

morphosis, would like to eternalize itself for a moment and, for a moment, become equal to all of art. But to become equal to art is already to return to absence, and absence alone is "eternity." The image, we feel, is joy, for it is a limit beside the indefinite; the possibility of suspension at the heart of a shifting movement; through it, we believe ourselves to be the masters of an absence become form, and the dense night itself seems to open itself to the resplendence of an absolute clarity. Yes, the image is joy—but close to it lies nothingness; nothingness appears at the limit of this image, and all the power of the image, drawn from the abyss in which it is founded, cannot be expressed except by calling to nothingness. Citing a famous line from his last novel, Malraux turns it into the song of glory of artistic creation: "The greatest mystery is not that we were thrown by chance between the profusion of matter and the profusions of the stars; rather, it is that in this prison we drew from ourselves images so powerful as to negate our nothingness." But perhaps one must add that the image, capable of negating nothingness, is also the gaze of nothingness upon us. It is light, and it is immensely heavy. It shines, and it is the diffuse thickness in which nothing reveals itself. It is the interstice, the spot of this black sun, a laceration that gives us, under the appearance of a dazzling brilliance, the negative in the inexhaustible negative depths. This is why the image seems so profound and so empty, so threatening and so attractive, always richer in meanings than those with which we provide it, and also poor, null, and silent, for in it this dark powerlessness, deprived of a master, advances; it is the powerlessness of death as a beginning—again.

### § 3 Museum Sickness

I draw the following remark from one of Curtius's essays: "The possibility of always having Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Goethe completely at our disposal shows that literature has a different manner of being than art." A striking remark, at first almost obvious. However, we quickly realize that this is falsely obvious. Curtius seems to be writing at a time in which there are no long-playing records, no audiovisual means of communication, no museums, and certainly not the "imaginary Museum," which the improvement in the technology of reproduction continues to enrich with prodigious generosity. That art and all of art can be brought to each person, at any moment, is the considerable event that Malraux has made perceptible to us and from which he drew a new outlook and seemingly a new exigency for artistic creation. We cannot forget this. But we are aware that this change could not have occurred by accident. Technical advances give us art, just as they give us the earth; they give us possession of everything and access to everything through a power of domination that scares some and drives others but can be stopped by no one. Let us not linger on this fact, which is of the first order, and let us take another look at Curtius.

He would perhaps say to us (if he could still speak to us), I doubt that a work of art is reproducible, when, in fact, it is the characteristic of great literary works to be transmitted without loss of sub-

stance and without alteration, indefinitely. This is what surprises us, and, in truth, how can he say that we have Homer, Dante—I would also add Mallarmé, René Char—completely at our disposal? The word completely is provocative. On the contrary, we know that no work, be it a literary one, be it the most immediately contemporary one, is at our disposal, for we must make ourselves receptive to it. We know that we have almost nothing of the *Iliad* and almost nothing of the *Divine Comedy*. We know that these works, even if they are transmitted without error, escape us and are estranged from us by the reading that makes them accessible to us. Everything separates us from them: the gods, the world, the language, what we know and what we do not, but above all our knowledge—our knowledge of Homer and our always more precise knowledge of what to attribute to the civilization of Homer. Here, familiarity succeeds only in making the strangeness of books go unnoticed—even by a mind as subtle as that of Curtius. It is very difficult to understand why he who denies that the work of art is reproducible, perhaps rightly so, accepts the indefinite transmission of literary works as a given, their power of communication that would bring them to us without harm and, while remaining themselves, would be marvelously enriched by our ignorant and learned reading of them.

This debate has a long history. It is not a question of printing but of writing. What Plato says against writing (such a surprise that Plato should still be free to denounce in the written exigency a dangerous and ruinous innovation) is just about everything that Georges Duthuit formulates with vehemence against the Museum and the facility of reproduction.<sup>1</sup> Plato, it is true, is not concerned with literature but with thought. What is this speech, he says, that is spoken by no one, that only knows how to repeat what it says, that never responds to the one who questions it, no more than it defends itself against the one who attacks it; a speech that no one speaks and yet lets itself be spoken by anyone, without discernment or preference or refusal, appallingly abstract, having been torn

from the place and life that conceived it, that thus wanders without authority, without name, here and there, with a blind vagrancy; a dead language that is capable of making us dead without memory, because it is, henceforth, written speech that will remember in our place, will think in our absence?<sup>2</sup> → *Le Bête de Lascaux*

This severity of Plato's (a protest made, with a first and deceptive appearance, in the name of a reasonable "humanism," that of Socrates, for whom there must be, behind every speech, a living man intending to vouch for it, to affirm it, and to affirm himself in it) cannot be seen as vain for having been unable to do anything against manuscripts, nor later against books. Today still, Heidegger is very close to seeing Socrates—who did not write—as one of the last men of thought: "And since Socrates, all thoughtful meditation has but led to books." Why this disdain for written things? It is undoubtedly linked to the idea that writing is second in relation to speech (as if one wrote only in order to relate, restore, and make oral communication last), just as the hatred of images, capable of repeating the singular work perfectly, is linked to a judgment made about technology. Mechanical production is essentially capable of reproduction: this is the meaning of the machine. What it produces, it reproduces indefinitely, identically, with a power that is carried out as if outside of duration. A power of the strongest, but a power that has always been feared, not only because it promises us monotony but perhaps for a reason more profound. One might say that the possibility of reproducing and of being reproduced reveals to us the fundamental poverty of being: that something could be repeated means that this power seems to presuppose a lack in being, and that being is lacking a richness that would not allow it to be repeated. Being is repeated, this is what the existence of machines means; but if being were an inexhaustible overabundance, there would be neither mechanical repetition nor mechanical perfection. Technology is thus the penury of being become the power of man, the decisive sign of Western culture.

On the contrary, art and works of art seem to affirm and perhaps restore the dignity of being: its richness escaping all measure, its force of renewal, its creative generosity, and everything that the

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words *life, intensity, depth, nature* call forth. Art tells us of the being that is not repeated, that is always other; the brilliance of the beginning, the first light. How could the artistic work, about which one already speaks inaccurately when one says that it is produced, not be opposed to everything that tries to make of it something fit to be reproduced? How could there not be an essential opposition between the solitude of the work, its existence that is always momentary, its uncertain certainty, its light all the more clear that it may go out at any moment, and the particular mode of reality assured it by the techniques of reproduction? At issue here is not a conflict between the one and the many, between the painting jealously preserved by a narrow-minded admirer and the right to be seen by the greatest number. Something else is at stake. In the case of art, the power to reproduce, in being carried out, changes the meaning of what is reproduced. It is not that the work escapes this power and that the copy always allows what is singular in the work to be lost. One could very well accept a picture taking the place of the original perfectly, a representation completely replacing presence. But what would the result be? More than an invisible destruction of the work: a destruction of art, the proof that what we thought was linked to the infinite overabundance of life is so poor as to lend itself to repetition and not be betrayed by the empty permanence of mechanical reproduction. To which one will answer that the painter, when he paints, continues to attest to the ability of painting always to begin anew, without repetition, without disruption, without consequence, and that the mechanical diffusion of the work does not prove anything against the singular movement of discovery that has for its place the painting. But is this so certain? Do we not sense that if the work were intimately associated only with the nonrepeatable essence of being, then its exact reproduction could never be carried out, no more than a superior life form could, until further notice, reengender itself identically? It is thus art in its very heart that is affected, perhaps compromised by this multiple presence of the singular painting, a presence that makes certain possibilities appear and ruins many others: henceforth there is no original, no organic link between the work and the painter;

soon perhaps there will hardly be a painter at all, but instead an anonymous, impersonal power of "creation." There is no one who does not obscurely feel—to deplore it or to delight in it—the dominant influence that the machine's new role in diffusing the work of art will soon exert upon the work's creation. So many temptations and so many vicissitudes. Hence, perhaps, the anxious thoughts that have led Duthuit to write his important book against Malraux, a book that is enormous but also moving, for it is the sign of a certain despair in the face of this disorientation of art, the perilous nature of which the experience of the imaginary Museum has caused us to neglect.

However, this danger is neither obscure nor new. One has but to enter any place in which works of art are put together in great number to experience this museum sickness, analogous to mountain sickness, which is made up of a feeling of vertigo and suffocation, to which all pleasure of seeing and all desire to let oneself be moved quickly succumb. Of course, in the first moment, there is shock, the physical certainty of an imperious, singular presence, however indefinitely multiplied it is. Painting is truly there, in person. But it is a person so sure of herself, so pleased with her prestige and so imposing, exposing herself with such a desire for spectacle that, transformed into a queen of theater, she transforms us in turn into spectators who are very impressed, then a little uncomfortable, then a little bored. Surely there is something insuperably barbarous in the custom of museums. How did things come to this? How did the solitary, exclusive affirmation that is fiercely turned toward a secret point that it barely indicates to us, lend itself, in each painting, to this spectacular sharing, to this noisy and distinguished encounter that is in fact called a show? There is also something surprising about libraries, but at least we are not obliged to read all the books at once (not yet). Why do artistic works have this encyclopedic ambition that leads them to arrange themselves together, to be seen with each other, by a gaze so general, so confused, and so loose that the only thing that

can ensue, it seems, is the destruction of any true relation of communication?

A lugubrious state of affairs, but one for which I doubt Malraux is solely responsible. Manifestly, one must suppose that this prodigious development of the museum, almost universal today—one that coincides with the moment at which art attempts to make itself visible for itself, no longer an affirmation of the gods or the divine, no longer the expression of human values, but the emergence into the day of its own light—answers to a decision whose course we cannot suspend, whose meaning we cannot reduce because of our own personal tastes. In works of art, we already sense the infinite diversity of the conflict that divides them, exalts and ruins them: the need to be alone and always closed in on themselves, visible-invisible, without sight, and, as Rilke says, separated from us by a void that pushes us away and isolates them; but also a need to be in relation to each other, a need to be, each in itself and yet all together, the manifestation of art, to be unique, self-sufficient, but also to be merely the moment of a greater becoming while making perceptible to us, real and already complete, the space in which this becoming is endlessly carried out.

The Museum is an allusion to these diverse forms of communication. Real museums, those palaces of the bourgeoisie where works of art, having become national property, give way to rivalries and to conflicts of interest, have all that is needed to degrade art by confirming its alienation in order to profit a certain form of economy, culture, and aesthetics; in this sense, the disclosure by the image is far from being a greater debasement. But is the imaginary Museum, as Malraux has made us conscious of it, merely the sum of real museums, completed by the images of those works that cannot be exhibited? Is it the museum become library? It is imaginary: this means that it is never given, nor present, but always in question in every new work, and always affirmed and shaken by it at the same time. I do not know if I am distorting the conception that animates *Les Voix du silence*, but it seems to me that in naming and describing the imaginary Museum with inspired vivacity, Malraux has given us, above all, an image of the particular space that is

artistic experience: space outside of space, always in motion, always to be created, and time always absent that does not really exist but exists only in the eyes of the work still to come that is always searching for itself in the artist. The word *experience* here is the most important, understood as that which escapes the reality of what is lived through. The Museum is thus not the receptacle of erudite contemplations, nor the ordered inventory of the discoveries of culture. It is the imaginary space where artistic creation, struggling with itself, ceaselessly searches for itself in order to discover itself each time as if anew, a novelty repudiated in advance.

It is true that Duthuit would undoubtedly have been no less hostile to this form of experience, and I think he would have tried to use the qualifier *abstract* in just such a polemic against it. Because it tears the works from their origin, separates them from their world, deprives them of what one very confusedly refers to as their aura, the Museum is indeed the symbolic place where the work of abstraction assumes its most violent and outrageous form. To this space that is not one, this place without location, and this world outside the world, strangely confined, deprived of air, light, and life, Duthuit opposes, in a way that is most impressive, a simple, living space, the reality of which the great Byzantine edifices still allow us to grasp, in which a relation of communion and inner harmony is established between the many and the one, between works of art and everyday existence, between beliefs, feelings, things, and their transfiguration by art. A space that Riegl calls *absolute or without limit*, that Worringer calls a *perpetual space*, one that is in relation to the infinite, but that Duthuit, although he makes use of their analyses, wishes only to call *real*, in order not to separate it from life, in accordance with the movement that inspires his aesthetics. A real space thus, a "space of rites, of music and of celebration," but real where? On the earth of Byzantium or in the heaven of Plato, for he asserts the following on the subject of this space: "which, had it been otherwise converted and without trace of coercive theology this time, would still have been that of everyone today; there is no reason to deny it, however deprived of it we are, hounded by trucks, surrounded by the architecture of a

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hygienic penitentiary and neon lighting that is decapitating our neighborhoods one by one, while they have promised us, in a manner of compensation, to turn our cities into trash cans with illustrated portulacas." What is here called *real* is thus only ideal and, I fear, terribly abstract, for it forces us, by means of an exclusive violence, to set aside the reality of the world that is ours, with all of the living forces that assert themselves in it, and to retire into the nostalgic memory of a remote past.



*abstraction* The person who wishes to fight abstraction—and the struggle is hopeless, though honorable—should first take on time as it gives itself to us through the suspension of the end of times. It is time that separates, tears, divides. Whether we encounter the mosaics in Damascus itself, at the Mosque of the Umayyads, or in the exhibit that offered us a first reconstitution of them a few years ago, in both cases they come to us just as mutilated, just as removed from their "real" space, and almost equally abstract. We may be grieved by this, and it is in fact very sad, but the museum is not only situated at the Louvre, it is also at Saint Sophia or at Saint Philibert of Tournus. The very fact that we speak of art in reference to them is enough to subject them to the rape of the archaeologists and to turn us momentarily into so many satisfied Lord Elgins. Malraux often speaks of resurrection, but what is it that is reborn? Our illusion, the mistaken belief that what is there, is there as it was, whereas it is there at most as having been: that is, as an illusion of presence. However, there is also something else, as we know, and this is the experience specific to our time. What was formerly world and presence of a world, asserts itself today as the nonpresent presence of what we call, perhaps in all ignorance and awkwardness, art. In the past, in the furthest reaches of time and in all times, works were invisible as works of art, hidden in their place of origin where they had their shelter. Once their universe had crumbled, they came to us through the historical movement of other worlds that elicited from them a presence that was otherwise hidden. These works offer themselves to us now for the first time, visible as works, in their fugitive manifestation, their radiant solitude, the

secret essence of their own reality, no longer sheltered in our world but without shelter and as if without a world.

In a certain way, the Museum expresses this lack, this destitution and admirable indigence, which is the truth of art without refuge and which Hölderlin was the first to recognize. However, and this must be added at once, if the Museum expresses this lack, it is in a very equivocal way and also by affirming the opposite. For it is precisely in the museum that works of art, withdrawn from the movement of life and removed from the peril of time, are presented in the polished comfort of their protected permanence. Are the works of the Museum deprived of the world? Are they turned over to the insecurity of a pure absence without certainty? When the term *museum* signifies essentially conservation, tradition, security, and when everything collected in this place is there only to be preserved, to remain inactive, harmless, in this particular *world*—which is that of conservation itself, a world of knowledge, of culture, of aesthetics, and which is as far from the questioning of art as the archival work that assures the life of a poem is far from the poem itself. This equivocation is not fortuitous. It is no accident that what gives itself as "pure presence" is immediately frozen and stabilized in a permanence without life and in the rotting eternity of a solemn and indifferent void. And if Duthuit is right to be surprised by and even despairing of the extreme favor received by the imaginary Museum, it is because the idea supporting this figure is necessarily so ambiguous that it is always ready to respond to our own questioning of art: either by expressing and realizing the need for inventory and the concern for recapitulation, for which our time can only vary the pretext, or else by affirming the new experience of literature and art, its essential *reversal*, which we all feel is the task of our days and our responsibility—sometimes saying *art* as if it were no longer anything but the grouping of all works of all times, art of the past and belonging only to the past, or, on the contrary, speaking of art as its unceasing metamorphosis, its endless becoming, its always future advent, its power to be, at every moment, a singular beginning and first appearance, but at the same time, divested of itself by that which affirms it from the eternal beginning-again.