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THE "CUBIST"

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PICASSO in his STUDIO

TRAVAIL A L'AUTOMNE

by FRIESZ

Eccentric School of Painting Increases Its Vogue in the Current Art Exhibition-- What Its Followers Attempt to Do.

AMONG all the paintings on exhibition at the Paris Fall Salon none is attracting so much attention as the extraordinary productions of the so-called "Cubist" school. In fact, dispatches from Paris suggest that these works are really the main feature of the exhibition.

The "Cubists," as it is known, are a school of artists who believe that the right way to paint persons and things is to paint them in cubes, squares, and hexagons. They have been before the public now for several years.

When they first burst on the astonished gaze of Paris and the rest of the universe they were known as the "Invertebrates." That was in 1906. On recovering from its first fit of amazement at the astonishing productions of the "Invertebrates" the public promptly dubbed them the "Wild Beasts." Now they are "les Cubistes."

Whatever their name, they continue to paint pictures before which descriptive adjectives retreat in disorder. They sleep colors, apparently in haphazard fashion, on their canvases, draw back a step, step on another assortment, and their calmly laid the emotional result "A Woman," "A Landscape," "Still Life," or something equally innocent and inappreciable. If you seek to find out where they got their ideas you will learn that the "Invertebrates" and "Wild Beasts" and "Cubists" call themselves disciples of Matisse. But there are those who say that Matisse stands against before these madhouses.

In spite of the crazy nature of the "Cubist" theories the number of those professing them is fairly respectable. Georges Braque, André Derain, Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Albert Gleizes, and others are a few of the names signed to canvases before which Paris has stood and now again stands in blank amazement.

What do they mean? Have those responsible for them taken leave of their senses? Is this art or madness? Who knows?

At all events the devoted group, so-called, is growing--not by years, but at least say that plenty of people want to see and admire upon them. If, like "Elysees," "Matisse," the "Cubist" movement of the jungle, their desire to be "noticed," they have been stimulated during their brief existence. Last year Gustav Guller, head of "Purple," now famous, also known as an artist of artistic habit, went to Paris and he came inspired with a desire to find out something about this wild school. He began the same twist of mind that caused him to turn out his sinuous and popular "Goose" moved him to undertake his voyage of discovery among hidden Parisian studios. Anyhow, he ventured forth on his quest, found what he sought, and described what he found in The Architectural Record.

The lust for discovery first stirred in Gelett Burgess when he entered the Salon des Indépendants and caught his first glimpse of a painting by one of the "Wild Men of Paris"--that is to say, he does those we know as "Cubists."

Here is how he describes that first glimpse:

"I had scarcely entered the Salon des Indépendants when I heard shrieks of laughter coming from an adjoining wing. I hurried along from room to room under the high ceilings and said I came upon a party of well-dressed Parisians in a paroxysm of merriment, passing through weeping eyes at a picture. Even in my haste, I had noticed other spectators hurrying hysterically in and out of the galleries; I had caught sight of paintings that made me gasp.

"But here I stopped in amazement. It was a thing to startle even Paris. I realized for the first time that my views on art needed a radical reconstruction. Suddenly I had entered a new world: a universe of ugliness. And, ever since, I have been mentally standing on my head in the endeavor to get a new point of view on beauty so as to understand and appreciate this new movement in art.

"'Une Soirée dans le Désert' was a fearful initiation.

"It was a painting of a nude female, seated on a stretch of sand, devouring her own knee. The gore dripped into a wine glass. A palm tree and two castles furnished the environment. Two large snakes with target-shaped eyes snaked at the debauch, while two small gnat-like 'buried away from the scene.

"What did it all mean? The drawing was crude past all belief; the color was as atrocious as the subject. Had a sign of art begun? Was ugliness to supersede beauty, technique to give way to naïveté, and violent discordant colors, a network of horrid lines, take the place of subtle, studied nuances of tonal tints? Was nothing sacred, not even beauty?"

"Eccentric School of Painting Increases Its Vogue in the Current Art Exhibition," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1911, page 65, clipping by Le Courier de la Presse.

The Lost Center

Jean-Claude Lebensztejn
Translated by Trevor Stark

Originally published as “Centre Perdu (ballet des lumineuses prunelles),” in *Déplacements* (Paris: Collection Fabula, les presses du réel, 2013), 80–97.

“Eccentric” and “eccentricity” are, at their origin, terms linked to the vocabulary of geometry and astronomy. Applied to human comportment, to a mode of thought, an attitude, a property, the words are Anglicisms employed in the French language since the nineteenth century, which was the golden age of eccentrics (two remarkable prototypes from the end of the eighteenth century are William Beckford in England and the Marquis de Brunoy in France). The same goes for the dandy. These terms were popularized with romanticism, especially late romanticism (Gautier, Baudelaire), from which they seem impossible to dissociate. They designate, therefore, a manner of being that sets itself voluntarily apart from the conventions of dominant society; “opposed to received habits,” writes Littré, qualifying these usages as neologisms.¹

Not that times prior lacked those we have since called “eccentrics,” but they referred to them by other names: “*originaux*” for example, like that nephew of Rameau immortalized by Diderot, who elicited mixed feelings in him (“I don’t think highly of these originals”).² In their linguistic evocations, these two terms are almost opposites. The original is opposed to the copy, it has no model, it is marked by ideas of the proper and the originary; the eccentric is defined in relation to a center from which it is ejected, a norm from which it differentiates itself. The term “original” implies an irony that has no place in the case of the eccentric: “We

This text, revised here, was the subject of a lecture at the École cantonale d’art du Valais, Sierre, Switzerland, in 2005, given at the invitation of Claire de Ribaupierre in the context of a seminar on eccentricity, and of a talk at the Institut national d’histoire de l’art in 2006, invited by Patrick de Haas (seminar on art at its limits) (...) For their help, I thank Rinaldo Censi, Patrice Cotensin, Elitza Duguerova (Mayakovsky), Francesco Galluzzi, Romy Golan (Kimball), Georg Holländer, Patrick Javault, Sibylle Seelkopf (title page of *Verlust der Mitte*), Hervé Vanel, and Christopher Wood. [Translator’s note: I wish to thank Jean-Claude Lebensztejn and *les presses du réel* for their permission to translate and republish this essay. All translations into English are my own unless otherwise noted. Notes in square brackets have been added for this translation.]

¹ [Littré, “Excentrique,” in *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, v. II (Paris: L. Hachette, 1873–74).]

² [Translator’s note: Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen rendered this passage from the narrator’s introduction, “I have no great esteem for such eccentrics.” Denis Diderot, *Rameau’s Nephew and Other Works*, trans. Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 9.]

call, proverbially and ironically, *an original*,” Furetière says, “a man who is ridiculous and uncommon in his manners, who provokes laughter through the novelty of his actions.”³ The nineteenth century was an era of violent ideological and artistic opposition, taking place at the heart of the dominant bourgeoisie, between a center that called itself the “*juste milieu*” and a rebellion that labelled this center with injurious terms like bourgeois, philistines, *épiciers*.⁴ The expression “*juste milieu*,” by which the July monarchy characterized itself (“We are seeking to maintain ourselves in a *juste milieu*, equally removed from the excesses of popular power as from royal abuses of power”⁵), referred just as much to writers and artists in harmony with the bourgeoisie of Louis-Philippe: it consisted of being neither too reactionary nor too innovative.⁶ The watchword among these figures was the verse of Casimir Delavigne:

May we love the novelties of prudent innovators [*Aïmons les nouveautés en novateurs
prudents.*]⁷

A prudence that delimits a space of centrality and of transgression. The artists of the *juste milieu*—writers including Delavigne, Augier and Ponsard (all three from the Académie Française), the painters Delaroche and Vernet, among many others—established the norms of taste and the borders that would be immortalized by the dramaturge François Ponsard, in a line situated at the heart of his comedy *Honor and Money* [*L'honneur et l'argent*, 1853]:

When the border is crossed, there is no longer a limit [*Quand la borne est franchie, il
n'est plus de limite.*]⁸

This verse was soon thereafter cited derisively by writers including Banville⁹, Asselineau¹⁰, Baudelaire, Flaubert¹¹, and Verlaine. It became such a joke that the author, republishing his

³ “Original” in Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire* (1690).

⁴ [Translator’s note: Literally “grocer,” *épicier* was used as an expression of contempt toward petit bourgeois vulgarity. Littré defines it as “Pejorative. An *épicier* is a person whose thoughts do not transcend his business, and who has vulgar ideas and tastes. *Littérature, idées d’épicier.*” Littré, “Épicier,” in *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, vol. II.]

⁵ Louis-Philippe, “Réponse du roi à l’adresse de la ville de Gaillac (Tarn), 29 janvier 1831,” *Le Moniteur universel* (January 31, 1831).

⁶ Léon Rosenthal, “Le juste milieu,” in *Du romantisme au réalisme, essai sur l’évolution de la peinture en France de 1830 à 1848* (Paris: H. Laurens, 1914). (Republished by Éditions Macula, 1987.)

⁷ Casimir Delavigne, *Les comédiens* (Paris: J. –N. Barba, 1820), Act III, Scene 12.

⁸ François Ponsard, *L’honneur et l’argent* (Paris: Gautier et Languereau, 1853), Act III, Scene 5.

⁹ Théodore de Banville, “Preface,” in *Odes funambulesques* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1859), 18. Banville, “Le mot,” in *Nous tous* (Paris: G. Charpentier et Cie., 1884), 179.

¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire’s annotations to the preface of Charles Asselineau, *La Double Vie* (1858). Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes, v. II*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 102.

¹¹ Gustave Flaubert, “Style des grands écrivains” and “Imbéciles. Littérature de Jocrisses,” in “Le Sottisier,” *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Gustave Flaubert, *Œuvres complètes, v. VII: Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: A. Quantin, 1885), xxxvi.

play twelve years later, believed he had to modify his verse (however fruitlessly), so that it read:

When the rule is transgressed, there is no longer a limit [*Quand la règle est franchie, il n'est plus de limite.*]¹²

At the center, hence, the delimited space of the *juste milieu*, beyond, a limitlessness that is the site of *eccentricity*: the obscure space, for example, to which the critic and future academician Jules Claretie relegates “the eccentric author of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.”¹³ The space where Verlaine places himself, in recalling his liaison with Rimbaud:

Leave the fear of the orgy
And all scruples to the good hermit
Because when the border is crossed
Ponsard wants no more limits.

[Laisant la crainte de l'orgie
Et le scrupule au bon ermite,
Puisque quand la borne est franchie
Ponsard ne veut plus de limite.]¹⁴

All is apparently quite clear. Yet this limitlessness is nothing but the limit of an enclosure into which all those that push eccentricity beyond reason are placed; for, according to the doctor Paul Moreau de Tours (son of the author of *Hashish*¹⁵): “the eccentric is a permanent candidate for madness, but he doesn't fall into it; he stops himself at the edge of the abyss.... For a doctor, the eccentric is an unbalanced person who has the privilege of not being locked up.”¹⁶ In brief, the madman is locked up and the eccentric is not—or not so far—but both are excluded from the center that maintains the norm.

Because he escapes imprisonment, the eccentric is intolerable to legitimate culture. Even Erwin Panofsky, pope of art history in his day, could not countenance “*mad geniuses*

¹² Ponsard, *L'honneur et l'argent, Œuvres complètes, v. II* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1865), Act III, Scene 5.

¹³ Jules Claretie, “Chronique,” *Diogène* (March 24, 1863). W.T. Bandy and Claude Pichois, eds. *Baudelaire devant ses contemporains* (Monaco: Éditions du rocher, 1957), 190.

¹⁴ Paul Verlaine, “Laeti et errabundi,” *Parallèlement* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1889), 102. [Translator's note: I have translated the poem above for sense. Maintaining rhyme, Martin Sorrell renders the stanza: “We left the righteous hermit to tremble/About sex performed with gay abandon—/For once they've crossed the Rubicon,/Even sticklers throw the rule book away.” Paul Verlaine, *Selected Poems*, trans. Martin Sorrell. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 201.]

¹⁵ [Translator's note: Lebensztejn is referring to Paul Moreau de Tours' father, Jacques-Joseph Moreau and his text *Du Hachisch et de l'aliénation mentale* (Paris: Librairie de Fortin, Masson, et cie., 1848).]

¹⁶ Paul Moreau de Tours, *Les excentriques. Étude psychologique et anecdotique* (Paris: Société d'éditions scientifiques, 1894), 6–7.

walking all the time at the brink of an abyss.”¹⁷ According to William S. Heckscher, his disciple and biographer: “He disliked ‘unreliable’ people. Of William Blake, he said, ‘I can’t stand him. I don’t mind if a man is really mad, like Hölderlin. True madness may yield poetical flowers. But I don’t like mad geniuses walking all the time on the brink of the abyss. Blake is all negative and unreliable.’”¹⁸

“*Unreliable*.” Unsound, not worthy of confidence. Strange reason for rejection. It’s because the eccentric troubles the division between the norm and its exterior, the *hors-norme*, that they invite mistrust and earn this name that expels them from a supposed center. But where, precisely, is this center? Those unsatisfied by this opposition, those who experience their epoch as one defined by alienation, prefer to conceive it in its entirety as a time of generalized eccentricity. “We are living in too eccentric a time to be astonished for a moment at whatever may happen,” Lautréamont wrote in 1869, on the brink of war, defeat, siege, the Commune, and his own death.¹⁹

The art of the center, the art with all the honors bestowed by power and a large public, seems incapable of maintaining itself beyond the moment of its emergence: so much so that all the art that would count for the future, since the middle of the nineteenth century, was this art that popular opinion qualified as eccentric: an art without any support but itself, an art without established norms. “But the soul must be made monstrous,” wrote Rimbaud in 1871 in his *Lettre du Voyant*. “Enormity becoming normal, absorbed by all.”²⁰ This is approximately how Sedlmayr defines modern art since the end of the eighteenth century, with a formula that gave him the title of his book: *The Lost Center*.

...

Hans Sedlmayr (1896–1984), Austrian art historian in the lineage of Alois Riegl, theoretician of a structural analysis of art and specialist in Baroque architecture, was a fervent Catholic and a committed Nazi (he joined the party six years before the *Anschluss*). His book, *Verlust der Mitte. Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit* (*The Lost Center: The Art of the 19th and 20th Centuries as Symptom and Symbol of the Time*—but such a translation is reductive, for the concepts of “*Mitte*” and “*Zeit*” exceed those of “*center*” and “*time*”²¹), published in 1948 on the basis of lectures given in the final years of Nazism, was the most intelligent of those antimodernist pamphlets that proliferated during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s: for example, books by Camille Mauclair in France or those of Thomas

¹⁷ [Translator’s note: English in the original.]

¹⁸ William S. Heckscher, “Erwin Panofsky: A Curriculum Vitae (1969),” in Erwin Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 171.

¹⁹ Comte de Lautréamont, *Chants de Maldoror*, trans. Guy Wernham (New York: New Directions Press, 1965), 277. [Translation modified.]

²⁰ Arthur Rimbaud, “To Paul Demeny [15 May 1871],” in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters, A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 377, 379.

²¹ [Translator’s note: Sedlmayr’s first English translator, Brian Battershaw, opted for the title *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*.]

Craven in the United States. Sedlmayr's book—a bestseller, going through several editions and translated into many languages (though not into French)—can be placed in the lineage of Oswald Spengler and Ernst Jünger, two writers whom the author cites abundantly. In George W. Bush's United States, neoconservative ideology in the person of Roger Kimball has worked to put it back into the spotlight.²²

In 1951, in the German edition (but not in the Austrian edition), Sedlmayr placed his book under the sign of Blaise Pascal²³: “*Die Mittel verlassen, heißt die Menschlichkeit verlassen*,” “to lose the center/middle means to lose humanity,” a loose translation of Fragment Laf 518 of the *Pensées*: “C'est sortir de l'humanité que de sortir du milieu,” a fragment that bears the title “Pyrrh[onisme],” which is to say Skepticism:

Pyrrh. [Skepticism]

Excess, like defect of intellect, is accused of madness. Nothing is good but mediocrity. The majority has settled that, and finds fault with him who escapes it at whichever end. I quite consent to put myself there and refuse to be at the lower end, not because it is low, but because it is an end; for I would likewise refuse to be placed at the top. To leave the mean is to abandon humanity. The greatness of the human soul consists in knowing how to preserve the mean. So far from greatness consisting in leaving it, it consists in not leaving it.²⁴

Pascal's thesis, he explains later, is that “Custom should be followed only because it is custom, and not because it is reasonable or just.”²⁵ By excerpting in his epigraph the penultimate sentence of fragment 518 and translating it as he does, Sedlmayr modifies its meaning and context, making the exit from the mean modernity's characteristic catastrophe, of which art is symbol and symptom.

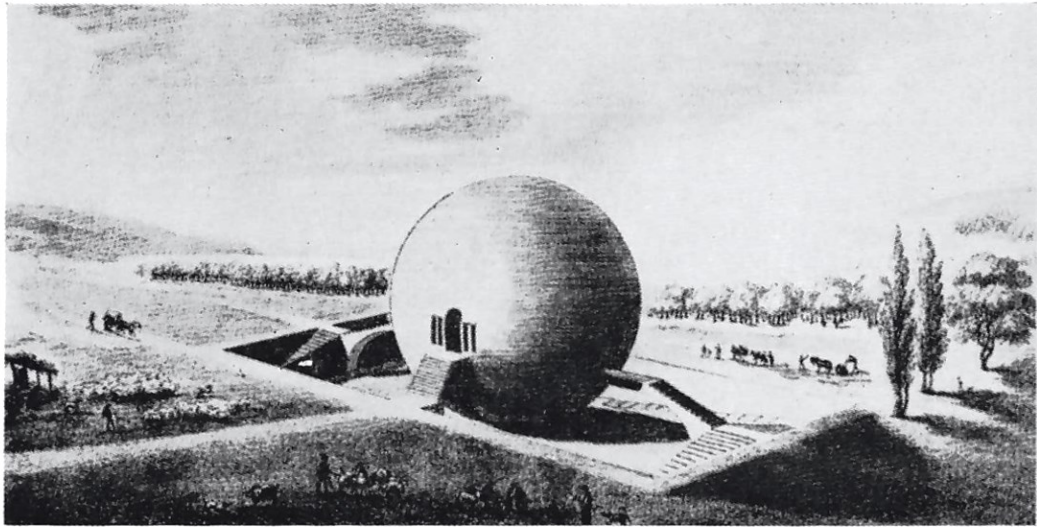
(Since the eighth Austrian edition of 1965, Sedlmayr added to Pascal's phrase two lines by Mayakovsky: “*Alle Mitten sind zerbrochen/und es gibt keine Mitte mehr* [All middles had

²² Roger Kimball, “Art in Crisis,” *The New Criterion*, vol. 24, no. 4 (December 2005), 4–9; republished as the preface to the American reedition of *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (New Brunswick and London: The Library of Conservative Thought, 2006/2007).

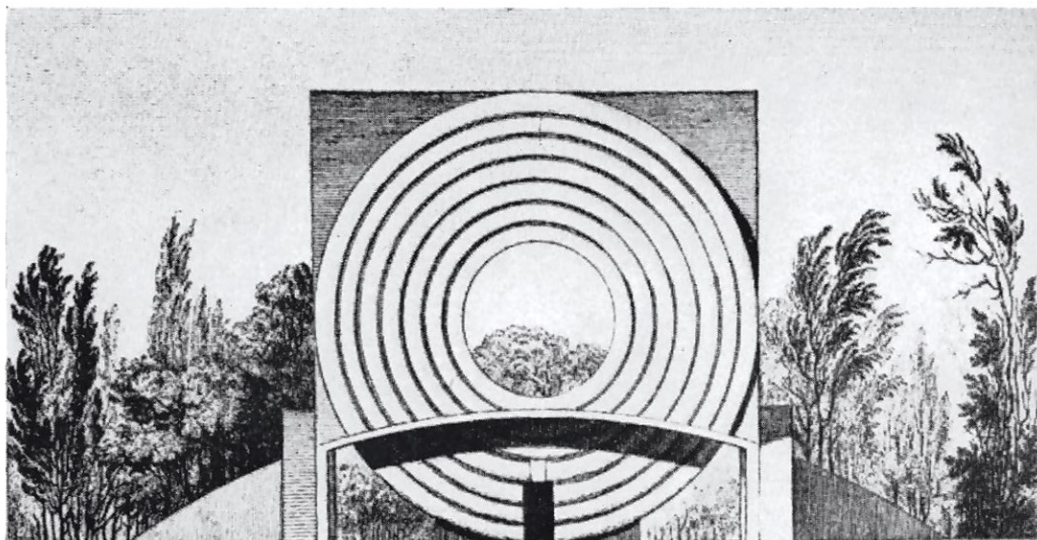
²³ The title pages of the first six Austrian editions (Salzburg: Müller, 1948–1953), and the seventeenth German edition (Frankfurt and Berlin: Ullstein, 1992) carry no epigraphs; in 1951, the German edition, but not the Austrian one, bears the phrase by Pascal discussed above; since 1965, the Austrian edition and the Italian translation (Turin: Borla, 1967) have added to Pascal's phrase the verses by Mayakovsky, retitled *Hymn to Satan* [discussed below]: “All middles had been destroyed/there was no middle ground left on earth.” As for the Anglo-American edition of 1957–58 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co.) it bears a line by Yeats on its title page: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.”

²⁴ Blaise Pascal, “Papiers non-classés, série XXIII, Lafuma, 518,” in *Pensées: Édition paléographique*, ed., Zacharie Tourneur (Paris: Vrin, 1942), 66. [Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. WF Trotter (New York: Dover Publications, 2018), 102–103.]

²⁵ Pascal “Papiers non-classés, série XXIII, Lafuma, 525,” in *Pensées: Édition paléographique*, ed., Zacharie Tourneur (Paris: Vrin, 1942), 67. [Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Trotter, 91.]



LEDOUX: SPHERICAL HOUSE FOR A BAILIFF before 1778
'The monumental has a tendency to invade every department of plastic creation.'
(See page 22.)



LEDOUX: CIRCULAR HOUSE FOR A WHEELWRIGHT
Architecture parlante: the shape of a house revealing its function. (See page 69.)

1. "Ledoux, Spherical House for a Bailiff" and "Ledoux, Circular House for a Wheelwright," plate from Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, trans. Brian Battershaw (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1958).

been destroyed/there was no middle ground left on earth].” They are extracted from the poem *150,000,000*:

From the everyday slime of petty facts,
 one came to light and stood out:
 suddenly
 all middles had been destroyed—
 there was no middle ground left on earth.
 No colors,
 no shades,
 nothing remained—
 besides
 one color staining everything white,
 and another
 bloodying everything the color of blood.²⁶

But the author of *Verlust der Mitte*, by isolating this destruction of all mean or center [*seredina*] from its revolutionary context inverts its positive value—and, what’s more, replaces the title of this collective epic with *Hymn to Satan*.)

Thus, Sedlmayr characterizes art from the end of the eighteenth century to our own day by the loss of the mean/center:

Art has become centrifugal [*die Kunst strebt fort von der Mitte*] ... Art has in a very definite sense become eccentric [*exzentrisch*]. Man seeks to get away from art which should be the mediating element between senses and spirit, and art itself struggles to escape from art in which it has as little satisfaction as man now finds in man.²⁷

The loss of the mean or center—Sedlmayr’s *Mitte* extends beyond a single point: it designates a central region, as in the political or topographical center—is not only the loss of hierarchies, but the loss of the human: of the human in relation to God, because, the author adds, “The lost center of Man is simply God [*die verlorene Mitte des Menschen ist eben Gott*].”²⁸ This entails a regression to the pre-human, to the inorganic, and to the chaotic—to death “in the absolute sense,” the author emphasizes—of which the modern art movements are for him the most chilling manifestation.²⁹

Such is the case with Ledoux’s architecture, which is ordered according to an abstract geometry and which has lost all sense of weight, all sense of hierarchies; it sets a sphere on the ground and treats a customs office like a temple (fig. 1). On this point, Sedlmayr cites (badly) Ledoux’s watchword: “*Pour la première fois on verra sur la même échelle la*

²⁶ Vladimir Mayakovsky, “150,000,000,” in *Selected Poems*, trans. James H. McGavran III (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 227–228.

²⁷ Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte. Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit* (Salzburg: Müller, 1948), 150. [Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, trans. Brian Battershaw (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1958), 152–153.]

²⁸ Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte*, 172–173. [Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 175.]

²⁹ Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte*, 161. [Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 161.]

magnificence du palais et de la guinguette” [“For the first time, people will see the splendour of the palace and the hut treated on the same level”].³⁰

This very deliberate project was immediately noticed, and the architect Jacques-François Blondel, Ledoux’s *maître*, criticized such ambitions: “Such is the result of false pride and a disordered imagination. One confers onto a bourgeois house the air of a *hôtel*, and onto the *hôtel* the pomp of a palace. Have we forgotten, do we no longer feel, that there is a character proper to each building? [...] The essential goal of Architecture is to know how to confer upon the order of the façades a character appropriate to the object we wish to form. A grand architectural order should be applied only to a sacred monument or public building.”³¹ The ruination of hierarchies is typical of romanticism (fig. 2). It is in this way that, in relation to Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, Novalis spoke about “that wonderful romantic ordering—which is oblivious to all rank and worth, firstness and lastness—greatness and smallness.”³² One could add numerous examples, like Friedrich’s desire to raise landscape painting onto the church altar³³, or the gigantic, heroic scale in which Géricault rendered a news item [*fait divers*] in *The Raft of the Medusa*. To those who reproached Friedrich for having hoisted a landscape onto the altar, thus provoking a “pathological emotion” in the spectator, and for not observing the hierarchy between the essential and the incidental in his paintings, he retorted:

People are always talking about ‘incidentals’; but nothing is incidental in a picture, everything is indispensable to the whole effect [...] The proper subordination of the parts to the whole is not achieved by neglecting incidental features, but by correct grouping and by the distribution of light and shadow.³⁴

Ledoux and Friedrich are not the only artists that one is surprised to find in *Art in Crisis*: Sedlmayr sets his sights on other artists who were not very well-known at the time, but who have since become central to our modernity. Boullée, Lequeu, Goya, Grandville, Cézanne, Seurat, Ensor, Matisse, Picasso, Franz Marc, cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism—figures, respectively, of death, chaos, and hell—each are taken in turn as manifestations of the serious illness that is infecting contemporary civilization, according to the author. His capsule histories have something compelling about them: after Goya, who reduces man to the state

³⁰ Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, *L’Architecture considérée sous le rapport de l’art, des mœurs, et de la législation (1804)* (Nördlingen: A. Uhl, 1981), 18. Cited in Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte*, 65. [Battershaw’s English translation of Sedlmayr’s gloss of the French in Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 65.]

³¹ Jacques-François Blondel, “Lettre LXX,” in *L’Homme du monde éclairé par les arts. v. I* (Amsterdam: M. de Bastide, 1774), 259.

³² Novalis, “445. On Wilhelm Meister,” in *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, trans. and ed., David W. Wood (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 70.

³³ [Translator’s note: The reference here is to Friedrich’s *Cross in the Mountains* or *Tetschen Altar*, 1808.]

³⁴ Caspar David Friedrich, *Caspar David Friedrich in Briefen und Bekenntnissen*, ed., Sigrid Hinz (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1968), 150, 154, 84. [Translated in Richard Friedenthal, ed., *Letters of the great artists: From Blake to Pollock, Vol. 2* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), 33–34.]



2. Caspar David Friedrich, *Cross in the Mountains or Tetschen Altar*, 1807/1808. Oil on canvas. 45.3 × 43.3 in. (115 × 110 cm). Presented in frame designed by Christian Gottlieb Kühn. Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden.

of a monster, and Cézanne, who treats him like a still life, come Seurat, who renders man an automaton, Matisse, a wallpaper motif, and the cubists, an engineering model.³⁵

What is striking about this singular book is not only the apocalyptic spirit that animates it, but the author's fascination with what he execrates. As often occurs, this enemy of modern art understands it better in its radicality than its partisans, who wish to integrate it into a progressive continuity and, consequently, are disposed to sand off its sharp edges. Christopher Wood, in the preface to his anthology of the Vienna School of art history, observes that, in contrast to liberals who were closed off to modern art like Panofsky and Gombrich, Sedlmayr, fired by hatred, hits the bullseye almost every time.³⁶ It's not surprising that he attracted the interest of Walter Benjamin, who commented on Sedlmayr's manifesto from 1931, "Toward a Rigorous Study of Art."³⁷ Frederick J. Schwartz has recently aligned

³⁵ Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte*, 127. [Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 134.]

³⁶ Christopher S. Wood, "Introduction," in *The Vienna School Reader*, ed. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 48–51.

³⁷ [Walter Benjamin, "Rigorous Study of Art: On the First Volume of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* (1931/1933)" in *The Vienna School Reader*, 439–452.]

Sedlmayr's conception of time with Benjamin's.³⁸ After the war, this unrepentant Nazi (unrepentant but prudent: he wrote in Catholic magazines under the pseudonyms Hans Schwarz and Ernst Hermann) found an unexpected ally in Theodor Adorno.³⁹ More recently, the painter Gerhard Richter, in conversation with Benjamin Buchloh, takes up in his own way the principle, but not the religious conclusion, of Sedlmayr's book:

Gerhard Richter: I see the basic fact [for contemporary art] as the loss of the Center.

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh: In Sedlmayr's sense? You can't be serious?

G.R.: Yes, I am; what he was saying was absolutely right. He just drew the wrong conclusions, that's all. He wanted to reconstruct the Center that had been lost... I've no desire to reconstruct it.⁴⁰

Already in 1956, as an art student in Dresden, Richter had mentioned Sedlmayr and the lost center in his thesis, and, in 1973, noted "To approve the loss of 'center,' along with the loss of convictions, of attitude, and of identity."⁴¹

For Sedlmayr, the eccentricity of art is an eccentricity devoid of center. The history of modern art and literature is the history of repeated attempts at re-centering what had been considered eccentric. For us, Baudelaire is at the heart of French literature from the mid-nineteenth century, but his contemporaries, and even his supporters, like Théophile Gautier, saw his art as extreme, bursting the bounds of the known world. When he had the audacity to present himself to the Académie française, a candidacy that almost no one took seriously, Sainte-Beuve, who held the chair of Casimir Delavigne in that institution, and whose program of prudent novelty he had cited approvingly, presented the candidate in these terms:

In short, M. Baudelaire has found a way to construct, at the extremities of a strip of land held to be uninhabitable and beyond the confines of known Romanticism, a bizarre pavilion, a folly, highly decorated, highly tormented but graceful and mysterious [...] This singular folly, with its marquetry inlays, of a planned and composite originality, which for some time has drawn the eye toward the extreme

³⁸ Frederick J. Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 243–250.

³⁹ [Translator's note: See Christopher Wood's discussion of Sedlmayr and Adorno in Wood, "Introduction," in *The Vienna School Reader*, 49–50.]

⁴⁰ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "An Interview with Gerhard Richter (1986)," in *Gerhard Richter*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 18.

⁴¹ Christine Mehring, Jeanne Nugent, and Jon Seydl, eds. *Gerhard Richter: Early Work, 1951–1972* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum; Getty Research Institute, 2010), 38–40, 50–57, 63–64. [Translator's note: On Richter's reading of Sedlmayr, see in particular Jeanne Anne Nugent, "From Hans Sedlmayr to Mars and Back Again: New Problems in the Old History of Gerhard Richter's Radical Reworking of Modern Art," in *Gerhard Richter: Early Work*, 36–62.]

point of the Romantic Kamchatka, I call *Baudelaire's folly*. The author is content to have done something impossible, in a place where it was thought no one could go.⁴²

Sainte-Beuve added, as a mordant contrast, that “M. Baudelaire loses nothing by being seen [in person], and whereas one expects to find a strange, eccentric man, one finds oneself in the presence of a courteous, respectful, exemplary candidate, a good boy, refined in speech and entirely classical in form.”⁴³

Baudelaire, who we might expect to be hurt by this sanctimonious praise, cited it positively in an anonymous summary of Sainte-Beuve’s article, where he describes himself as “more tickled than irritated”⁴⁴—as if he preferred this extreme singularity to the centrality that posterity would assign to him. Posterity has indeed accorded to Baudelaire a central position, but that centrality has effaced the disorienting force that the scandal of his eccentricity maintained intact. In the final analysis, Baudelaire’s problem going forward was to preserve both: to create a novel approach that would make of his extreme position a new field of action. In his letter of gratitude to the critic, he wrote, “As for what you call my Kamschatka, if I often received encouragement as vigorous as that, I believe I should have the strength to make an immense Siberia of it, but a warm and populous one.”⁴⁵

Mallarmé, several decades later, saw in what he called the “crisis of verse” the staging of a more general crisis of history.⁴⁶ At the end of his life, he carried his challenge to centrality all the way into typography. In an observation about his poem *Un coup de Dés jamais n’abolira le Hasard*, in which the textual apparatus makes words explode across the page, he notes that in a classical poem, the margin of white frames the text; the *Coup de Dés* situates this margin inside the text as much as outside it: “The ‘blank spaces,’ in reality, assume importance and catch the eye at once; versification has always demanded them, as a surrounding silence, so that a lyric or a short-lined piece usually occupies only about the central one-third of its page: I am not transgressing against this arrangement, merely dispersing its components.”⁴⁷

The blankness of the page, this “spacing of the act of reading,” where “the paper intervenes,” puts to work, concretely and symbolically, that which animates the cultural and

⁴² Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, “Des prochaines élections à l’Académie,” *Le Constitutionnel* (January 20, 1862). Sainte-Beuve, *Nouveaux Lundis*, v. I (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1863), 398–399. [Cited and translated in Roberto Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 260–261.]

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Charles Baudelaire, “Une réforme à l’Académie,” published anonymously in *La Revue anecdotique*, at the end of January 1862. [Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, v. II, 189.]

⁴⁵ Baudelaire’s letter to Sainte-Beuve, circa January 25, 1862. [Reproduced and translated in Théophile Gautier, *Charles Baudelaire, His Life*, trans. Guy Thorne (London: Greening & Co., 1915), 143.]

⁴⁶ [Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis of Verse,” in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 201–213].

⁴⁷ Mallarmé, “Observation relative au Poème *Un Coup de Dés jamais n’abolira le Hasard*,” *Cosmopolis, Revue internationale* (May 1897), 417. [Translated in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 262–263].

social spaces in which humans circulate.⁴⁸ And should anyone find this reading too far-fetched, I would remind them that—since 1968, according to Yves Barel—to the “eccentric” has been added the “marginal,” a term that represents, in its very name and position, society itself as a centralized textual body.⁴⁹ The marginal is excluded and excludes itself from this body; but, insofar as the concept of the eccentric is associated with notions of poetic luxury or destructive aestheticism, the figure of the marginal is more somber and lawless. The eccentric rejected the aesthetic and social conventions of the world in which they lived; the marginal also violates juridical, political, economic rules. The eccentric squandered their fortune or racked up debts; the marginal may squat, steal, deal, prostitute themselves. In the bourgeois imaginary of the nineteenth century, the former, as incarnated by Sainte-Beuve’s Baudelaire, “intoxicate themselves with hashish to ponder about it afterward, ... take opium and thousands of other abominable drugs in cups of the finest porcelain”⁵⁰; in the bourgeois imaginary at the end of the twentieth century, the latter gets high on crack or crystal meth. The former emerged from the bourgeoisie or, more rarely, from the aristocracy in decline; the latter, from the explosive collapse of class relations. What links the two is their shared exclusion, dictated or not by the powers that be—an exclusion that the labels of eccentric and marginal anchor in language and in the collective consciousness. These labels imply the establishment of a center in relation to which eccentricity and marginality are constituted as such. Whereas it’s precisely the center itself that eccentricity rejects—and if England was the country *par excellence* of such eccentrics, it’s because, according to a fragment by Novalis, “every Englishman is an *island*.”⁵¹ In this way, “eccentricity” stands for modernity: modern art, and with it modern science and thought, rejects the idea of a center, even as it establishes new norms: such is its profound ambiguity. I recall here the triple epistemological decentering that Freud, in 1917, assigned to Copernicus, to Darwin, and to himself: humanity, in its sovereign mastery, is no longer at the center of the world, cosmologically, biologically, or psychologically.⁵² And I recall once more the Derridean logic of the supplement and the *parergon*, which undermines every reassuring opposition between inside and outside, center and margin.⁵³ For if modernity meant anything, it might have been this above all: the calling into question of a centrality that sought to maintain itself by establishing the eccentric and marginal as such.

The same goes for art. Art, as Sedlmayr knew perfectly well, is no longer central to itself. Jean Dubuffet said as much in a set of lecture notes from 1945: “However, think

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Yves Barel, *La marginalité sociale* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1982), 37–38.

⁵⁰ Sainte-Beuve, “Des prochaines élections à l’Académie,” *Nouveaux Lundis*, v. 1, 398–399. [Cited and translated in Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*, 260.]

⁵¹ [Novalis, “1065,” in *Notes For a Romantic Encyclopaedia*, 180.]

⁵² Sigmund Freud, “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis,” *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917–1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 135–144.

⁵³ [Translator’s note: On the *parergon*, see Jacques Derrida, “Parergon,” in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian MacLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15–148.]

particularly about the arts that have no name—fortunately until now they have had no name, people haven't quite come to realize that they *are* arts, owing to which ignorance they blossom and abound freely: the art of speaking, the art of walking, the art of blowing cigarette-smoke gracefully or in an off-hand manner. The art of seduction. The art of dancing the waltz, the art of roasting a chicken. The art of giving. The art of receiving."⁵⁴

In brief, that which constitutes an art of living: an art that is no longer opposed to life. In this regard, the dandy, who made of his person and of his life a work of art, and who transformed the superficial into the essential, became the paradigm of an art without works and without limits; but also the incarnation of a refusal of all centrality outside of his own. "Whether these men are nicknamed exquisites, *incroyables*, *beaux*, lions or dandies," writes Baudelaire, "they all spring from the same womb; they all partake of the same characteristic quality of opposition and revolt."⁵⁵ However, he continues, "Dandyism, an institution beyond the laws, itself has rigorous laws which all its subjects must strictly obey."⁵⁶ This legality outside the law makes of the dandy, on the one hand, the supreme eccentric and, on the other, one who refuses the idea of eccentricity itself because they refuse to be situated in relation to a centrality they reject.

This position makes of the eccentric an emblem among others—the feline, the child, the criminal—of the narcissism that captured Freud's attention. In 1914, on the eve of a conflict that rang the death knell of Eurocentrism, Freud recalled the fascination exerted by those beings who pose as their own center.

For it seems very evident that another person's narcissism has a great attraction for those who have renounced part of their own narcissism and are in search of object-love. The charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us, such as cats and the large beasts of prey. Indeed, even great criminals and humorists, as they are represented in literature, compel our interest by the narcissistic consistency with which they manage to keep away from their ego anything that would diminish it.⁵⁷

The cat, whose affectation is to consider humans as but satellites to its own centrality, was long considered as a diabolical being (Baudelaire called the cat a "sweet vampire" [*vampire*

⁵⁴ Jean Dubuffet, "Avant-projet d'une conférence populaire sur la peinture (1945)," in *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 36. [Translated in Jean Dubuffet, *Jean Dubuffet: Towards an Alternative Reality* (New York: Pace Publications, 1987), 45.]

⁵⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), 28.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁷ Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 89.

sucre)⁵⁸, and it's in this way that Théodore de Banville explained the negative judgements that classical thought and science formulated about this animal, a living challenge to humanity's vanity and property relations:

Upon reading the appallingly unfair piece that Buffon consecrated to the Cat, we may reconstruct, if we had forgotten it, the entire reign of Louis XIV when man believed he had become the sun and center of the world, and could not imagine that thousands of stars had been tossed into the ether for something other than his own personal use. And so the *savant* in ruffled cuffs who reproaches this gracious animal for stealing what it needs to eat seems to assume among Cats the exact notion of property and the thorough knowledge of codes, which, happily, have not been accorded to animals.⁵⁹

The classical epoch made of the cat a symbol of alterity; it thereby assured its proper centrality. Baudelaire or Banville, both poets of exile, were fascinated by the cat because this companion animal is also an animal in exile. According to Banville, there is exile and there is *exile*. The true exile is devoid of return, even of a place to return to; the exile of those who "wherever they are, are far from home":⁶⁰

They sometimes encounter their uncommon brothers who are, like them, exiled, and, exchanging a hand gesture and a sad smile, they lament the very stone that, transported far from its sun, pales and turns to dust, and the frostbitten lion that, in the cage where man has imprisoned him, stretches out his sovereign limbs and yawns with disdain, showing his pink tongue, and sometimes looks on with astonishment at the eagle, a captive like himself, whose eyes are fixed upon the stars, never lowering his gaze, and who, through flaming clouds ripped by a hurricane, follows with a never-weary wing the vertiginous flight of lightning.⁶¹

For his part, Mallarmé characterised his internal exile thusly: "I don't know what the public is. [...] I don't live in Paris, but in a room."⁶²

In the sadness of a distant exile, a place without soil or sky, the ontological exile of the artist, in the cages of zoos where we have stored away those we have labelled eccentric, the eagle may be a poet and the lion a cat. "We know," Banville writes, "that the great [Luís de] Camões, unable to afford a candle, had his cat lend him the clarity of his pupils to write a canto of *The Lusíads*."⁶³ I don't know where the poet of *The Exiles* found this sublimely

⁵⁸ Baudelaire, "Aphorisms du carnet d'Asselineau," in *Œuvres complètes, v. I.*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 710.

⁵⁹ Théodore de Banville, "Le Chat," in *Les Animaux chez eux* (Paris: L. Baschet, 1882), 82.

⁶⁰ Banville, "Préface," in *Les Exilés* (Paris: G. Charpentier et Cie., 1887), 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶² Interview with Mallarmé about George Rodenbach's *Voile*, first published in *Le Petit Bleu du matin*, March 20, 1894. Reproduced in François Ruchon, ed., *L'Amitié de Stéphane Mallarmé et Georges Rodenbach* (Geneva: P. Cailler, 1949), 119; Mallarmé, "Un Belge à la Comédie-Française," in *Œuvres complètes, v. II*, ed. Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 710.

⁶³ Banville, "Le Chat," 84.

sentimental anecdote; I don't know whether it has a grain of truth. But it says much about the subject that has occupied us; the collusion of the one-eyed and impoverished poet with the luminous pupils of the cat annihilates every center. In this center, that, must we repeat, is not exactly God, but deified money, is silently substituted, in the dead of night, the centerless focal point of an undefinable orbit.