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*IN-TENSION OR PRE-TENSION: THE SPOILS OF WAR AS CULTURAL HERITAGE*

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## PREFACE

In 1988, both Rose and Bill McCormack commemorated Cecil King's work, the latter, under his pseudonym 'Hugh Maxton' (the name stamped on his Poetic Licence), published a prose-poem. It is contained in his most recent publication The Puzzle Tree Ascendant. However previous to this in 1987, this same text (edited by Luke Gibbons) appeared in Circa art magazine - which has since fallen by the wayside.

The fact that McCormack's text was described by a Sunday newspaper reviewer as perhaps heralding a new and wondrous 'Trauerspiel' reminds me of C. J. Haughey's pronouncement on this our post-modern age:

Ah, but say, we would not make such mistakes nowadays.  
We are all avant-garde now. Nothing escapes us however  
outré or strange it seems.

The motivation for this thesis primarily concerns the McCormack text and its context, drawing upon many extrinsic contingencies that I hope bear relevance and contribute towards the debate between cultural practices/artifacts and political praxis.

Briefly I would like to thank all those who helped me in writing this thesis and particularly to mention Joan Fowler, Bill McCormack, Oliver Dowling and not least Marion Lynch who did the typing.

"A Mortuary of Disused Mottoes Overhead: On Cecil King" is an elliptical piece of writing by Bill McCormack, alias, the literary historian W. J. McCormack and the poet Hugh Maxton. The text appeared in Circa Art Magazine in the summer of 1987 and was in no way typical of the kind or style of writing which usually appears in the magazine. This 'style' generally fell into the categories of objective, empirical and vernacular, with an accepted convention between writer and reader of some notion of rational communicative discourse. The presence of the text is explained by a transference of editorial control to Luke Gibbons which took place in the July/August edition. Gibbons is described by the Circa editorial board as being, "particularly concerned with developing the interface between the traditional visual arts and the contemporary visual media"<sup>1</sup>. This is clearly borne out in Gibbons' selection of contributors for 'his' particular issue. Apart from Bill McCormack's article on Cecil King the other writers and articles featured are, Tom Duddy on Irish Art Criticism, Tanya Kiang on Umberto Eco's Semiotics, Luke Dodd on Gender and Masquerade and a statement on funding in letter form from the film maker Pat Murphy. Gibbons' editorial is entitled, "Peripheral Vision", emphasising that the, "thread running through the articles is that of marginal identity, or how subaltern groups or art-forms can challenge the dominant forces in society."<sup>2</sup>

Although "[A Mortuary of Disused Mottoes Overhead]"<sup>3</sup> :On Cecil King" appears in Circa as the work of an author named 'Bill McCormack', it is in fact not the case. "A Mortuary of Disused Mottoes Overhead" (note without "On Cecil King", which was added for the Circa text) was

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1. Circa, July/Aug, 1981, p. 12.
  2. L. Gibbons, "Peripheral Vision", Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 13.
  3. Note: The brackets do not appear in the Circa text.



written by the poet, Hugh Maxton and is to be attributed to his body of work. Without wishing to be too pedantic, I have yet to, in the literal sense, read another piece of writing by "Bill McCormack", as his portfolio is composed of two "authors": W. J. McCormack and Hugh Maxton. What I am suggesting is that the way in which an author's name is presented is coded and affects our interpretation of the text; and this is particularly true in the case of titled authors. Another example would be listing 'T. W. Adorno' as 'Theo Adorno'! Had the title of the text appeared with the authorial name, W. J. McCormack, not only would its reception have been totally different, but also the text itself. It would in fact be very unusual for 'W. J. McCormack' to appear, under such an oblique title. Compare, for example, this author's previous use of titles: "Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish literary History from 1789 to 1939", "Sheridan le Fanu and Victorian Ireland", "A Festschrift for Francis Stuart on his Seventieth Birthday", "James Joyce and Modern Ireland", "Seeing Darkly: notes on T. W. Adorno and Samuel Beckett", and, "The Battle of the Books". If however we turn to the titles to which 'Hugh Maxton' is attributed we can see an immediate analogy: "The Noise from the Fields", "Jubilee for Renegades"<sup>1</sup>, "The Enlightened Cave: Inscriptions", "Snapdragons", "At the Protestant Museum", and his most recent "The Puzzle Tree Ascendant", - the collection which contains "A Mortuary of Disused Mottoes Overhead" and "Mary Fitzgerald's Drawing Room". In concluding, the question that arises is whose interests or what interests are being served by attaching, "On Cecil King", and, "by Bill McCormack" to this poetic title.

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1. After Ernst Block's essay.

At the end of McCormack's<sup>1</sup> text it is revealed that McCormack is both the author of The Battle of the Books and the poet Hugh Maxton. In a wider context, Gibbons, who edited quite a lot of the original text, may have felt that attributing such a text to a well known poet might detract from the conventions implicit to both theoretical texts and debates. 'Bill McCormack' has a familiar ring to it, a casualness or straight-forward-ness which was perhaps felt necessary as an introduction to a piece of writing which is anything but straight forward and is positively esoteric. If we do give up on attempting to understand the text we are comforted with the knowledge that the author is also a poet. For McCormack this sense of the casual allows for a certain tentativeness in how he writes or indeed continues to write about art and artists. The text is not a poem yet neither is it a discursive essay, but rather a 'prose-poem'<sup>2</sup>. The text which appears in Circa is the second such prose-poem which McCormack has written on art/artists. The first, which also appears in The Puzzle Tree Ascendant was for the catalogue of Mary Fitzgerald's installation at the Oliver Dowling Gallery, in 1987, entitled "The Drawing Room".<sup>3</sup> In this catalogue Hugh Maxton is the author and the writing is more poetry than prose, (it is also a lot shorter), hence the text in Circa is distinctly different from the Mary Fitzgerald catalogue, and this difference is symbolically manifested in the change of title and substitution of author. The Circa text could well be heralding the emergence of another 'intellectual' named 'Bill McCormack' to join the

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1. Despite the fact that the text in question is attributable to Hugh Maxton, from here on in I will refer to it as Bill McCormack's text, primarily for convenience but also to set it apart from Maxtons' work.
  2. The words McCormack used to describe the text in a recent interview I had with him.
  3. Featured in Rosc '88 as was the work of Cecil King. Mary Fitzgerald also illustrates The Puzzle Tree Ascendant.



ranks of Richard Kearney and Luke Gibbons writing's in art theory.

The catalogue is infamous for dragging theorists out to legitimate the artists' work (sometimes this is done quite cynically, its only function to jettison the artist on to the centre, the market (Donald Kuspit writing on Brian Maguire comes close to this category<sup>1</sup>) or to court the gallery-going audience with something to read while they gaze. It is customary to find in the exhibition catalogue adulatory and celebratory comments, paragraphs and sometimes pages about the artist's work. Yet I would not rule out the catalogue as a space for a critical practice but this usually depends on the nature of the artist's work. In The Drawing Room catalogue McCormack (as Maxton) engages with the work in a highly personal interpretative manner attempting, one presumes, some kind of echo in the words from the paintings (poetry is after all a spoken art). Here is an example of one of the small paragraphs:

"Almost unstable blue has heaviest above the surface.  
Season vacillates. Disparates continuities are slow to let fall.  
Impasto alights. The shade becks without gender or pronoun  
of person." 2

This use of Maxton's poetry in relation to the work of King and Fitzgerald and not least his association with the Oliver Dowling Gallery might indicate that his poems are perceived (either by himself or others) as being the most suitable form of writing to accompany abstraction or minimalism.

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1. D Kuspit, "Brian Maguire", Dublin: The Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1988.
  2. Hugh Maxton, "Mary Fitzgerald's Drawing Room", The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, Dublin: Dedaleus, 1988, p. 31.



The publication of "The Noise of the Fields" in June 1976 and its selection as the Poetry Book Society's summer choice, marked Hugh Maxton's emergence as an Irish poet. Past noteworthy choices made by P.B.S. include Austin Clarke, Derek Mahon, and Seamus Heaney. Joseph Holt in an essay on Hugh Maxton examines the poems within this collection towards an understanding of Maxton as a poet with a puritan imagination tempered by "neo marxist inertia"<sup>1</sup>. Holt explains that "attention to the power of language is central to all puritan art". The puritan aesthetic can be defined by the paradox, "the better it is the worse it is", while the puritan imagination "is at once cautious to feeling and open to it". In every aspect of consciousness there is 'choice' for the puritan perceiver; puritan consciousness cannot exist without choice, which stems from distrust. As Holt expands,

"To suppose that man is free of the bitterness, which the Edenic past entails, leads - by puritan argument - to ejection from the paradise of language. The Fall, therefore, is necessary, or if not necessary, devoutly to be wished. Two phrases spring to mind to describe this paradox, one drawn from political sources, the other religious. Marxism defines freedom as 'the recognition of necessity' thus stressing that freedom is an attribute of consciousness. Orthodox Christianity acknowledges a power 'whose service is perfect freedom'. Language which tyrannizes and seduces, is nevertheless, the only means by which those tyrannies and seductions of consciousness may be charted and, by being charted, checked. If man (woman) must serve his (her) language, and recognise its imperial sway over his (her) feelings, he (she) is by the same token released into an appreciation of his (her) dilemma, is in the Marxist sense, free."

However for Maxton, Holt claims such puritan/marxist aspirations are conditional, and all dogmas especially that of autonomy whether of the Self or of Art are to be treated sceptically. As a line in Maxton's

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1. Joseph Holt, "Hugh Maxton, The Puritan Imagination", Studies, Aut. 1979, Vol. 68, No. 27, pp. 193-199. All subsequent quotes in this paragraph originate from this essay unless otherwise stated.

poem "A Blank Map" indicates, "The image cannot be trusted". In the text on Cecil King we hear how King, "simultaneously broke away from a puritan distrust of art per se without taking up the slack representationalism which his surrounding context took to be art"<sup>1</sup>. Holt argues that there is a dialectical notion of nature at the base of Maxton's work, understood by his attention to absence. Nature is seen not as a "solid firmament but as a dimension of experience which is changed by our perception of it". In his early poem 'Dowth' Maxton writes, "pictures create more than they possess/containing within our lines and contours/more than the momentary thing ..." "The better it is the worse it is" which constitutes the puritan dialectical ideology can be seen to both operate in both Maxton's and King's work (as defined by McCormack). In the Circa text King's work is described as political in that it indicates by exclusion autonomous notions of representation, and that it takes issue with images of nationalism and naturalism within Irish Art by its attention to absence. McCormack also suggests that a transcendental or metaphysical fear is expressed by the paintings in their confrontation with nothing.<sup>2</sup> For the present it suffices to say, that such puritan pre-occupations have antecedents in Modernism, particularly of note in this case American Art and Criticism - of the 1950s and 1960s.

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1. Bill McCormack, "A Mortuary of Disused Mottoes Overhead: On Cecil King", Circa July/Aug, 1987, p. 20 (hereafter referred to as Circa, July/Aug, 1987).
  2. Note the line "Not all artists succeed in repressing the fatal question. There is always in each of us the intrepid traveller and fool who, as soon as he discovers his own happiness by understanding the difference between life and death would first resolve by all arts and methods whatsoever to procure himself riches." (Not printed in Circa). H. Maxton, "A Mortuary of Disused Mottoes Overhead", The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, Dublin: Dedaleus, 1988, p.36 (Hereafter referred to as The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, 1988).



In the "At the Protestant Museum" collection of Maxton's poems, published in 1986, a poem called "Series (after Cecil King)" appears. The poem is punctuated by ten sections or episodes each corresponds to a particular title of a Cecil King painting; each section is six lines long. The titles which feature are; 1. Ring's End, 2. Verge, 3. Two, 4. Threshold, 5. Traverse, 6. Trapeze, 7. Sounion, 8. Nexus, 9. Nexus II, 10. Idrone, 1, 2 and 8 are mentioned in the Circa article. Aside from a numerical progression each section which has about 9 - 11 words within seem to connect in some way. However my interest in the poem is not for its technical value as I would be in no way competent to assess its syntactical virtuosity, its rhythmic syllables, etc, rather it is the relative uncomplicatedness that interests me. For example:

2. Verge	The question of which panel is answered by the arrangement of a line against the colour.	10. Idrone	Intensity suggested by lighting a thing by what it is not. Serenity. Light is need. 1
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Here again we see/hear signification by absence - "a thing by what it is not". We also see/hear the word "serenity" a word Dorothy Walker was fond of using to describe King's work which McCormack mentions in the Circa article: "We can proceed to note how mistaken the conventional description of King's style as serene really is ... its serenity belongs finally to the viewer not to the creator" <sup>2</sup>. McCormack's argument being that this is because the paintings are <sup>3</sup> achieved, "through profound and experimental labour" <sup>3</sup>. What is also

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1. Hugh Maxton, At the Protestant Museum, "Series (After Cecil King)", 1986, p. 34-35.
  2. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 21.
  3. Ibid., p. 21.



significant is the design of this poem and in fact in many of his poems in this particular collection, the placing of the words on the page is an intentional activity. The poem "Numbers"<sup>1</sup> illustrates this: there are large expanses of white (the page) and small clusters of words running vertically up and down.

The Circa article is interesting in this respect in that it indicates that the text was not edited for reasons of space: There are two wide margins either side of the two columns of text which run down the centre of the page. This again may sound too literal but the normal three column format is not being used - why? Is it a coincidence that this happens to refer to both the linearity of King's work and Maxton's poems. The reduced reproduction of King's painting 'Trapeze' fits exactly into this 'bar' which contains two columns of text, situated in the centre of the page, in a way reinforcing this hard edge abstraction. In The Puzzle Tree Ascendant the same text is presented in a much more conventional format which doesn't emit such resonances.

The Circa text looks from the outset as being an essay but this is only the surface value, perhaps in contrast to "Series (After Cecil King)" which is much more formalist in its approach. The opening lines are presented in such a way as to seem to suggest an introduction or opening synopsis, yet their origin is ambiguous and their meaning enigmatic:

"There was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour,"<sup>2</sup>

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1. See Hugh Maxton, At the Protestant Museum, p. 43.
  2. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 19.

or,

"That is the secret delight and security of hell that is not to be informed on and that is protected from speech that it just is, but cannot be public in the newspaper, be brought by any word to critical knowledge ..."

In a recent interview with McCormack he explained to me that these opening quotations served as a warning of what was to follow, a defence as to why he should have any kind of philosophically coherent presentation of his argument about King and a prescription which one might follow in conducting an argument <sup>1</sup>. McCormack, is saying in effect, that if people (an audience) read the opening of this text in a different way, then he believes he has changed (however subtly), the way in which people respond to a discussion about culture <sup>2</sup>. Yet this is not just simply concerned with these opening quotations but also with the text itself - the opening quotations are in some way a condensation of these dubious assumptions. To McCormack it is not just what you write about but also how you write about it. I am not in disagreement with this. My disagreement is precisely with these two words within the formulation 'what' and 'how'. Hence, I, would argue that the elliptical nature of the text and its cultural elitist tinge, both in the form and the content, indicates an ideological commitment to a stereotypical Modernist practice. Furthermore there is evident within McCormack's text a lack of interrogation, in terms of Critical Theory of Modernist criticism particularly that of Abstract Expressionism <sup>3</sup>. The following expresses such a disparity clearly, while the situation is not exactly analogous, the direct relationship is obvious and it also helps to extend the debate into a broader field of reference.

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1. Interview with Bill McCormack.
  2. Interview with Bill McCormack.
  3. The difference between Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism is important to reflect on here. While Jackson Pollock is an Abstract Expressionist, Barnett Newman is located in a more ambiguous field between Abstraction and Abstract Impressionism. I would argue that Cecil King emerged from such a position, though his work is undoubtably aligned to Abstraction particularly in his later work. Such distinctions, which are ignored by McCormack are important in determining the ideological commitment of both the artists and their art work.



Barnett Newman is an artist who had a profound effect on Cecil King's work<sup>1</sup>. Newman is also an artist whose work has been the focus of a debate between formalist readings of abstract expressionism/abstraction (Clement Greenberg and Donald Judd), and non-formalist readings, primarily existentialist and humanist (Tom Hess, Donald Kuspit and Newman himself). The example which clearly delineates these different critical practices comes from Charles Harrison's article in Art Scribe International entitled, "Expression and Exhaustion - art and criticism in the sixties". Harrison presents two interpretations of a Newman painting entitled Shining Forth (to George). The first comes from the American critic, Tom Hess, author of Barnett Newman's retrospective catalogue. In it Hess writes:

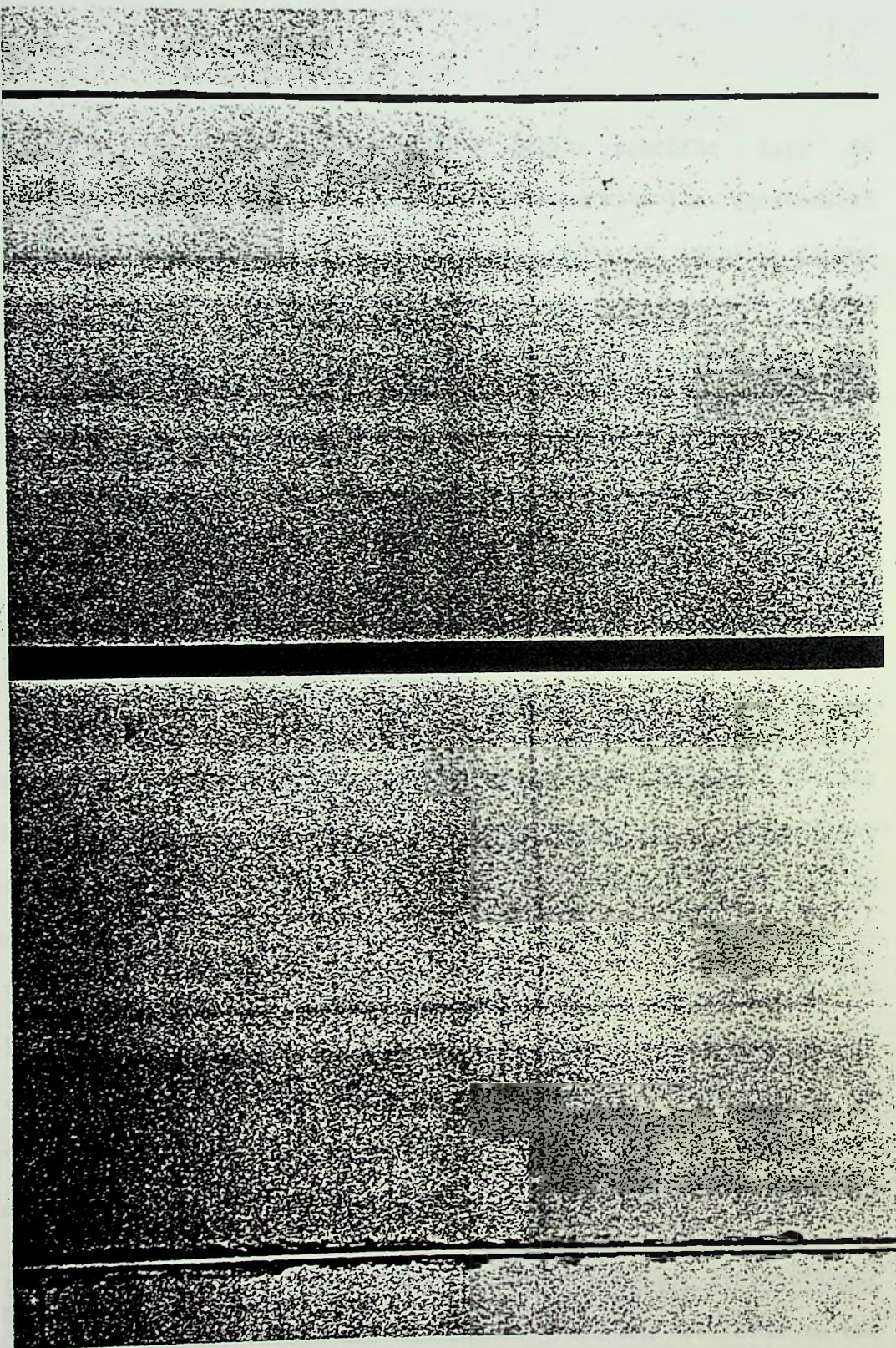
".... there are three things in 'Shining Forth (to George)', - three levels if you will. There is the tragedy of death, and of 'being', living in the face of death. There is the conceptual struggle of the artist, the intellectual and the emotional decisions which he confronts in the canvas. And there is joy and exaltation of working and accomplishing, of reaching a vision." 2

The second interpretation comes from artist and critic Donald Judd, writing on the same painting:

"'Shining Forth (to George)' done in 1961, was shown in New York this year. It's nine and a half feet high and fourteen and a half long. The rectangle is unprimed cotton canvas except for two stripes and the edges of a third. Slightly to the left of the centre there is a vertical black stripe three inches wide. This hasn't been painted directly and evenly like the central stripe, but has been laid in between

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1. King met Newman at the first Rosc in 1967, and they became friends.
  2. C. Harrison, "Expression and Exhaustion - Art and Criticism in the Sixties", Part 2, Art Scribe International, "Barnett Newman" Tate Gallery, (London), 1972, April/May, 1986, p. 33, quoting T. Hess, catalogue intro.





*Shining forth (To George)*, 1961.  
Oil on raw canvas, 9 feet 6 inches x 14 feet 6 inches.  
Collection Annalee Newman, New York.



two stripes of masking tape, the paint has run under the tape  
some making the stripe a little rough ..." 1

and so on.

While Judd is clearly attaching a highly specific type of interpretative writing on abstract expressionism with its existential and metaphysical associations, the (above) piece of writing cannot merely be seen as an attack against such practices rather that it is also prescribing a certain format/practice of artistic evaluation and interpretation. Harrison maintains this to be characterised by a "rigorous abstinence from all attempts at interpretation and at historical prescription"<sup>2</sup>. Yet Harrison does not make clear whether this position of a historicism, and anti-interpretation is intentional by (on the behalf of) Judd or an unavoidable loss, inevitable in a battle to change the rules of engagement.

In Part II of his essay Harrison concentrates on four American artists of the sixties/seventies who, for him, "identify a significant development in art after 1950", the development being an "acknowledgement of those limits on expressiveness and unself-consciousness which (he) takes to be determining conditions of art post-Pollock". These artists are Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Robert Morris. Harrison maintains that the "celebration of Barnett Newman in the late fifties was a sign that modernism had failed to come to terms with the implications of it's own analysis", and that

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1. Ibid. p.33 quoting D. Judd, "Barnett Newman", Studio International Feb. 1970; this article was written in Nov. 1964.
  2. C Harrison, "Expression and Exhaustion - Art and Criticism in the Sixties": Part 2, Artscribe International, April/May 1986, p. 33. All quotations from the subsequent two paragraphs originate from this text unless otherwise stated.

this crisis in Modernism both determined the work of Johns, Judd, Stella and Morris and at the same time was to be identified within their work respectively. While Modernist criticism may have mistaken "symptoms for causes" the succeeding work of such artists became paradoxically both symptoms and cause of the crisis at hand.

Harrison explains how Johns managed to exist with this paradox of making modernism plausible in order to sustain its critique through his artistic practice. One of the strategies by which Johns managed to achieve this was in using 'quotation', i.e. certain stylistic and technical characteristics of Abstract Expressionism. In other words he 'quoted' (nearly linguistically, Harrison maintains), "the overall field of Newman, the gestural brush stroke of Kline or de Kooning, the centred image of Rothko, the jagged paint work of Still or of '46 Pollock". By doing this Harrison argues that Johns managed to attack their autonomy/originality through their ability to communicate and express, while also focusing the debate on the value of such concepts as "communication" and "expression" within art. (Personally I find it very debatable as to whether Johns succeeded in achieving such 'high claims', however the issue with this thesis is not directly concerned with Johns' work, but rather with Harrison's argument, which has a direct bearing on what is to follow.)

It is at this point that we return to the McCormack text: "A Mortuary of Disused Mottoes Overhead", as the opening paragraphs deal with the phenomenon of the quotation, while also introducing the work of Cecil King for interrogation. The first paragraph opens with,



"Walter Benjamin once envisaged a book, which would compose entirely of quotations, it would have been a literary work purged of the self, or retaining only the formal outline of an authoring presence." 1

McCormack acknowledges that the 'only' is the means by which we "measure the impossibility of the task" and that all writing "however humble or casual consists in quotation" 2 . For Benjamin and for

McCormack passive consumption of the written word cannot take place in the light of what McCormack describes as this 'painful contradiction' 3

in the fact that while it is impossible to create non-ego art it is by this very fact that it is impossible to create anything original. What McCormack is suggesting about the text is that its only claim to originality is by the very fact it is infiltrated with quotation. This logic directly refers back to Harrison's argument about Johns' practice, however, unlike Harrison, McCormack is attempting to argue his point through these contradictions.

The second paragraph of the text (not printed in Circa) also begins with reference to Benjamin - this time to Benjamin's work, The origin of German Tragic Drama:

"Perhaps in his melancholic searches in the German Baroque, Benjamin discovered a genre of poem now required as a precedent for the pieces gathered here. 4 It is or should be a genre written in heart shaken anticipation - and so not elegaic simply - of the death of some personally known or beloved" 5.

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1. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 19 (my emphasis).
  2. The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, 1988, p. 34.
  3. Ibid., p. 34.
  4. The precedent being the death of Cecil King.
  5. Ibid., p. 34.

As an aside I feel it is important to note that this 'anticipation' - of death which McCormack refers to is made clear further on in the text (again not printed in Circa) when he says:

"I had been writing about King's painting before his death; and after it, the pleasure of writing a catalogue note about Mary Fitzgerald's series of canvasses was tempered by the realisation that even in this least allegoric work, there was a numinous tribute to the departed master". 1

The Origin of German Tragic Drama is Walter Benjamin's major pre-Marxist study; in it Benjamin drew together all the strands of his earlier intellectual and personal development in a most esoteric and erudite reading of the melancholy plays of the seventeenth century baroque dramatists. He began his study in 1916 during World War One and the text suggests such connections; it was completed in 1925<sup>2</sup>. Benjamin looked to the 17th Century and saw in the German baroque drama an attempted understanding of the political, military and social catastrophes of the era, (the Thirty Years War and its aftermath), which had an affinity with the artistic endeavours of early Modernism in the twentieth century - specifically in the work of Kafka, Eisenstein and Brecht.

If Barnett Newman was a profound influence on Cecil King the same could be said for Benjamin on McCormack at least certainly in this text. Benjamin concentrated on a criticism seen not as judgement but as a method of completion of the work of art<sup>3</sup> and therefore by necessity

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1. The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, 1988, p. 36.
  2. Intended as his PhD, Benjamin's study of the German Baroque was turned down by the University of Frankfurt, because it was found to be incomprehensible.
  3. The origin of much of this material comes from E. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, London: Verso, 1985, pp. 173-194.

poetic itself. Much of McCormack's argument for a departure from discursive style and logic in favour of illuminating details encased in quotations stems from Benjamin's critical strategy. In the long methodological introduction to The Origin of German Tragic Drama Benjamin conceived of the critical process on the production of a mosaic of quotations whose mutual meanings would emerge from their relative placements. This critical process would manifest itself not in the conventional book form but rather in the form of an essay - incomplete, digressive, without proof or conclusion in which juxtaposed quotations, fragments would be drawn from every level of the contemporary world. These fragments would function allegorically. Eugene Lunn maintains that this was Benjamin's response to the problem of representation and communication in Avant-Garde work<sup>1</sup>. Stanley Mitchel explains that Benjamin hoped in constructing his critical practice through montage-allegory to, "'shock' people into new recognitions and understandings"<sup>2</sup>. "This collage strategy was itself an image of the 'break-up', the 'disintegration' of civilisation in the modern world"<sup>3</sup>. Benjamin, like the baroque dramatist who was also haunted by the idea of catastrophe, "perceived historical time as an ever-growing pile of debris"<sup>4</sup>. "Allegories are in the realm of thoughts", Benjamin wrote, "what ruins are in the realm of things"<sup>5</sup>, the premise being that something only becomes an object of knowledge when it has decayed or is in the process of disintegration. Benjamin maintained that it is only with such chosen objects that the allegorical, the literary process itself may be self reflexively revealed, i.e. as a ruin before it has crumbled.

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1. Ibid., p. 188

2. S. Mitchel, "Introduction", to Walter Benjamin, Understanding Brecht, NLB, 1977, p. xiii.

3. G. Ulmer, "The Object of Post Criticism", Post Modern Culture, Ed. Hal Foster, London: Pluto, 1983, p. 97.

4. E. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, London: Verso, 1985, p. 186.

5. W. Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, NLB, 1977, p. 178.



McCormack's prose poem contains numerous references to life and death, the apocalypse: "our damnation is already under way".<sup>1</sup> For McCormack, King's death may be even representing the demise of Modernism as the motivation for writing the piece, and McCormack executes it in true Benjamin-esque style. The 'opportunity' (not in any self-seeking manner), seems to be signified by testing whether melancholy, "is the most profound form of allegorical revelation"<sup>2</sup>. McCormack is appropriating a certain amount of Benjamin's critical strategy in order perhaps firstly to remember the dead, their contribution, influence, the objects they have created, that are left in their absence, and by so doing perhaps to fulfil a second function of attacking the bourgeois nature of Irish literature/art and criticism. However we are still talking about intentions, the subject of this discourse is Cecil King's paintings, his critical practice as identified by McCormack.

To conceive a book entirely composed of quotations requires first of all the collection of these quotations, and it is here that McCormack strikes a direct chord between Benjamin the collector of quotations, books, historical objects, etc., and King the collector of art. King's initial involvement with art was through collecting not painting. Benjamin saw collecting as a particular kind of creativity similar to writing without a writer, a non-ego based activity - the objects you collect are yours yet you had no hand in making them.<sup>3</sup> McCormack identifies collecting "as a form of aesthetic commitment".<sup>3</sup> (I am sure the Saatchi's would also agree!) Benjamin's ambition to

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1. The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, 1988, p. 35.

2. Walter Benjamin, unreferenced quote in Ibid., p. 35, also Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 20.

3. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 20.

write a book consisting entirely of quotations was also motivated in effect by the desire to do actively what was only possible passively through collecting. King continued to be a collector right through his artistic career. In 1983 King exhibited his work and his collection at the Belltable Art Gallery in Limerick in an exhibition called "King's and Kings". Whether intentional or not there is a definite analogy between shifting the apostrophe and the way King himself used the title of his painting to distinguish the pictorial field from the visual field. King's titles give a kind of nominal priority to one element (the pictorial field) in the painting and what is left remains the visual field. Because the paintings are all the one surface, we look outside the painting (their small scale - most of King's paintings are about 1½ - 2' square or oblong - also forces us to do this) to the title with which we identify the paintings. Nearly all King's titles are paradoxically poised between 'Nouns' (the name of things) and imperative verbs (exhortations to act), titles like "Break-away", "Verge", "Intrusion", "Divide", "Drop"; and the paintings can then be seen in this way alternating between passive or static and active or kinetic.

In his 1961 essay on Beckett's Endgame T. W. Adorno described it as an "exemplary work which refuses assimilation".<sup>1</sup> McCormack is prepared to go along with Adorno's statement recognising of course that the Irish culture industry has Beckett firmly in its grip. McCormack it would seem, like Adorno, reconciles this contradiction by believing that works of art or literature function as acts of resistance, conditioned but never wholly determined by what is resisted. Hence McCormack sees within Beckett's critical strategy a relationship to the

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1. T. W. Adorno "Trying to Understand Endgame", New German Critique No. 26, (1982), pp. 119-150, quoted in W. J. McCormack, "Seeing Darkly: Notes on T. W. Adorno and Samuel Beckett", Hermathena, CXLI, Winter, 1986, p. 26.

critical politics which he claims determined King's work. Beckett's post-war minimalism succeeds in excluding more and more meaning in writing. "Understanding it", Adorno writes, "can involve nothing else than understanding its incomprehensibility"<sup>1</sup>. While omitting the external world, social reality, history and politics, Beckett was simultaneously making strategic choices of what exactly should be included in a 'Beckett text'. Quite often these were no more than slight recognisable traces of the so-called physical world, the Ardennes in France, Irish place names. In the Circa article McCormack writes, "a single feature, a divergence constitutes all that is omitted and the achievement of omitting it"<sup>2</sup>. For McCormack it follows then, that like Beckett, King is making an affirmative decision about painting; the medium; the object. This object or painting was not created in a vacuum, it does have a relationship with all that is excluded, all that is displaced. This relationship is precisely defined as a line which interrupts the visual field. "Interruption is one of the fundamental methods of all form-giving. It reaches far beyond the domain of art, it is to mention just one of its aspects the origin of quotation"<sup>3</sup>. This line is then interpreted by something which has to stand outside the painting which is the title. For McCormack it is the inevitability of the relationary aspect between the painting and the title while simultaneously being forced to examine this relationship that King's paintings succeed in achieving.

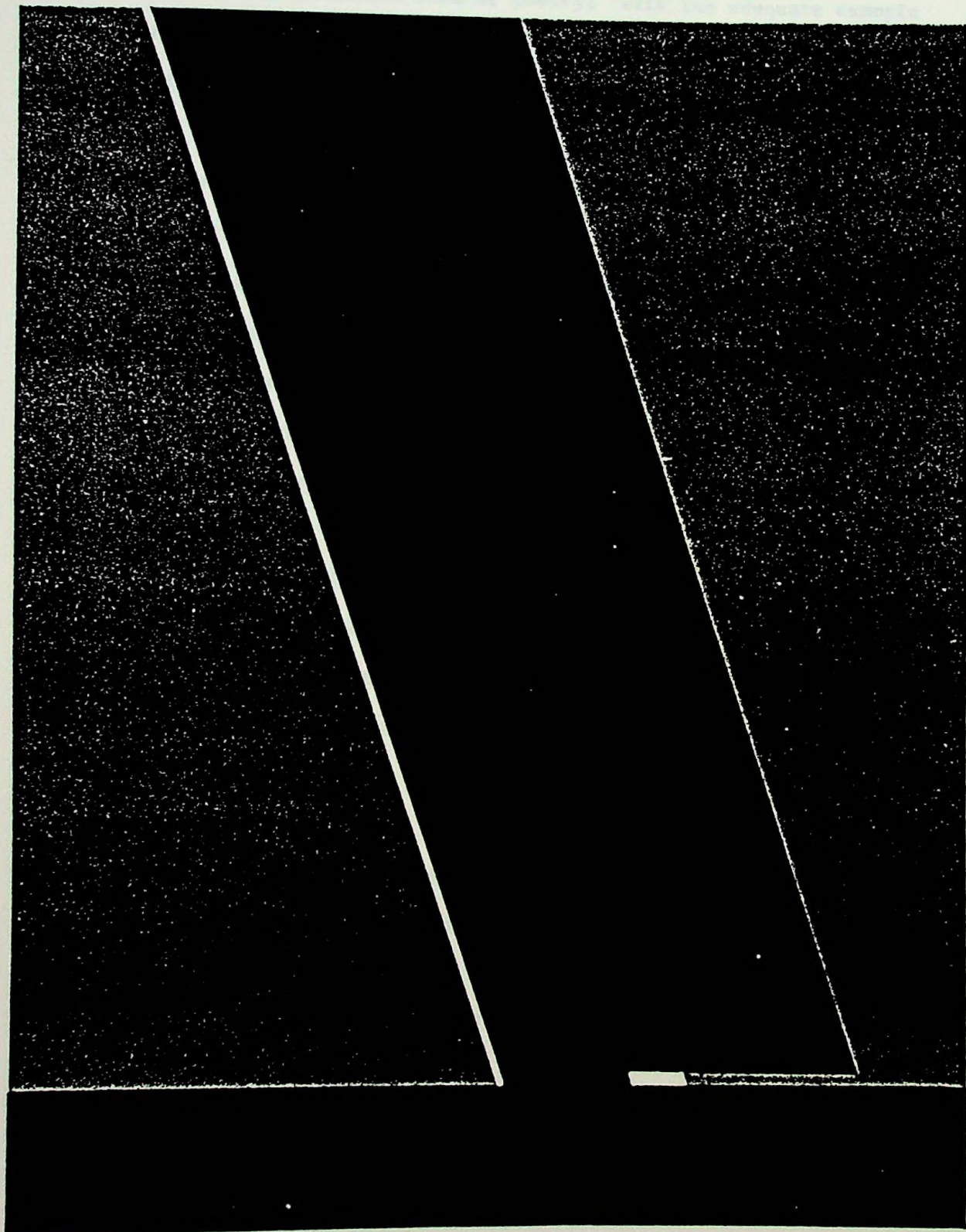
Despite the relative similarities between Beckett's and King's work which McCormack identifies, he makes fundamentally different approaches

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1. Ibid., p. 27.
2. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 20.
3. W. Benjamin, Understanding Brecht, London: NLB, 1977, p. 19.



in defining the priorities of their respective work. Both agreed  
in 'serious' periods and both are in a state of transition. Why  
is there a difference in the last years? - They could be said to be the  
very substance of the matter. Why is it that following years about  
not to take the conservative line of thought with the previous years?



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in debating the criticality of their respective work. Both appeared<sup>1</sup> in 'serious' periodicals and both are in a sense commemorative. Why is there a difference in the two texts? - they could be read as the very antithesis of one another. Why is it when McCormack writes about art it takes the connotative form of poetry; with the adequate example of the Mary Fitzgerald text? The interesting factor about the Cecil King text is that it is somewhere between the connotative and denotative modes, between clear discursive argument and 'existential' poetics (dream of consciousness at least). Occasionally McCormack exhibits a romanticism, suspiciously close to an affirmation of an historical transcendentalism within art, - "felt abstraction", and, "not all artists succeed in repressing the fatal question"<sup>2</sup> - very similar to Tom Hess's narrative poetics. Only once in the text is a description of a King painting offered, they are described as "small matte abstractions with their single intrusive lines and their mutely radical juxtapositions of colours"<sup>3</sup>. Nowhere is there an empirical analysis of King's paintings and how they function visually; very little is defined while a great deal is intimated. McCormack acknowledges that the paintings are abstract but their relationships to the outside world is not abstract; what defines this relationship and its function constitutes this debate.

Barnett Newman in an interview with Tom Hess explained that with his paintings, "his strategy was to emphasise the intentional nature of the perceptual field by urging us to shift from our pre-conscious

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1. This particular issue of Hermathena, CXLI, 1986, commemorates Samuel Beckett's eightieth birthday.
  2. The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, 1988, p. 38.
  3. Circa, July/Aug., 1987, p. 20.



perceptual activity to a conscious one and at the same time to prevent this consciousness from crystalizing in any definite way"<sup>1</sup>. This prevention was achieved, Newman believed, by a deliberate play on the confusion of the viewer's perception by not allowing the 'pictorial' field to be distinguished from the 'visual' field. Donald Kuspit maintains that by doing this Newman was attempting to lay bare one of the most traditional conventions of painting, a convention which lies at the base of narrative painting - namely the dislocation between the perceptual visual field (which is radically altered when one isolates one of its elements) and the pictorial field whose elements solicit our attention<sup>2</sup>. Hence for the perceiver there is no rest but a constant shifting of emphasis and this state of perpetual shifting constitutes the 'ground' of his paintings. In the formal sense there is a direct link between this technique and King's body of work, which to perhaps a greater extent than Newman's, adopted the conventions of 'hard edge' and flatness of brush stroke. Aside from the 'purely formal' readings of Newman's work (the position of Judd, already outlined), Yve-Alain Bois in a catalogue essay entitled "Perceiving Newman" argues that Newman's work can be related through this analysis of our perception of the 'visual' and 'pictorial', to an inquiry into 'notions' of the 'perceived self'. As Newman himself says, "the self terrible and constant is for me the subject matter of painting"<sup>3</sup>. Borrowing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception and the social anthropology of Claude Levi Strauss, Newman constructed his practice. For Merleau-Ponty symmetry is an essential condition of human perception, and the human figure is grounded in symmetry, hence he believed that a phenomenological inquiry into the nature of

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1. Yve-Alain Bois Perceiving Newman, New York: The Pace Gallery, 1988, P. VII, quoting T. Hess, "Barnett Newman", New York: M.O.M.A., 1971, p. 51.
  2. Yve-Alain Bois Perceiving Newman, New York: The Pace Gallery, 1988, P. VII
  3. T. Hess, "Barnett Newman", New York: M.O.M.A., 1971, p. 60, quoted in, Yve Alain Bois "Perceiving Newman", New York: The Pace Gallery, 1988, p. IV.

perception is in a sense an inquiry into what makes something like man/woman, or the self, possible. The seventeenth century French philosopher Pascal had this to say about symmetry: "Symmetry. In anything one takes in at a glance: based on something that there is<sup>1</sup> no reason for doing differently and also based on the face of man". Hence symmetry is to be seen as a condition of perception rather than as a quality of perceived objects.

Levi Strauss explained the symmetry in the art of the Brazilian and North American Indians, Maori and archaic Chinese by the fact that these cultures were 'mask' cultures, where tatooing was often a surrogate of the mask<sup>2</sup>. In these cultures the first surface to receive the pictorial sign is the human face, which is perceived as symmetrical. In his detailed analysis of the art of the Caduveo Indians Levi Strauss explains: "... the use of a design which is symmetrical but yet lies across an oblique axis ... a complicated situation based upon two contradictory forms of duality, and resulting in a compromise brought about by a secondary opposition between the ideal axis of the object itself [the human face] and the ideal axis of figure which it represents"<sup>3</sup>. Levi Strauss discovered that this art is intimately linked to social organisation functioning both as validation of the hierarchy which exists but also as imaginary resolutions to real contradictions by ensuring the transition from symbol to meaning, magical to normal, supernatural to social<sup>4</sup>. Thus

1. Blaise Pascal "Pensees", New York: Harper and Bros., 1982, p. 416, quoted in Yve Alain Bois "Perceiving Newman", New York: The Pace Gallery, 1988, p. V.
2. Claude Levi Strauss, Structural Anthropology 1, London: Penguin, 1963, pp. 261-262.
3. C Levi Strauss, Triste Tropiques, New York: Atheneum, 1971, p. 176, quoted in F. Jameson The Political Unconscious, London: Methuen, 1981, p. 78.
4. C Levi Strauss Structural Anthropology 1, London: Penguin, 1963, pp. 256-262.



this art functions similarly to what Levi Strauss claimed as the function of myth<sup>1</sup>. To Levi Strauss these art works are only understood by construing the purely formal patterns as a symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic. The visual text of the Caduveo facial art constitutes a symbolic art, whereby real social contradictions insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm.

In The Political Unconscious Frederic Jameson takes up Levi Strauss's interpretation of face painting among the Caduveo Indians to expand this relationship between the imaginary, the symbolic with the social and aesthetic into an understanding of the aesthetic as ideological. To Jameson, "ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act itself is ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions"<sup>2</sup>

However correct Jameson's logic is one cannot overrule the fact that Caduveo face painting may not be as symbolic as Levi Strauss or Jameson assume. Likewise not all aesthetic objects are wholly symbolic and the converse is also correct. This being stated, I feel it is important to outline that in terms of understanding "purely formal" abstract art in its social context Jameson's argument is particularly suitable. It would be incorrect to take the formal design of King's paintings as solely symbolic in themselves but rather I would argue for concentrating on this act of exclusion identified

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1. i.e. Logical techniques for resolving basic antinomies in thought and social existence - see Structural Anthropology 1, London: Penguin, 1963, pp. 206-231.
  2. F. Jameson The Political Unconscious, London: Methuen, 1981, p. 79.

by McCormack as being symbolised by the paintings themselves through the title, scale, distribution, colour and medium. Despite the strong anthropomorphic connotations carried by any symmetrical configuration it would also be wrong I think to read King's paintings as a kind of cryptic portrayal of man/woman as such in that it would only serve to confuse and detract from the argument under analysis here.

Significantly Jameson identifies both the aesthetic and the narrative form to be seen as ideological. Hence within this scheme McCormack's text demands close scrutiny. If we look again at Tom Hess's interpretation of Newman's painting Shining Forth to George,<sup>1</sup> Hess prioritises three different levels of meaning within the painting. Firstly "the tragedy of death and of being" - "living in the face of death", secondly "the conceptual struggle of the artist" in making the work and thirdly, "the joy and exaltation of reaching a vision", all of these three elements are present in McCormack's text. The 'tragedy of death and of being' has resonances throughout the whole text: "this persistence of the merely actual can also be encountered as a metaphysical theme in the relation between death and life", and also "our damnation is already underway". The conceptual struggle of the artist is directly referenced throughout the text with phrases like "felt abstraction", "acts of discreet self-denial", or lines like, "painting which achieves its abstraction through profound and experiential labour". Finally the joy and exaltation of reaching a vision can be detected in: "Not all artists succeed in repressing the fatal question" or "the aesthetic decisiveness of his work purged it of

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1. See Pages 11-12.



that broodiness for which the country is famous" or "there is always in each of us the intrepid traveller and fool who, as soon as he (she) discovers his (her) own happiness by understanding the difference between life and death would first resolve by all arts and methods whatsoever to procure himself (herself) riches"<sup>1</sup>. Can it be said that McCormack's modernism, the aesthetic of abstract universalism is to be seen as a 'disinterested' mythic solution to real contradictions between political praxis and cultural production?

In the final paragraph of "Seeing darkly: Notes on T. W. Adorno and Samuel Beckett", McCormack cites an extract from Adorno's Minima Moralia which serves not only to make clear the contradictions within McCormack's practice, particularly in terms of the text under consideration, but also to advance our understanding nearer to the instance, as Benjamin says, where "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism"<sup>2</sup> - emphasising the ideological dimension of all high culture. Adorno writes:

"To identify culture solely with lies is more fateful than ever, now that the former is really becoming totally absorbed by the latter, and eagerly invites such identification in order to compromise every opposing thought. If material reality is called the world of exchange values, and culture whatever refuses to accept the domination of that world, then it is true that such refusal is illusory as long as the existent exists. Since, however, free and honest exchange is itself a lie, to deny it is at the same time to speak for truth: in face of the lies of the commodity world, even the lie that denounces it becomes a corrective."<sup>3</sup>

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1. The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, 1988, pp. 34-37.
  2. W. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Illuminations, London: Fontana, 1977, p. 258.
  3. T. W. Adorno, Minima Moralia, London: NLB, 1974, p. 44, quoted in W. J. McCormack, "Seeing Darkly: Notes on T. W. Adorno and Samuel Beckett", Hermathena, CXLI, Winter, 1986, p. 10.

For example if we look to Freud we can see this procedure identified more clearly. For Freud, whatever appears in speech acts and utterances is a product of displacement, of a cover up, a secondary process; however the truth is not simply behind this deceptive surface and process, it will not be found by a simple act of uncovering and particularly not by negating the surface. The truth is nowhere else but in the deceptive secondary process itself. 'The process of hiding is the structure of truth'<sup>1</sup>. Both Levi Strauss and Jameson drew from this immanent logic which the latter uses to critique attempts at looking for a metaphysical solution to a crisis in Modernist interpretation and criticism. Similarly the Frankfurt School began in the early 1930s to utilise Freudian theory as a result of an increasing pessimism about the revolutionary potential of the working class. They hoped it would help explain the psychic sources of mass instinctual conservatism - "the misplaced love for the wrong which is done them" as Adorno and Horkheimer wrote in Dialectic of Enlightenment - if properly filtered through a revised Marxian perspective on industrial society.<sup>2</sup>

Freud is mentioned in the McCormack text in the second paragraph (not printed in Circa). McCormack likens his collection of quotations and fragments already associated with Benjamin's critical strategy to "fugues in the sense that Sigmund Freud employed the term - wanderings

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1. Rainer Nagele "The Scene of the Other: T. W. Adorno's Negative Dialectic in the Context of Poststructuralism", Post Modernism and Politics, US: U.M.P., 1986, p. 107.
  2. E. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, London: Verso, 1985, p. 206.



embarked on by a problematic Self which can survive its trauma only by means of inner amnesia and outer peregrination, each going forth at first sight shapeless but in fact determined by the Self so abandoned"<sup>1</sup>

. This identification of misrecognition and the abandoning or de-centering of the self can also be read within a Lacanian context; similarly this can be said of McCormack's attempted collaboration or analogy between the form of his poetic narrative and his understanding of King's critical practice identified with various aspects of the work already mentioned. "One wonders what would be the self", Lacan writes, "where no-one knew about bilateral symmetry"<sup>2</sup>. The influence of Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure and Levi Strauss on Lacan's psychoanalytic theories and their importance as regards investigation into ideology situates this discourse in a relationary aspect to both the argument being constructed, the text, in question, and the artwork under examination.

Lacan's structure of misrecognition is articulated in the 'Mirror Phase' as the moment when the child gazes at itself in a mirror and makes an identification with the reflected image of integration, symmetry and sufficiency in an attempt to compensate for its sense of fragmentation and internal inadequacy<sup>3</sup>. The child imagines a future self identity which it is not, which is other than what it is in the present. For Lacan the sense of the self does not proceed in the relationship to the 'other', it is produced through it. Narcissism

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1. The Puzzle Tree Ascendant, 1988, p. 34-35.
  2. Jacques Lacan Ecrits, Paris: Seuil, 1966, p. 71, quoted in Yve Alain Bois Perceiving Newman, New York: The Pace Gallery, 1988, p. IV.
  3. The origin of this brief account of Lacanian theory comes from R. Kearney Modern Movements in European Philosophy, Manchester: M.U.P., 1987, pp. 268-282 and Jan Miel "Jacques Lacan and the Structure of the Unconscious", Structuralism, New York: Doubleday, 1970, pp. 94-101.

manifests itself when the ego becomes fixated on this reified illusion of the self over the 'other' (the imaginary). According to Lacan the true task of psychoanalysis is to free the subject's fixation with itself in order that it may acknowledge its more fundamental relation to the 'other'. Recognition takes place only in a state of flux as we recognise ourselves through the 'other', the idealised self, and the way in which it deceives us.

This relation with the 'other' is what Lacan calls 'language', it is 'symbolic' rather than 'imaginary'. The role of psychoanalysis as Lacan sees it, is to release the patient from the imaginary order of self obsession into the symbolic order of language, for it is only in the symbolic order that the subject can recover the language of desire as 'desire of the other'. This decentering of the self which Lacan calls for would allow, he believed, a return to the suppressed language of the unconscious. It would permit the subject to rediscover the absence at the heart of itself, the 'lack' which is the desire of the 'other'. Hence the unconscious is the discourse of the other structured like language: a discourse that dispossesses us of our imaginary sense of self completeness.

Louis Althusser pinpoints Lacan's (scientific) understanding of Freud's discovery of the structure of misrecognition as being of particular concern for Marxist investigations into ideology - similar to the Frankfurt school's use of Freudian psychoanalysis. Althusser used Lacan to argue that power could not be maintained without control over what he termed 'ideological state apparatuses'<sup>1</sup> : those social

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1. L. Althusser "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", Essays on Ideology, London: Verso, 1984, pp. 1-61. It is important to note, however that Althusser's conception of ideology beyond the basics of misrecognition is by and large over-determined. Significantly his text on art entitled "A Letter on Art in Reply to Andre Despre" which related the position of art within the ideological framework is both conservative and traditionalist.



institutions which embrace the domains of religion, culture, education, familial relations, etc., and are distinguished from 'repressive state apparatuses' in that they function by ideology. Just as there is a need for the maintenance of productive skills in capitalist society so too Althusser argues, there is a need for the working class to be confirmed in the naturalness of its subordinate status. In other words there must be a reproduction of the subordinate class's submission to the rules of the established order. The 'misrecognition' which then takes place is the subordinate class's acceptance and adoption of the image which is preferred by the dominant group. However, in order for this hypothesis to be correct and scientific, Althusser argues for the role of historical materialism to complement Lacan's structural science of psychoanalysis:

"The law of culture which is first introduced as language and whose first form is language is not exhausted by language; its content is the real kinship structures and the determinate ideological formations in which persons inscribed in these structures live their functions. It is not enough to know that the western family is patriarchal and exogamic (kinship structures) - we must also work out the ideological formation that govern paternity, maternity, conjugality and childhood. A mass of research remains to be done on these ideological formations. This is the task of historical materialism." <sup>1</sup>

Returning to the text we can see how McCormack identifies the Freudian motif of condensation in his understanding and outlining the function of King's titles in relation to his paintings: 'A single feature, a divergence, constitutes all that is omitted and the achievement of omitting it' <sup>2</sup>. In his major work The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud explains the task

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1. L. Althusser, Freud and Lacan Essays on Ideology, London: Verso, 1984, p. 163.
  2. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 20.

of dreams (dream-work) as the labour of transposing, translating the latent dream-thoughts into the concrete imagery of the manifest dream-content and in the process distorting them. Within this process Freud identified two main mechanisms at work, condensation and displacement. I would argue that the Freudian (and the later Lacanian, by implication) concept of condensation is an essential component in McCormack's writing and argument.

For Freud condensation explained the economy of expression typical of dreams. "Dreams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range of wealth of dream-thought. If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page. The analysis ... may occupy six, eight or a dozen times as much space"<sup>1</sup>. One method by which the dreamer is able to achieve condensation is by the omission of material. Like for example how a play or a film with a number of scenes taking place at different times and locations will omit altogether the intervening periods of time. Every representation artistic or otherwise involves omission. Like the illusion of a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional plane, in artistic terms, condensation can be seen as a convention<sup>2</sup>. Also, in a creative practice, both artists and viewers derive a sense of pleasure because of the economy achieved in the means of expression.

The linguist Roman Jakobson correlated Freud's theory of dreams (displacement and condensation) and Saussure's understanding of our

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1. S. Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, London: Hogarth Press, 1953, p. 279.
  2. John A. Walker, "Dream Work and Art Work", Leonardo, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1983, pp. 109-114.



mental activity in relation to linguistics (the syntagmatic and paradigmatic or associative planes) to two different semantic figures of speech: metonymy and metaphor. For Saussure the syntagmatic plane is more closely related to speech (parole) and the paradigmatic plane to language (la langue)<sup>1</sup>. To Saussure the syntagmatic plane is linear and occupies the horizontal axis of diachrony (historical, yet accidental and particular) whereas the paradigmatic plane is static and occupies the vertical axis of synchrony (quasi a-historical, general arrangement, regular). Saussure prioritises the synchronic over the diachronic. Similarly according to Jakobson in any discourse both metaphoric and metonymic poles will be present but one will dominate.

Jakobson's theory was appropriated by Lacan and is frequently wrongly identified as Lacan's discovery. Freud himself said that everything depended on language<sup>2</sup>, however Lacan makes this more precise by saying that the discourse of the unconscious is structured like language. What Lacan is suggesting is that human desires and fantasies (what Freud identified as the matter-of-fact ground of the unconscious) operate in and through linguistic structures. But these structures are not themselves 'visible' at the conscious level of the individual speaker's utterance (parole), rather they function as an 'invisible' unconscious language which is 'trans-individual', and which reveals itself less in what the speaker explicitly says than in the way he implicitly says or manages not to say something else<sup>3</sup>. Hence for Lacan each dream must be seen as a signifying chain which is so structured that it is possible to use words to signify something quite

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1. F. de Saussure, "Course in General Linguistics", Structuralism, New York: Doubleday, 1970, pp. 59-79.
  2. L. Althusser, "Freud and Lacan", Essays on Ideology, London: Verso, 1984, p. 159.
  3. R. Kearney, Modern Movements in European Philosophy, Manchester: M.U.P., 1987, p. 276.

other than what we appear to be saying in our conscious speech, i.e., when the patient gives an account of his or her dream. Lacan employs Jakobson's understanding of metaphor and metonymy to define the working of our unconscious language. "For the symptom is a metaphor whether on likes it or not as desire is a metonymy"<sup>1</sup>. According to Lacan desire establishes a metonymic relation between one signifier and another and does not depend on likeness or any immediate semantic correspondence. Desire is metonymic to the extent that there is no 'natural' or 'fixed' relationship between it and any given object; "these amount to nothing more than that derangement of the instincts that comes from being caught on the rails - externally stretching forth towards the desire for something else - of metonymy"<sup>2</sup>. For Lacan desire unlike need can move freely from one signifier to another, its range of possible signifiers is almost infinite. Desire only becomes problematic when it becomes (visually) fixated upon one single signifier which serves as a fetish (the mirror phase). Making a direct reference to Freud's understanding of the visible and invisible<sup>3</sup>. Lacan writes "This two-faced mystery is linked to the fact that the truth can be evoked only in that dimension of alibi in which all 'realism' in creative works takes its virtue from metonymy"<sup>4</sup>.

Metaphor by contrast functions in terms of a vertical relation between signifiers whereby one signifier is selected from a whole range of similar signifiers. It is in terms of such a metaphorical

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1. J. Lacan, 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious', Structuralism, New York: Doubleday, 1970, p. 127.
  2. Ibid., p. 127.
  3. See pg. 26 "The process of hiding is the structure of truth".
  4. Ibid., p. 126



relationship of association by similarity that the patient makes a choice of one signifier over another, even not making a choice is seen metaphorically as making a choice, which Lacan likens to the conventional understanding of a symptom which can refer to the hidden traumas of the unconscious. According to Lacan "the creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the conjunction of two images that is of two signifiers equally actualised. It springs from two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the hidden signifier then remaining present through its (metonymic) relation to the rest of the chain"<sup>1</sup>. Lacan argues for what he calls the necessity of the metaphoric drawing on the symbolists and surrealists in the production of the poetic spark. "One word for another: that is the formula for the metaphor and if you are a poet you will produce for your own delight a continuous stream, a dazzling tissue of metaphors"<sup>2</sup>. Significantly Lacan insists that the experience of the unconscious operates in terms of a synchronic time, (where the past, future, and present generally overlap), rather than in the 'diachronic' (imperative all registered in history). Hence we can see the motivation for Althusser's argument of combining historical materialism with Lacanian theory.

Both Jakobson and Lacan have observed how the symbolists by the use and emphasis on, the metaphor exploited the synchronic and vertical relations of language in their modernist enterprise. Symbolism is also the major aesthetic current in the work of Benjamin. In much

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1. Ibid., p. 115.

2. Ibid., p. 115.

modernist art the narrative or temporal structure is weakened or even disappears in favour of an aesthetic ordering based on synchronicity, the logic of the metaphor, the spatial form. Instead of narrating outer sequential or additive time many modern novelists in particular, explored simultaneously of experience in a moment of psychological of 'unconscious' time/space in which are concentrated past, present and future, e.g. Joyce. To adapt Yeats's phrase things do not so much fall apart as fall together, unity is intended from the juxtaposition of past and present, inner and outer; their distances eclipsed as though on a flat surface. For the symbolists the secret of poetic art lay in the 'objective' independence of language from mere communicative and thus intra-subjective functions<sup>1</sup> and it would seem for this reason that it has been a major source of recent French structuralist thought. Whether or not such a procedure shows an escape from historical thinking or merely its purely linear evolutionary or additive forms can only be discerned from an analysis of the social, political and economic forces in which the work was made.

Excluding the reference to the importance of the perceiver, the brief definition at the beginning of this text on the puritan artist correlates with the above understanding of the symbolist ideology. McCormack's own writing is firmly placed within the symbolist aesthetic. Similarly abstraction and abstract Expressionism, particularly in the work of Newman and Motherwell with their emphasis on the synchronic can be read within a symbolist discourse. To McCormack the titles of King's paintings function metaphorically as the physical world of figuration and representation which surrounds the small works. Similarly his view of the colour in King's painting is

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1. E. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, London: Verso, 1985, p. 46.



their function to aestheticise reality - McCormack likens the colour combinations to colour charts that might be used in a design school<sup>1</sup>. Significantly use of metaphor has been aligned with the production of auratic art. Clement Greenberg, as Luke Gibbons points out in his Circa editorial<sup>2</sup>, believed that under high modernism paintings achieved a 'presence', an irreducible aura which prevented their appropriation as commodities. Benjamin in his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", defined the aura as both uniqueness and as the phenomena of distance between object and perceiver; it is a spatial phenomena<sup>3</sup>. It is important to remember Jakobson's claim that in every discourse both metaphoric and metonymic will be present but one will dominate - it is not incongruous for their mutual co-existence. Benjamin was not only influenced by the nineteenth century symbolists but by Marx as well, symbolism can be read within a realist discourse.

In this sense then I would argue that the difference between condensation and displacement is a political or ideological context. Late nineteenth century symbolists often used formal techniques to reinforce a sense of social importance as in the cultivation of an aesthetic of death which Benjamin identifies in Baudelaire<sup>4</sup>. As with Jameson's Field Day pamphlet on Joyce what is important in discerning the political content in the symbolist practice is the

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1. Interview with Bill McCormack.
  2. L. Gibbons, "Periphery Visions", Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 12.
  3. E. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, London: Verso, 1985, p. 152.
  4. Ibid., p. 45.

emphasis on the formal qualities of the work. Displacement's main function as outlined by Freud is that of overcoming censorship which can be either intentional or unintentional. Most important in this context is that displacement facilitates condensation. "The direction taken by displacement", Freud writes, "usually results in a colourless and abstract expression in the dream thought being exchanged for a pictorial and concrete one"<sup>1</sup>, hence displacement also facilitates representation. It is in this sense then that displacement adopts an ideological capacity barred to condensation. Freud cites the use of symbols in dreams as one of the indirect methods of representation. "Dreams make use of this symbolism for disguised representation of their latent thoughts"<sup>2</sup> - symbolism becomes paradoxical. For example allegory is a form for expressing political criticism, its very indirectness enables it to escape the censor yet it runs the risk of losing its ability to communicate its criticism. Gershom Scholem commented to Benjamin in 1931, that the Russians would have no use for his 'dynamite' except in the bourgeois camp since it was so different from the party point of view. In answer Benjamin instead of contradicting the suggestion wrote that he sought to 'methyrate' his work "like spirits to guarantee its unpalatability to the other side - at the risk of making it unpalatable to everyone"<sup>3</sup>.

If we look to the social context in which King produced his paintings, which is outlined by McCormack in the text, we can have a better understanding as to why this particular type of Modernism was adopted not only by King but by his contemporaries as well. A brand of

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1. S. Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, London: Hogarth Press, 1953, p. 339.
  2. Ibid., p. 352.
  3. E. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, London: Verso, 1985, p. 190.



Modernism which was symbolic, auratic and synchronic in character with an ideological commitment to an autonomous art. McCormack's attention to King is a recent phenomenon and hence most of the text concerns itself with "contemporary" debates between abstraction and representation - culture and politics. It is important to understand that for McCormack the importance of King's work lies not in historical reality but rather in the context of the present. Significantly he attempts not only to identify the works' historical evolution from abstraction to representation (Jack Yeats and the Beckett post-war minimalism), but also to introduce specific political and religious references (the war in Northern Ireland and Irish Protestantism). Both of these tangents serving as mechanisms of legitimation of the alleged critical politics within King's body of work. If we look to another piece of writing by McCormack, a clearer explanation can be given.

In the introduction to his book The Battle of the Books, McCormack explains that the motivation for the arguments in the book stem from his perception (on arriving back to Ireland from abroad) of the literary debates taking place, (or not taking place as his argument maintains), as sterile. McCormack correctly identifies Irish writing as being almost totally locked into notions of figuration, representation and self concealed bourgeois formation. These, McCormack perceptively argued were succeeding along with the thriving Irish culture industry to move culture away from the politics with the help of a refurbished sectarianism. In terms of this debate, The Battle of the Books is important because it emphasises the relationship between the aesthetic, the ideological and the political. Within this its conceptual framework, is significant in that, in the second last paragraph of The Battle of the Books, McCormack identifies painting

specifically from the Oliver Dowling Gallery: Cecil King, Mary Fitzgerald and Felim Egan as being "outmoded or premature"<sup>1</sup> for the concept of 'debate'. This is put all the more forcefully in the Circa text, "where literature refuses to jettison its bump of clay" "... painting (from the Oliver Dowling Gallery?) has the means of signalling its negation of present modes and relations while still working from and against them"<sup>2</sup>. King's paintings are seen as "constituting a finer critical knowledge of society than armpit expressionism"<sup>3</sup> by their relationship to their titles. What McCormack is saying is that when we look at a King painting called 'Intrusion' for example, we acknowledge by virtue of the title that King's painting is the very antithesis of the painting which could have the same title by a Ronan Walshe or a Michael Kane. Not least from the way in which McCormack identifies this organic relationship between "felt" abstraction and "armpit" expressionism I would question his registering of contemporary and historical art critical debates and styles within modernism, particularly in the Irish context. What does neo expressionism mean to McCormack? Could Cecil King be seen as a 'neo-geo' artist?. In summary why is McCormack's approach to the visual arts, symbolic of the traditional lack of interrogation associated with emissaries from the literary establishment. He, like others seem content to allay their fears in the culture industry by swallowing or shying away from, the modernist myths of autonomy, auraticism, of the symbolic order, the masterpiece in the master narrative.

On the 13th of August 1969 the then Taoiseach Jack Lynch gave a public

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1. Note the ambiguity between outmoded (redundant or outre) and premature (transcendant or ill-timed).
  2. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 20.
  3. Ibid., p. 20.



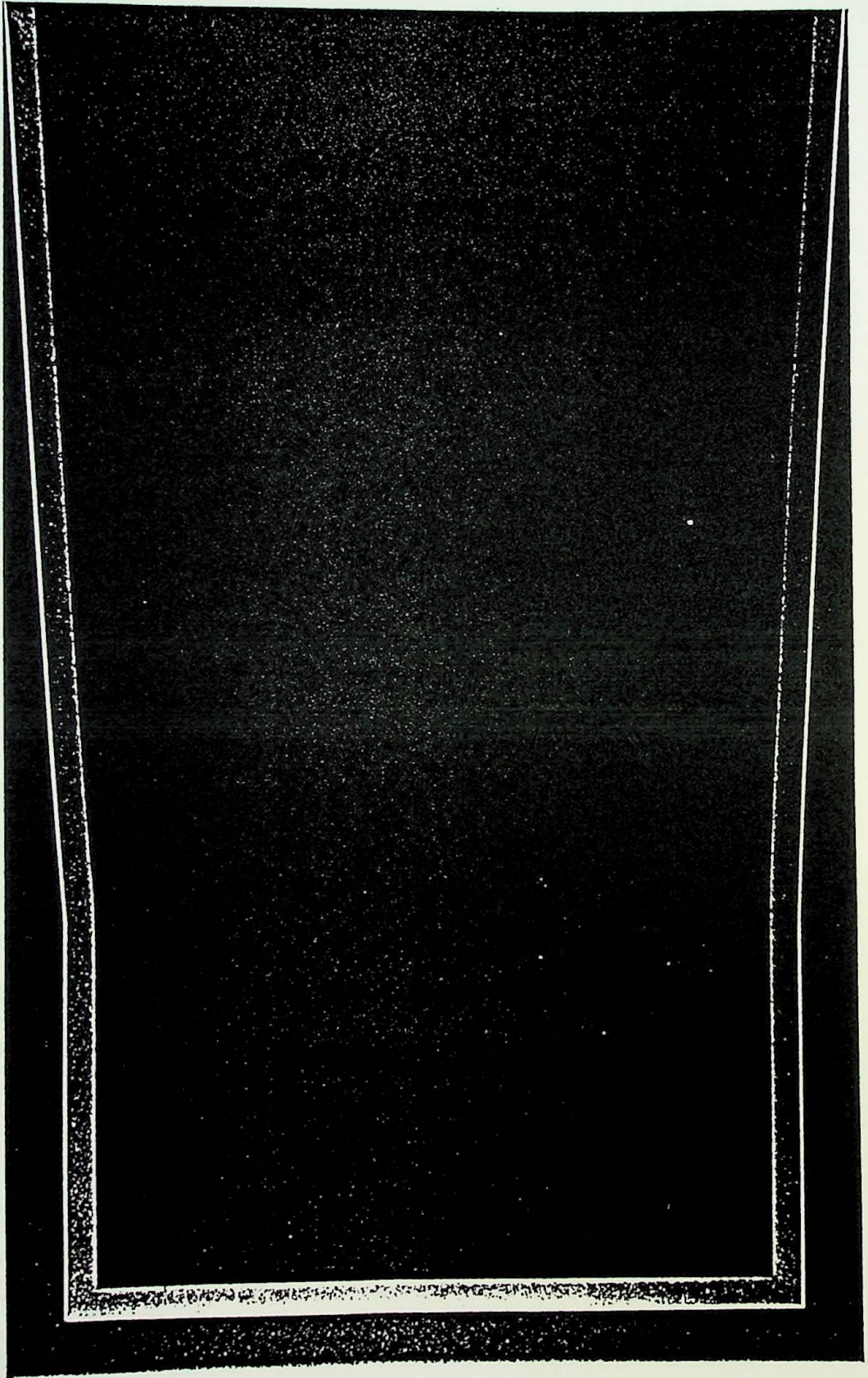
address over the radio in response to, what has now become known as, 'The Battle of The Bogside' which took place on that day during the marching season. He said: "It is clear that the Irish Government can no longer stand by and see innocent people injured and perhaps worse"<sup>1</sup>. Despite the fact that Lynch and his Government did stand by the above example serves as an indication of the degree to which the outbreak of violence in the six counties raised tensions in southern Ireland, particularly for the emerging middle classes of the Lemass era. This tension was also registered in the work of Irish Modernists at that time.<sup>2</sup> The word 'tension' becomes a convenient metaphor as it has both latent and manifest meanings. It can be embodied or projected. For example in Theo McNab's painting, Irish Elegy, the tension between representation and abstraction becomes almost parody. Cecil King travelled to Berlin in 1970 where he produced the Berlin Series (paintings) and the Berlin Suite (prints). Eithne Waldron, in the catalogue for the exhibition that followed, wrote:

"Beneath the classical presentation, the style and the finesse of these prints, there exists a disturbing element, that undermining high-powered tension which permeates each individual print echoing and re-echoing the artist's complete despondency at the sight of the divided city of Berlin".<sup>3</sup>

With reference to his earlier circus paintings Luke Gibbons in his editorial writes, "the tensions he (King) is interested in are those of the circus not the cathedral. By bringing abstraction down to earth<sup>4</sup> he draws closer to the contingencies of his own Irish experience".

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1. J. Lynch "Address over R.T.E. on 13th August, 1969", Speeches and Statements Aug 1969-Oct 1971, Government Information Bureau, 1971, p. 2.
  2. Seamus Deane likens the effect of the eruption of Northern Ireland on the intellectual life just forming at that time with the metaphor of 'injury' "just as the scar tissue of material advancement had begun to form, the old wounds opened up again". S. Deane, "Remembering the Irish Future", The Crane Bag, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1984, p. 82.
  3. E. Waldron Introduction to Berlin Suite of 6 screen prints published by Editions Alecto, 1970.
  4. L. Gibbons, "Periphery Visions" Circa, July/Aug, 1971, p. 12.







This 'tension' of the circus paintings is identified by Kenneth Jameson writing in a King catalogue, as that of "the silent circus".

"A circus of concentration considered with the detachment of the trapeze artist, the tight rope walker, the trick cyclist on the high wire. For the moment of the act all is suspense. The juggler calculates intuitively his performance is mathematical. The trapeze artist has a rendezvous in time and space, precisely plotted as the counter point in a Bach fugue. Nothing is random and in this cool essential detachment the true artist seeks a condition of equilibrium. When it is safely achieved the crowd applauds. Cecil King's paintings provide a visual analogy".<sup>1</sup>

Similarly Sven-Claude Bettinger writes, "the tension King creates in his work emanates harmony and mystery"<sup>2</sup>. Besides McCormack's claim for the tension between the paintings and the titles also present is the tension between the abstract and the natural. The abstract is destroyed by resemblance with the natural, recognised by the perceiver, all abstraction is subject to this fate. In King's 'Berlin Series' the paintings become depictions of the skylights of Berlin. It could be said that by using abstract titles King was attempting to arrest such quick recognition in his work. While fully recognising that no one art object or artist's body of work could or even should hope to claim to solve conflicts, there are however degrees of engagement which a politically minded critical practices can embrace, whether they are within art institutions themselves or a wider social arena. It is not in any negative dialectic sense that 1970s Irish abstract modernists were motivated by the politics of liberalism, pluralism and romanticism.

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1. K. Jameson, Arts Council Gallery, Belfast, 1967.
  2. S. C. Bettinger, Gallerie Monika Beck, Schwarzenacker Saar, 1974.

To McCormack King's paintings are abstract by virtue of the fact that they are not representational, firstly because of the inherited international Modernist tradition and secondly because they take issue with Nationalist and Naturalist traditions within Irish art. Conversely what I am arguing is that the form of King's paintings is determined by a particular ideology which is also manifest in political praxis as the cultural hegemony of bourgeois humanist fantasy, identifiable within the South's relationship to the North's 'problems'. In giving McCormack the benefit of the doubt this I feel might be his motivation in introducing Northern Ireland into the text - however this only occurs at the end of the text and in no way compensates for the lack of criticality in approaching King's work.

In the final paragraph of the Circa text McCormack explains that, "in the last two years ... (King) ... always returned to the question of Ulster and the need rigorously to deny the sectarian terminology"<sup>1</sup>. In The Battle of the Books McCormack identifies this sectarian terminology as a prerequisite for constructing a sectarian sociology of art: "Words alone it seems are certain good"<sup>2</sup>. This can be identified in structuralist linguistics, Saussure's system in which there are only 'difference', the result of a sign's difference from other signs. For Levi Strauss these differences became binary oppositions, which have direct resonances to our understanding of the conflict. Yet for the structuralist the units of a system have meaning only by virtue of their relation to one another (McCormack's claim on King's abstraction). We can transpose this to Northern Ireland - John Wilson Foster cites a suitable example:

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1. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 20-21.
  2. W. J. McCormack, The Battle of the Books, Dublin: Lilliput, 1986, p. 65.



"to what extent is an Ulster Protestant an Ulster Protestant because he (she) is not the Ulster Catholic of whom he (she) is nevertheless incessantly conscious? Isn't the Ulster Catholic an inescapable element of his (her) identity." 1

This is only the case when you accept that Catholics and Protestants are in constant opposition to one another, which places you back at square one - the sectarian sociology one is trying to overcome. If however we look at sectarianism from a more historical and political perspective, the word sectarianism should not be used in the narrow sense to connote merely a set of attitudes. Rather it is the material reality reconstructed and hence perpetrated in everyday life. If sectarianism is taken in the narrow sense as a set of attitudes only, then it can refer to the attitudes of both the dominating and the dominated. But in a (revised) structural sense of the word similar to sexism and racism it can only be applied to the activities of dominating. By analogy, if racism exists only at the level of attitudes then blacks who hate whites can be said to be as racist as whites who hate blacks. Many state policies to supposedly counteract racism are built on that assessment. But if racism is a phenomenon at the structural level, then it is only institutions and policies designed and managed by powerful whites that can properly be said to be racist in as far as they perpetuate the domination of blacks. In this sense, even those institutions and policies designed to counteract racist attitudes can themselves be racist. If we look to Althusser we can see how the above analogy can be further understood within his notion of 'structural causality'. How the structure is nothing outside its effects and can be distinguished from expressive and mechanistic causality in that difference is understood as structural relativity and distance rather than on the basis of identity and fixed laws and measures respectively.

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1. J. W. Foster, "The Critical Condition of Ulster", The Honest Ulstermen, No. 79, Aug. 1985, p. 48.

"The structure is not an essence outside the economic phenomena which comes and alters their aspect forms and relations and which is effective on them as an absent cause absent because it is outside them. The absence of cause in the structure's 'metonymic casualty' on its effects is not the fault of the exteriority of the structure with respect to the economic phenomena, on the contrary it is the very form of the interiority of the structure as a structure in its effects." <sup>1</sup>

Within Modernism there exists a strong liberalist humanist contingent, a world view in which the political and the ideological are mere secondary or at best registered as a footnote to the content of a real 'private' life, which alone is authentic and genuine. The existence of such a force within Modernism explains not only the pluralism inherent in the later, but also in how Modernism has been split from Modernisation. How Modernism has wrongly inherited the anti-modernisation bias in the right wing political thinking of several major modernist writers and artists e.g. Yeats and Elliot. In his essay, "Romantic Revival Modernist Prescription: An Irish Case Study" John Wilson Foster suggests that symbolism may well be the key to modernism's uneasy relationship to modernisation <sup>2</sup>. More significantly perhaps, he claims that political instability militates against Realism. <sup>3</sup> The analogy with King's art and others working in the 1970s is clear and direct.

In The Battle of the Books McCormack makes two interesting statements that have relevance to this debate. Writing on Northern Ireland he

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1. L. Althusser, et. al., Reading Capital, p. 187, quoted in F. Jameson, The Political Unconscious, London: Methuen, 1981, p. 24.
  2. J. W. Foster, "Romantic Revival Modernist Prescription: An Irish Case Study", Modernism and Modernity, Canada: N.S.C.A.D., 1983, p. 75-76.
  3. Ibid., p. 78.



says "Not until the end of the 1970s did it really dawn on the plain people of Ireland that this is normality now"<sup>1</sup> and "The fallacy of her (Edna Longley's) position is not so much one of critical theory as of political fact - Northern Ireland is not a state"<sup>2</sup>. McCormack could easily be read as perceiving the conflict which is manifest in the local as synchronic - an arrangement conducted through everydayness or even as a passing phase of history. "If ever the violence of the streets and hill farms ceases there will be a desperate need for intelligent criticism in order to render the language capable of acknowledging that cessation" "The important question here is that: what is this relationship between 'intelligent criticism' and the 'violence of the streets'<sup>3</sup> or in what McCormack entitles a chapter in the book "Fighting or Writing"? Edward Said levels a similar criticism against Frederic Jameson and the answer that Said arrives at is that Jameson's assumed constituency is an audience of cultural literary critics and that such questions are simply not on the agenda.<sup>4</sup>

Many questions and investigations are not on the agenda of Northern Ireland though much has been written about it. McCormack is correct when he says that the lack of scientific investigations into religion and economics, class and culture, non-colonialism and post-industrialism<sup>5</sup> is "felt daily like an amputation" or, as John Wilson Foster argues, "inadequacy in our cultural knowledge and our criticism vitiates our thinking on Ulster and is encouraged by political prejudgement".<sup>6</sup>

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1. W. J. McCormack, The Battle of the Books, Dublin: Lilliput, 1986, p. 14.
  2. Ibid., p. 61.
  3. Ibid., p. 18.
  4. E. Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies", Post Modern Culture, Ed. Hal Foster, London: Pluto, p. 147.
  5. W. J. McCormack, The Battle of the Books, Dublin: Lilliput, 1986, p. 46.
  6. J. W. Foster, "The Critical Condition of Ulster", The Honest Ulsterman, No. 79, Autumn, 1985, p. 49.

To McCormack the local idiom "yearns for an authenticity, it cannot understand."<sup>1</sup> The local also defines the visual arts in Ireland because, "they are necessarily physical, but they are also significantly international because previous generations of Irish painters have insisted on this relationship".<sup>2</sup> To McCormack local and modernist discourses do not sit together easily but this I would argue is determined by McCormack's 'conventional' understanding of Modernism - not least emphasised by his support for what he saw in King's work as a Fabian tactic in engaging with Modernism. In the text the debate between the local .vs. the Modernist is introduced, criticised, then re-introduced in the final paragraph (Circa text): "... strictly to refuse the easy assumptions of class and caste in southern society. The background to this admirable (because rare) bourgeois rectitude was lower middle class Protestant Wicklow, one very close to my own. But the aesthetic decisiveness of his work purged it of that broodiness for which the county is famous".<sup>3</sup> This contradiction of terms in writing about King as an artist who paints in the international mode of abstraction yet registering it as significant that he comes from Rathdrum is recognised by McCormack: "that it is puerile to localise such serenely non-representational art".<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless Luke Gibbons in his editorial writes:

"In King's most notable paintings McCormack discerns a use of abstraction which is not a flight from Irishness towards some indeterminate cosmopolitanism but rather takes issue with received images of Irishness from within. It only acquires meaning when it is located with the specific circumstances of his upbringing as a southern Protestant." <sup>5</sup>

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1. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 11.
  2. W. J. McCormack, transcript opening speech, NCAD Exhibition "The Subversive Sketch", Atrium Gallery, TCD, January 1987.
  3. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 21.
  4. Ibid., p. 21.
  5. L. Gibbons, "Periphery Visions", Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 12.



Gibbons identifies King's work within an Irish context as Protestant-Abstraction, i.e. as a distinct mode of the expression within a tradition. Gibbons I feel is mistaken in both this nomenclature and in his assigning of "otherness" to the denomination of the author or artist. King he writes "looks to vibrant linear configurations to excise the legacy of romantic nationalism which excluded him."<sup>1</sup> The word 'vibrant' is like the word 'serene', its use here in this context indicates nothing other than a collapse into the (sectarian) terminology we are trying to move away from. McCormack is ambiguous in relation to the use of the word 'serene', in that despite dismissing such a 'conventional description' he cannot finally rid himself of it. "This is painting which achieves its abstraction through profound and experiential labour, its serenity belongs finally to the viewer not to the creator".<sup>2</sup>

There is further ambiguity as regards the role of the local and religion in McCormack's text: "They (King's paintings) are acts of discreet self-denial, which is to say that they have something in them of a Protestant tradition of confession and a tradition from which King consciously came and which he analysed in conversation."<sup>3</sup> In my opinion both McCormack and Gibbons are over-determining the role of identity (particularly religious) in a critical practice - a symptom perhaps of the war in the North?

<sup>4</sup>  
McCormack in his defence presents the argument: that why should we

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1. Ibid., p. 12.
  2. Circa, July/Aug, 1987, p. 20. Note: The word also appears in his poem 'Series (After Cecil King)', see page 8.
  3. Ibid., p. 20.
  4. Interview with Bill McCormack.

grant to American painting a status other than that of the local albeit a big location, it itself is surely governed by circumstances. To conceive of American art as such is to make a significant political oversight to Ireland's neo-colonialist status in the advance of both American cultural and economic imperialism where twentieth century modernist painting cannot be distinguished from American painting. In The Battle of the Books, McCormack situates the loss of our geographical periphery to the cultural imperialism of the late nineteenth century. "British intellectual life pioneered the anthropology of primitive cultures and repaid the material debt by elevating the most under-developed regions of Ireland to the heady role of culture-fodder for Modernism. Yeats's West of Ireland in league with Frazer's Anthropology."<sup>1</sup> The discourse of 'Celticism' which arose from these and other collaborations had a major influence on the cultural production of Irish writers and artists. Edward Said's thesis of the relations of power inscribed in the discourse of "Orientalism" is in many ways applicable to 'Celticism': "Orientalism depends for its strategy on the flexible positional superiority, which puts the westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without him ever losing the upper hand".<sup>2</sup> This makes a direct reference back to Althusser and Lacan. It is in this context that one should criticise McCormack's claim that if an exhibition of Robert Motherwell's opened here tomorrow, the viewer who is now familiar with King's work will be unable to see Motherwell's work in the same way as before, i.e. pre-King.<sup>3</sup>

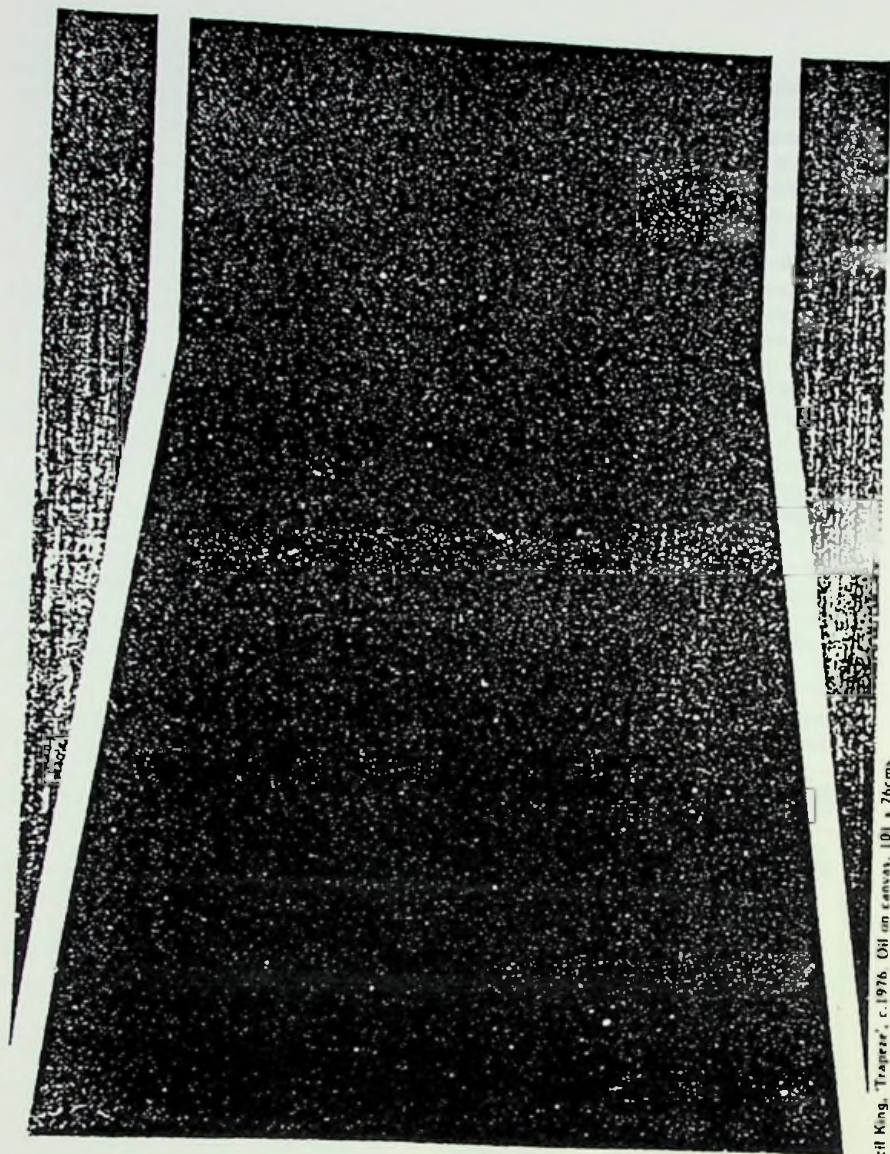
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1. W. J. McCormack, The Battle of the Books, Dublin: Lilliput, 1986, p. 46.
  2. E. Said, Orientalism, London: Penguin, 1978, p. 7.
  3. Interview with Bill McCormack



In conclusion and with the aim of leaving this debate open ended, I cite an extract from an Onlooker, Terry Eagleton's Field Day pamphlet "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment", which in some way serves as a rebuke or warning against complacency.

"Imagination and enlightened liberal reason are still being offered to us in Ireland today as the antithesis of sectarianism; and like all such idealised values they forget their own roots in a social class and history not unnoted for its own virulent sectarianism, then and now ... The liberal humanist notion of Culture was constituted, among other things to marginalise such peoples as the Irish, so that it is particularly intriguing to find this sectarian gesture being rehearsed by a few of the Irish themselves." 1

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1. T. Eagleton, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment", Field Day Pamphlet No. 13, Derry: Field Day, 1988, p. 13.



Cecil King, 'Trapeze', c. 1976. Oil on canvas, 101 x 76cm.

## A MORTUARY OF DISUSED MOTTOES OVERHEAD: ON CECIL KING

Bill McCormack

There was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour

The necessity, if one is to allow the unknown to enter, to address oneself to an addressee unknown at that address, definitely absent, almost impossible to find.

That is the secret delight and security of hell, that is not to be informed on, that it is protected from speech, that it just is, but cannot be public in the newspaper, be brought by any word to critical knowledge....

*Navigare necesse est, vivere non necesse.*

Walter Benjamin once envisaged a book, which he would compose, entirely consisting in quotations. It would have been a literary work purged of the Self, or retaining only the formal outline of an authoring presence. By that 'only' we can measure the impossibility of the task. Yet quotation has been a profitable modernist technique in this century, lending to irony all the former resonance of the posture noused. Every bit of writing, however

humble or casual, consists in quotation necessarily, and the struggle to introduce the truly original is as impossible as the other one, already assessed.

### Locale as Originality

Dublin Modernism? The term has a cheeky disregard of its absurdly obvious self-cancelling simplicity. Locale and modernist preoccupations do not sit together easily, however much Joyce may be cited in



support of the case. Yet the persistent characteristic of our culture in the twentieth century has been the attachment of an irreducible mundane to what must appear an incompatible aesthetic formalism. Soil hangs from the underside of our typewriters. Of course this often is little more than the overlapping of successive chronological periods typical of the provincial condition: the novel retains Hardy-esque tones even as it breaks new ground, and the lyric poem admits placenames and biographical traces in what seems a jeopardy to lyric purism. But this persistence of the merely actual can also be encountered as a metaphysical theme in the relation between death and life.

The local idiom preserves a verb usefully heaped with prefixes — it *disimproves*, it favours the unsavoury while failing to appreciate the genuine Felix Krull in its midst. You see, it yearns for an authenticity it cannot understand. The grossest feature of its corruption is its pettiness, nothing is worth bothering about. At the same time, a corpse is transformed into a lethal weapon; the food queues roll up like extras for a Cold War film; a taxi plies faithful-fatally between indifferent savages, themselves the product and not the process only of immiseration. And in place of something worth bothering about clings the still small accent of the local, intimate as a lover's bad breath. Melancholy, Benjamin proceeded to show, is a profound form of allegoric revelation and, so, peculiarly modern. Lover lyric may rest its hand upon a bell of flaming red hair, but it turns in some nottobegainsayed moment to be a perpetual 'Upon a Dying Lady': acts as echo-chamber to the dissolving tongue inside. Ambiguity, the unstable mix, the roving eye of retributive indifference, busy-body neglect. You can damn a man here by naming him, never by listing his crimes or his victims, or the perennial agony of the survivors, the lyric is obliged to excoriate socially in a republic where excoriation *en pur* runs like water off a duke's Porsche. By extension, Alexandrian commentary can aspire to the condition of art where art itself is jeopardised. You may laugh.

#### Abstraction as Resistance

I think it could be shown that Cecil King's small matte abstractions, with their single intrusive lines and their mutely radical juxtaposition of colours, constitute a finer critical knowledge (Thomas Mann's phrase) of society than arm-pit expressionism or metrical polemic. They are acts of discreet self-denial, which is to say that they have something in them of a protestant tradition of confession, a tradition from which King consciously came and which he consciously analysed in conversation. There is of course an iconoclastic strain in Irish protestantism, a distinct suspicion directed towards the representation of the divine or even its symbolic signification. This should not be confused with philistinism which, to be sure, is also present but on different grounds. King came quite quickly (once

he began to paint and not merely to collect; like Benjamin he well knew the aesthetic commitment of collecting) to abandon representation in favour of what looks on the outside like restrained American abstract expressionism, Robert Motherwell daubed small and daubed neat. Thus simultaneously he broke away from a puritan distrust of art *per se* without taking up the slack representationalism which his surrounding context took to be art. Yet this process has a taut history: Ringsend Morning ... Circus Pastel ... Baggot Street Painting ... Berlin Painting No. 24 ... these titles trace a movement from traditional Irish landscape themes, through Jack Yeats perhaps, to the post-war world of urban, felt abstraction. There is a politics to King's art — it is the politics of critical knowledge, of indicating by exclusion areas of destructive power in an era when the old themes are being refuelled for new missions of domination and subordination. The philistines discourse melodiously. You cannot tour an exhibition of King's paintings, they are incapable of becoming



Robert Ballagh, 'Homage to Walter Benjamin'. Bookwork, Irish Exhibition of Living Art, 1982.

coach-windows. I can think of one exception which proves the rule — in a painting from the Berlin Series hung in a canteen where it becomes the mere graph of a drinking glass, of the too many drinking glasses in the canteen. The truth of King's painting is placed in some unique feature — the titles work as titles have not worked since Yeats's day — Break Away .... Interstice ... Nexus ... Verge ... Intrusion. A single feature, a divergence, constitutes all that is omitted and the achievement of omitting it. Where literature refuses to jettison its bump of clay (and thereby hangs on to a faithful/fickle patronage which makes an exhibition of its Self), painting has the means of signalling its negation of present modes and relations while still working from and against them. And truth it is.

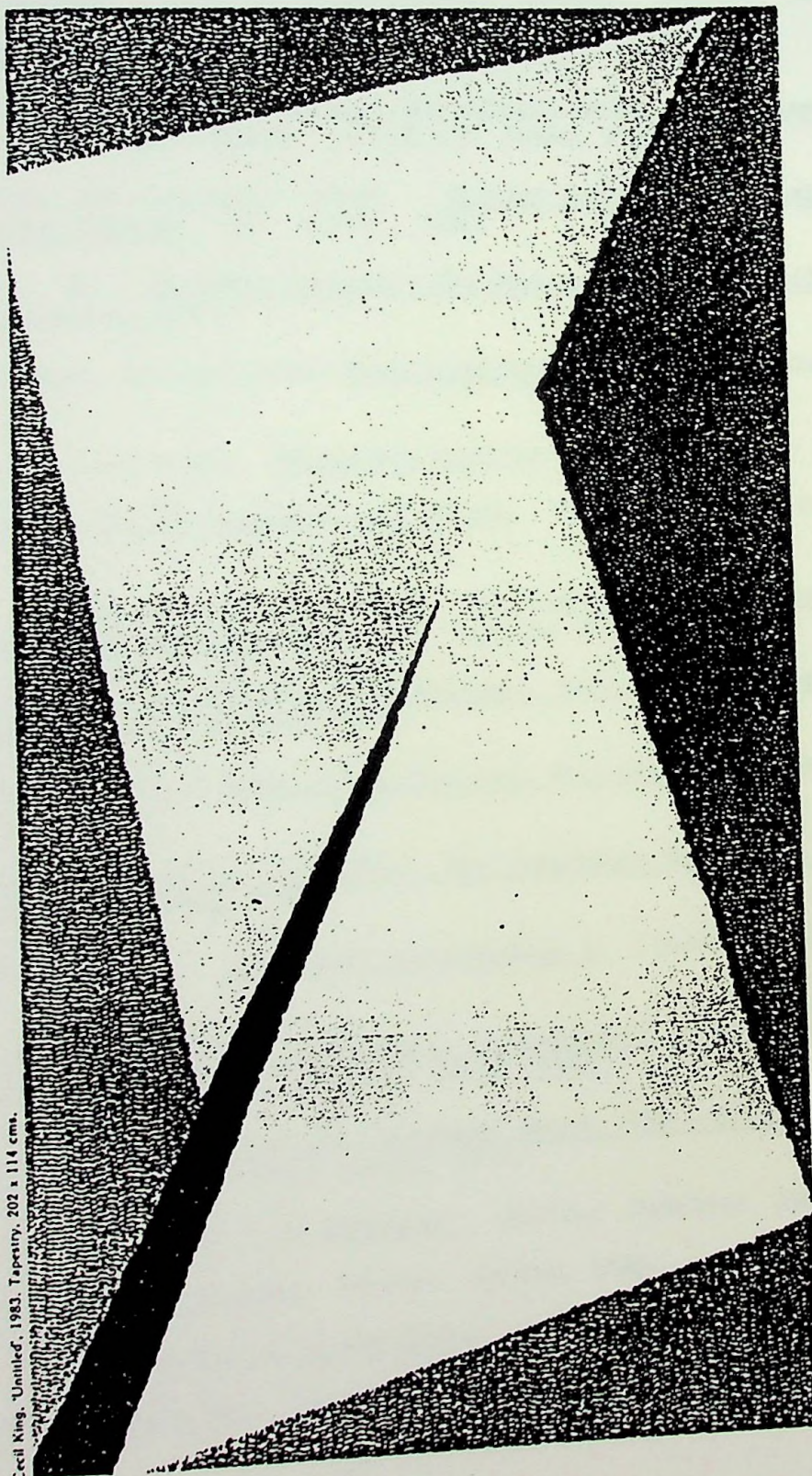
We had several such conversations in his last two years, and he always returned to the question of Ulster and the need rigorously to deny the sectarian termin-



ology, strictly to refuse the easy assumptions of class and caste in southern society. The background to this admirable (because rare) bourgeois rectitude was lower middle-class Protestant Wicklow, one very close to my own. But the aesthetic decisiveness of his work purged it of that broodiness for which the county is famous. In one sense it is puerile to localise such serenely non-representational art, but given the location thus dismissed we can proceed to note (I believe) how mistaken the conventional description of King's style as serene really is. This is painting which

achieves its abstraction through profound and experiential labour, its serenity belongs finally to the viewer not to the creator who might (but unknowably to us) be touched by some reflective abschied of the viewer. Behold, he would never say, I shew you a mystery. Viewers should perhaps begin to pay the debt.

Bill McCormack is the author of *The Battle of the Books* (1986) and *Ascendancy and Tradition* (1985), and writes poetry under the name of 'Hugh Maxton'.



Cecil King, 'Untitled', 1983. Tapestry, 202 x 114 cms.



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