shall examine them shortly. I wish in the meantime to mention that his suicide (or unintentional opium overdose to some) enshrouded his character in an aura of mystery and legend that has yet to dissipate. The Parisian Dadaists, and primarily Breton, were keen to conclude that Vaché's death was no accident. It was, rather, the only viable option left for a man who fought so strenuously to free himself from all things, including his own life. Breton went so far as to write that "his death was admirable in that it could pass for accidental" (in the essay "Disdainful Confession", 1924), an interpretation that is more credible than one may imagine considering the character of Vaché as evidenced by friends' reports and his own writings. His contributions, both to painting and literature, were expectedly minimal due to the time he spent in the service and to his early death (he died at the age of twenty-four). In spite of this unfortunate dearth of material, most accounts of the history of the Dada movement cite Vaché as one of the founding fathers, a curious conclusion when one considers that none of his writings even mention Dada. Still, Breton's fascination with Vaché led him to compose eulogies that found a wide audience in the circles of Dada and beyond. Likewise, his publication of the war letters in the same year of Vaché's death brought the characteristic indifference and, more importantly, the concept of *'umour* to the world. Reflecting upon the Paris sector of Dada, Georges Hugnet, in his retrospective account entitled "The

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[56] The numerous ellipses in this passage are found in Motherwell's quoted text.

Dada Spirit in Painting",[57] writes: "Jacques Vaché, had already accustomed the group, by his personal and dangerous brand of humor, disintegrating and lucid, to a sort of disorganization of thought, logic and life" (Motherwell 165-166).[58] Drafted in 1914 and serving between the years of 1915 and 1918, Vaché met Breton at a hospital in Nantes in 1916, while the former was being treated for a leg wound (Lenti 201). The two found that they were of equal minds, and they began a correspondence that ceased shortly before Vaché's death on 6 January 1919 (205). Paul Lenti, in his introduction entitled "Is Suicide 'Umorous?", observes that for Vaché,

> life itself becomes a game to be played, shaped by chaos, confusion, and carnage, leading to the unasked and unanswerable question "Why." His response was *'umour*, a word he coined to describe his own removed attitude to life and a response to the future one which also included suicide. (204)

Before we investigate the significance of the war letters in our theory of self-reflexivity, let us examine Vaché's expression of military experience and how it is that he arrived at the concept of *'umour*.

The ironic persiflage of the letters is difficult to penetrate, but there are salient themes that indicate the mood and, more importantly, the preoccupations of the author. Vaché often draws attention, for example, to his irrepressible boredom with the war. The first mention of this pernicious ennui comes in the second letter, in which Vaché relates to Breton his role as an interpreter for the British troops. In spite of the amenities granted him for his position, he remains "*horribly* isolated" (210):

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[57] The text appears in Motherwell's anthology, pages 123-165.

[58] In the same vein, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, in his "History of Dada", summarizes the importance of Vaché to his posthumous following of Dadaists: "Dandy, anglomaniac and opium addict, a young man who rejected life, he exerted a great influence on André Breton". Likewise, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia recalls in her memoirs of New York Dada that Duchamp was particularly influenced by Vaché (Motherwell 105 and 260).

> Over all, once again a *horrible* boredom has descended on me...I am bored by uninteresting things – And for fun – I imagine that the English are in reality the Germans and that I am with them, and for them, at the front. (211)[59]

Vaché thus establishes the following equation: isolation – which in this case is more akin to *anomie* than loneliness – gives way to profound boredom, which in turn engenders the play-acting described above. The author's predilection for uniforms and costumes is but another facet of his play-acting.[60] His adoption of various pseudonyms and his penchant for costuming himself in the uniforms of other military branches reinforces the observation that he is a man who epitomizes Musset's call to creative despair; he draws creative inspiration from the desperation he experiences during his service. He writes in his third letter to Breton,

> I'm the English interpreter, a position to which I bring a total indifference decorated with a quiet farce – such as I like to bring to official things – I take my Crystal monocle and a theory for troubling paintings for a walk around villages in ruins...And furthermore, I imagine I'm in the German Army and I've succeeded – Things change, how I truly believe I serve against the allied armies – What do you expect?... (213)

The phrase "a total indifference decorated with a quiet farce" exemplifies a typical Dadaist reaction to life, and applies particularly well to the comportment of Duchamp and even of Schwitters, to a degree.[61] Vaché's phrase is felicitously insightful in that it exposes the hypocrisy of affected indifference. The mere suggestion that one would ornament "total

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[59] Vaché peppered his accounts with ellipses and strained punctuation, which has for the most part been reproduced by the editors at Atlas Press.

[60] This equation is of course equally applicable to a large number of modernist artists and writers. For example, we are immediately reminded of Duchamp's cultivation of Rrose Sélavy. The initial Dada group which coalesced in Zurich was composed of individuals who, for various reasons, were overwhelmed by the pangs of *anomie* engendered by their reluctance to participate in the war. Like Vaché, they chose to embrace and even cultivate their spiritual *malaise* in an effort to survive it.

[61] As with the note on the "doctrine" of Dada, I am consciously over-simplifying the matter here, but only in the interest of brevity. Many Dadaists, particularly those in the Parisian and

indifference" with anything is laughable, and points to the frivolity of striking any serious pose, to whatever end. The "crystal monocle", an affectation adopted by some of the Dadaists, was intended "to poke fun at bourgeois pretensions" (Lenti 262). The "theory for troubling paintings", a most improbable *vade mecum*, underlines the pointlessness of bourgeois artifice (reduced metonymically by Vaché to two instances of ostentation – the "monocle" and the "theory") in a world destroyed by mass warfare. And by pretending (at least to himself) that he is actually an enemy who has infiltrated the Allied camp, he engages in a similar sort of self-fragmentation as the sort indicated by Bergson with regards to the humourist. In order to dampen the mental anguish engendered by the ubiquitous violence of the war, Vaché fragments himself in a gesture of creative despair. Unlike the Bergsonian fragmentation detailed above, however, Vaché manages to splinter into *many* different selves, thus complicating the issue further. Yet like Bergson and Baudelaire's figure of the humourist, he does possess a self-awareness that enables him to perceive the mechanical elements of military society which threaten to stifle the fluid and creative impulse. For example, rather than accepting the prescribed function of the military uniform to facilitate identification of any given soldier with his corresponding military body, Vaché uses it to pluralize his own identity. This penchant for self-pluralization was unsettling even to some of Vaché's closest friends; to those who did not know him, his play-acting rendered him a disturbing enigma.[62] In

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New York sectors, stressed their independence from the Expressionists by flaunting their disinterestedness and indifference as much as possible.

[62] In his essay "The Disdainful Confession", Breton recollects, "He sometimes strolled the Nantes streets dressed in different uniforms: as a Hussar lieutenant, an aviator or as a doctor" (17). Furthermore, in his "Introduction 1919", Breton writes, "for to tell the truth, I was never sure to which branch of the military Jacques Vaché belonged" (13).

the fourth letter, he relates the story of how he undermined a General and a Staff major:

> I was introduced today to a Division general and a Staff major at headquarters under the name of a famous painter – (I think the said general was 50 or 70 years old – perhaps he is dead also – but the name remains) – They (the General and the Staff major) managed to run away from me as soon as possible – it's strange and I amuse myself by imagining how unamusing this will end up – In any case...Besides...And in the end it leaves me indifferent as to how it will all turn out – it's not really funny – not funny at all. No. (215-216)[63]

Vaché indulges in insubordination of a different kind by eliciting a response from his superiors which he himself is forbidden from giving (he cannot simply turn and walk away). His disdain for them is clear, but cleverly he manufactures a situation in which they flee from him, not the other way around. More important are the incomplete thoughts at the end of the passage. The independent clause "I amuse myself by imagining how unamusing this will end up" is a succinct and yet precise example of creative despair. The reader is once again presented with a pervasive indifference, and ultimately Vaché manages to undermine the nihilistic laughter that he has previously proven is so valuable to his subsistence.

The most salient point to emerge from the correspondence is the concept behind the nebulous term *'umour,* which is introduced as early as the third letter. Although Poggioli misattributes *'umour* to Breton, as evidenced by the letters it was a word coined by Vaché and taken up by the latter. The invocation of such neologisms delighted Vaché, who more than likely took on the sport from one of his favourite authors, Alfred Jarry.[64] Throughout the

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[63] As with much of Vaché's war correspondence, the story may or may not be apocryphal. What matters for our purposes are the sentiments expressed.

[64] Vaché celebrated his appreciation for the unfathomable, and by that time legendary, playwright and novelist. In the fourth letter, he writes to Breton, "Are you sure that Apollinaire is still alive or that Rimbaud even existed? For me, I don't think so – I only see

Ubu trilogy, to which Vaché often alludes, Jarry appropriates common cuss words such as *merde* and transposes them slightly, usually by adding a letter or combining two or more words; his most enduring neologism, "*merdre*", is popularly translated as "pschitt".[65] The usual order of letters, producing sounds familiar in colloquial discourse, is subverted in the cases of Jarry's *merdre* and Vaché's *'umour*, the immediate result being that what we anticipate does not follow, and thus we begin to dissect a word we previously took for granted. We come to realize that the conventional meaning conveyed by that word is easily upset when a letter is added, subtracted, or the order of letters is inverted. The conclusion at which we arrive upon further reflection is that words, which are arbitrary in their spelling, are equally arbitrary in what they denote if their meanings are so easily distorted by an orthographical trick played on us by the author. We detect the "ready-made formulas and stereotyped phrases" that constitute our language (Laughter 103), and uncover beneath the seeming order of words "something mechanical encrusted on the living"; by necessity we laugh. Beaumont says as much when he observes that

> the third element inherent in the word 'merdre' is that of linguistic deformation and invention. The addition by Jarry (or by the pupils of the Lycée de Rennes, since it is certain that the word goes back to the play's schoolboy origins) of an extra *r* to the celebrated *mot de Cambronne* gives it a magnificent resonance far beyond that of its original form (*merde*), which it is, alas, impossible to recapture in English. Far from euphemising the word however (as the somewhat

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Jarry (Anyway, what do you want, anyway – ... – UBU)"... (216). The inscrutable parenthetical expression, punctuated mysteriously by hyphens and an ellipsis, suggests that Vaché truly is silenced by the contributions of Jarry.

[65] Keith Beaumont, in his book Jarry: Ubu Roi, writes the following:

> Nothing exemplifies more vividly, and more fully, the characteristic features of the language of Ubu Roi than the play's opening word, *merdre*. It embodies at one and the same time the vulgarity and obscenity of much of the play's language; its violence and aggressiveness; the element of linguistic deformation and invention; and the numerous elements of mystification which the text contains. (47)

> prissy substitution of *mince* for *merde* in French, or *sugar* for *shit* by some English-speakers, seeks to do), the purely derisory nature of Jarry's apparent camouflage gives to the word instead a parodic value, caricaturing a popular form of linguistic deformation and substitution. This linguistic deformation and inventiveness, moreover, is an important factor in enlivening the play's string of oaths and obscenities; for vulgarity and obscenity quickly become tedious unless constantly renewed by imagination and invention. (49)

What Jarry and Vaché establish in practice is Bergson's proposition: "a comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fixed into a well-established phrase-form" (104). They also substantiate Bergson's theory of "*the comic transformation of sentences*": "We may thus surmise that a phrase is likely to become comic if, though reversed, it still makes sense, or if it expresses equally well two quite independent sets of ideas" (109). What Bergson writes about phrases is equally true of words, as they are, at their basic level, the constituent elements of those same phrases.

Vaché's fondness for Jarryisms such as "merdre" and "oneilles" (translated as "earens") is but another side of his play-acting, and neologisms like *'umour* function much like the assorted costumes and uniforms he donned in gestures of self-fragmentation. No formal definition is provided anywhere in the correspondence of the word, in spite of Breton's attempts to coax an explanation out of his friend. It first appears in the third letter of the collection, and it would seem that either some part of the correspondence is missing or Breton has ventured, of his own accord, a definition of the neologism, for Vaché teasingly dismisses him by writing, "...you only approximately grasp what I meant by 'umour", and continues on, without correcting the misinterpretation. He mentions it again when he observes that "the British Army, as preferable as it is to the French, is without a lot of 'umour" (214). The penultimate musing of the third letter concerns the

writing of St. Augustine, whom Vaché imagines as "a monk who has absolutely no concept of 'umour whatsoever" (214). Clearly Breton was perplexed by the curious term and expressed his desire to be enlightened, because in the fourth letter Vaché writes, "and then you ask me to define 'umour for you – just like that!..." (216), but not before he confesses "...I amuse myself by imagining how unamusing this will end up – In any case...Besides...And in the end it leaves me indifferent as to how it will all turn out – it's not really funny – not funny at all. No." (216). The tone of the fourth letter is generally more forlorn than the others, and includes the very telling line "I'm tired of mediocrity and am of a mind simply to go to sleep for an indefinite period" (215). It is in this dejected mood that Vaché issues his first attempt at defining *'umour*.[66] He haphazardly explains that "...'umour derives too much from a sensation of not being very difficult to express – I think that it's a sensation – I was going to say SENSE – also – of the theatrical (and joyless) futility of everything" (216). Almost as soon as the author begins to engage the concept of *'umour*, he abandons it and completes the letter instead with the mundane and obviously facetious observation "it's boring to write with a pencil on lined paper" (217). It is clear from Vaché's circuitous non-answers that he wishes to maintain the ambiguity of *'umour* as much as possible. Nevertheless, the significance it held for him should not be underestimated, for in the tenth letter the singular importance he ascribes to the word is made explicit:

> – O ABSURD GOD! – because everything is contradiction – isn't it?
> – and will 'umour be the one who is never taken in by the hidden and

[66] The phantom of Jarry, which hovers over Vaché's correspondence, is not to be overlooked, for as previously discussed it is in this same letter that he elevates Jarry and Ubu to an esteemed position far above the likes of Apollinaire and Rimbaud (216).

> sneaky life of everything?...and will 'umour be the one who will feel the lamentable optical illusion of universal simile-symbols.
> – It's in their nature to be symbolic.
> – 'Umour shouldn't produce – But what to do about it?... (228)

Vaché's refusal to provide a solid definition is based upon two reasons. Firstly, as he indicates in the fourth letter, *'umour* is a symbol of sorts, and after all "it's in the essence of symbols to be symbolic" (216). The concept behind the word is obfuscated by its own categorization. As Bergson states in An Introduction to Metaphysics,

> A representation taken from a certain point of view, a translation made with certain symbols, will always remain imperfect in comparison with the object of which a view has to be taken, or which the symbols seek to express. (5)

and

> The very idea of reconstituting a thing by operations practised on symbolic elements alone implies such an absurdity that it would never occur to any one if they recollected that they were not dealing with fragments of the thing, but only, as it were, with fragments of its symbol. (25)

Vaché seems to recognize, or at least observe, that *'umour* is only an impoverished symbol intending to relate pithily at least some of the *angoisse*, frustration, and nihilistically minded humour he and his artistic compatriots were harbouring at the time. We can imagine Vaché believed that either Breton intuitively understood the visceral profundity behind the word or he did not; there was no method of explicating the symbol if one could not grasp what was being symbolized. Furthermore, the playful hints with which he taunts his friend underline the intrinsic dependency of the term on the ludic. Indeed, it would have been jarringly inconsistent for Vaché to have laid bare his definition of such a nebulous term with scientific precision. Still, we are obliged to attempt an investigation into this curious term, for *'umour*

encapsulates that same link between introspection and humour described earlier.

The case of Jarry, along with numerous examples taken from the Dada period, proves that social criticism couched in absurd humour is highly potent. This conclusion may be explained by considering what Bergson identifies as the social corrective purpose of humour. With these theories in mind, it is easy to see through the playfulness and absurdity of Dada and understand the more profound project of invoking laughter to the effect of addressing the ills of society. Likewise, seemingly nonsensical neologisms like *merdre* and *'umour* become valuable shibboleths wielded by artists like Jarry and Vaché. Those familiar with Ubu Roi and as delighted by it as Vaché was would recognize *merdre* and immediately understand the context; the social criticism contained therein would be immediately obvious to them. *'Umour* is a bit more slippery a term, as it seems to be only the tip of a conceptual iceberg rather than a rallying cry unto itself.[67] Still, the fact that it retains its mystifying power to this day underlines its potency. When we consider the profundity of *'umour*, a profundity which surely was not lost on its author or on Breton, we are reminded of Bergson's assessment of the use of imagery in philosophical discourse:

> No image can replace the intuition of duration, but many diverse images, borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized. (14)[68]

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[67] Breton addresses the *'umour* enigma with the following: "It is difficult to know exactly what Jacques Vaché meant by *'umour* (without an "h") or even to know where we now stand in his struggle between the faculty for affectation and for cultivating certain supercilious attitudes" ("The Disdainful Confession", as quoted in Vaché's War Letters 16)

[68] The concept is equally applicable to art, as this Edvard Munch quotation suggests: "In reality, my art is a confession made of my own free will, an attempt to clarify my own notion of Life...at bottom it is a kind of egoism, but I shall not give up hoping that with its assistance I shall be able to help others achieve their own clarity" (Bischoff 42). As with Vaché's *'umour*, the impetus behind Munch's work (and all Expressionist work for that matter) is first

It would have been impossible for Vaché to relate to Breton or Fraenkel the true state of his inner self as it was during his military service. Even if he had the luxury of composing exhaustive examinations of the psychological effects he experienced during the war, he could not have fully conveyed all the sensations to an audience which could not totally immerse itself in the author's position. It is much more effective (although still flawed) to introduce a new word to catalyse the reflection Vaché's audience was meant to undertake upon reading his war correspondence. His invocation of *'umour*, along with his liberal distribution of semi-quotations and words appropriated from other literary sources – in short his tenacious insistence on constructing *tableaux* rather than wholly descriptive treatises – all exert a magnetism on the mind of the reader which draws the attention (or perhaps even the subconscious) to the interface where it may converse directly with reality. An objection may be raised at this point that disputes the validity of this tactic. It may be said that such economizing on description serves only to distance the reader from the subject at hand, leaving as it does unnegotiable gaps which the reader may fill in with his own information. The possible outcome would then be a description only loosely based on the author's intentions, most of which has been refashioned by the reader according to his own experiences. No doubt a collection like Vaché's war letters runs this risk, and perhaps some readers do in fact fail to reach that introspective interface at which they were meant to arrive. Still, I would argue that the author in this case strikes the proper balance between a narration of the reality which surrounds him and inducing

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and foremost the realization of an idea, and secondly the effort to communicate that idea as viscerally as possible to one's audience.

an introspective mode in his audience. From the self-reflexive point of view, *'umour* functions as a Bergsonian "image" in that it "direct[s] consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized (14).

Conclusion

Admittedly, Bergson's distinctions between the ironist and the humourist become quite blurred in the example of Vaché, for he appears throughout his correspondence as both a Bergsonian ironist (his prepossession with language proves as much) and an humourist who acts a "double part" and "set[s] down details [of brutality and "evil"] in the most cold-blooded indifference" (132 and 116).[69] Vaché epitomizes Bergson's comic figure, and in his war correspondence we uncover a superior example of how humour and self-reflexivity are linked through the condition of creative despair. It is not a linear or steady progression between the two poles, however, and by this point in our study we should not expect it to be so. The path the humourist traces is akin to that pursued by the self-reflexive artist, for the trajectory is meandering, uncertain, and treacherous. The war letters collection presents this criss-crossing trajectory and follows it through from Romantic (self-conscious) introspection to modernist fragmentation, back to Romantic creative despair and towards trenchant avant-guard irony, finally arriving (but

[69] Indifference is critical in Bergson's characterization of the humourist, for it distinguishes said character from more conventional comic figures. The humourist makes use of subtlety to the effect of negatively emphasizing the sharpness of his criticism. Breton's depictions of Vaché do not paint the picture of a wildly comic figure, but rather one whose comic effect is heightened by his self-immersion in what he deems most unsatisfactory, namely, military service: "His refusal to participate is absolute, and takes the guise of a purely formal acceptance pushed to the limit: he maintains all the 'outer signs of respect,' of a somewhat automatic acquiescence to precisely what the mind deems most insane" ("Jacques Vaché", essay by Breton in his Anthology of Black Humor 293).

not resting at) black humour. Indeed, what Bergson writes about the comic character is highly applicable to the case of Vaché:

> In one sense it might be said that all *character* is comic, provided we mean by character the *ready-made* element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically. It is, if you will, that which causes us to imitate ourselves. And it is also, for that very reason, that which enables others to imitate us. [...] It is comic to wander out of one's own self. It is comic to fall into a ready-made category. And what is most comic of all is to become a category oneself into which others will fall, as into a ready-made frame; it is to crystallize into a stock character. (134)

Jarry, unparalleled as a comic figure (or more appropriately, a tragi-comic figure), attained his comic zenith by first creating and breathing life into a character who was an amalgamation of vices and gestures. On stage and in text, Père Ubu was the embodiment of mechanical rigidity, and so when Jarry began to fashion himself as much as possible on his creation, by necessity he had to "wander out" of himself towards the realm of the improbable.[70] Vaché moved in a similar direction, with the exception that he manufactured (or rather fragmented into) many personages, but in his case he finished, posthumously, as a ready-made category into which many of the Dadaists would happily step, rather than "fall".[71]

Schwitters also fits Bergson's characterization of the humourist, and his comic nature was noted, begrudgingly at times, by those who had occasion to interact with him (Huelsenbeck, for example). Richter offers this double-edged insight into Schwitters' comic nature:

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[70] And this movement away from the creative self towards the rigidity of form is obviously Simmelian. I perceive here a link, deserving of further exploration, between the subjective/objective struggle which engenders culture and the fragmentation of the humourist who courts the rigidity of forms as he fragments his own creative self.

[71] The reverence many of the Dadaists held for Vaché is indicative of more than a sense of affinity or an acknowledgement of influence. Vaché tapped into the precise state of being that was best suited to many of the young avant-gardists of the era, and although such posturing

> There was never a moment's boredom when 'Kurtchen' was around. Whatever he did was in deadly earnest, even when we took it as a joke. This disconcerting ambivalence was a source of tremendous energy released, in fifty per cent of the cases, in an explosion of laughter. But it was laughter of a special kind, laughter that awakened and stimulated the spirit. (Dada: Art and Anti-Art 139)

The ambivalence of which Richter takes note is somewhat similar to the indifference witnessed in the writings of Vaché and in the "dryness" of Duchamp's readymades. This ambivalence/indifference is, in Bergson's estimation, an indication of a "natural detachment" which some individuals are fortunate enough to possess. Its function is to divorce the mind from the innate connection to executable action, a connection (though necessary for life) that threatens to impose geometrical thinking on the contemplation of non-geometrical matter:

> Were this detachment complete, did the soul no longer manage to cleave to action by any of its perceptions, it would be the soul of an artist such as the world has never yet seen. It would excel alike in every art at the same time; or rather, it would fuse them all into one. It would perceive all things in their nature purity: the forms, colors, sounds of the physical world as well as the subtlest movements of the inner life. (Laughter 139)

It would be specious to claim that Schwitters, or any of the Dadaists for that matter, had elevated themselves to such heights, but certainly Schwitters was moving in this direction when he sought to produce, within the contextual unity of Merz, art that was in direct communion with the creative spirit. And as we shall see in the following chapter, the neo-*Gesamtkunstwerk* project of the Hanover Merzbau sought the fusion of the "forms, colours, sounds" and "movements of the inner life" that had, prior to its construction, floated within the domain of Merz.

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resulted in his untimely death, others, like Breton, could play at being his disciples as much as he played at being in the enemy camps.

Chapter III

Towards the Self-Reflexive Essence of the Hanover Merzbau: The Architectural Triumph of Vitalist Metaphysics

"For with our thousand weaknesses and the tiny spark of the ideal, we human beings can at best merely give ourselves, openly and honestly, and work, in the ideal sense, towards ourselves."[1]

Introduction

Of all the divergent explanations offered for the origins of the name "Dada", perhaps the most satisfactory is the etymological definition; the word, from the Slavic tongue, translates as the emphatic affirmation "Yes yes". The overwhelming majority of artistic movements proclaim in their titles more or less accurate descriptions of the principles on which they are founded, but Dada is singular in its very lack of specification.[2] That the title was chosen because in French it signified a hobby-horse, or because it was the exact entry in the dictionary upon which Huelsenbeck's attention capriciously landed, are claims which need not be disputed, for the word is elastic enough to absorb various interpretations and even misinterpretations.[3] The nonsensical connotation evoked by the first explanation, or the triumph of chance suggested by the second, work equally well when we attempt to uncover the relation between the movement and its title. So much of the Dada

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[1] The quotation belongs to Schwitters, who is speaking in particular about his tenacious proclivity towards naturalistic painting. The passage is reproduced in Kurt Schwitters (Elderfield 216).

[2] To cite some examples, "Expressionism" was a call for artists to move beyond the passive assimilation of *impressions* towards the tangible *expression* of the inner states of the mind (in all their vibrant confusion and authenticity). "Futurism" announced the fixation of the aesthetic eye on whatever lay beyond the quotidian past and present. Names like "Fauvism" and especially "De Stijl" serve as more than mere definitional reductions, as "Expressionism" and "Futurism" (or "Constructivism" and "Minimalism") do, but they still do not approach the mystical potency contained in "Dada".

[3] In Dada: Art and Anti-Art, Richter provides a superb overview of the "Homeric struggle over the ownership of the trademark" (31). Also, Elderfield addresses (in great detail and with sharp insight) the enigma of the name in his afterword to Flight Out of Time (238-251).

spirit originates in the ludic drive inherited from the Romantics, and the reliance on chance was, ironically enough, carefully cultivated in many works, most notably in pieces like Duchamp's "3 Stoppages Étalons" ("3 Standard Stoppages", 1913-1914). The proliferation of theories and assertions of authorship that enshroud the meaning of the word suggest that the disciples of the movement were genuinely at a loss for an irrefutable definition, as are biographers and theorists today.[4] However, to scramble as many have done to unearth with archaeological exactitude the true origin and meaning of "Dada" is to betray that noncommittal *modus vivendi* of the movement.[5] In "Dada" we approach an *intuition* rather than a concept, and thus we are already several steps closer to exhuming a *duration* that has been buried beneath decades of scholarly analysis. In his chapter "The Case of Dada", Huelsenbeck touches upon the same idea when he writes, "One could say that the other movements concentrated more on a theory of art or of life rather than on life itself" (136). We take then as our point of departure the philosophical "nought" which the affirmation inherent in the name "Dada" betrays, although we remain conscious of the distance that remains between the metaphysical unity given spontaneous and free expression in the title and our understanding of what is signified.

What are we affirming when we speak the name of Dada, and more crucially, what are we denying? Before we attempt an answer to this weighty

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[4] Again, Richter comments, "To this day it is impossible to be sure who discovered or invented the word Dada, or what it means" (31).

[5] With a flourish that stifles the competing opinions over the origins of the word (or at least casts aspersion on further argument), Richter writes:

> but these petty jealousies only appeared after Dada had become a world-wide enterprise. [...] Some of the leading members of Dada set out, *a posteriori*, to cut off each other's supplies of vital fluid even, as it were, in the womb, and many, with an insensitivity that was totally foreign to the Zurich group as I remember it, are still trying. (32)

question, let us briefly investigate what a few of the interpretations the original (that is, Zurich) Dadaists have suggested. If we consult Richter on the matter, we find that the focus falls on the affirmative interpretation of the word: "Nothing could better express our optimism, our sensation of newly-won freedom, than this powerfully reiterated "*da, da*" – "yes, yes" to life" (31). In marked contrast, we encounter Tzara's characteristically effusive negativity in the June 1916 entry in his "Zurich Chronicle (1915-1919)": [6]

> A word was born no one knows how **DADADADA** we **took an oath of friendship** on the new transmutation that signifies nothing, and was the most formidable protest, the most intense armed affirmation of salvation liberty blasphemy mass combat speed prayer tranquillity private guerilla negation and chocolate of the desperate. (18)

Affirmation here is quite distinct from the kind that is given voice in Richter's quotation, for the fact that Tzara issues a litany of both traditionally positive and negative concepts, and in doing so stresses the all-embracing quality of such militant affirmation. It is, perhaps, less an avowal of certain percepts than a jubilant reception of all percepts; Tzara celebrates the fact that under the rubric of "Dada", anything goes.[7] Elsewhere he states that it was a word devoid of meaning ("DADA MEANS NOTHING"), but follows that characterization with a variety of possible interpretations, both plausible and fantastic.[8] Huelsenbeck, who allied himself with Ball over the matter of the coinage of "Dada" (against the Tzara/Arp axis), endorsed the German-French

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[6] The text was initially published in Huelsenbeck's Dada Almanac, and it is from this source that I quote.

[7] Tzara's coyness over the authorship of the term was soon replaced by strident claims, substantiated by Arp, that he had selected the disyllabic utterance first and used it to christen the loosely bound group that was gathering at the Cabaret Voltaire. Elderfield, in the afterword to Flight Out of Time, cites Arp's prankish testimonial (242).

[8] I am quoting from Tzara's "Manifest dada 1918" ("Dada Manifesto 1918"), as reprinted in Motherwell's anthology, page 77.

dictionary myth,[9] which is challenged by Elderfield in favour of Ball's sole authorship, in whom he finds the likeliest (although still unverified) of authors (251). In "En Avant Dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus" ("En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism", 1920), Huelsenbeck challenges, with more than a little vituperative criticism, Tzara's stance vis-à-vis the nonsensical nature of the word "Dada":

> A word which affects the masses so profoundly must embody an idea that touches the most vital interests of these masses, shaming, frightening or encouraging them in their innermost soul. That is why it is so incomprehensible that this Tristan Tzara, who out of childish ambition passes himself off as the inventor of Dada, should try to bind Dada to abstract art. [...] To be sure, the choice of the word Dada in the Cabaret Voltaire was selective – metaphysical, predetermined by all the idea-energies with which it was now acting upon the world – but no one had thought of Dada as babies' prattle. (31)

Huelsenbeck categorically refuses Tzara's authenticity as well as his characteristic leanings towards nonsense and anti-sense, and when we consider the separate spheres of Berlin and Paris Dada, each (respectively) spearheaded by these two original Dadaists, then we can easily trace how their contradictory interpretations of "Dada" coloured the satellite movements they initiated.[10]

Elderfield follows a different path in his efforts to trace the true origin and author of "Dada". Firstly, he cites none other than Schwitters as the instigator of the decades long dispute between Tzara and Huelsenbeck. Having been dismissed from the blossoming group almost *a priori*, Schwitters

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[9] His story, which involves Ball and Hennings, appears in his essay "Dada Siegt!" ("Dada Lives!", 1936), reproduced in Motherwell's anthology (277-281).

[10] Berlin Dada followed, from its inception, more of a political agenda, while Paris Dada was, more frequently, gratuitously provocative. In Kurt Schwitters, Elderfield observes:

> Under Tristan Tzara, in Zurich and later in Paris, [Dada] became an aggressively experimental and increasingly Gallicized movement, dedicated to the shocking and the mystifying virtually for their own sakes. Under Huelsenbeck, however, when he returned to Berlin from Zurich in 1917,

was, with reason, wary of Huelsenbeck, and in the interest of discrediting him in the eyes of the Dadaists, he challenged Huelsenbeck's authority as the reigning sovereign of Berlin Dada and Dada at large.[11] (We shall return later to the issue of Schwitters and his struggle for inclusion in Dada.) Elderfield does, however, lean more towards Huelsenbeck's influence, for his side – which finds that the word did indeed have meaning and significance – is more closely corroborated by Ball's diary entries (247). Ball, as a poet first and foremost, was preoccupied with the mystical power contained in words, and I agree with Elderfield's conclusion that as the founder of the Cabaret Voltaire, he would have no doubt been reluctant to authorize a word chosen for its very lack of meaning (250). We have before us, then, a multitude of suggested meanings, but I must concur with Elderfield's theory that the word, in spite of its infantile sound, carried with it great significance. I do, however, wish to explore another possible route by which the same conclusion may be reached, one that will incorporate Bergson's theory of the nought and our own theory of self-reflexivity thus far developed, which comes to great fruition in the Hanover Merzbau.

Huelsenbeck's quotation cited above regarding the potency of the word "Dada" merits further attention. In the same essay, he reports how violently the word asserted itself amongst the European populace:

> During the past decades in Europe, no word, no concept, no philosophy, no slogan of party or sect can be said to have burst upon the imagination of a civilized society with such catastrophic force.

> Dada became something very different indeed, and implacably opposed to what Schwitters and his connections stood for. (34)

[11] I refer to Elderfield's abridged history of the conflict in his afterword to Flight Out of Time (240). On the same page, he situates this great schism in the year 1920, which he points out was the same year in which Dada disintegrated into the splintered movements which were built on its ruins. In emphasizing that fateful date, Elderfield strongly suggests that the furore over the name (which Schwitters deviously instigated) had more than a small part to play in the fissure of the group.

> [...] The immense effect of Dadaism on the great mass of the artistically indifferent lay in the senseless and comic character of the word Dada, and it would seem that this effect, in turn, must derive from some profound psychological cause, connected with the whole structure of "humanity" today and its present social organization. ("En Avant Dada", Motherwell 31)

Even if we allow for the usual Dadaist blustering and self-aggrandizement, we still must acknowledge that the movement did indeed make a heavy impact not only upon Europe, but upon America as well. The explanation offered here by Huelsenbeck is redolent of both Simmel and Bergson. The allusion to a pervasive psychological condition affecting society as a whole recalls "The Metropolis and Mental Life" and Simmel's theory regarding the tragedy of culture, while the comedy inherent in the movement (and the serious philosophical preoccupations it veils) harkens back to Bergson's Laughter. While it is certainly the case that nonsense was cultivated under the battle cry of "Dada" and that it came to inform many works of the period, there was, in reality, a great deal of order which lurked beneath the chaos.[12] Many declamatory manifestos were written to the contrary, but Dada clearly kept at its core a positive ideal, a unity that stretched across the contradictions and embraced even the most divergent of styles and concepts. For although many Dadaists like Tzara and Picabia posited an anti-art stance, they continued to compose poems and execute paintings, just as the predecessors they eschewed had done for hundreds of years. Even Tzara came to appreciate the positive productivity of the movement he once claimed fell under a title that signified "nothing".[13]

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[12] To conjure up a fitting image, we may imagine a turbid stretch of river whose turbulence nevertheless derives from the concrete arrangement of its rocky (but stationary) bed.

[13] His "Dada Manifesto 1918" begins as follows: "The magic of a word – Dada – which has brought journalists to the gates of a world unforeseen, is of no importance to us" (Motherwell 76). Age seems to have tempered his delirious *je m'enfoutisme*, however, for in "An Introduction to Dada" (written many years later and also appearing in Motherwell), he states,

The Shadow of the Nought

Bergson's theory of the nought is predicated upon the belief that "nothingness", in spite of our conception of it, is in reality as full as its positive opposite:

> the idea of Nothing, if we try to see in it that of an annihilation of all things, is self-destructive and reduced to a mere word; and that if, on the contrary, it is truly an idea, then we find in it as much matter as in the idea of All. (Creative Evolution 324)

Bergson begins by identifying a critical problem in our comprehension of "the inner life". As consciousness is tethered to the faculty of the intellect, it is unaccustomed to interpreting the inner life by the intuitive method; rather, it selects static moments and extrapolates the nature of *duration* by those fixed points (297). There is another problem Bergson identifies, one that develops as a result of our reliance on the interpretive abilities of our consciousness. As discussed in the preceding chapter, our intellect performs its duties as a function of the action we require, and for this reason it is difficult to move outside of a philosophy based on our desires and the actions we undertake to achieve them.[14] At this point, we identify the common misperception which feeds our understanding of the void and complementary fullness:

> All action aims at getting something that we feel the want of, or at creating something that does not yet exist. In this very special sense, it fills a void, and goes from the empty to the full, from an absence to a presence, from the unreal to the real. (297)

We mislead ourselves, therefore, by supposing that our disappointment, which comes when we fail to locate an object or situation of our wishing, is equivalent to the reality of what we encounter. In reality, "it is only order that

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"Was this movement, only the destructive side of which had been seen by most critics, really necessary? It is certain that the *tabula rasa* which we made into the guiding principle of our

is real", for disorder is only man's word for an order which disappoints the expectation.[15] It is this unveiling of terms that prompts Bergson to conclude, "The idea of disorder is then entirely practical" (298). We fall into a philosophical *abîme* whenever we propose the non-existence of order, because in that very proposal we simply vacillate between the order that is in concert with our ideals and the order that disappoints us (that which we term disorder). Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that "the supposed suppression of the one and the other implies the presence of the two" (298-299), and so it is that disorder (and as we shall soon see, nothingness) is but a mirage. Still, we perceive it on the horizon as a reality that affirms our belief in order and fullness.[16] Bergson even posits that at the first moment of self-reflection, the mirage of disorder appears in the distance, coaxing us to step forward but eluding us at every pace. In pursuing that illusion, however, we eventually discover that "Existence appears...like a conquest over nought" (300), and it is this error which stimulates the mind to form the question: "How – why does this principle ["a Principle of creation"] exist rather than nothing?" (300).[17]

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activity, was of value only in so far as *something else* would succeed it" (405).

[14] "We thus express what we have as a function of what we want" (298).

[15] "All that is left of disorder is a word" (299).

[16] Disorder is, in these passages of Creative Evolution, defined as the "absence" of order, and it is in this way that the argument Bergson makes soon shifts to the question of absence in general. Intuitively we perceive that the pejorative opinion we hold of disorder is but a few grades shy of the negativity we ascribe to our idea of absolute nothingness.

[17] Ortega y Gasset, in Some Lessons in Metaphysics, also addresses the issue of the external world and how our curiosity of it is prompted by the unanswered desire manifest in action. It is when "things" fail to yield to our wishes, when we are disappointed in the reluctance of objects to bend to our will, that we come to recognize them as "beings". The example given is of a table which gives way when a hand is placed on it. Such an experience would convince one that the table is but an extension of the body. If, on the other hand, the table yielded when it was meant to be supporting the hand, then it would prove an "annoyance", and "when a thing annoys me, it poses a question to me; because I need it and cannot 'count on it', because it fails me" (88). Thus, Ortega y Gasset sees disappointment in the external world as the requisite prompt for metaphysical questioning. It also leads one to understand the outside world as foreign and distinct from the "I" (87).

In order to reach that state at which theoretical nothingness may be encountered face-to-face, Bergson proposes an exercise of wilful self-extinguishment. He first supposes that all sensorial perceptions can be blocked out, and in this way the "material universe sinks into silence and the night" (302). Once that realm fades away, he tries to "blot out and forget my recollections up to my immediate past", but in doing so the crux of the problem emerges: "at the very instant that my consciousness is extinguished, another consciousness lights up – or rather, it was already alight: it had arisen the instant before, in order to witness the extinction of the first" (302-303). Of course, if one is to recognize oneself as having been extinguished, there needs be a witness, another self, who is capable of testifying to the effacement of the primary self, "for the first could disappear only for another and in the presence of another" (303).[18] In summation,

> do what I will, I am always perceiving something, either from without or from within. When I no longer know anything of external objects, it is because I have taken refuge in the consciousness that I have of myself. If I abolish this inner self, its very abolition becomes an object for an imaginary self which now perceives as an external object the self that is dying away. (303)

We find, then, that the mind is seduced into believing that the spectre of nothingness haunts all reality, both concrete and theoretical, and that the absence of existence stealthily lingers around existence, threatening to envelop it at any moment (300-301). It is not entirely clear why the mind is so preoccupied with the nought, but it is possible that it finds in it a self-justificatory reason for its own existence. We know from Bergson that, living as we do in the world of solids (xix), our primary concern is executable action.

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[18] Again we recall Schopenhauer's "knower" and "known" (The World as Will and Idea 88). He also finds that there is no extinguishment of the self-conscious ego, and its tenacity he ascribes to the endurance of "will".

To this end, we are accustomed to viewing the external world in geometric terms, and we are fond of imagining that laws are immutable, constant, and predictable. Although there is at the core of our existence an intuitive consciousness cognizant of its own *duration*, for practical purposes we operate under the direction of our intellect, and in doing so we stray from the self-conscious impulse that resides in our hearts. Nevertheless, as we learned from Simmel and Ortega y Gasset, the self-conscious "I" reaches itself by way of the external world, for objects are produced that in turn inform our existence. In the procedure Bergson proposes above, we find that the abolition of all objects may, theoretically, be achieved, but that at the final moment the self cleaves itself once more, and so is able to keep the torch of consciousness alight while the former self slips away. It would seem, in these lines and in other passages in Bergson and Simmel, that the self is condemned to endless generation. To put it another way, before man is "condemned to be free", man is simply "condemned to be". Ortega y Gasset:

> I do not give myself life, but it is given to me; I find myself with it on finding myself with myself. But what is given to me when I am given life is the inexorable necessity of having to do something under the threat of ceasing to live. And not even in this am I free – because ceasing to live is also a form of doing [...]. (89)

It is ironic, considering that we are engaged in constant production and that we *endure* in a world increasingly over-populated by our own products, that we conceive of nothingness at all. Perhaps it is but another example of our geometrically inclined philosophy attempting to extend its reign over our inner lives as well; we tend towards dualisms, and so what else could oppose fruitfulness but barrenness, fullness but the void? It may be that the thought of nothingness serves as a great motivator, that we engage in the production of objects (again, to the end of achieving self-knowledge) more fervently than

ever when we sense the darkness of nothingness pushing ever closer. Bergson suggests that our fixation on the nought is simply the opposite face of the interests and desires we invest in the outside world. When we encounter that which we did not anticipate, or when we are confronted with a reality other than the one for which we hoped, we are disappointed, for a spanner has now been thrown in the works we were intending to execute for our own gain. In our exasperation, we state that we find the room in disarray, that "nothing" has replaced the item for which we were searching.[19]

These suppositions are but illusions in disguise, and these are the illusions in which we place so much confidence. At the core of the error is a flux between what we perceive externally and what we believe we perceive internally. Bergson suggests that at a point equidistant between these two poles, the concept of "nothingness" resides. However, in reality, this space that sits between subject and object is only virtual:

> the image of Nothing, so defined, is an image full of things, an image that includes at once that of the subject and that of the object and, besides, a perpetual leaping from one to the other and the refusal ever to come to rest finally on either. (304)

This kind of "nothingness" is self-evidently replete with "somethingness", and thus cannot possibly be relied upon for a definition of the nought. Furthermore, because the process is predicated upon the wilful annihilation of the self, it incorporates, in spite of itself, "existence in general" (304). Bergson refutes the likely protest given by philosophers who suppose that the

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[19] Bergson:

> In a general way, human work consists in creating utility; and, as long as the work is not done, there is 'nothing' – nothing that we want. Our life is thus spent in filling voids, which our intellect conceives under the influence, by no means intellectual, of desire and of regret, under the pressure of vital necessities; and if we mean by void an absence of utility and not of things, we may say, in this quite relative sense, that we are constantly going from the void to the full: such is the direction which our action takes. (323)

nought exists only as an idea. He likens such a proposition to the idea of a "square circle", the impossibility of which is immediately apparent. "An idea constructed by the mind is an idea only if its pieces are capable of coexisting; it is reduced to a mere word if the elements that we bring together to compose it are driven away as fast as we assemble them" (305). In this way, the "annihilation of everything" is only a word, according to Bergson, in the same way that a square circle contradicts itself at its first appearance on the tongue. The basic objection Bergson presents to the attainment of the nought via the annihilation of everything is that in order to suppose mentally one thing non-existent, it is necessary to replace it with another. In this way the substitution of "something" for "nothing" is carried on indefinitely. Thus,

> *the representation of the void is always a representation which is full and which resolves itself on analysis into two positive elements: the idea, distinct or confused, of a substitution, and the feeling, experienced or imagined, of a desire or a regret.* (308, author's italics)

In addition, it is crucial to recognize that the process by which we seek to uncover nothingness (we first imagine something and then imagine it non-existent) is a process predicated upon the idea of existence, upon the mental picture of something of which we can form a thought. If we wish to deny the existence of something (Bergson uses the general figure of "object A"), then we first must picture, or at least acknowledge to ourselves, the existence of object A. We then imagine that another entity has replaced this object. Practically speaking, if the absence of object A disappoints us, we envision another object having taken its place.[20] Due to the fact that the mind generates

[20] Bergson is vague in what he supposes may be the replacement object, but as he reminds us, we are dealing with theoretical existences here, and so it really does not matter what supplants object A: "it is useless to represent this latter reality explicitly; we are not concerned with what it is; it is enough for us to know that it drives out the object A, which alone is of interest

at least several concepts in its attempts to seize upon the nought, there is "more, and not less, in the idea of an object conceived as 'not existing' than in the idea of this same object conceived as 'existing'" (311). On a similar point, we find that affirmation "bears directly on a thing": we affirm our findings when they reveal themselves to us according to our anticipations (313). Conversely, negation "aims at the thing only indirectly, through an interposed affirmation. ...a negative proposition expresses a judgment on a judgment" (313). For the simple explanation that we cannot prove a negative, we instead judge our initial judgment, which itself is formed by the information relayed by the senses.[21]

In brief summation, Bergson acquaints us with the elusive idea of "nothing" by proposing we investigate the processes by which we attempt to uncover the nought. It is customary to try and arrive at nothingness by performing the mental function of imagining an object and then imagining it non-existent, but Bergson proves to us that such an operation is in reality only the replacement of the initial concept with another thought, and so the result is at least twice removed from "nothing".[22] Even when the mind supposes itself extinguishable, another consciousness rises up in place of the former to witness its predecessor's demise. The element of desire also cannot be ignored, for what we find we express in terms of what we hoped to find. To this end, we translate our disappointments into negation, but this negation does

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to us" (310). If, for example, we hope to locate object A on our desks, and we fail to find it where it is meant to be, it is not "nothing" that we find, but either another object instead or perhaps even a "blank" space. Still, that seemingly empty space is, in terms of molecules, atoms, and so on, not "empty" at all.

[21] Bergson gives the example of a table one encounters and judges to be black. Such a statement is a simple affirmation, but should one be disappointed with what one encountered, that is, if one expected to find a white table, the resulting statement would be, "This table is not white" (312-313). It is a logical impossibility to perceive the absence of the colour black, and so a judgment is cast on the initial judgment, and not the table (313).

not hold for, as previously proven, "there is no absolute void in nature" (305). And as with his theory of laughter, Bergson uncovers in negation a social cause. When we negate a presence, we implicitly suggest to "an interlocutor, real or possible" (and this shadowy figure may one's own self) that whatever he had previously been affirming must, by necessity, be replaced by something else (313):

> There is no longer then, simply, a person and an object; there is, in place of the object, a person speaking to a person, opposing him and aiding him at the same time; there is a beginning of society. Negation aims at someone, and not only, like a purely intellectual operation, at something. It is of a pedagogical and social nature. It sets straight or rather warns, the person warned and set straight being possibly, *by a kind of doubling*, the very person that speaks. (313-314, my italics)

It is in the social signification of negation that we find partial justification for our belief in the nought. We have already learned that, as with the square circle, "nothingness" is but a word, and as Bergson reminds us, words symbolize concepts; it is in the realm of conceptual thought that our quotidian actions are executed (317). What is of particular interest at this point is the sociological significance Bergson identifies in negation. The didactic nature of negation is even more profound than that of affirmation, for with affirmation we have but one judgment, but in negation we have two; thus, twice as much information is being imparted. With regards to a theory of self-reflexivity, Bergson's words above, coupled with the procedure he describes for the ostensible attainment of the nought, establish a strong link between negation, introspection, self-fragmentation, and social interaction. To invoke the nought, to illustrate one's disappointment in a given situation by retreating into the terminology of negation, is not just to express said disappointment,

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[22] Does not the linguistic "double negative" function in the same way?

but more crucially to court correction, either of oneself or one's neighbours. Similarly, "the idea of annihilation is therefore not a pure idea; it implies that we regret the past or that we conceive it as regrettable, that we have some reason to linger over it" (320). The Futurists' and Dadaists' calls for annihilation are, in this light, to be recognized not as wanton nihilistic proclamations, but rather the voicing of a Romantic *creative despair* that spurs feverish creation even in the face of overwhelming cultural pessimism. Finally, the periphrastic expression of disappointment (for example, "This table is not white") misleads one to believe that the absence of white can be empirically established, and in the same way that error replicates itself to the point where we imagine that the self, like any other entity, is extinguishable. This often-repeated error is not without social value, however, for it compels man to keep his attention fixed on action. As he commonly sees it, the stealthily lurking spectre of the nought is forever threatening to erase his products and his very being. We can now comprehend how it is that the Dadaists, in spite of their superficially nihilistic calls for the abolition of art, were, in reality, an industrious group.

Not the Nought, But the Self

Having investigated Bergson's theory of the nought, we may now return to the question of the word "Dada". As stated in the beginning of this chapter, the name is a double affirmative, but the vehemence behind that emphatic affirmation, a negativity that appears, however briefly, in nearly every Dadaist manifesto and work, should be just as audible as the infamous "Yes yes". At the core of this nebulous movement, exemplified in its very

name, is the Dadaists' spirit for *enantiodromia*. For them, it was not enough to shuttle back and forth between the poles of affirmation and negation:[23]

> It is ridiculous and a sign of idiocy exceeding the legal limit to say that Dada (whose actual achievements and immense success cannot be denied) is "only of negative value." Today you can hardly fool first-graders with the old saw about positive and negative. (Huelsenbeck, "En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism", Motherwell 44)

The Dadaists perceived that there was an overarching unity to uncover, and they set about this Herculean task with results that corroborate Bergson's theories discussed above. If we follow his line of thought, we find that a great deal of self-reflexivity informs the processes of affirmation and negation. In tracing the latter, we discover that the self is inextinguishable, and as the attempted attainment of the nought begins and ends with the self, the journey itself is illusory. It is only a word, and in a sense that word, at least for a brief period in the early twentieth century, was "Dada". Ribemont-Dessaignes may or may not have been aware of Bergson's theories when he composed his "Histoire de Dada" ("History of Dada", 1931), but the characterization he provides of the movement is remarkably supportive of the latter's conclusions on the issue of the nought:

> the implications of the movement went beyond literature and art. It aimed at the liberation of the individual from dogma, formulas and laws, at the affirmation of the individual on the plane of the spiritual; it may even be said that the movement liberated the individual from the mind itself, placing the genius in the same rank as the idiot. (Motherwell 102)

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[23] As the greatest of all oppositions, "Affirmation" and "negation" (or, more basically, "Yes" and "No"), is the wellspring from which all other dualisms derive. The Dadaists proved that the distinction between these two poles was not only blurred at times, but that it was mutable and malleable even. Once this seminal dualism was revealed to be subject to flux, then all other traditionally acceptable dualisms became assailable. Ball is clearly speaking to this new condition when he writes, "He [the Dadaist] no longer believes in the comprehension of things from *one* point of view, and yet he is still so convinced of the unity of all beings, of the totality of all things, that he suffers from the dissonances to the point of self-disintegration" (12.VI.1916, Flight Out of Time 66). We shall return to the issue of self-disintegration shortly.

What is here termed the "spiritual" is equivalent to Bergson's invocation of metaphysical *intuition*. Thus, the "affirmation of the individual" may be understood as the informed self-consciousness achieved when external realities are processed not by the intellect but by *intuition*. The idea posited here, however (that the mind is capable of self-liberation), was disproved by Bergson, but what follows makes it clear that Ribemont-Dessaignes was more interested in illustrating the levelling effect of Dada than in proposing a valid method for self-effacement. In order to achieve self-liberation (in other words to immerse ourselves in the richness of *duration* rather than just attempting to conceptualise it) it is necessary to recognize that the nought is but a detour on the path to self-knowledge (Creative Evolution 324), and I maintain that the very name "Dada" does just this. We cannot visualize the affirmation it proclaims without questioning what is being denied, and so "Dada" is the condition at which we arrive after the academies have been swept clean, after nihilism and the nought have been revealed as detours or puerile sport. What is stated above is far from the conventional nihilism with which Dada is conventionally charged, for liberation implies a shedding of an outmoded and increasingly constrictive skin that no longer fits the blossoming body. Something more positive, something of greater value supplants the old laws, and from negation springs an ecstatic affirmation: an *enantiodromia* once again effects its power.

The Italian Futurists, the French Cubists, and the German Expressionists, all immediate predecessors of Dada, revealed with great innovation and passion the subtext of endless contradiction and flux that pervaded even the most civilized and bourgeois of societies. The liberation of

typographical characters, the arrogation of militaristic belligerence, the embrace of the mechanical, and the integration of commercial products into the hitherto sacrosanct realm of the painter's canvas are all commonly identified with the Dadaists, but even a cursory survey of modernist European art would reveal the true origins of these developments. In fact, most pieces of Dadaist art are not as singular as we would be pressed to believe if we yielded to the movement's propaganda (Duchamp's readymades excepted for obvious reasons). Nevertheless, Dada clearly garnered for itself a legendary aura with which it has yet to part, no small achievement considering how far beyond the bounds of tradition and propriety much postmodernist art has gone. The negativity and the reactionary postures adopted in defence against the mediocrity of bourgeois culture do not belong to Dada alone, even though Dada constituted the pinnacle of such cultural protests. It was, rather, the realization at which the Dadaists arrived; the eternal poles of affirmation and negation, construction and destruction, civilization and barbarism, and all the other dualisms that follow contained a vitality which suffused all cultural endeavours. Up until that point, artists, like their scientific, religious, and political brethren, trained their eyes and thus their disciplines on solutions that would somehow stabilize the system under scrutiny. What Dada contributed most significantly was an espousal of negativity, destruction, and barbarism, recognizing as it did that it was not a transcendence that was required (for others had already transcended the parameters proscribed by representation), but rather a transfiguration.[24] Even to the point of predicting and welcoming

[24] I refer the reader to Birringer's article "The Struggle for Transfiguration in Modern Art", in which he identifies the seminal struggle of modern artists to be between the "transcendence of representation through the individuating spirit" and "a transfiguration through a move visceral experience of the 'secret soul of things'" (143).

its own demise, Dada understood, perhaps more insightfully than any preceding group, that "human beings became truly human only when they accept the smallness of their place within Creation, admit their dependence on the material world, and cultivate a respect for the natural powers that flow through and around them" (Sheppard 178). The objection may be made at this point that primitive art is the embodiment of precisely this ideal, and it is the doe-eyed innocence with which the primitives greeted their pantheistic world that suffuses early art and makes it so appealing to modern viewers. However, if we recall the great importance that Bergson ascribes to memory, we may extend without difficulty the parameters of the theory a bit further and come to speak of a collective social memory which governs a society's present and future as much as an individual's memory does his own life. Then we find that the concretion of thousands of years of human experiences has rendered modern man cynical and pessimistic, and this is why the primitivism which Dada affects is but the invocation of an ideology that could not possibly carry any true validity in the modern world. In his Über das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 1911) Kandinsky opines in a similar way that the affinity which the modern artist holds for the art of the primitive is but a "spark", and the "doubt" that has taken hold of modern man (an apprehension that combines cynicism and dread in seemingly equal measure, and which derives from materialism) is what distinguishes him most significantly from his inspired ancestor (1-2).

In the section of Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism entitled "Triune Dada and Carnival Laughter", Sheppard addresses the three species of Dadaist humour: the "ebullient and anarchic joy", the "scathing satirical fierceness",

and, most importantly for our purposes, the "highly developed sense of self-irony" (198-199). Deriving in part from "Schlegel's Romantic Irony", the self-irony of the Dadaists "signifies [their] awareness that in a world in flux, the subjective point of view and human formulations are relative" (199).[25] Sheppard continues:

> Self-irony guarantees an attitude of flexibility and openness toward a world of uncertainty. Self-irony functions as a means of checking blind enthusiasm and utopian dreams. [...] Self-irony can even help one come to terms with mortality – which explains why the Dadaists cultivated an indifference toward the survival of their own artistic products. But finally, self-irony, the ability to stand back from oneself and laugh, betokens that there is a quality in human nature that is stronger than all the negative and disorienting pressures that play upon it. [...] Ultimately, and despite all its provocative cynicism and uncomfortable subversiveness, the humor of Dada says "yes" to life – even if it cannot solve the philosophical problem that would be inherited by postmodernism of why it should say "yes" to anything at all. (199)

The "self-irony" of which Sheppard writes operates within the realm of self-reflexivity, for it actively influences the self in which it originates, and serves to colour its relationship to the external world. Furthermore, we find Bergson's humourist (and his not-too-distant cousin, Baudelaire's comic man) lurking stealthily in Sheppard's words. To quote Bergson once again:

> When the humorist laughs at himself, he is really acting a double part; the self who laughs is indeed conscious, but not the self who is laughed at. (132)

Combining what we have learned about the self-fragmentation of the humourist with the fragmentation exercises of the mind in search of absolute negation, we discover the answer to the riddle Sheppard quietly poses above. That "quality in human nature" which stands up to the lashings of

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[25] Sheppard cites several examples of how the Dadaists championed relativist philosophy in their works. Most notably, he mentions that Van Doesburg granted Bergson the distinction of being a Dadaist. Unfortunately for Bergson, this relativism, based as it was on the almighty *intuition*, soon became for his critics a foray into anti-intellectualism and ultimately irrationalism. However, in his defence, such conclusions are based on biased analysis and

disorientating and destructive forces is much more than a simple quality. It is the immutable self that resists extinguishment, even attempted extinguishment by itself. It is the *élan vital* from which all creativity streams; it is the self-conscious soul that exerts a centripetal force upon its own products and organizes them around its core. Dada's brand of humour emphatically affirms life not simply because it is heavily informed by vitalist philosophy, but because it is the gesture of a movement that understood just how unavoidable the self really was. Thus, to speak of Dada as a group predicated upon a philosophy of nihilism is to utter a pure contradiction, as surely as affirmation is all that really exists, and the nought is no more than a mirage. I would even venture as far as to challenge Sheppard's suggestion that Dada ultimately stood silent before the postmodernist enigma of enforced affirmation. The most lucid of the Dadaists (and besides Schwitters I am thinking primarily of Duchamp and Ball, although others may of course be considered) intuitively understood that Dada had to say, "Yes yes" because "No", as pure negation or as a philosophical nought, never existed and so could never be found, precisely because the self was inextinguishable.

Schwitters' Merzbau constructions, and in particular the Hanover Merzbau, encapsulate the modernist artist's ambition towards a "pure art" that is pure primarily in its "transfigurative" self-reflexivity. What Birringer suggests regarding this issue is especially applicable to Schwitters' most significant work:

> We could say that this idea of 'transfiguration,' this search for pure forms which can transcend the objective, concrete world and all representational ballast that suggests and reminds us of the very contingency and impermanence of this world, is in itself almost a

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thus yield only specious characterizations. See Antliff 4 and Alexander 53 and 62 for more detailed arguments concerning the matter of Bergson's supposed unadulterated relativism.

> metaphysical project, and it clearly denotes a spiritual protest against the materialism and positivism of our time. Paradoxically, the project announces itself rhetorically in the name of a heightened subjectivism, which means that it remains caught up with the dilemma the protest was directed against in the first place. (140)

In the case of the Hanover Merzbau, the incorporation of found objects, enshrined in numerous "grottoes" similar in concept and construction to the displays of holy relics one encounters in Catholic cathedrals, speaks to "this search for pure forms". As is the case with Duchamp's readymades, these objects (and shortly I shall detail some of them) were seemingly objective products of a material world that bore the signature of the artist who collected and arranged them (like *Fountain*, 1917, and "R. Mutt"). The selection of the objects, the nearly obsessive care with which they were collected and incorporated into the work, and the move towards permanence they signified constitutes a "spiritual" enterprise of great importance to Schwitters. The Merzbau, as "a metaphysical project", partook of vitalist metaphysical philosophy (as understood in the contemporary works of Simmel and Bergson) that was in circulation at the time. It is noted repeatedly in books and essays addressing the complexities of the Merzbau that the creator constructed and encouraged the metaphysical flux that informed the project. Thus, we are reminded of Duchamp's "Large Glass", which was also several years in the making and left incomplete:[26]

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[26] An investigation into the similarities and differences between both projects, particularly as they function on vitalist principles, would yield a fruitful study. One of the greatest discrepancies between both works is the fact that Duchamp welcomed the encroachment of chaos (I refer to the accident that left the piece severely cracked and the collection of dust that inspired Man Ray's memorable photograph "Dust Farm", 1920). Contrariwise, Schwitters was loath to abandon his work when he was forced to emigrate in 1937, and the subsequent destruction of the Hanover Merzbau in an Allied bombing raid in October 1943 (Elderfield 157) disturbed him greatly. Elderfield also looks to some comparisons between the artists, and concludes that a project of "dissociation" was central to both Duchamp's readymades and Schwitters' collages (235).

> As [Schwitters] stated in an article from 1931 entitled "Ich und meine Zeile" ("Me and my work"), an article that appears as part of *Merz 21. erstes Veilchenheft*, an issue of his *Merzheft* (*Merz-journal*) and contains the first and most elaborate discussion of his *Kathedrale*, the work was, "in principle, always in flux." (Gamard 5)

Such a statement is perhaps too elementary to bear analysis unless we consider it in philosophical terms. Any work requiring revision or restoration may be said to be "in flux", but on a much more profound level, the Merzbau was in flux because it shuttled constantly between the subjective and objective poles. Furthermore, it flaunted that shuttling as one of its virtues. As a work that was consistently in progress, the Merzbau held various dialogues: with the artist, with the viewer, with itself, and with the realm of objects, both aesthetic and not, in which and with which it was conceived and executed. Before we interpret the Merzbau in terms of Simmel and Bergson's philosophies, let us first detail its construction and situate it in Schwitters' oeuvre.

Out of Dada, Merz

From the softly-hewn organic woodcuts of Arp to the politicised vitriol of Grosz's drawings, and from the esoteric cosmogony of the "Large Glass" and "Tu M'" (1918) to Man Ray's haunting Rayograms, Dada can only be labelled "a movement" for convenience's sake, for no movement (in the traditional sense) could hold so many discordances and still march behind a single tune. It was undoubtedly the sustained internationalism of Dada, a salient accomplishment considering the World War raging at the time, coupled with its open-door policy for all genres of artistic creation, that enticed divergent figures who under normal circumstances would never have cause to exhibit together. Daimonides' "Towards a Theory of Dadaism" provides a

rarely cited characterization of the group that speaks to its (supposed) all-encompassing nature:

> Dada's view of life takes account of all possible transcendence. Its horopter is thoroughly universal; so it is a misunderstanding, often enough criticised by qualified Dadas, to imagine that DADA limits itself even technically to being an art movement. (Dada Almanac 64)[27]

The metaphoric allusion to optometry speaks to the visual clarity with which Dada surveyed its domain. It would follow that a group whose merit rested with the appreciation of "transcendence" (to the point of welcoming a transcendence of its own parameters), which at various times counted among its members no less than the Son of Man, would readily receive a talent as unique and developed as Schwitters, but it is to the discredit of Dada that such an ignominious eschewal by Huelsenbeck in 1919 resulted in his official exclusion. Richter, in Dada: Art and Anti-Art, recalls with poignant regret the way in which Schwitters' "application" for admission to Club Dada in Berlin was refused by the self-proclaimed leader of the group, Huelsenbeck. In spite of proclaiming in his "En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism" (1920) that "everyone can be a Dadaist" and that "Dada is not limited to any art" (Motherwell 28), Huelsenbeck took a nearly instant dislike to Schwitters, whom he characterized as unforgivably bourgeois, a heavy criticism at a time when the European avant-garde rallied behind an expressly anti-bourgeois code. Nevertheless, as much as one can speak of "true" Dadaism, it was Huelsenbeck who was the lesser Dadaist. As Elderfield states, the original

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[27] The cursory biography of Daimonides, appearing in the Dada Almanac but composed by the editors of Atlas Press, erases at least some of the enigma behind this satellite Dadaist. He was otherwise known as Edgar Firn or Dr. Karl Döhmann, and he lived between 1892 and 1982 in Berlin. He was a venereologist and a Sanskrit scholar, and participated as a pianist at several Berlin Dada soirées. Surely his profession, as well as his knowledge of Sanskrit, would have made him more than a welcome member of Berlin Dada, in spite of his lack of artistic credentials.

intentions of Dada (under its founder, Ball) were much closer to Schwitters' aesthetic concerns (34). When Huelsenbeck imported Dada to Berlin in 1917, it adopted a much more polemical, political flavour; his statement in "En Avant Dada" – "Dada is German Bolshevism" – unequivocally underlines his political interests (Motherwell 44). By the time Schwitters was seeking admittance to Berlin Dada, he was already at a disadvantage for having aligned himself with Sturm Expressionism:[28]

> The first target of Berlin Dada was Expressionism, and especially Sturm Expressionism: its inwardness, its spirituality, its isolation from social conditions, its middle-class support. [...] Schwitters' association with Der Sturm was an alignment to art, outside of social or political commitment. It was therefore, implicitly at least, anti-Dada. (Elderfield 34)

It merits comment that the objections presented here, levied against "inwardness", "spirituality", social independence, and bourgeois "support", are somewhat insincere, considering that it was Zurich Dada that assumed these supposedly Expressionist qualities and incorporated them, albeit in a more refined form, into many of its plastic and literary works. Nevertheless, these four characteristics of Expressionism reveal themselves quite clearly in Schwitters' work, and so if Huelsenbeck objected to Sturm for these reasons, it is self-evident why he objected to Schwitters. The "inwardness" aspect of his art, informed by his association with Sturm Expressionism (and ultimately derived from German Romanticism), is related to the self-reflexive nature of the Merzbau, and I shall be devoting much more time to this issue presently. For the moment, however, I wish to explore the other qualities noted above,

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[28] Elderfield tells us that it was on 27 June 1918 that Schwitters "signed his name for the first time in the guest book of Herwarth Walden in Berlin and joined the Sturm group". He was not just a signatory, for he was also profoundly influenced by the movement: "the organization itself became the model from which Schwitters' own one-man movement, Merz, was developed" (30).

and how their incorporation led Schwitters to be declared unfit for active service in the army of the Berlin Dadaists.

In the context in which it is presented here, "the expression 'spirituality' functions largely as a metaphor, hinting at imaginative possibilities that may promise new meanings for the connection between the work of art and the world it presents" (Birringer 138). It does not connote allegiance to a particular religious doctrine, although certainly it came to its greatest fruition in the case of Ball. Rather than try and pinpoint precisely what such a nebulous term entails, it serves our purposes better simply to oppose it, as Elderfield does, to the "extravert asceticism practiced by the Berlin Dadaists" (34).[29] There is more than a little spirituality contained between the walls of the Merzbau (more evident in fact than in many of the collages and assemblages), but certainly it is a spirituality known only to the artist. Schwitters was not a religious man, but he clearly displayed great devotion to the tropes and figures which populated his private universe.[30] Schwitters' allegiance to his profession was particularly irksome to Huelsenbeck, who understood Dada to be "a philosophy that went beyond art into life itself" ("The Dada Drummer", in Memoirs of a Dada Drummer 63). The terminology employed by the artist in reference to his Merzbau does betray religious fervour, but again it is fervour that functions self-reflexively and is not directed towards an external God but rather back towards the work's

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[29] Huelsenbeck's distrust of religiously derived spirituality is echoed in his rather dismissive characterization of Ball as "too honorable, too Roman Catholic, too something" ("En Avant Dada", Motherwell 33-34).

[30] He revered Anna Blume with a Marian devotion. Gamard puts great emphasis on Schwitters' spirituality as it pertained to what she erroneously calls "The Cathedral of Erotic Misery" (the Hanover Merzbau), and she interprets the work in terms of Christianity and German mysticism. Elderfield is much less inclined to search the Merzbau for shadows of Christian convention. Considering Schwitters' lack of religious faith, it seems that Elderfield is much closer to the truth on this point.

creator.[31] Schwitters called the diminutive concavities "grottoes", and while some of them were populated with items selected *by* Schwitters *for* Schwitters, others housed mementos donated by (and stolen from) friends.[32] The overall form of the work, with its vaulted ceilings, cavernous dimensions, and (in its later stages) secret chambers hidden beneath uniformly white walls, impresses one as a construction whose creative impulse must have been spiritual in origin; the Merzbau never seems as secular as Schwitters himself.

We would be much more justified in interpreting the Merzbau in spiritual terms if its creator were a religious man, but by every account he was not. If we consider Ball and his Catholicism, which was in remission but nevertheless present during his Expressionist and Dadaist phases, we find that even in the years when he was less than religious, his writing was nevertheless infused with a profound spirituality. The difference here is that the spirituality we find in Schwitters' work is subservient to his personal *élan vital*, and at best lives with it symbiotically. The same may be said for the third objection Elderfield paraphrases above, that is, Berlin Dada's dissatisfaction with Sturm Expressionism's "isolation from social conditions". The phrase "social conditions" is here understood as commitment to social reform, and the political affiliations of the Berlin Dadaists proved their strong interest in

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[31] The title "Kathedrale des erotischen Elends" ("Cathedral of Erotic Misery") is a common misnomer for the Hanover Merzbau, but Elderfield makes it clear that in spite of an early predilection for interchangeable names for his new structure, Schwitters recognized the "Cathedral of Erotic Misery" as only one column out of approximately ten from which the Merzbau grew (147).

[32] As it is the main premise of her thesis, Gamard focuses on the spiritual elements of Schwitters' Merzbau, although again, she is perhaps misled from the beginning by her misappropriation of the title "Cathedral of Erotic Misery". Still, her likening of the "grotto-reliquaries" to those found in Roman Catholic churches is sound and intriguing: "Much like Roman Catholic reliquaries, in which physical aspects (teeth, fingers, a piece of a martyr's clothing) specific to the various saints are stored, the presence of the various objects would elicit the presence of the individual's spirit or aura" (104).

achieving that reform through art. Huelsenbeck's ambition to this end is voiced in the following quotation from "En Avant Dada":

> In January 1917 I returned to Germany, the face of which had meanwhile undergone a fantastic change. [...] Berlin was the city of tightened stomachers, of mounting, thundering hunger, where hidden rage was transformed into a boundless money lust, and men's minds were concentrating more and more on questions of naked existence. Here we would have to proceed with entirely different methods, if we wanted to say something to the people. Here we would have to discard our patent leather pumps and tie our Byronic cravats to the doorpost. While in Zurich people lived as in a health resort, chasing after the ladies and longing for nightfall that would bring pleasure barges, magic lanterns and music by Verdi, in Berlin you never knew where the next meal was coming from. Fear was in everybody's bones [...]. (Motherwell 39)

It is much more than a banal observation to say that Berlin was a wildly different city demanding a wildly different existence. The severity of life there convinced Huelsenbeck and his followers that art could no longer be produced for the pleasure of the artist and his bourgeois patrons; the artist now bore a responsibility to "say something to the people". As surely as he was non-religious, Schwitters was also apolitical, and the paucity of references in his oeuvre to political events underlines his sustained disinterest. Perhaps Huelsenbeck would have been somewhat placated if Schwitters had shown even a modicum of sympathy for any political party, but as it was, "Schwitters, in his romantic idealism (which the petty bourgeois touch made rigid), was totally removed from my world of the international, the universal-intellectual, and philosophical" ("The Dada Drummer" 65). It is going too far to say that Berlin Dadaists under Huelsenbeck's guidance were politicos first and Dadaists second, but certainly after a period of free fall, Dada was once again forging an alliance with something outside of itself, something beyond purely aesthetic concerns. Yet Schwitters, by all accounts, was "an artist and nothing but an artist" ("The Dada Drummer" 64), and so it quickly became

self-evident that Club Dada had no room for such a traditionally minded Hanoverian, even if he was quite avant-garde. All of these other criticisms aside, it was really the bourgeois element of Schwitters that incensed Huelsenbeck the most. Or rather, it was the fact that Schwitters did not stray from his bourgeois origins and continued to live comfortably in Hanover, all the while working assiduously as an avant-garde artist.[33]

If we take into account the quintessence of Dada, which I suggest is its embrace of contradiction in the interest of mirroring the flux of modern life, then we must acknowledge that an artist who both adopted and eschewed its tenets would be an artist closest in spirit to the quiddity of the movement. "To be against this manifesto is to be a Dadaist" is a proclamation found at the end of one of the most stentorian of the Dada manifestos, Huelsenbeck's "Dadaistisches Manifest" ("Collective Dada Manifesto", 1920).[34] Or consider Tzara's "Manifesto of mr. aa the anti-philosopher" (reproduced in Motherwell's anthology), in which he confesses, "Take a good look at me! /I am an idiot, I am a clown, I am a faker" (Motherwell 84). Shrewdly enough, the Dadaists understood that previous artistic movements offered polemical commentary on contemporary issues, but none had gone so far as to cast such systematic aspersion on their own justifications for existence. In order to distinguish themselves as much as possible, they trumpeted their own destruction, and bestowed honorary membership on figures who (technically

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[33] Elderfield's analysis of Schwitters' short story "Revolution in Revon" includes the observation that the father of Merz was both an alien to the bourgeoisie of Hanover, as well as a member of it (167). In his two-fold relationship to the city of his birth, Schwitters "joins his self-image to two long-standing personifications of the contemporary artist" (167). For Elderfield, those two poles are represented by the figure of the *flâneur*, and the tangentially related (but distinct) personage of the "scavenger" (167-168): "This connoisseur's view of reality meant both that he found security in his Hannover world – by documenting and certifying it in his art – and that he refused its effect on him, moving passively and at random throughout its society converting everything in sight into an instant souvenir" (168).

speaking) existed outside the bounds of Dada, men such as Alfred Jarry, Arthur Cravan, and Jacques Vaché. So for all of Huelsenbeck's distrust of Schwitters, is it not possible to see in him the essence of a true Dadaist? In his entry for 12 July 1916, Ball writes,

> The dadaist loves the extraordinary and the absurd. He knows that life asserts itself in contradiction, and that his age aims at the destruction of generosity as no other age has ever done before. He therefore welcomes any kind of mask. Any game of hide-and-seek, with its inherent power to deceive. (Flight Out of Time 65)

To harken back to that familiar distinction between representation and presentation, would it not, in the context of such a self-conscious avant-garde movement as Dada, be far more valuable to *present* oneself as a contradiction *in vivo* than simply *represent*, *in vitro*, those same contradictions? And furthermore, could we not read Huelsenbeck's attacks on Schwitters as an extension of that great Dadaist innovation of guarding against complacency in all its insidious forms?

It is not the aim of this investigation to interpret Huelsenbeck's dismissal of Schwitters, although I would suggest that instances of dissension in the ranks of Dada could prove useful in determining what precisely the parameters of the satellite groups were as understood by the constituent members. What is critical for our purposes is a recognition that the disaffection that drove Schwitters from any affiliation with Berlin's Club Dada led to his isolation from many would-be peers, which in turn engendered the creation of the Merz universe and ultimately what may be viewed as the castle of the Merz-kingdom: the Hanover Merzbau. The etymology of Merz is legendary by now, but to reiterate briefly, the name is a sort of "rectified readymade", lifted as it is from a sign adorning the "Kommerz- Und

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[34] The manifesto is reproduced in Motherwell (242-246).

Privatbank" ("Commercial and Private Bank"). Although it was during the previous year that Schwitters began executing his characteristic collages and assemblages, it was only in July 1919 that his new brand of art was christened "Merz" (Elderfield 12). Prior to that date, Schwitters was primarily a naturalist painter, and his continued commitment to landscape painting, even in the years of his most aggressive avant-garde experiments, has proven a source of much consternation to art historians eager to delineate a more conventionally unidirectional progression from naturalist to abstract painting.[35] Here again we find evidence that Schwitters was an Über-Dadaist, straddling as he did two poles of artistic allegiance commonly viewed as irreconcilable; this spirit of contradiction was at the heart of Schwitters, and so like Duchamp he was, paradoxically, more of a Dadaist for being (superficially at least) less of one.

There is always traceable evidence, however, in an artist's juvenilia, and this is especially the case with Schwitters, who retained his fascination with nature painting to his death in 1948. Even in his early days as a painter, there was, as Elderfield observes, a fixation on surfaces, because Schwitters was preoccupied with "creating conceptual rather than perceptual symbols for objects...attempting, somewhat naively, to make the rendering of the motif serve expressive before descriptive ends" (15). A look at some of the early works such as "Landschaft aus Opherdicke" ("Landscape from Opherdicke", 1917), and "Hochgebirgsfriedhof" ("Mountain Graveyard", 1919) corroborates this characterization, for in these paintings the emphasis is squarely situated with the expression of the "innerer Klang" ("inner sound") as

[35] Schmalenbach summarizes the matter as follows: "That Schwitters never ceased to paint

theorized in Kandinsky's Concerning the Spiritual in Art. In the former piece, a heavy impasto technique is applied deliberately and with great effect, but slicing through the picture, on a diagonal plane, is a conspicuous wall whose colours are much lighter than the brooding greens on either side. Regarding Kandinsky's theories, it would be useful to apply them in an analysis of this painting and "Hochgebirgsfriedhof", for both fall under the rubric of Expressionism and Kandinsky's treatise was of seminal importance to the German Expressionists at that time. In the Opherdicke painting, various tones of green dominate, but most striking is the heavy green of the trees in the upper half of the painting. The colour is so intense in places as to border on black, but along the top of the wall (which is flat) we find, nearly centred in the composition, a light yellow surrounded by shades of blue, its complementary colour. The weighty pensiveness of the piece is attributable to the abundance of green, which, according to Kandinsky, "is the most restful colour that exists" (38). Green is more than restful, however, as the theory states that "pictures painted in shades of green are passive and tend to be wearisome" (38). The connotations in Kandinsky's mind are clearly pejorative, as he continues on with this characterization: "In the hierarchy of colours green is the 'bourgeoisie' – self-satisfied, immovable, narrow" (38).[36] The constituent colours that produce green, yellow and blue, are given much attention in Kandinsky's writings, for in them he finds two opposing

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from nature, by no means just for a livelihood but often with unmistakable enthusiasm, is continually surprising – and even to his contemporaries it seemed exceedingly strange" (76).

[36] Without stretching the comparison too far, it is worth mentioning that Schwitters displays an affinity for the colour green, and he even wrote a poem entitled "Grünes Kind" (Green Child) around 1918. Green is perceived by Germans to be the colour of romance, and of course it connotes blossoming vegetation and thus spring and summer fertility. The word shares its Old Teutonic root with "grow". It would be yielding to temptation to suppose that Schwitters' use of the colour is linked to his cultivation of bourgeois sensibilities, but at least

tendencies. The first, associated with yellow, is the tendency to portray warmth, action, and an earthly feel. More specifically, yellow possesses what we shall term (borrowing the vocabulary of thermodynamics) an "exothermic" property, which is to say it extends its energy out to the viewer. In contrast, blue (as the "heavenly colour") connotes coolness and "repose", and it is an "endothermic" colour in that it draws in upon itself, forever in retreat from the viewer's eye. Returning to the Opherdicke landscape, we find that the greens employed are primarily more blue than yellow, and thus they partake more of that endothermic restfulness and coolness than if they were more slanted towards yellow. The violets that enter the upper left-hand corner of the picture and contribute to the patchwork of shades on the left side of the wall are the coldest shades of the piece, displaying as they do a heavy reliance on blue:

> Just as orange is red brought nearer to humanity by yellow, so violet is red withdrawn from humanity by blue. [...] Violet is therefore both in the physical and spiritual sense a cooled red. It is consequently rather sad and ailing. It is worn by old women, and in China as a sign of mourning. (Kandinsky 41)

Warm yellow accents pepper the scene, but it is the sunlit segment of the wall that commands the most attention. The wall is drawn so that it retreats into the background, but what is most curious is that the progression of colours along the top side of it imply a movement towards the viewer, and so the colours perform the opposite function as the perspective in the painting.

As previously quoted, Elderfield perceives the painting (and others executed around the same time in Opherdicke, where Schwitters spent his honeymoon) to be rather flat, due to the fact that the artist was "exaggerating

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for our purposes it suffices to say that in this painting (and in some others) the strength of the colour calls for quietude and "equanimity".

the tactility of the surface, while keeping the color of a fairly even intensity and restricted range of hues" (14). As a result, we are confronted with a landscape that does not spread its magnificence before the viewer, but remains static and even somewhat introverted. The unanticipated splash of yellow in the centre of the work is jarring and adumbrates the curious pieces of script or other foreign materials that appear in the later Merz assemblages, pieces that stand out from the background and often determine the works' titles.[37] We need not make an attempt to reconcile the contradiction between the introspective colours of blue and green and the stridency of the yellow, for what matters here is that Schwitters, even in this early period, self-consciously exploited contradictions in his work (and beyond), and at least in this regard he remained a staunch Dadaist. However, "Mountain Graveyard" appears to be Romantic in inspiration and Expressionist in execution, and we may infer that such a painting found a home in Huelsenbeck's armoury of invective directed against Schwitters.[38] Primary colours dominate "Mountain Graveyard", but green also makes a notable appearance, as does black. Wheels and schematically drawn churches are motifs employed time and again in Schwitters' work, particularly in some of the Aquarelles and the Rubber Stamp Drawings. Of course, the painting is immediately reminiscent of

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[37] Assemblages like "Merzbild 32A. Das Kirschbild" ("The Cherry Picture", 1921) and the Constructivist-inspired reliefs such "Merzbild 1924, I. Relief mit Kreuz und Kugel" ("Relief with Cross and Sphere") prove my point. In the former, a rectified readymade card (which appears to be the sort used to teach children foreign languages) with a simple colour drawing of a bunch of cherries framed by the words "Kirchen" and "Cerises" sits firmly in the centre of a field of coloured scraps of paper, newspaper clippings, pieces of wood and other ephemera. The red ball of the relief construction, which is vertically but not horizontally centred, exudes a warmth that is less aggressive (but more permanent) than the yellow rectangle besides it.

[38] Elderfield suggests that the work probably predated the first "*Merzbilder*", also finished in 1919, and that it could have been the piece misnamed in the catalogue for the January 1919 Der Sturm show (387). It was also exhibited at the Kunstverein in Jena in the months of May and June 1919 (387).

Caspar David Friedrich's Romantic mountains punctuated by crosses, and Gamard recognizes as much when she reads the piece in conventional religious terms. On the other hand, Elderfield finds in "Mountain Graveyard" early evidence of the artist's preoccupation with wheels and pulleys, forms with which he became very familiar when he was working at the Wülfel ironworks between 1917 and 1918 (26). There is something mechanistic about the piece, perhaps because it too appears to be more a matter of surface than depth, and it is difficult to read conventional religiosity into a flat and/or mechanistic picture. Returning briefly to Kandinsky's colour theory, we find that in places where the background could have indicated a retreating perspective, the areas are painted in glowing hues of yellow, and so the opposite effect is achieved; these segments move towards the viewer. Furthermore, we notice in this painting and in "Landscape from Opherdicke" that the determined partitioning of certain areas (Schwitters uses strong black lines to indicate where one form ends and another begins) contributes to the flatness effect. Elderfield attributes these lines to the artist's attempts to resurrect motifs lost beneath "a dense, clogged surface of even and uninteresting uniformity":

> Schwitters was impelled, therefore, to reinforce his compositions with a different kind of drawing, both to excavate the motif from the surface and to provide stability and accent for his painting. He would put in accents, nearly always in lines of dark paint, emphasizing salient contours of the motif. [...] The result of this is that the paintings seem to contain two quite specific methods of handling. In "Landschaft aus Opherdicke", the interiors of the different forms almost fuse with each other to create a generalized green mood. The drawing is left to carry the burden of information about the motif. This separation of drawing from painterly surface continues to be crucial in his development towards abstract art. (15)

These decisive lines, it may be reasoned, are the predecessors of the discrete borders created by the juxtaposition of the collage elements such as newspaper

scraps and pieces of fabric. In later works, the demarcation is more pronounced, particularly in assemblage constructions like "Merzbild 1924, I. Relief mit Kreuz und Kugel" ("Relief with Cross and Sphere"). Another consideration to take into account is what Elderfield identifies as Schwitters' marriage of "rural" and "urban iconography" (26). In "Mountain Graveyard", the stylised Romantic imagery is played off against an impersonal, mechanistic style and assortment of primary colours.[39]

In 1917 "Schwitters' art thus broke through to abstraction", an observation supported by the emergence of a series of paintings done in Futurist/Cubist style (19).[40] Certain works, like "Z57 Abstraktion" ("Abstraction", 1918), resemble Futurist paintings such as Carlo Carrà's "Interpenetration of Planes", 1913. Elderfield finds in the more sophisticated pieces in this group of paintings "a clear two-part structure of loosely gestural tone painting and tense linear scaffolding", and he attributes this development to the influence of Cubism (23). It was not so much that Schwitters sought to adhere to particular tenets of either Expressionism or Cubism, for he was always an artist whose primary allegiance was to himself rather than to any school or group. Many artists encounter new influences and ideologies and incorporate them into revised styles, immersing themselves to the point of saturation only to be seduced by the latest trend. Schwitters, however, is often

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[39] A similar painting, entitled "Abstraktion 19 (Entschleierung)" ("Unveiling", 1918), is interpreted by Elderfield as a "bridge" between nature and the metropolis (26).

[40] Schwitters was keen to organize his works into descriptive categories and sub-categories. For example, he named the Expressionist paintings from around 1917 "Expressionen", the abstract works that followed "Abstraktionen", the watercolours "Aquarelles", and so on. Most notably, the Merz oeuvre was partitioned into "drawings", and "pictures", as well as "relief assemblages" and "large collages". Although the system is not entirely reliable for historical classification purposes, it does speak to Schwitters' fastidious nature, at least in his earlier years as an artist. On page 49 and in footnote number 9 on page 390, Elderfield delves into the complexities of Schwitters' system and explains it in great depth. In any case, 1921 was the year in which such rigorous classification ceased.

credited with conserving influences; as much as he was loath to discard his seemingly insignificant *objets trouvés*, he was equally loath to move beyond former styles. Thus, we are confronted with the retention of post-Impressionist naturalist landscapes, even into his last year, and we find that elements of Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, and Constructivism all continue to populate the Merz universe. It was as if Merz was set tumbling down the modernist slope, and as it rolled it accumulated and assimilated the various (and often contradictory) styles over which it passed. Yet at its core it retained its inscrutable essence, and what provided it with its unity (in the face of all these competing influences) was the centripetal force of the artist.

"The confusion is like that of a kaleidoscope, which though possessing a life of its own, belongs to another sphere".[41]

Moving quickly through the chronology of Schwitters' artistic development, we arrive next at the enigmatic but thoroughly pleasing "Dadaist drawings", appearing in 1919, the same year as the official advent of Merz. Many are watercolours, hence the designation "Aquarell" (or "Aq." as Schwitters often wrote), but Schmalenbach and Elderfield include them in the genre drawings and page designs such as the one that served as the cover for "Anna Blume, Dichtungen" (1919).[42] They seem to partake of a consistent narrative whose characters include "isolated heads in profile, hands, eyes, hearts, pots, wheel, churches, umbrellas, windmills, coffee mills, little railroad trains, animals, fish, arrows, and sketched typographical elements such as

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[41] The quotation is Kandinsky's, appearing in his section entitled "Theory" (Concerning the Spiritual in Art 47).
[42] Elderfield recognizes two distinct groups of "early graphic art": Dadaist and rubber-stamp drawings (44).

letters and numbers" (Schmalenbach 78).[43] Bearings are easily lost in these works, as inverted figures float by in a realm of suspended coordinates. Schmalenbach assesses the drawings in terms of typical Dadaist "discontinuity":

> But the unity of the pictorial space is suspended: discontinuity prevails in the relation of part to part. Fragments of the objective world are "senselessly" juxtaposed and brought together in a new relation that more or less makes new sense. Here a Dadaist principle enters in: objects that in "reality" do not belong together are brought into "random" association by being combined in pictorial space. (78)

However, in spite of courting chance, nonsense, and even anti-sense, Dada established perhaps more solidly than any preceding group that randomness still yielded order and that nonsensical juxtapositions still engendered narratives. Duchamp's endeavours to evade "style" and "taste" by selecting commercially produced objects at predetermined moments resulted in an oeuvre that was still his own (and thus subject to his whim and personality) and upon which critics still continue to inscribe their interpretations. The Surrealists, likely aware (after dabbling in Dadaist projects) that sense prevailed after all, returned with automatic drawings which very much resemble Schwitters' watercolours. Simmel explained this effect by suggesting that the self-conscious soul exerted a centripetal force over the objects it created as well as encountered, and we recall that through this process the soul substantiates its own existence and creative powers. As a result, culture is made. We also recall that in An Introduction to Metaphysics, Bergson established that the presentation of diverse images could lead the reader or viewer, via his *intuition*, to the point at which the underlying *duration* could be apprehended. Therefore, two possible methods present

[43] Elderfield produces a similar list, but adds "buckets", "houses", and "pin-figures" (45). The

themselves, although both arrive at the same result. If we interpret these seemingly nonsensical works according to Simmel's theory, we infer that Schwitters was subject to that self-conscious, uneradicable "I" that manifested itself by generating forms.[44] Although these characters superficially appear to be chosen at random, upon further reflection the viewer concludes that their very inclusion presupposes deliberation on the part of the artist, however brief. Having been created by the same hand, they must bear relation to one another. Suppositions are confirmed again when the viewer encounters the same characters in other works, for then it appears that the artist clearly possessed an affinity for the objects. In this way anti-sense is proven to be a fallacy. If we look to Bergson on the matter, we reach the same conclusions, albeit from the perspective of the viewer. Initially perplexed by the pig's tail extending from the backside of the diminutive chapel, the viewer remains befuddled when he is confronted by animals that are vaguely familiar but still unclassifiable.[45] Hearts as simplistic as those found on Valentine's Day cards jostle with little trains reminiscent of childhood toys, and such odd couplings startle the viewer as much as the mental visualization of Lautréamont's sewing machine atop an operating table. Intellectual analysis betrays its own shortcomings when it is invoked in the interpretation of such works, for an artist working at a creative pitch does not create by the light of his intellect; thus, we cannot rely upon ours to uncover his creative impetus. These works

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point is that in these busy works many characters reappear in a variety of permutations.

[44] We understand "forms" in this context to mean both the characters of the drawings and the drawings themselves.

[45] Schwitters' recombined birds are redolent of the frightening chimerical beasts that populate the earthly and hellish landscapes in Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, but of course the former are much more benign.

originate in another faculty, and so we employ our faculty of *intuition* and find that connections begin to reveal themselves. To quote Bergson once again:

> No image can replace the intuition of duration, but many diverse images, borrowed from very different orders of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized. (14)

That "certain intuition" may or may not be the one that guided the hand of the artist, but it is likely to be in sympathy with it. In this way, the artist has "won over" his audience by circumventing realism and intellectual analysis at the same time. He has managed to lay himself bare through the medium of his art.[46] Either way, such abstract pieces function self-reflexively, but whether Simmel or Bergson's theory prevails depends on whether we believe the pieces were self-consciously designed to such an end. As indiscriminately juxtaposed as these figures seem at first, there is an ease and fluidity that suffuses the "Aquarelles" and renders them successful – they are far too advanced to be considered experiments, in spite of their affected juvenile hand.[47]

Emphasizing the movement of the works, Dietrich contrasts their depiction of flux to the relative stability of preceding pieces:

> All elements are thrown together in a seemingly haphazard manner, irrespective of scale and perspective, and drawn in an abbreviated, sketchlike manner in a self-conscious reference to children's drawings. There is a pervasive sense of movement in these drawings that Schwitters further accentuates with arrows and overlapping circles. (85)

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[46] Elderfield writes that the viewer reconstructs the narratives of the "Aquarelles" "through the dual mechanisms of synecdoche and metonymy". He finds that each figure metonymically replaces its referent, and likewise the figures indicate by way of synecdoche the world(s) from which they originate, worlds that are "domestic", "industrial", or "quaintly archaic". These devices lead us to "look for affinities, or causal connections", and eventually to "discover in each of these drawings a fictional universe in which the original functions and meanings of the objects it contains have been altered" (45).

[47] Dietrich qualifies the series as "experimental", but in the same paragraph she attests to their importance in Schwitters' artistic development (84).

Throughout his career, Schwitters was preoccupied with lines, circles, and other geometric forms. In those early post-Impressionist and Expressionist paintings, heavy black lines delineated prominent motifs, but as their composition was so decisive and the motifs were comparatively less so, they gained aesthetic significance beyond their original meaning.[48] Concerning the "Abstraktionen" series, Elderfield speaks of "a clear two-part structure of loosely gestural tone painting and tense linear scaffolding", a description strongly reminiscent of the emphasized borders in "Landscape from Opherdicke" (22). The lines in the "Abstraktion" paintings are "sometimes curved but more often tense, sharp and abbreviated", and they constitute a "skeletal framework" that is much more exo- than endo- in appearance. There is clearly an evolution behind the vector lines displayed in the "Aquarelles", and so we dispute Dietrich's claims that "the drawings come as a surprise in Schwitters' oeuvre", and that "nothing in his earlier work prepares us for their inventive playfulness, their degree of abstraction, and their radical new style" (85). It is true that the series (to which approximately forty works belonged) is striking at first and appears discordant with the rest of the paintings, but I would argue that in reality, they are a focused maturation of some earlier preoccupations. Again, Schwitters was not the kind of artist to move through a style and leave it behind, and so it is that after some reflection and a little analysis, we come to the realization that the "Aquarelles" constitute but one possible line of development in Schwitters' art.

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[48] Elderfield concludes that the "separation of drawing from painterly surface", as evidenced in early works like "Landscape from Opherdicke", foreshadowed years of preoccupation with surfaces (15), a fixation that came to fruition in the collages and assemblages, as well as in the Merzbau projects.

This series is by far the most vitalist of all of Schwitters' painterly works, and so a Simmelian/Bergsonian interpretation is in order. Let us focus one on exemplary watercolour work, "Aq. 23, Koketterie" ("Coquetry", 1919). Firstly, the viewer is drawn to the centre of the picture, where a yellow struthioid creature is stepping across the roof of a nondescript building, on the near side of which the numerals "1", "2", "3" and "4" appear (in that order). The building extends from the lower middle to the lower right-hand corner of the field, and at what would presumably be its entrance, we find a floating eye whose sclera is shaded light pink and whose pupil is dark and exaggerated. Moving diagonally towards the upper left-hand corner, we notice that the feet of the "bird" echo in shape, colour, and orientation the eye beneath. The eye reappears just left of centre at the very top of the picture, but this time it is connected (by a slightly crooked line) to the eye of the "bird". This third eye belongs to a kite-like figure which is either drifting into or out of view, for like the building it is truncated by the border of the painting. Across the top edge, to the right, is a circle of which approximately one-sixth is segmented by a rod. The final noteworthy figure is a man balancing upside-down on a curved line. He is more or less a stick figure, with no discernible facial features (his head is far too small to accommodate any) but nonetheless he sports a hat. As already mentioned, the "bird" is predominantly yellow, and yellow appears beneath the eye at the entrance of the building, in a lighter hue on the roof of the building, on the segment of the circle, on the near face of the kite, and on the trousers of the man. Most of the remaining colour is given over to pale shades of green done in gentle washes, except for the area immediately around the head of the upside-down man. A light cornflower blue, some dark grey, a

few splashes of light pink, and a chalky black are the only other colours appearing in the composition.

"Coquetry" is populated by figures that reappear in Schwitters' other Dadaist drawings. The "bird", the inverted stick-figure, the free floating eye, the kite, the circle, and the numbers must, either singly or in various permutations, represent a private world known only to Schwitters. If we follow Elderfield's line of reasoning, we may interpret the figures according to the synecdochic or metonymic devices, and so by the first method, circles come to signify the wheels of machinery of which Schwitters became increasingly enamoured. The line of vision between the eye of the kite and that of the "bird" is literally made manifest in the picture, and thus it signifies, metonymically, the attraction, the "coup de foudre", resonating between the figures (perhaps this tangible magnetism between the two was the titular flirtation Schwitters had in mind). Dietrich reads the narrative of this piece and others in the series metaphorically, and finds that in his employment of mundane objects in fantastical orientation to one another, Schwitters taps into the language of Expressionism only to subvert it (104).[49] It is possible to analyse the images contained in these unusual works metaphorically, and in this way to recognize in the "bird", for example, a folkloric yearning for a reconnection with the natural world, but I would argue that to do so is to focus too closely on details that were selected to be enigmatic.[50] Therefore, let us

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[49] In tracing the trope of inversion in this series, she arrives at the conclusion that Schwitters was playfully invoking the theme of the "World Upside Down" (104): "Schwitters's images of inversion offer a space for artistic experimentation, but serve to reconfirm hierarchical order. His chaos is a chaos to be explored and restructured..." (106).

[50] Compare Marc Chagall's domesticated fowl and other farm animals, which were invoked in an effort to sustain the folkloric quality of the artist's work. In the case of Chagall, the invocation of rustic nature is part and parcel of his vision to preserve his provincial heritage, while Schwitters returns to nature partly for inspiration but mostly in order to juxtapose and play its organic feel off his mechanistic urban materials.

gather an overall impression and use it as our starting point for a closer look at the work.

The most cohesive theme to reveal itself is that of movement and flux, and the paintings are composed in such a way as to emphasize the motion of the narratives they depict. Firstly, the inversion of many of the figures, such as the upside-down man in "Coquetry", imparts to the viewer the sense that the characters were tossed into the air and then sketched as they were in freefall. We recall that at about the same time, several of the Dadaists were experimenting with similar procedures in the interests of tapping into the spontaneity of chaos and chance and depicting their effects on various objects. Duchamp's "Three Standard Stoppages" is one such work, and the three pieces of string were, reportedly, set in the positions in which they fell.[51] In a similar way, Arp (whimsically at first) produced a work that also sought to capture the hidden logic of chance as it manifested itself on scraps of paper.[52] Schwitters at this point has not yet transcended the constraints of pictorial convention, but he is clearly involved in an attempt to channel the kinetic energy inherent in motion and apply it to a two-dimensional surface. To this end, he not only uses the inversion of figures and (seemingly) a haphazard distribution of motifs, but he also resorts to the much more fluid medium of watercolour, a far cry from those impasto-laden Expressionist landscapes. Furthermore, the undulating effects evident in the application of the pastel paints, in some areas no more than the gentlest of colour washes, enhances the

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[51] The method behind this piece, and some critical commentary concerning its place in Duchamp's oeuvre, is provided in Cabanne's Duchamp & Co. (89).

[52] The anecdote is told by Richter, who credits the episode with leading Dada to the conclusion "that chance must be recognized as a new stimulus to artistic creation. This may well be regarded as the central experience of Dada, that which marks it off from all preceding artistic movements" (51).

fluid movement of the picture. It appears as if the colour has softly drained from the regions of heavier colouration, such as the darker green surrounding the inverted stick-figure. There is also the hastily applied lines of pencil, which appear somewhat more deliberate in this piece but less so in others like "Aq. 1, Das Herz geht vom Zucker zum Kaffee" ("The Heart Goes from Sugar to Coffee", 1919). Other works in the series have motion lines drawn in as they would appear in a cartoon, but again, in this "Aquarell" the lines exist for purposes of shading rather than the suggestion of movement. The kite-figure, floating into the frame of view, is a motif employed to portray a quiet and drifting kind of motion. The numbers, arranged in standard counting order, beg continuation, which is why they may appear on the side of the building whose nearest edge is cut short by the picture's border. Finally, in what is maybe the most significant inversion of all (a figurative, not literal inversion, that is) the animal commonly representative of flight is grounded, at least temporarily, as it strides along the roof; its wing is rendered vestigial by crude pencil lines and awkward positioning. What Schwitters presents in this piece, and in others similar to it, is his *intuition* of movement, and by doing so he skilfully leads the viewer to their own personal *intuition* as well. The lively tumbling of the figures, suspended momentarily in their free fall, is apparent at even the most cursory glance. Dietrich sees a threatening chaos in these paintings: "the entry into that world is a violent, fragmenting birth…" (93), but I would argue that the levity of the motifs, and the playfulness with which they are imbued, proves that the world may be chaotic, but it is still benign. Although he frequently courted other kinds of oppositions, Schwitters was never really a polemicist like Grosz or a truculent critic like Picabia. His work

exists unto itself, and for this reason he is preoccupied mostly with aesthetic concerns rather than socio-political ones. In the "Aquarelles" he is much more concerned with the depiction of motion, but that depiction is limited to a two-dimensional surface where little illusion of depth is offered. With regards to the illustration of flux, we recall Bergson's notion of *mobility*:

> *There is a reality that is external and yet given immediately to the mind.* This reality is mobility. Not *things* made, but things in the making, not self-maintaining *states*, but only changing states, exist. Rest is never more than apparent, or, rather, relative. The consciousness we have of our own self in its continual flux introduces us to the interior of a reality, on the model of which we must represent other realities. *All reality, therefore, is tendency, if we agree to mean by tendency an incipient change of direction.* (An Introduction to Metaphysics 55)

Schwitters provides an assortment of figures and motifs and gives the viewer only the barest necessities of representation. The viewer has thus been led to an *intuition* of *mobility* much more immediately than if the artist had opted for conventional methods of illustrating motion. The ludic quality of "Coquetry" serves to conceal the complex mechanism beneath the narrative of the picture, a mechanism by which Schwitters lays bare his preoccupations and coaxes the viewer to construct their own narrative from the fragments he provides. This work directly prefigures the Merzbilder in that fragments borrowed from a fragmented society are entrusted to the viewer's interpretation. In the Merzbilder, they become the elements of collage and assemblage – paper scraps, broken pieces of commercial products, and so on. "Coquetry" as a whole is thus also an inversion, for it inverts the tradition of realist painting by which an artist produces a painted narrative and presents it as a *fait accompli* to his audience. For this reason, this watercolour and others like it fall under the rubric of "meta-art", and thus reside within the realm of self-reflexive art.

As much as this series prefigures the collages and assemblages of "Merz", it was not until Schwitters was fully engaged in the construction of his "Merz" universe that the self-reflexive nature of his art came to fruition. In 1920 he composed an article that first appeared in the January 1921 Munich periodical "Der Ararat" (Elderfield 41). The title, appropriately, is "Merz".[53] In this rather lengthy piece, Schwitters gives his account of the evolution of his art and how it was that he arrived at his own branch of Dada. He begins by describing in (intentionally) tedious detail how an artist learns to "paint after nature". Although he conscientiously relates the method of reproducing the model with photographic accuracy, he peppers the description with dismissive statements: "This you can learn if you are in good health and not color blind", "All this can be learned", and "That is academy" (57-58). He continues:

> I beg the reader's pardon for having discussed photographic painting at such length. I had to do this in order to show that it is a labor of patience, that it can be learned, that it rests essentially on measurement and adjustment and provides no food for artistic creation. For me it was essential to learn adjustment, and I gradually learned that the adjustment of the elements in painting is the aim of art, not a means to an end, such as checking for accuracy. (58)

The reader is here presented with a valuable insight into Schwitters' idealistic idea of what the essence of art should be, and to what (unfortunately) it is customarily reduced. His insistence on "adjustment" echoes what Elderfield was quoted earlier as saying; Schwitters' art remained a matter of surfaces and the juxtaposition of his "pictorial elements", how they articulated with one another, was of seminal importance.[54] According to Schwitters, the move to Expressionism occurred when ambition towards "the personal grasp of nature"

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[53] The article is reproduced in full in Motherwell's anthology (55-65), and so all quotations and page numbers refer to that translation (given by Ralph Manheim).

[54] It is because Schwitters was so concerned with that articulation of elements that his art remains an art of surfaces, and the focus on surfaces provides the forum for an art of juxtaposition.

supplanted the attainment of photographic accuracy. The realistic representation of nature was used to formulate expression, but soon it became apparent that "the striving for expression in a work of art" was "injurious":[55]

> Art is a primordial concept, exalted as the godhead, inexplicable as life, indefinable and without purpose. The work of art comes into being through artistic evaluation of its elements. I know only how I make it, I know only my medium, of which I partake, to what end I know not. (59)[56]

The artist is reduced to a vanishing point. Schwitters often proclaimed with a studied self-effacement how subordinate his person was to Merz. His position is similar to Ball's when he transfigured himself into the "Magic Bishop", or to Duchamp when he sought to eliminate personal style and taste. The latter often spoke of himself not as an artist, but rather as a craftsman, and the notion inherent in that self-characterization is precisely the same as the one Schwitters voices in these lines. What we are beginning to perceive in these comparisons is the phenomenon by which artists who create highly self-reflexive works, artists who have moved to the very precipice, seek to nullify their presence in the universe of their art. The shift is unexpected, for one would anticipate, by analysis of the term, that self-reflexive works mirror and preserve the image of their creator and actively substantiate his presence, not negate it. However, when the artist, after sincere and studied immersion in his work, has accomplished a distillation of his subjective spirit into his

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[55] Compare Kandinsky's conclusions in his section on theory:

> The revolt from dependence on nature is only just beginning. [...] The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul, so that he can test colours for themselves and not only by external impressions. If we begin at once to break the bonds which bind us to nature, and devote ourselves purely to combination of pure and abstract form, we shall produce works which are mere decoration, which are suited to neckties or carpets. Beauty of Form and Colour is no sufficient aim by itself, despite the assertion of pure aesthetes or even of naturalists, who are obsessed with the idea of "beauty". (47)

(objective) product, he may comfortably relinquish that tenacious hold on himself *qua* artist. He is now liberated from the common desire to "express" himself and imbue his work with his personality. The soul, as Simmel suggested it would, has travelled the path back to itself.

We encounter in this utterly complex process a crucial *enantiodromia.* The creative spirit of the artist compels him to produce objects by which his spirit substantiates its existence. Taken alone, these items do not contribute to that higher ideal, but the centripetal influence of the self-conscious spirit organizes them and draws them back to their origin. Thus, there is a point at which the identity of the artist becomes eclipsed by the vibrancy given to the work; if we understand the achievement of a pure, self-reflexive work to be the zenith of artistic creativity, then this point would be termed the corresponding nadir. Yet art of this kind, full of flux and as dynamic as the spirit that created it, does not remain at its nadir for long, for soon it collapses into its opposite, and what results is a rare but pure symbiosis between the artist and his art, the zenith of artistic creation. Only then may the artist comfortably dismiss his artistic influence, because now the work he has created begins to direct its own creation and offer constructive commentary of what the creation of art entails. Simmel addresses the ecstasy of an artist who has achieved such an advanced level:

> In the happiness of a creator with his work, as great or insignificant as it may be, we find, beyond a discharge of inner tensions, the proof of his subjective power, his satisfaction over a fulfilled challenge, a sense of contentment that the work is completed, that the universe of valuable items is now enriched by this individual piece. Probably there is no higher sublime personal satisfaction for the creator than when we apperceive his work in all its impersonality, apart from our

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[56] Here we find Schwitters as reverent as ever towards art, and views like these would have done little to endear him to the iconoclastic Berlin Dadaists rallying under the direction of Huelsenbeck.

> subjectivity. Just as the objectifications of the spirit are valuable apart from the subjective processes of life which have produced them, so, too, they have value apart from the other life processes which as their consequences depend on them. ("On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture" 32)

A great infusion of personality has led to the generation of a work that transcends the personality of the creator and the viewer; herein we find the *enantiodromia* behind Duchamp's "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even" and especially behind the Hanover "Merzbau". While it may have seemed to more politically charged Dadaists like Huelsenbeck that Schwitters' inwardness could only detract from his talent, it is now apparent that the self-reflexive work of art was the logical corollary of Dada's sacred tenets, and such art, leading the soul on the journey back to itself (the soul of the artist and the art), could only be formed by an introspective (read: highly self-conscious) artistic mind. The self-conscious individual must produce objects in order to see before it the products of its unique and spiritual creative force, but the artist whose ambition is directed towards self-reflexive art goes even further, pouring his subjective spirit into the creation of a new world in which his products may reside. In a more general sense, that new world for a collective of young artists in 1916 Zurich was Dada, but more specifically a "kingdom of one" arose, and it was Merz.

The well-documented confrontation between Schwitters and Huelsenbeck obviously influenced the former to pursue a movement that would be receptive to his aesthetic ideology and corresponding work; he was so ripe with contradiction that not even a self-contradictory movement like Dada could contain him. Although the antipathy directed towards Schwitters by the Berlin Dadaists was predicated largely on his ties to Sturm Expressionism, that affiliation allowed for two crucial influences to take hold

over Schwitters' work. The first was the ambition to embark on a "multidisciplinary artistic enterprise", an endeavour that Sturm sought to cultivate based on "the synthesist tradition of the Italian Futurists, and of Kandinsky and Marc's Blaue Reiter group" (Elderfield 30-31).[57] The second influence is perhaps more appropriately viewed as a corroboration of the artist's pre-existent ideas. It is an emphasis on art attesting to or simply being "a spiritual renaissance before a social one" (32). The multidisciplinary approach was far from anathema to the Dadaists, for in spite of their eagerness to distance themselves from all preceding movements, their membership drew heavily from the same groups they denounced. Furthermore, Dada itself was multidisciplinary, looking as it did to disciplines beyond the scope of the arts.[58] It was, then, the increasingly unpopular conviction of Herwarth Walden that art should not be conscripted into political service that incensed many. Such an apolitical stance was deemed unconscionable and pretentious, especially when one was faced with the turbulence erupting in Germany at the time. Thus, the opposition came to rally behind "Die Aktion", a periodical which Franz Pfemfert founded in 1911 (33):

> In terms of specifically artistic modernism, Walden's group was certainly more advanced; but Walden's unwillingness to declare a position on the social front meant that as the war developed – and especially as it ended, in defeat and then in revolution – there was a gradual erosion of Der Sturm's place at the forefront of avant-garde activity. With few exceptions, those who were to become Dadaists in Berlin had, through the war, allied themselves to the Activist rather

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[57] In "Merz" Schwitters summarizes this ambition:

> To busy myself with various branches of art was for me an artistic need. The reason for this was not any urge to broaden the scope of my activity, it was my desire not to be a specialist in one branch of art, but an artist. My aim is the Merz composite artwork, that embraces all branches of art in an artistic unit. (Motherwell 62)

[58] For example, Dadaists such as Duchamp were investigating the philosophy and physics of chance and the fourth dimension. Ball notes in his diary entry for 8 April 1917, "I have realized a favorite old plan of mine. Total art: pictures, music, dances, poems – now we have that" (Flight Out of Time 104).

> than the Sturm cause, even though the specific social proposals voiced in *Die Aktion* were often absurdly utopian and unrealistic – to such an extent indeed that the Dadaists came to repudiate all Expressionism, not only the Sturm variety. (33)

With his inward focus and his ambition to create pure art, Schwitters obviously found more common ground with Walden than with Pfemfert and his cohorts.[59] For this reason, he was already a target by the time he "applied" to Club Dada, even though Elderfield suggests that it was unlikely he even knew anything of Dada when he joined Sturm in the spring of 1918 (34). Still,

> even if he did, the kind of art that he was then making had nothing in common with Berlin Dada. In Huelsenbeck's first Berlin lecture of February 1918, he condemned Cubism, Expressionism and Abstraction as no longer useful or relevant to the contemporary situation. At that time, Schwitters was making this Cubo-Expressionist drawings and *Abstraktion* paintings. Huelsenbeck's First (German) Dada Manifesto of April 1918 had spoken of three techniques that he did think were useful and relevant: "bruitism," "simultaneity," and "the new medium," that is to say, sound poetry, simultaneous group performance and collage. Not until Merz was invented in the winter of 1918-19 could Schwitters agree. (34-35)

It was likely that Schwitters met Arp in late 1918, after he became involved with the Berlin avant-garde (35). Soon afterwards he was in contact with Tzara, and so his knowledge of Dada would have grown as he started to receive publications from the Zurich group (35).[60] That Schwitters was able to penetrate even slightly (he met with Raoul Hausmann in early 1919) is likely due to the fact that the Revolution had temporarily relaxed the "partisan

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[59] Elderfield observes, "Schwitters' own understanding of art was never as completely spiritual and Expressionist as that of Walden and his fellow Sturm artists. Still, he obviously valued the Sturm emphasis on artistic purity..." (33). Perhaps it is fair to say that Schwitters was more taken with the introspective method than the spiritual end to which it was directed. Nevertheless, he played on the periphery of spirituality (mostly a traditional Christian spirituality) and Gamard's book investigates his work from this point of view (although she does seem to forget that Schwitters himself was not a spiritual man). A study covering how Schwitters subverted traditional Christian iconography (emphasis on "subverted" rather than "incorporated" or "appropriated") would be an enlightening project.

[60] According to Elderfield, it was probably Tzara or Arp who moved Schwitters in the direction of Berlin Dada, for Zurich Dada enjoyed amiable relations with Der Sturm. Probably unbeknownst to them, Berlin Dada was distancing itself from Sturm Expressionism (and eventually all Expressionism), and so anyone who came bearing sympathies for Der Sturm "was in for a rude surprise" (35).

stances" of the various Berlin groups (35). Soon enough, however, Club Dada broke free and Expressionism was as detestable as ever. For Schwitters, good timing soon turned bad and he was shut out before he could ever really be considered "in". In terms of Merz, however, the timing proved exquisite, for in July 1919 Schwitters began to term his assemblages and collages (which date to the last part of 1918) with the readymade term that was to signify his artistic maturity and independence. In his defence of Merz ("Merz", 1920), he underlines the freedom inherent in his newly found art: "Merz stands for freedom from all fetters, for the sake of artistic creation. Freedom is not lack of restraint, but the product of strict artistic discipline" (Motherwell 59).

Clearly exuberant though he was over his discovery of a movement liberated from socio-political concerns, Schwitters was more concentrated and focused than ever. Merz was crucial in that it provided a private forum in which the artist could be as introspective as the work demanded without having to answer to objections from others in his group, but it was also absolutely essential to his development as an artist for another reason. In the preceding lines, Schwitters relates how important the juxtaposition of materials was for him:

> When I adjust materials of different kinds to one another, I have taken a step in advance of mere oil painting, for in addition to playing off color against color, line against line, form against form, etc., I play off material against material, for example, wood against sackcloth. I call the *Weltanschauung* from which this mode of artistic creation arose "Merz". (Motherwell 59)

Merz as a movement was not only based on the juxtaposition of materials, for it too functioned as a juxtaposition. Straining for individuality (or perhaps being forced into it), Schwitters created a universe built on contradiction that by necessity contradicted the universe out of which it was born. If avant-garde

art at that time in Germany was meant to adhere to a political agenda, then Merz was fiercely apolitical, and if Berlin Dada eschewed the Romantic figure for his inwardness and proclivity for solitudinous reflection, then Merz was the ideal sanctuary for an artist of self-reflexive inclinations. It is not enough to say that Merz was *different* from Berlin Dada or even that it cultivated an individualistic quality. It *actively* moulded itself in contradiction to what was popular at the time in anti-popular circles such as Dada. So when Schwitters writes, "The meaning of the concept 'Merz' changes with the change in the insight of those who continue to work with it" (Motherwell 59), he is being intentionally enigmatic, because the value of the change (positive or negative) is incidental. What matters is the flux, or at the very least, the tendency for it. At times Merz could appear Romantic in conviction, while at other times it presciently anticipated the innovations of postmodernist art. It was irrepressibly Dada because it refused Dada and asserted Merz instead:

> Here I must clear up a misunderstanding that might arise through my friendship with certain kernel Dadaists. It might be thought that I call myself a Dadaist, especially as the word "dada" is written on the jacket of my collection of poems, *Anna Blume*, published by Paul Steegemann. On the same jacket is a windmill, a head, a locomotive running backwards and a man hanging in the air. This only means that in the world in which Anna Blume lives, in which people walk on their heads, windmills turn and locomotives run backwards, Dada also exists. In order to avoid misunderstandings, I have inscribed "Antidada" on the outside of my Cathedral. This does not mean that I am against Dada, but that there also exists in this world a current opposed to Dadaism. Locomotives run in both directions. Why shouldn't a locomotive run backwards now and then? (Motherwell 60)[61]

Schwitters is addressing a thorny issue that arose upon the publication of "An Anna Blume". He had already been banned from Club Dada, but his inscription of the word on the cover stirred Huelsenbeck's animosity

[61] The drawing of which Schwitters writes was composed much like "Coquetry", and as his description indicates, some of the same figures we have already encountered reappear.

(Elderfield 39), and a stern rebuttal was issued in Huelsenbeck's introduction to his Dada Almanac. We find evidence here that Schwitters is attempting to garner legitimacy for his new movement (it was closer to the ideals of the original Dada group), a legitimacy he believed "Huelsendada" lacked. Nevertheless, he does not profess himself a Dadaist, and he clings to a noncommittal position with regards to the movement. The world of Anna Blume, a fantastical universe where the laws of convention are flounced even to the point of welcoming convention (there is more than a little Romantic influence in this poem and in other similar works), is the world of ludic contradiction, and I would argue that Schwitters' insistence on remaining non-partisan is akin (once again) to Duchamp's efforts to obliterate personal taste. This stance became Schwitters' method for keeping Merz as inventive as it could be, and if that meant on occasion that he had to introduce themes dear to the German bourgeoisie, then he welcomed such unpopular additions. Ball's diary entry for 9 January 1917 illustrates the point with lucidity:

> Self-assertion suggests the art of self-metamorphosis. The isolated man tries to hold his own in the most unfavorable circumstances; he has to make himself unassailable. Magic is the last refuge of individual self-assertion, and maybe of individualism in general. (Flight Out of Time 96)

The circumstances were certainly unfavourable for Schwitters, not just because of the social difficulties he endured under Huelsenbeck but also because of the despair into which Germany was falling at the time. Ball found such magic in the "inner alchemy of the word", while Schwitters found it in the myriad permutations that unfolded when juxtapositions were forced and cultivated, not only in Merz but in himself as well. Critical, as Ball points out, was the necessity to undergo constant "self-metamorphosis", and although metamorphosis traditionally signifies a profound change of being, the

metamorphosis suggested here is harnessed into an art form, not unlike the cultivation of creative despair presented in the previous chapter. And of course, the invocation of magic implies the courtship of the unknown, or perhaps even of primitive forces. Most curious is the implication that the self must subject itself to change, that it must abandon itself to the nebulous logic of magic if it is to assert its quintessence. This conclusion serves as further evidence that the individual, through an *enantiodromic* process, must break with its self-conscious point of origin before it can enter back into the self-conscious realm with actual, not theoretical, knowledge of itself.

Keeping this complex theory in mind, we find in the Merz collages and assemblages, and in Duchamp's readymades as well, that there is an initial dampening down, or perhaps even eradication, of the artist's presence. The twentieth century avant-garde's search for and incorporation of *objets trouvés* (and their logical counterparts, the rectified readymades) was in part the salvaging of fragments from the ruins of society, but it was also related to the fragmentation of the modern artist. Coming to us as they do from the world of mass production, *objets trouvés* signify a world in which mass production, while providing for the masses, has concurrently nullified the unique essence of any given individual.[62] When these items emigrate to the canvas, the viewer is inspired to the following cognitive process. Firstly, he notes that the item has relinquished the function for which it was intended: the snow shovel is impotent without snow, the button useless without the buttonhole. His curiosity piqued by this condition of implied incompletion, the viewer then

[62] This thought is given much attention in Simmel's work, and we recall that it plays an important part in his theory of the metropolitan: "Money is concerned only with what is common to all, i.e., with the exchange value which reduces all quality and individuality to a purely quantitative level" ("The Metropolis and Mental Life" 326).

begins to ponder the human presence hidden behind the object. This line of questioning is particularly stimulated by segments of newspaper clippings in which only partial narratives can be uncovered. After this speculative investigation of the materials, the viewer finally comes to consider the hand of the artist behind the work, what motivated the selection of these objects over others, how they came to be arranged thusly, and what significance they held for the artist. So while the objects have lost their connection to the individuals who once had use for them, they have become tokens of the artist's intent and personality, and it is through them that the artist exerts his creative influence on the work and on his audience as well. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of the collage or assemblage artwork mirrors the exercise in self-fragmentation in which every self-reflexive artist partakes. As the self-conscious "I" of the artist produces objects and forms and by way of that production journeys back to itself, the collage work participates in a similar process. The unity of the entire piece is temporarily suspended in the prism of its constituent elements, but if the work is successful, that is, if it achieves an overarching unity (in spite of the disjointedness of its elements), then the viewer is hypnotically drawn into an intuitive understanding of the piece. Recognizing this effect, Shattuck writes:

> The intimacy of the voyeur relationship to art, watching it from the wings, represents a yearning to be in touch with the subconscious world which produced it. This candidness is turned inward. Interest in the inaccessible resources of the human mind induced the arts to model themselves less and less on the rational polite disciplines of the past. They sought what Sergei Eisenstein called "inner speech." Subconscious thought processes – dream and memory and wit – function by sudden leaps the way a spark jumps a gap. The arts have sought to duplicate these inner creative processes, to portray them without putting them through rigorous realignments of dramatic development, linear perspective, or tonality. (341)

Shattuck's invocation of Eisenstein's crucial theory is quite fortunate from our point of view, for it is the cinematic counterpart of the painterly self-reflexivity we have thus far been examining. Furthermore, Eisenstein's essays are contemporaneous with Schwitters' Merzbau years, and so they offer an intriguing example of how self-reflexive art was a preoccupation (and oftentimes more so an aim) of artists working in various disciplines and countries.[63]

The "inner speech" to which Shattuck refers appears under the rubric of the "inner monologue". This concept, according to Eisenstein, developed out of a necessity to portray "the feverish *race of thoughts*, intermittently with the outer actuality" of a character under duress; the Romantic authors E.T.A. Hoffmann, Novalis, and Gerard de Nerval are credited with the innovation (104).[64] The impetus behind the "inner monologue", which manifests itself cinematically as the "montage" sequence, is the same heightened self-consciousness that we find at the root of all self-reflexive art: "How fascinating it is to listen to one's own train of thought, particularly in an excited state, in order to catch yourself, looking at and listening to your mind. How you talk 'to yourself,' as distinct from 'out of yourself'" (105). In "Film Form: New Problems", Eisenstein observes that there is a definite logic governing "inner speech", a logic "subject to no less clear-cut laws and

[63] Eisenstein's essays that deal with the theories of montage and "inner monologue" (under which "inner speech" falls) are: "A Course in Treatment" (1932), "Film Form: New Problems" (1935), and "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today" (1944). All of these works, among others, appear in Film Form, edited and translated by Jay Leyda.

[64] "'Slipping' from the objective into the subjective, and back again, is a characteristic of the writings of the romantics..." (104). With regards to our theory of self-reflexivity, the subjective is the obvious point of departure, but Eisenstein's characterization of this very specialized kind of art is nevertheless applicable.

structural peculiarities" as the kind to which more superficial methods of communication subscribe:

> What is remarkable therein, and why I am discussing it, is that the laws of construction of inner speech turn out to be precisely those *laws which lie at the foundation of the whole variety of laws governing the construction of the form and composition of art-works.* (130, author's italics)[65]

According to Eisenstein, these laws "represent an inexhaustible storehouse", and so he restricts himself to enumerating two salient examples.[66] The first is termed "*pars pro toto*" (synecdoche) and the second is explained as the phenomenon by which "every embodiment must be in strict artistic accord with the story situation being embodied" (134). Following a brief description of these points, Eisenstein intriguingly turns to the case "where the material of the form-creation turns out to be the artist himself", and in that case he finds that the second example given above is given even fuller expression (135):

> in this instance the structure of the finished composition not only reproduces, as it were, a reprint of the structure of the laws along which flow sensual thought-processes. In this instance the circumstance itself, here united with the object-subject of creation, as a whole duplicates a picture of the psychic state and representation corresponding to the earlier forms of thought. [...] It is the characteristic involving the conception that a human being, while being himself and conscious of himself as such, yet simultaneously considers himself to be also some other person or thing, and, further, to be so, just as definitely and just as concretely, materially. (135)

We encounter in these lines a complete substantiation of the theory of self-reflexivity we have been formulating. First of all, Eisenstein speaks of the element of structure, which may contradict our initial impression of self-reflexive art as partaking of the turbulence of the subconscious from which it

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[65] And in "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today":

> Thus we arrived at the primary source of those interior principles, which already govern not only the formation of montage, but the inner formation of all works of art – of those basic *laws of the speech of art in general* – of those general *laws of form*, which lie at the base not only of works of film art, but of all kinds of arts in general. (251, author's italics)

draws at least partial inspiration. It is customary to imagine avant-garde artists, particularly Dadaists, as characters that perform with abandon, but as Schwitters unequivocally reminds us in "Merz", "Freedom is not lack of restraint, but the product of strict artistic discipline" (Motherwell 59). Certainly Schwitters operated behind strict formal laws, many of which were known only to him but nevertheless exerted a profound power over his work. Elderfield often refers to Schwitters' adherence to a strict formal code. When writing of the artist's transition into full-fledged Merz works, Elderfield concludes, "The effect was to heighten the real expressive feeling of the art, which came to depend above all else upon Schwitters' control of a strictly delimited vocabulary of formal elements" (27). Second of all, we encounter the subject-object dualism, but Eisenstein adds a fascinating new element when he proposes that this dualism, marked by flux, joins with itself and thus results in a total "picture" of the inner life that conceived the work in the first place. The subject-object dualism, or what we have been calling the manifestation of the self-conscious "I" in objects or forms of its own production, itself functions as but a part of the self-reflexive gesture, while at the same time maintaining its integrity as that same gesture.[67] Finally, this nexus of interactions (between the subject and subject, the object and object, the subject and object, and the subject-object with itself) induces in the self-conscious mind a state not unlike that in which primitive man immersed

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[66] The author appositively qualifies "inner speech" as "sensual thinking", and in a footnote he cites Hegel and Plekhanov's interest in "sensual thought processes" (130).

[67] Eisenstein, in his discussion of the *pars pro toto* method:

> At that stage of non-differentiated thinking the part *is* at one and the same time also the whole. There is no unity of part and whole, but instead obtains an objective identity in representation of whole and part. It is immaterial whether it be part or whole – it plays invariably the role of aggregate and whole. (132)

himself; the artist acknowledges his sovereign existence but concurrently understands himself to be another entity.[68] In the case of Schwitters, we need no further evidence than his statement "I am Merz".

"Eternal Creation": The Evolution and Structure of the Hanover Merzbau

As with all artistic projects of this magnitude and legacy, a haze of mystery engulfs the true origins of the Hanover Merzbau. According to Ernst Schwitters, it "began when his father became interested in the relationship between the columns or sculptures and the pictures that he hung on the walls behind them" (Elderfield 147).[69] Accordingly, Schwitters began to link these pictures with string, which was soon replaced by wire, which in turn was ensheathed by wood, which ultimately was moulded over with plaster of Paris (148).[70] If this account is accurate (and we have no reason to doubt the veracity of Ernst Schwitters, who laboured diligently on the reconstruction of the Hanover Merzbau and who recalls living in its presence), then we have a before us a fascinating insight into the evolution of the work.[71]

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[68] Eisenstein provides numerous anthropological examples of how primitive or uncivilized cultures perform in such a fashion. His tangential discourses upon such societies also elucidate Schwitters' case, for it has been well established that he (and many of the other Dadaists) were strongly influenced by primitivism.

[69] Unfortunately we have no way of knowing in what arrangement the connections occurred or whether or not Schwitters laced the string according to a predetermined pattern. Nevertheless, the delineation of these negative spaces, combined with the manifestation of otherwise purely mental associations, establishes for us the basic principle of the Merzbau: the exposure of the relationships between objects and forms which the self-conscious creative spirit provides on its journey back to itself.

[70] "It was probably in 1924-25, therefore, that the period of joining pictures and sculptures with string and wire gave way to the creation of a fully environmental, sculptural interior" (Elderfield 152).

[71] The interlacing of the works with string prefigures Breton's "First Papers of Surrealism" exhibition, organized in New York in 1942, in which Duchamp provided a similar effect: "Duchamp's contribution was to hang an inextricable cat's-cradle across the rooms in which the show was held, so that the visitors who wanted to look at the works were obliged to perform feats of gymnastic contortion in order to reach them" (Cabanne 148). The major difference between the two gestures is that Schwitters' was contained in a private residence,

We know from Schwitters' preoccupation with landscape painting that he relied upon nature to provide eternal themes which could be incorporated into his urban art. One theme that was clearly of interest to him was that of organic growth, a theme surreptitiously at work in the Merzbilder, but more readily apparent in the later sculptures (dating from the late thirties to his death) and the Elterwater Merzbarn (1947). The proliferating tangle of string would have made the artist's studio seem more like a bog swamp heavily strewn with sphagnum moss.[72] Perhaps with some precedence, Schwitters was emphasizing unspoken *connections* rather than abrupt juxtapositions, but either way the self-reflexive element remains the same, for in practice both methods are really complements of one another. In the case of juxtaposition, the onus is placed on the viewer to hazard a guess as to what creative impulse motivated the artist to assemble such contradictory items. With the connective method, the artist has provided tangible links between the works, but the question regarding creative impulse remains. Juxtaposition functions more in concert with Bergson's theory regarding the presentation of diverse images in an effort to conduct the viewer's attention to a position more sympathetic with *duration*.[73] In emphasizing the negative spaces between the works hanging in his studio, Schwitters was heeding Bergson's call to grasp the "trajectory" of a

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and so the string functioned more as a tangible expression of the artist's interest in the connections between his works. In Duchamp's case, the intent to subvert the typical viewing experience of the audience and to promote danger in the otherwise neutral and safe atmosphere of the museum formed the impetus behind the stunt.

[72] The ensheathing of the string also recalls the organic ensheathing of neuronal axons. Schwann cells wrap themselves around axons and create a smooth sheath that expedites the neural impulses. An investigation into the organic tendencies of the Merzbau (perhaps even along anatomical lines) would be an ambitious and enlightening project.

[73] Shattuck clearly thought so too, for he writes regarding the juxtapositional method, "Bergson felt this dynamic so deeply that he sounds as if he were writing about film, or cubism" (342). He then quotes the passage from An Introduction to Metaphysics which explores the achievement of *duration* through the presentation of "many diverse images".

phenomenon rather than attempting to reproduce it by way of instantaneous moments. The string serves as a rudimentary signifier of the mental connections we forge when we take into account the totality of an artist's oeuvre and sympathetically immerse ourselves in the *duration* with which the artist infuses his work. It now becomes evident that the string threaded through the negative spaces between Schwitters' works is akin to the vectors and schematically drawn lines of motion we see in the Aquarelles; it implies movement and is indicative of flux and change. However, unlike the lines in the Aquarelles, the string clearly marks a point at which Schwitters was making a decisive move away from surfaces and into the three-dimensionality of the Merzbau. Of course the assemblages, with their assortment of machine parts, toys, blocks of wood, and other bulky items, were three-dimensional in composition, but Schwitters was still preoccupied with what effects he could produce o*n the surfaces* of these works:

> Schwitters begins in 1920 to address the surface of his work as a responsive rather than an inert object, and makes of his art an affair not merely of placing materials and covering surfaces but of animating and actually creating surfaces 'through the choice, distribution and metamorphosis of materials'. (Elderfield 62)[74]

Still, the imprisonment of these materials within the bounds of a traditional four-sided frame kept them from asserting their three-dimensionality, preventing any disruption of the piece's surface tension.

When Schwitters began to hang string between the various pictorial items in his studio, he made a significant leap from the relative two-dimensionality of his collages and assemblages to the three-dimensionality

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Shattuck concludes, "A great diversity employed to suggest and delimit a point in another dimension aptly describes juxtaposition" (342).

[74] Elderfield traces this shift to "more physical, bulky reliefs" to the influence of Constructivism upon Schwitters in the early twenties.

inherent in an architectural work. With this added dimension, the flatness for which he had striven in his earlier works was, by contrast, further emphasized. At the same time, attention was drawn to the interstitial spaces that transcended (but included) those earlier planar pieces. At least in the beginning, and probably more so towards the end, the Merzbau was a Merzbild piece grown beyond the usual dimensions; it was a Merz picture into which the artist could step and by which he would ultimately be enveloped. Prior to its development, Schwitters had immersed himself in the various disciplines that existed under the rubric of Merz – Merz painting, Merz poetry, Merz prose, Merz typography, *et cetera* – but each of these endeavours still existed, for the most part, independently of one another, and although Schwitters' wilful self-effacement was already underway, he was not yet subsumed by his art. In the case of the Merzbau, however, it soon became self-evident that Merz had achieved autonomy because all of its satellite activities were now combined, and likewise the construction, in its unity, was capable of encompassing (literally and figuratively) its creator. What marked the shift, besides the Brobdingnagian proportions of the Merzbau, was the fact that this project, which was the closest Schwitters ever came to a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, was a unification of what had hitherto been the preoccupations of the artist: movement and the vital flux, organic growth, humour and nonsense, the maintenance and rupturing of surface tension, fragmentation, juxtaposition, natural and urban iconography, machines and their function in modern art, and of course, self-reflexivity. Furthermore, these constituent themes within the confines of the Merzbau articulated with

one another in an unprecedented fashion,[75] and besides the incorporation of these and other secondary themes, the Merzbau grew concentrically around the influences of contemporary art movements. Its core was Dada ("The Holy Affliction" is very much Dada in inspiration) or perhaps more accurately Merz, but by the time of its demise, it was predominantly Constructivist in appearance.[76] Yet Elderfield underlines the point that the work was more than a concretion of styles:

> Although it developed from a Dadaist source to a stylized exterior, it was never a "joint artistic activity" telling metaphorically of a harmonized social environment, but a way for Schwitters to preserve his individuality in a period of increasingly impersonalized styles. (148)

The irony is that Schwitters asserted his individuality by first effacing it in a construction whose dimensions dwarfed him. This indirect route of self-realization in parallels that which we have already witnessed vis-à-vis self-reflexive art.

As Ernst Schwitters' account relates, the Merzbau grew in concentric layers from its very inception. Before we continue with our interpretation, let us pause and consider some of the accounts given of the work. In "Merz 21. erstes Veilchenheft", composed in 1931, Schwitters provides insight into the ideas and growth of the Merzbau.[77] He notes that "it is unfinished", but he is quick to remind the reader that it is intended to be so. He continues:

> It grows about the way a big city does – when a new building goes up, the Housing Bureau checks to see that the whole appearance of the city is not going to be ruined. In my case, I run across something or other that looks to me as though it would be right for the KdeE, so

[75] Schmalenbach speaks to this unifying quality of the Merzbau as follows: "When, around 1923, Schwitters moved his studio to another room of the house, he began to let the hitherto separate creations coalesce into a whole" (130).
[76] As Elderfield notes, Constructivism was experimenting in "environmental design" at that time (150).
[77] All citations for this piece refer to Schmalenbach's book.

> I pick it up, take it home, and attach it and paint it, always keeping in mind the rhythm of the whole. (Schmalenbach 130)[78]

Schwitters' likening of the Merzbau to a city is more than a metaphoric device. In a large city, the individuality of the citizen is both enhanced and diminished by his participation in such a mass social group. The metaphor of the "big city" is a felicitous one when we consider the position of the artist within such a looming artwork, for like the metropolitan, he too relinquishes some of his individuality in order to join a much larger sphere. This premise may seem contradictory, but consider Simmel's sociological position as expressed in "Group Expansion and Development of Individuality": "Individuality in being and action generally increases to the degree that the social circle encompassing the individual expands" (Levine 252).[79] Similarly, we recall Sheppard's observation that the Dadaists understood with great clarity that "human beings became truly human only when they accept the smallness of their place within Creation" (178). Comparing these two quotations, we arrive at the basis of a theory which holds that the individual must diminish himself if he not only is to retain his individuality but to aggrandize it in a greater arena, that of the large social collective. Immediately we are reminded of our earlier conclusions regarding the proclivity of the artist who, in creating self-reflexive works, forgoes his identity in favour of that of the work. When he does so, he follows the path that Simmel delineates of the self on its journey to a heightened self-consciousness. There is, then, another *enantiodromia* at work. Rather than

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[78] The confusion over Schwitters' name for the Merzbau continues here, but as already confirmed by Elderfield, "KdeE" ("Kathedral des erotischen Elends") was somewhat of a misnomer. In this quotation, Schwitters is clearly referring to the Merzbau.

[79] This quotation, italicised in the original, appears under the sub-heading "Group Expansion and the Transformation of Social Bonds". The essay was published in 1908.

resulting in the extinguishment of individuality altogether, the infusion of a work of art (an "object" or "form" in Simmel's terms) or the self-submersion of the individual in the collective results in greater individuality. Elsewhere in the same essay, under the sub-heading "Group Expansion and Consciousness of the Ego", Simmel lays bare the mechanism behind this *enantiodromia*, and in doing so expressly connects self-consciousness with a temporary relinquishment of individuality:

> The more uniformly and unwaveringly life progresses, and the less the extremes of sensate experience depart from an average level, the less strongly does the sensation of personality arise; but the farther apart they stretch, and the more energetically they erupt, the more intensely does a human being sense himself as a personality. (Levine 291)[80]

In these lines, we discover an invaluable metaphysical line of thought that links the metropolitan with self-reflexivity. Again we find, as we did in "The Metropolis and Mental Life", that discontinuous but highly noticeable stimuli provoke the mind to move towards a more heightened state of awareness. In a similar fashion, when the individual steeps himself in a collective comprised of "other highly differentiated individuals", the quintessence of his personality is temporarily eclipsed by those surrounding him, but as he struggles for identity, his individuality emerges *to his own mind* as a singular and distinguishable character (292): "it is precisely through the *alternation* of sensations, thoughts, and activities that personality documents itself" (291). However, as evidenced by Schwitters' quotation above, there is a critical quality responsible for ensuring that the work exists beneath an overarching unity. Simmel, as we have seen, attributes that centripetal organizational force

[80] This passage is redolent of Bergson's stipulation that "many diverse images" inspire the mind, by way of its own *intuition*, to enter into a sympathetic relationship with its own *duration* and perforce all other *durations* (An Introduction to Metaphysics 14).

to the self-conscious "I", while Bergson localizes it in the *duration* of the *élan vital*. In either case, the esemplastic power resides in the creative individual who summons his *intuition* to process and interpret conflicting and disorientating perceptions; invariably he finds the flow of *duration* beneath it all:

> Just as duration can be determined only in the presence of alternation, and just as it is only the alternation of nonessential properties that throws constancy of substance into bold relief, so too the ego is apparently perceived as the one constant in all the alternation of psychological contents, especially when these contents provide a particularly rich opportunity. (291)

Schwitters initially invokes the metaphor of the city to describe the growth of the Merzbau, and in his rather humorous portrayal he casts himself in the bureaucratic position of the "Housing Bureau". The necessity of preserving the unity of the whole, a difficult task considering the myriad items that comprised the Merzbau, is in concert with the artist's struggle to assert his individuality. In the case of the city, the objects and forms (not just the buildings but the laws and customs of the populace as well) produced by so many hands may threaten to disrupt the unity of the metropolitan centre, but the overseeing bureaucracy ensures wholeness in spite of fragmentation. Keeping in mind the quotations above, it would seem that an artwork that includes as many diverse items as possible, should it be under the direction of a creator in search of heightened self-consciousness, would be like a city that encompasses myriad forms but is even more of a metropolis for that reason. The Merzbau is precisely this kind of artwork, and like the city that grows under the guidance of its Housing Bureau, it expanded under the self-conscious (and ultimately self-reflexive) influence of its creator. That influence is explicitly demonstrated in Schwitters' active role of procuring

items and fitting them into the Merzbau, with an eye to preserving (like the Housing Bureau) the unity of the entire construction. There is, however, a secondary interpretation to be considered with regards to Schwitters' function in the realm of the Merzbau. The structure was primarily a means of the artist asserting himself on a grand scale and in truly individualized form, but it also became the embodiment of his obsession over the preservation of objects. The quotation from "Merz 21. erstes Veilchenheft" cited above continues thusly:

> Then a day comes when I realize I have a corpse on my hands – relics of a movement in art that is now passé. So what happens is that I leave them alone, only I cover them up either wholly or partly with other things, making clear that they are being downgraded. As the structure grows bigger and bigger, valleys, hollows, caves appear, and these lead a life of their own within the over-all structure. (Schmalenbach 130)

There is a marked shift in tone following Schwitters' whimsical self-portrayal as the Housing Bureau of the Merzbau. The invocation of death in this passage recasts the previously described gathering activities of the artist as scavenging forays, the results of which eventually amount to no more than "a corpse". The "passé" art movement to which he refers is probably Dada, although Expressionism and Cubism are also possibilities. We have already addressed the issue of Schwitters' reluctance to part with past trends and forms, and so it should hardly come as a surprise that he finds it necessary to *entomb* these "relics" rather than dispose of them altogether. It is crucial to note that Schwitters is not laying these items to rest, but rather sending them into serene seclusion. Far from being stripped of their vitality, these relics are enshrined in grottos ("hollows" and "caves") that come to serve as organic units, organs perhaps, of the super-structure body that is the Merzbau. As we shall soon see, Schwitters dedicated much effort to these grottos, which came

to be one of the most significant (and disturbing) aspects of the project, remarked upon by visitors with dread and voyeuristic enthusiasm.

The Threshold of Imaginative Recall

The looming dimensions of the Merzbau deserve further attention, and to this end let us consult one of Simmel's earlier essays, "Über aesthetische Quantitäten" ("On Aesthetic Quantities", 1903).[81] This short but dense piece takes as its point of departure the conviction that artistically portrayed proportions correlate to the nature of the "physical objects" depicted. In and of itself this idea is not so profound, but how Simmel develops the argument is intriguing and quite applicable to the issue of the Merzbau's construction. He begins by distinguishing between the illustration of inorganic and organic natural features, and gives as an example of the former the impossibility of representing the full magnificence of the Alps (81). Conversely,

> In all organically grown phenomena we find that the circumference always reaches as far as the inner forces are able to develop it. Thus we may have a feeling, through complex, probably unconscious experiences, and through empathy, for the inner forces of growth. Usually therefore, we are in agreement with their size. For the artist, too, the transformations of form which are required because of changes in quantities come about without effort. (82)

For the reason that we are governed by organic forces and thus find ourselves in sympathy with them (even when we trace them outside of our own existence), we are capable of discerning the vital impulses that dictate organic growth. Intuitively we understand that the growth of such specimens emanates in a centrifugal manner, and so, as Simmel writes, we accept with no hesitation the ultimate size achieved. He finds the same is true for the artist,

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[81] The essay is reproduced in Etzkorn's book The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays (81-85).

who infuses his objects and forms with his creative spirit. The subjective spirit is akin to the vital forces that compel the growth of "organically grown phenomena" (82). For inorganic forms, growth is determined by the limiting factors of external influences: "Thus, we can only guide ourselves by the given facts of their spatial dimensions" (82). From these discrepancies, Simmel reasons that we find ourselves at a disadvantage when asked to consider and reconstruct mentally the sensations and dimensional impact of a large architectural structure from a small-scale model. We can only engage our faculty of "reconstructive imagination" when we engage with "objects of a certain absolute minimum size", and it is this minimum that Simmel terms "the threshold of imaginative recall" (82).[82]

When the Merzbau began to expand three-dimensionally and challenge the confines of the artist's studio, a new and more pronounced juxtaposition erupted, namely, that between the work and the viewer who suddenly found himself incorporated in it. In prior work, the viewer stood outside of the field of juxtapositions, but as the chambers of the Merzbau became large enough to accommodate a full-grown man, the viewer came to play an increasingly participatory role.[83] The question then arises as to whether or not the Merzbau is sizeable enough to push the viewer beyond the threshold of imaginative recall. More specifically, what intuitive response does the Merzbau pique (what is the viewer meant to recall) and how were the dimensions of the Merzbau limited or informed by the vision of the artist? In order to respond to

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[82] According to Simmel, architecture throughout history has customarily been constructed within the parameters of the proper dimensions required to stir "empathetic feeling" in the soul of the viewer. When the dimensions shrink beneath that threshold or expand too much, they render the architectural form "devoid of aesthetic effect" (82).

[83] That participation was at times enforced by Schwitters, who would secret away mementos of his visitors in the grottos of the Merzbau.

these questions, we need to reflect on precisely how the Merzbau would be classified in terms of the polar categories Simmel presents above. We have already spoken figuratively of its organic growth, but in the true sense of the word it is hardly so, unless we factor in the bodily waste bottled and displayed by the artist and the showcasing of the guinea pigs. It is not entirely inorganic either, for its growth, noted time and again, propelled it like a climbing vine that eventually "burst the room apart at the seams" (Richter 153) and came to "stretch…from the subterranean to the sky" (Elderfield 157).[84] A more reliable classification is hinted at in Simmel's essay, and so we inquire whether or not the growth of the Merzbau seemed to emanate from some vital force deep within or whether it appeared to be defined by external limitations. The work developed outward from the kernel of the original studio (in which the string was hanged), and so we remain justified in speaking of the project in terms of its organic nature.[85] It was not as if Schwitters had hewn the structure out of some pre-existing form, and the fact that the layers were added concentrically from this centre suggests that the Merzbau grew in such a way as to elicit a sympathetic reaction from its viewers. As an "organic" structure, the Merzbau conditioned the viewer (by his nature in sympathy with organic growth) so that he could extend his "imaginative intuition" to the contemplation of the *intuition* that informed the work. Once he entered into a sympathetic union with the structure, the viewer could explore its cavernous passageways and peer into its hazy grottos. Rudolf Jahns, who authored one of the few extant eyewitness accounts, relates the following:

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[84] The Merzbau was growing so large by the 1930s that Schwitters extended it into the floor above (and out through a skylight) and down into an uncovered well (Elderfield 157).

> Schwitters asked me to go into the 'grotto' alone and, once it had had its effect on me, to tell my thoughts to a beech tree in the middle of the structure on a small table (made of wood or plaster or plastered wood – I don't remember exactly anymore). I entered the structure, which, with its twists and turns, resembled at once a snail-shell and a cavern. The path to the centre was very narrow, because new structures and constructions and [...] Merz reliefs and recesses kept emerging from the sidewalls into the as yet empty space. (143)[86]

In this account, we find that Schwitters was keen to subject Jahns to a kind of "baptism" in Merz. His insistence on contemplative solitude and a meditative communication with the structure – an insistence prefigured by Friedrich in the gravid darkness of his mystical forests – signifies a desire to immerse the viewer in the work and to incorporate him in such a manner that both entities would be tangibly altered after the encounter.[87] Even more remarkable is the sinuous path Jahns is forced to trace in order to enter that inner sanctum. Building such a structure in such a confined space as his home, Schwitters could hardly have avoided the gnarled and dank passageways, but it is entirely possible that he deliberately constructed the Merzbau in such a way as to make manifest the journey the artist tenaciously pursues on his own path to that heightened self-consciousness that Simmel identifies as the cultivated state.

We have thus far seen how *enantiodromic* processes govern self-reflexive gestures, and here we discover yet another example of this phenomenon. In the quotation cited above, Jahns characterizes the section of the Merzbau he visited as being both like a "snail-shell" and a "cavern". At face value the two images appear contradictory, for a snail-shell is based on a mesmerizing spirality that draws the eye to an infinitely receding point, while

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[85] It is not coincidental that the Merzbau is spoken of most frequently in these terms, even without any reference to Simmel's theories. Viewers and scholars alike reach the same intuitive response; the Merzbau is a "living" structure (Richter 152).

[86] This excerpt derives from Jahns' brief essay entitled "Notes About his First Encounter with the *Merzbau*". It is reproduced in I is Style (142-144).

the cavern is a surprising triumph of empty space in an otherwise confined area.[88] The former presents a collapse of space upon itself, while the latter is an expansion. What, then, is the effect of the coexistence of these two kinds of spatial organization?[89] I propose that as with the structure of the human ear, the combination of *recessional* and *expansional* space serves to amplify the intuitive response gathered by the viewer as he immerses himself in the work. Confronted with these different organizations of space, the viewer retains above all an impression of flux, and it was necessary for Schwitters to produce these telescoping spatial dimensions in order to lend to the bulkiness of the Merzbau a mobility that it would otherwise have denied itself.[90] That mobility was necessary, of course, if the Merzbau was to develop along organic lines, and its organic essence was indispensable to its status as a self-reflexive artwork. Antliff illustrates this connection between organic form and the creative product as follows:

> The organic metaphor itself is a construct possessing a determinant logic that overruns the powers of origination it is said to embody. Organic form is typified in Bergsonian criticism by its creative freedom, its continual invention, whereas mechanical form is

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[87] Consider for comparison Schwitters' plan to incorporate people in his Merzbühne project (Elderfield 109-110).

[88] These divergent organizations of space are redolent of the polar thresholds Simmel identifies in his theory of aesthetic quantities:

> Each artistically usable element seems to be composed of two thresholds of size. There is a certain quantity for their representation through which aesthetic reactions in the final analysis are produced, and there is one through which they disappear again. Such thresholds can also be found in other spheres of the higher mental life as, for example, the threshold of becoming conscious of justice or of religion. ("On Aesthetic Quantities" 83-84)

[89] An unlikely comparison may be drawn between the structure Jahns describes and that of the human ear, in which a snail-shell (the cochlea) and a cavern (the auditory meatus that extends from the concha to the tympanic membrane) articulate with one another. The etymology of "cochlea" recalls the "snail-shell" appearance of that organ, as does the designation of "concha" for the external ear.

[90] In his brief commentary on the essence of art ("What art is, you know...", 1926), Schwitters stresses the point that art "is nothing more than rhythm": "That's why you mustn't look too hard at the material; because that isn't what it's all about. Don't look for some hidden imitation of nature, don't ask about expressions of the soul, but try, in spite of the unusual materials, to catch the rhythm of the forms and the colors" (Pppppp 229).

> predetermined, a lifeless fabrication. However, there is an inherent contradiction in this system, for while artistic invention is not mechanically predetermined, its relation to the organicist metaphor of growth of self-generation constitutes another determinant. When Bergson declared human creativity a manifestation of the cosmic élan vital, he understood artistic creativity as both the product and producer of a meta-creative process. In short, the personality was decentered as the origin of creativity, for as an instance of the materialization of the élan vital, the organic form bore within it creative capacities that did not originate with the artist. To enter into intuitive relation to the self was, paradoxically, to dissolve self-presence altogether [...]. (12)[91]

What Antliff observes here corroborates what we have thus far termed the *enantiodromic* effect exemplified in self-reflexive art; the subjective creative spirit dissolves itself in the inorganic form it engenders, only to resurrect itself in a "cultivated" state. This theory of creation, in Bergson as well as in Simmel, is too vitalist, too informed by flux theory to be constrained to a unidirectional representation. The arrows in this equation flow both ways between subject and form. Particularly speaking, the artistic form, as addressed in the quotation above, may be classified as an inorganic product of the creative spirit, but it is very much like the organically produced item in one critical way: it is not mechanically predetermined. Still, as Antliff notes, "artistic invention" is removed enough from the "organicist metaphor of growth of self-generation" to serve as its own determinant, and in this way it functions as a valuable example of meta-creativity. It is not organic creation, but it is creation in organic terms, and because it is safely removed from the strains and requisite considerations of true organic creation, the artist is free to lose himself in his work and experiment with methods of regaining that heightened self-consciousness. So it is then with the Merzbau, crafted from

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[91] Concern with "organic form" does indeed take precedence over mechanics in Bergson's philosophy, but as we have learned from Simmel's later vitalist writings, inorganic forms may be informed by the "stable substantive order of values", and thus they may reconnect with the life that produced them ("On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture" 31).

inorganic elements but assembled in a manner that rendered it organic in disposition.[92] Its organic nature was crucial in encouraging a sympathetic response from the viewer and in preventing it from succumbing to its own bulkiness.

As for its size, Schwitters ensured that his Merzbau juxtaposed cavernous spaces with claustrophobic retreats, and what resulted from this combination was an overall impression of a vital flux, which leads us back to the metaphysical conception of an organic reality. From the perspective of the viewer, the size of the Merzbau needed to be large enough to envelop him. As he stood amidst the dizzying complexity of the work (the view showing the Blue Window illustrates this point well), he would surely have sensed the diminution of his own personality in the confines of Schwitters' highly personalized structure – built out of elements that were in themselves depersonalised. By the time a viewer like Jahns had reached a particular grotto, he would have encountered so many "diverse images" that his consciousness would have been at "the precise point where there is a *certain* intuition to be seized" (An Introduction to Metaphysics 14, my italics). That *intuition*, perhaps the most critical for our argument, reveals the self-conscious, self-reflexive, creative spirit of the artist, and in turn that creative spirit announces the much greater phenomenon of the cosmic *élan vital*. So by losing himself in the vastness of the Merzbau, the viewer has (like the artist

[92] In his aphorisms concerning aesthetics, Schopenhauer similarly looks to the different effects inorganic and organic nature have on us. The former, he concludes, "produces a very melancholy, indeed oppressive impression" because that which is inorganic does not triumph over gravity. We derive pleasure and are sympathetic to organic nature because of its triumph over gravity. Water, which like the Merzbau is technically inorganic, transcends what would otherwise be a "melancholy effect" because of its "great mobility, which produces an impression of life..." (Essays and Aphorisms 161-162). The Merzbau purports its vitalism in a similar manner.

before him) turned his focus from his own individuality to that of a more substantial existence, and in doing so he has arrived at a more informed conception of his being. In this sense, the size of the Merzbau was critical in determining its effect on the viewer, for it needed to be large enough to surround the viewer and render him a diminutive figure in its shadow. It could not, however, be too big or too small to propel him beyond the threshold of imaginative recall. This diminution of the individual (both the artist and the viewer) substantiates our hypothesis that artwork produced explicitly in accordance with organicist principles mirrors the self-consciousness of creation inherent in organic processes.

The Unfolded Unity

Whereas many of the Dadaists laboured towards anti-art aims (and in some notable cases arrived at non-art), Schwitters' oeuvre was in essence meta-art, as it was preoccupied with laying bare, often in an ironic way and subversive way, the hitherto sacrosanct and mysterious mechanism behind artistic creation.[93] His focus on surfaces, as demonstrated with particular keenness in the Opherdicke landscapes and the assemblages, is evidence enough of this fact.[94] These surfaces, exaggerated and in some cases conspicuously over-worked, were half motivated *by* and half responsible *for* his interest in the juxtaposition of materials, a concern that defined his

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[93] In the 1929 piece, "About me by myself", Schwitters observes, "Art is above all only formation, creation" (Ppppp 239). The way in which Schwitters cultivated "roughness" in his collages, assemblages, and even in the Merzbau speaks to his desire to portray that "forming" element that he identified as being synonymous with art. Even his Constructivist pieces lacked the glossy veneer that characterized Mondriaan's work. I propose that Schwitters worked under his "forming" principle because the finished product (if there was such a thing in his philosophy) was secondary to his ambition to expose the mechanism of artistic creation and the vital flux that set that "forming" in motion.

[94] Still, the emphasis on surfaces conversely prompts the viewer to inquire as to what dwells behind those surfaces. This circuitous path to the secret profundity of the work encourages the viewer to step into the role of the scavenger, a role pioneered by Schwitters himself.

approach to uncovering and presenting the secret vitality of his ephemera.[95] Surely Schwitters felt himself limited, however, by the constraints of his innovative but relatively traditional work – the collages and assemblages, for all of their fantastic display, remained bounded by the usual four-sided frame – for as early as 1919 he was publishing a theory of his first *Gesamtkunstwerk* project, the "Merzbühne", or "Merz Theatre".[96] Elderfield classifies this project as a more fanciful extension of the Merzbilden, particularly in that the constituent materials are grouped formalistically by Schwitters and assigned different values. The "real stars" of the Merzbühne project are, not surprisingly, surfaces, and they are followed in importance by lines and then "meshes, nets and veils" (108). This progression derives entirely from the principles of the assemblages, in which the same kind of layering occurs to great effect (109). The only difference is that now Schwitters was turning his focus to a more conspicuous exploitation of three-dimensionality, whereas in the assemblages the three dimensions were compressed so tightly that their expansion was only suggested. Part of the power of the assemblages is precisely this call to intuit, to recall imaginatively, what the assemblages would look like if their elements were allowed to traverse the bounds of the four-sided frame. With the Merzbühne (or at least with the theory of it – the project was never actualized), elements previously associated with the assemblages were in a post-expansion state, and as such the concern became

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[95] I qualify it "secret" because one does not often credit refuse with possessing a great deal of vitality. Always one to court contradictions, Schwitters ambitiously sought to reconstruct (or at the very least reveal) the vital flux he believed could be extracted from his Hanoverian rubbish.

[96] Elderfield notes that in 1919 the theory was published in Walden's *Sturm-Bühne* series, "and was thereafter reprinted (in sometimes slightly revised forms) on half a dozen occasions between 1919 and 1923" (106).

how they articulated with one another and how their concerted motion incorporated or influenced the viewer.

Elderfield, in discussing the relationship between the Merzbühne theory and the poetry and prose that Schwitters was composing contemporaneously, offers the following observation:

> To manipulate the structure of a work in a collage-like way was to dissociate its individual parts from the sources and the emotions from which they derived. [...] Certainly in the *Merzbühne* text we see an utter absorption both in the very mechanics of assemblage – so that formal elements seem possessed by a kind of potential energy as active, kinetic forces in the space they inhabit – and in the oddities of juxtaposition thus created, which make us think that the pictures too were generated from a story-telling sensibility. (110-111)

That dissociation of individual parts, either the primary objective or the result of collage-work, mirrors the dissolution of the individuality of the artist in the medium of self-reflexive artwork. As we view a collage or assemblage, we naturally focus first on the elements themselves, but it is not long before we begin to reflect upon their origins and how it is that they came to be showcased in such a work. The issue of juxtaposition is secondary, but not in importance; only when we have properly scanned the items individually do we begin to question how it is that they work for or against one another. What those same elements lose in their fundamental individuality, however, they regain from the creative direction of the artist, and so it is that his individuality comes to fill the void created when the items are plucked from their original contexts. That creative direction is what Elderfield frequently terms the "diaristic" or "story-telling" impetus of the artist, as posited above. Is it then the same with the complex interaction between the artist (Schwitters) and his work (the Merzbau)? If understood in terms of the theory of self-reflexivity we have been formulating, then surely it is. Schwitters surrendered himself in

the context of the Merzbau to a thorough self-effacement, and in doing so attained a more cultivated individuality that in Simmelian terms is expressed as "the unfolded unity".

Let us return to the essay from which the phrase derives, "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture".[97] We recall from the chapter on Simmel that the main concern of the essay is to trace how it is that man becomes cultivated through the objects of his creative production. The focus then turns to the titular conflict that arises when those objects threaten to overpower and vanquish the very creative spirit that spawned them. In the familiar sense of "cultivation", we envision the studied collection and incorporation of valuable slices of "knowledge or skill" into our characters, and although it is not often expressly stipulated, it is commonly supposed that "we become cultivated only when all of them serve a psychic unity which depends on but does not coincide with them" (28). Bergson is equally interested in discerning between the accumulation of ideas and their absorption:

> Not all our ideas, however, are thus incorporated in the fluid mass of our conscious states. Many float on the surface, like dead leaves on the water of a pond: the mind, when it thinks them over and over again, finds them ever the same, as if they were external to it. Among these are the ideas which we receive ready made, and which remain in us without ever being properly assimilated, or again the ideas which we have omitted to cherish and which have withered in neglect. (Time and Free Will 135-136)

That we seek an overarching unity capable of gathering under its mantle all of our intellectual and material acquisitions is not an arbitrary or coincidental desire, for the impetus ultimately derives from our self-conscious core.[98] In

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[97] Again, this essay is translated and reproduced in Etzkorn's edition of The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays, and thus the ensuing page numbers refer to this book.

[98] As I state in my chapter on Simmel, "This organizational model was instituted...at man's first instance of self-consciousness, for it was then, when he 'began to say "I" to himself, and became an object beyond and in comparison with himself', that 'the contents of the soul' aggregated around the self-conscious germ" (Chapter One, page 32).

addition to those external acquisitions, we also encounter our own tendencies, referred to by Simmel as "a bundle of developmental lines which expand in different directions and quite different lengths" (29). He suggests that these "developmental lines", the possible trajectories of our personal evolutions, may in themselves be actualised and perfected, but they carry no greater value for the bearer than the acquisitions he accumulates.[99] Unity, understood as the zenith of cultivation, extends outward from that self-conscious core; it cannot be manufactured by gathering up "isolated perfections" any more than the essence of motion may be divined through the analysis of stationary points. In Simmel's words,

> man does not cultivate himself through their isolated perfections, but only insofar as they help to develop his indefinable personal unity. In other words: Culture is the way that leads from the closed unity through the unfolded multiplicity to the unfolded unity. (29)

"Developmental lines", by virtue of their existence, imply a "closed unity" in that they borrow whatever unity they possess from that self-conscious core, but as they have not yet been actualised, they remain "closed". When the subject begins to explore and engage those same lines, the paths on which he embarks become characterized as the "unfolded multiplicity"; they have unfurled themselves and have spread out before the subject, but they are too numerous and too divergent for him to travel concurrently.[100] In this way, they constitute a "multiplicity" more so than a unity. When the subject,

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[99] These natural tendencies remind us of Bergson's understanding of reality: "All reality, therefore, is tendency, if we agree to mean by tendency an incipient change of direction" (An Introduction to Metaphysics 55).

[100] We may consider the example of a young scholar who possesses multiple talents. For professional as well as social reasons, he cannot fashion himself a master of all disciplines and so he selects one or two to which he can dedicate his studies. In selecting one path, medicine for instance, he has followed what was clearly an inner proclivity for scientific study. Pursuing too many directions too superficially leads one further away from the ultimate goal of self-cultivation. The Latin phrase "aliquis in omnibus, nullus in singulis" sums up such an individual.

however, acts in sympathy with his "particular interests and potentialities" and traces a select few of those "developmental lines", the multiplicity becomes suffused with his "indigenous drive" and so becomes a unity (29). It is "unfolded", for he has moved through objects and forms of his creation (and perhaps even others' creations), and in doing so has definitively posited an external self that has matured in the objective realm. Of further significance is the fact that in naming these stages, Simmel moves from the terms "closed" to "unfolded", thus enunciating what he has so far maintained is the necessity of the subject to move outside of itself. Also, the adjective "unfolded" suggests that while something has been unfurled, not all of the potential energy has been spent. Further development, or infinite development, is a critical component of this concept. By this point, it should be self-evident that the "unfolded unity" is but the Simmelian term for Bergson's *duration*, particularly as it is explained in An Introduction to Metaphysics: "The inner life is all this at once: variety of qualities, continuity of progress, and unity of direction" (13).[101]

Conclusion

Elderfield suggests that Schwitters' reticence with regards to his developing masterpiece derives from the conflict that was growing between the form of the Merzbau and International Constructivist art, with which Schwitters was actively involved from the mid 1920s onwards (148).[102] From

[101] Simmel's phrase is fortuitous, for it qualifies the term "unity". Bergson cautioned, again in An Introduction to Metaphysics, against limiting *duration* to a profound experience of unity: "when I replace myself in duration by an effort of intuition, I immediately perceive how it is unity, multiplicity and many other things besides" (19).

[102] Schwitters, he tells us, refrains from any written documentation of the Merzbau until 1931: "For such a self-publicist, this seems astonishing" (148). Elderfield attributes this reluctance

Expressionism to Dada to Constructivism, the oeuvre that precedes the Merzbau testifies to the fact that Schwitters was involved in myriad movements and trends, and the fact that he incorporated techniques and motifs from these movements (long after his affiliation with them expired) establishes that he embraced diverse styles rather than eschewed their influence. The Merzbau project was not so much a way for Schwitters to try and shake off the impact of "increasingly impersonalized styles". Rather, it provided the best opportunity thus far to assimilate them into Merz. To have manufactured a construction purely out of unique and untested methods would surely have been a great achievement, but to do so out of the remnants of earlier movements is doubly so. First of all, the very act of selecting remnants and objects pivots on a pre-conceived ideal that the artist is hoping to fulfil. Why the grotesque but not the political elements of Dada appear in the Merzbau, or why guinea pigs eventually replace the white mice as the project's only live inhabitants (besides Schwitters) are questions that refer back to the artist's private intent.[103] Thus, Schwitters' scavenging activities constitute the first instance of his self-manifestation in the external world.[104] Second of all, the way in which these items came to articulate with one another, a process explicitly exposed when the string began to spread across the studio, is the assimilatory means by which Schwitters professes his individualized *élan vital*. If he had pursued the more direct route of embarking on a project that

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to the fact that the artist must have felt at least somewhat insecure in producing "so utterly personalized a monument while publicly supporting an opposite party line" (148).

[103] Elderfield: "And there is a photograph of the *Merzbau* which shows that guinea pigs did indeed inhabit it. Why Schwitters replaced white mice with guinea pigs is, I suppose, as fit a subject for scholarly study as many others..." (150, author's italics).

[104] Due to the fact that these objects and remnants were often not his own, he was trafficking in forms not produced by him but by foreign (and in the case of the mass-produced items, anonymous) hands. To be able to trumpet his individuality through such non-personal items confirms the artist's capabilities and ambition.

championed newness and the eradication of all cultural memory (that is, a Merzbau that had as little in common as possible with any preceding styles or movements, and one that did not make use of any *objets trouvés*), he would not have attained the cultivated sophistication that he did with the Hanover Merzbau. As we have seen, cultivation (in the Simmelian sense) is centred on the *esemplastic* nature of the self-conscious mind. The soul that travels the indirect route through its own products (or perhaps more generally the products of others) attains a more informed and specialized self-consciousness.[105] Similarly, an artist who is able to construct artwork from the objects and remnants of society commits himself to a greater effort, but it is precisely because he has moved through these objects and forms and has built *with* them rather than *in spite of* them that he attains a cultivated individuality.[106] Besides the objects themselves, Schwitters constructed the Merzbau incorporating the themes and stylistic conceits of various movements, and the composite nature of the Merzbau (its Dadaist grottos, Constructivist exterior, and Expressionist bearing) mirrored Schwitters' own trajectory and methodology. Certainly the International Constructivist movement was, as Elderfield stresses, not founded on the need for personalized art, and German Dada adhered to a policy of politics first and artistic ambitions second. Thus, for Schwitters to have borrowed extensively from these non-individualized movements is both an unexpected and an ingenious move.

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[105] Again, this route is opposed to the more direct (but less meaningful) path taken by way of religious ecstasies ("On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture" 29).

[106] Bergson's insistence on the presentation of diverse images proves crucial once again. How much more stirring is a collage or assemblage that by its nature *presents* fragmentation rather than a conventional painting that attempts to *represent* it?

The "stylistic lamination"[107] that is showcased in the Merzbau evolved from Schwitters' earlier preoccupations with juxtaposition. Elderfield summarizes the layering of styles thusly:

> between 1919 and 1921, he made a number of Dada columns; by 1923, he had moved them into a new studio; between 1923 and 1926 he transformed them into an increasingly geometric environment; between 1926 and 1932, he enlarged this environment in a more curvilinear style. (156)

In his Dada work and particularly in Merz, Schwitters achieved his most enduring self-expression through juxtaposition, but as the Merzbau evolved, Schwitters made a concerted effort to produce a smoother appearance. The temptation exists to consign that shift to the maturation of the artist's tastes; the emigration of Schwitters from the Dada sphere to International Constructivism informed the work but cannot be read as the exclusive motivating force. As noted time and again, Schwitters was never one to dismiss former styles and take on new projects to the exclusion of previous work (the very fact that the Merzbau grew from those early Dada columns is proof enough). It is a disservice to the artist to propose that in the mid 1920s he became dissatisfied with the progress of the Merzbau and decided to whitewash (literally and figuratively) its Dada origins with Constructivist forms. If that had been the case, then the Dadaist grottos would not have remained intact.

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[107] The felicitous phrase belongs to Elderfield (158), and he employs it in order to suggest that the final "Constructivist veneer" may be understood as a sign of Schwitters having found in Constructivism what was lacking in Dada. However, Elderfield is clearly in favour of distinguishing between the "finished identity" of the Merzbau and its "real identity", the "excavation" of which requires "an archeological expedition" (158).

Conclusion

"Today every child knows what Merz is. But what is i? i is the middle vowel of the alphabet and the designation for the consequence of Merz in relation to an intensive apprehension of the art form. For the shaping of the work of art Merz uses large ready-made complexes that count as the material, to shorten as much as possible the path leading from the intuition to the actualisation of the artistic idea, so as to avoid heat loss through friction. i defines this path as = o. i apprehends the work of art in nature. Here the artistic shaping is the recognition of rhythm and expression in a part of nature. Thus no loss through friction, i.e., no disturbing distraction during creation occurs here. I demand i, not as the only form of art but as a special form."[1]

By virtue of his unconventionality, his adherence to his bourgeois upbringing and lifestyle, and his insistence on pure art, Schwitters was a stranger twice removed. The public and protracted argument with Huelsenbeck had the immediate effect of distancing him from "Club Dada", but more significantly the distance that grew between him and his would-be peers led him to create for himself a movement to which he was guaranteed admittance. Understood in this way, it becomes completely self-evident and expectable that he would delve so deeply into Merz and would ultimately erect a temple of sorts in his own middle-class Hanoverian abode. In an often-quoted passage, Schwitters relates the trauma he experienced as a child when neighbourhood boys tore apart his diminutive garden in which he had invested so much care and attention; the ordeal was so damaging to Schwitters that according to him he became an invalid and was sequestered in the serenity of his home for two years. During this period of self-imposed solitude and recovery, he was introduced to poetic and visual art. As Elderfield suggests,

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[1] The quotation is an excerpt from Schwitters' brief 1922 manifesto, "i", reproduced in Ppppp (222). The notion of tracing the path of least resistance from the *intuition* to the actualisation of the work is a theme that recurs in Dada and later in Surrealism, where the phenomenon of automatic writing and drawing was based on a similar principle. In this context consider Joan Miró's words concerning his later works, in which large expanses of space were left unfilled: "It is important for me to achieve a maximum of intensity with a minimum of effort. That is why the empty spaces in my pictures gain increasingly in significance" (Mink 87). It is curious to note how this ideal of least resistance could promote

such traumatic childhood episodes were not uncommon catalysts for artistic development:

> what is special to Schwitters' version, however, is that he turned to art (or tells us he did) after the idealized form of nature he had physically cultivated had been destroyed. Art, it seems, could serve to rebuild a new form of nature, safe from interference. (20)

Elderfield's reading is enticing, particularly when we consider how tethered Schwitters remained to nature. If it is correct, we may surmise how difficult Huelsenbeck's dismissal must have been for the delicate intellect that resided behind Schwitters' (superficially) self-possessed character. We do not wish to resort to a psychoanalytic evaluation of Schwitters' personality based on the experiences of his youth, but instead we draw attention to the fact that he was, from an early age, an introverted and melancholic figure. Such qualities predisposed him to becoming an artist who would retreat into a synthetic world of his own making. Also, the discrepancy between the private Schwitters and the one who laboured intensively on self-promotion made it even more urgent for a sanctuary to be established.

Simmel's essay entitled "Der Fremde" ("The Stranger", 1908) elucidates the case of Schwitters as regards his social affiliations:

> If wandering, considered as a state of detachment from every given point in space, is the conceptual opposite of attachment to any point, then the sociological form of "the stranger" presents the synthesis, as it were, of both of these properties. [...] The stranger will thus not be considered here in the usual sense of the term, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the man who comes today and stays tomorrow – the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going. (143)[2]

The second sentence of this quotation describes Schwitters in several ways. Firstly, it speaks to his permanence, not just in the art circles of his day, but

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works of both profound emptiness and exasperating clutter at the same time (as with the Hanover Merzbau).

also in the canon of modern art.[3] Secondly, Simmel identifies in the figure of the stranger an enduring union of arrival and departure, a synthesis that preserves the mobility of both conditions without sacrificing its own stability (the emphasis here is on the embodiment of mobility). Thirdly, there is the element of freedom, a freedom not only to partake of the status of citizen as much as that of foreigner, but also to transcend both. In his essay "The Adventure", Simmel proposes that the work of art itself may serve as an adventure into which the conditioned "stranger" (the artist in this case) may wander:

> Here, above all, is the basis of the profound affinity between the adventurer and the artist, and also, perhaps, of the artist's attraction by adventure. For the essence of a work of art is, after all, that it cuts out a piece of the endlessly continuous sequences of perceived experience, detaching it from all connections with one side or the other, giving it a self-sufficient form as though defined and held together by an inner core. A part of existence, interwoven with the uninterruptedness of that existence, yet nevertheless felt as a whole, as an integrated unit – this is the form common to both the work of art and the adventure. ("The Adventure", 245)

It was always the case with Schwitters that he straddled with great aplomb the chasm between labouring as an independent artist and subscribing to a larger social group of peers and patrons. His brooding melancholia was frequently noted in personal accounts, but so was his effusive nature and willingness to promote his talent even to hostile audiences (Huelsenbeck and his group in particular, and the gentile Hanoverian society in general). His most enduring poetic success, "An Anna Blume" (1919), triumphs precisely because it crafts a poignantly inward and private fiction out of readymade commercial jargon and exploits German Romantic sensibilities in an indelible Dadaist form. The

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[2] The essay appears in the book On Individuality and Social Forms.
[3] It is ironic how the name and legacy of Schwitters is probably more recognizable than Huelsenbeck's to those on the periphery of avant-garde studies.

same holds true for the Merz collages, which testify to Schwitters' ambition to assert his singular creative presence through the most mundane and impersonalized rubbish the metropolis had to offer. As Elderfield notes, "although Merz was indeed the ultimate liberation, the sense of conflict and opposition between the external world and the personality and privacy of the artist continued as an active and irritant force in Schwitters' subsequent work" (Elderfield 27). Certainly this irritant manifested itself to great effect in the Merzbau, which was first and foremost a building within a building that contained shrinking (but nevertheless active) grottos. One of the greatest legacies of the Merzbau was the fact that it provided an unforgettable showcase for the public/private dualism under which Schwitters had been operating for so long. Still, it refrained from issuing a judgment for either side; even in this regard it remained incomplete, albeit intentionally so. Its capacious dimensions allowed it to function as a convenient pilgrimage site into which the artist could retreat and immerse himself in the mysticism of his own Merz universe. At the same time, however, the Constructivist casing that Schwitters erected rendered (but only in a superficial way) this fantastically private world into one devoid of personality and autobiographical detail.

Ten pages of illustrations excluded on instruction from the university.

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