

outrageously sown there, and the creation of an abstract unity in the texture and color of the skin, which unity, like that produced by hosiery [more specifically: the leotard, the dancer's body stocking], immediately assimilates the human being to the statue, that is to say, to a divine and superior being).

Chapter 9 Beau Brummell; or, The Appropriation of Unreality

In 1843 Grandville published *Petites misères de la vie humaine*, based on a text by his friend Forgues. In a series of genially perverse illustrations, Grandville gave us one of the first representations of a phenomenon that would become increasingly familiar to the modern age: a bad conscience with respect to objects. In a leaky faucet that cannot be turned off, in an umbrella that reverses itself, in a boot that can be neither completely put on nor taken off and remains tenaciously stuck on the foot, in the sheets of paper scattered by a breath of wind, in a coverlet that does not cover, in a pair of pants that tears, the prophetic glance of Grandville discovers, beyond the simple fortuitous incident, the cipher of a new relation between humans and things. No one has shown better than he the human discomfort before the disturbing metamorphoses of the most familiar objects (see figure 9). Under his pen, objects lose their innocence and rebel with a kind of deliberate perfidy. They attempt to evade their uses, they become animated with human feelings and intentions, they become discontented and lazy. The eye is not surprised to discover them in lecherous attitudes.

Rilke, who had described the same phenomenon in the episode of the coverlet from *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, observed, with a revealing expression, that the "relations of men and things have created confusion in the latter." The bad human conscience with respect to commodified objects is expressed in the *mise-en-scène* of this phantasmagorical conspiracy. The degeneration implicit in the transformation of the artisanal object into the mass-produced article is constantly manifest to modern man in the loss of his own self-possession with respect to things. The degradation of objects is matched by human clumsiness, that is, the fear of their possible revenge, to which end Grandville lends his pen.¹

It is perfectly understandable that the dandy, the man who is never ill at ease, would be the ideal of a society that had begun to experience a bad conscience with respect to objects. What compelled the noblest names of England, and the regent himself, to hang on every word that fell from Beau Brummell's lips was the fact that he presented himself as the master of science that they could not do without. To men who had lost their self-possession, the dandy, who makes of elegance and the superfluous his *raison d'être*, teaches the possibility of a new relation to things, which goes beyond both the enjoyment of their use-value and the accumulation of their exchange value. He is the redeemer of things, the one who wipes out, with his elegance, their original sin: the commodity.²

Baudelaire, who was actually frightened by the animated objects of Grandville and who thought of dandyism as a kind of religion, understood that in this respect the poet (he who, according to Baudelaire's own words, should know how to "manage the intangible") might have something to learn from the dandy.

The Marxist analysis of the fetishistic character of the commodity is founded on the idea that "no object can be invested with value if it is not something useful. If it is useless, the labor that it contains has been uselessly spent and therefore creates no value." According to Marx, "production itself is directed in all its development toward use-value, not toward exchange value, and it is therefore only through the exceeding of the measure in which use-values are required for consumption that they cease to be use-values and become means of exchange, commodities." Coherently with these premises, the enjoyment of use-value is opposed by Marx to the accumulation of the exchange value as something natural to something aberrant, and it can be said that his whole critique of capitalism is conducted on behalf of the concreteness of the object of use against the abstraction of the exchange value.³ Marx evokes with a certain nostalgia the case of Robinson Crusoe and of the autarkic communities for whom exchange value is unknown and in which the relations between producers and things are therefore simple and transparent. He thus writes in *Capital* that "capitalism is suppressed from the outset if it is postulated that the enjoyment, and not the accumulation, of goods is its motive force." Marx's critique is limited in that he does not know to separate himself from the utilitarian ideology, which decrees that the enjoyment of use-value is the original and natural relation of man to objects; consequently the possibility of a relation to things that goes beyond both the enjoyment of use-value and the accumulation of exchange value escapes him.⁴

Modern ethnography has discredited the Marxian prejudice that "no object can be invested with value if it is not something useful" and the idea serving as its basis, according to which the utilitarian principle is the psychological motive of economic life. The study of archaic economies has demonstrated that human activity is not reducible to production, conservation, and consumption, and that archaic man seems in fact to have been dominated in all activity by what has been defined, perhaps with some exaggeration, as a principle of unproductive loss and expenditure.⁵

Mauss's studies on the potlatch and on ritual prodigality do not merely reveal what Marx did not know—that the gift, and not exchange, is the original form of exchange—but also reveal a whole series of behaviors (which range from the ritual gift to the destruction of the most precious goods). From the point of view of economic utilitarianism, these behaviors appear inexplicable, and on the basis of them one might say that primitive man could attain the rank to which he aspired only through the destruction or negation of wealth. Archaic man gave gifts because he wished to lose, and his relation to objects was not governed by the principle of usefulness, but by that of sacrifice. On the other hand, Mauss's research shows that, in primitive societies, the thing was never simply an object of use, but was endowed with a power, a *mana*, equivalent to that of living beings, and was profoundly implicated in the religious sphere. Where the object had been withdrawn from its original sacred order, sacrifice and the gift always intervened to restore it to that order. This requirement was so universally dominant that an ethnographer has been able to affirm that, in primitive cultures, the gods existed only to give structure to the human need for sacrifice and self-expropriation.

Baudelaire was perhaps alluding to behavior of this kind when he spoke of "a kind of dandy encountered by the travelers in the forests of North America." What is certain is that he hated "repugnant usefulness" too much to think that the world of the commodity could be abolished by means of a simple return to use-value. For Baudelaire, as for the dandy, the enjoyment of use is already an alienated relation to the object, scarcely different from commodification. The lesson that Baudelaire bequeathed to modern poetry is that the only way to go beyond the commodity was to press its contradictions to the limit, to the point at which the commodity as such would be abolished and the object would be restored to its own truth. As sacrifice restores to the sacred sphere what servile use has degraded and profaned, so, through poetic transfiguration, the object is pulled away both from the enjoyment of its use and from its value as accumulation, and is restored to its original status. For this reason Baudelaire saw a great analogy between poetic activity and sacrifice, between "the man that sings" and "the man that sacrifices," and he planned the composition of a "theory of sacrifice" of which the notes in *Fusées* are but fragments. As it is only through destruction that sacrifice consecrates, so it is only through the estrangement that makes it unattainable, and through the dissolution of traditional intelligibility and authority, that the falsehood of the commodity is changed into truth. This is the sense of "art for art's sake," which means not the *enjoyment* of art for its own sake, but the *destruction* of art worked by art.

The redemption that the dandy and the poet bring to things is their evocation of the imponderable act in which the aesthetic epiphany is realized. The reproduction of the dissolution of the transmissibility of culture in the experience of the shock thus becomes the last possible source of meaning and value for things themselves. To the capitalist accumulation of exchange value and to the enjoyment of the use-value of Marxism and the theorists of liberation, the dandy and

modern poetry oppose the possibility of a new relation to things: the appropriation of unreality.

The condition of success of this sacrificial task is that the artist should take to its extreme consequences the principle of loss and self-dispossession. Rimbaud's programmatic exclamation "I is an other" (je est un autre) must be taken literally: the redemption of objects is impossible except by virtue of becoming an object. As the work of art must destroy and alienate itself to become an absolute commodity, so the dandy-artist must become a living corpse, constantly tending toward an *other*, a creature essentially nonhuman and antihuman.⁶

Balzac, in his *Traité de la vie élégante* (Treatise of the elegant life), writes that "making himself a dandy, man becomes a piece of boudoir furniture, an extremely ingenuous mannequin." Barbey d'Aurevilly made the same remark about George Brummell: "He elevated himself to the rank of object." And Baudelaire compared dandyism (which for him was of a piece with the exercise of writing poetry) to the "most severe monastic rule, the irresistible order of the Old Man of the Mountain, who commanded his adepts to commit suicide."

The creative activity and the creator cannot be spared the process of alienation. In modern poetry, the emergence into the foreground of the creative process, and its establishment as an autonomous value independent of the work produced (Valéry: "Why not conceive of the production of a work of art as a work of art in itself?") is above all an attempt to reify the nonreifiable.⁷ After having transformed the work into a commodity, the artist now puts on the inhuman mask of the commodity and abandons the traditional image of the human. What reactionary critics of modern art forget when they reproach it with dehumanization is that during the great periods of art, the artistic center of gravity has never been in the human sphere.⁸ What is new about modern poetry is that, confronted with a world that glorifies man so much the more it reduces him to an object, modern poetry unmasks the humanitarian ideology by making rigorously its own the *boutade* that Balzac puts in George Brummell's mouth: "Nothing less resembles man than man." Apollinaire perfectly formulated this proposition in *Les peintres cubistes*, where he writes that "above all, artists are men who wish to become inhuman." Baudelaire's antihumanism, Rimbaud's call "to make one's soul monstrous," the marionette of Kleist, Lautréamont's "it is a man or a stone or a tree," Mallarmé's "I am truly decomposed," the arabesque of Matisse that confuses human figures and tapestries, "my ardor is rather of the order of the dead and the unborn" from Klee, "the human doesn't come into it" of Gottfried Benn, to the "nacreous snail's trace" of Eugenio Montale and "the head of medusa and the Robot" of Paul Celan, all express the same need: there are still figures beyond the human!

Whatever the name given to the object of its search, the quest of modern poetry points in the direction of that disturbing region where there are no longer either men or gods, where there is but a presence, rising incomprehensibly over itself like a primitive idol, at once sacred and miserable, enchanting and terrify-

ing, a presence that possesses at once the fixed materiality of a dead body and the phantomatic elusiveness of a living one. Fetish or grail, site of an epiphany or a disappearance, it reveals and once again dissolves itself in its own simulacrum of words until the program of alienation and knowledge, of redemption and dispossession, entrusted to poetry over a century ago by its first lucid devotees, will be accomplished.

Scholia

Grandvilliana; or, The world of Odradek

1. As usual, Poe was among the first to register this new relation between man and objects. In a tale, translated by Baudelaire, entitled "L'ange du bizarre" (The angel of the bizarre) he makes an improbable creature of nightmare appear, the ancestor of the Odradek bobbin of Kafka, whose body is constituted by utensils joined together in a vaguely anthropomorphic manner (a small flask of wine, two bottles, a funnel, a kind of tobacco case, two barrels) and which presents itself as "the genius that presides over the annoyances and bizarre incidents of humanity." Because of having refused to believe in the existence of the creature, the protagonist of the tale is led on by a series of insignificant incidents until he nearly has one foot in the grave.

The discomfort of man with respect to the objects that he himself has reduced to "appearances of things" is translated, as it was already in the time of Bosch, into the suspicion of a possible "animation of the inorganic" and into the placing in doubt of the bond that unites each thing to its own form, each creature to its familiar environment. In these two stylistic procedures the prophetic excellence of Grandville excels: they are confused and add up to a single disquieting effect in the "animated flowers," in the military decorations transformed into marine plants, in the personified musical instruments, in the "heraldic animals," in the eyes removed from their sockets, and in the anguished chain reaction of metamorphoses that populate his "otherworld."

Baudelaire, who was fascinated and frightened by the "illegitimate crossings" of Grandville and who saw in his designs "nature transformed into apocalypse," spoke of him with a kind of reverent fear. "There are superficial persons," he writes in *Quelques caricaturistes français* (Some French caricaturists), "whom Grandville amuses. As for myself, he terrifies me."

At this moment was born, as a mass-consumption commodity, the genre of "disturbing" literature, which relies on the discomfort and unconfessed fears of the reader. The theme of the portrait that comes to life, which Grandville had anticipated in the *Louvre des marionnettes* (The puppet museum), is developed by Gautier in a story that was to be imitated in innumerable variations. It is therefore not surprising that Offenbach should have chosen as the libretto of one of his most fortunate operettas *The Tales of Hoffmann*, in which Olympia, the chilly animated puppet of Hoffmann's *Sandmann*, appears. Thus, in the "ironic utopia

of a permanent domination of capital” (which is Benjamin’s characterization of the operetta), is manifest the menacing presence of the animated object, destined to have a second existence in the age of advanced mechanical development.

Freud dedicated an ample study, which appeared in the fifth volume of *Imago* and whose conclusions are highly significant, precisely to the uncanny (*Das Unheimliche*, of which he finds notable examples in two topics dear to Grandville: the eye out of its socket and the animated puppet, discovered in the novels of Hoffmann). Freud saw in the uncanny (*Unheimliche*) the distanced familiar (*heimliche*): “This uncanny is not in reality anything new or strange, but rather something that has always been familiar to the psyche and that only the process of distancing has rendered other.” The refusal to acknowledge the degradation of commodified artifacts (*facticia*) is expressed cryptographically in the menacing aura that surrounds the most familiar things, with which it is not possible to feel safe.

The liberty style, which transforms dead matter into an organic creature, lifts this discomfort into a stylistic principle (“a washbasin of Pankok,” a benevolent critic of that new style wrote in 1905, “with its cartilaginous and swollen members, appears to us a living organism. When Hermann Obrist designs an easy chair, the arms seem to be muscular limbs that seize and immobilize”). A few decades later, surrealism would make estrangement the fundamental character of the work of art. Grandville was claimed by the surrealists as their precursor; a lithography of Max Ernst reads: “Un nouveau monde est né, que Grandville soit loué (A new world is made, may Grandville be praised).

Brummelliana

2. One of the most celebrated remarks of Beau Brummell (“Do you call this thing a coat?”, also related in the variant “What are these things on your feet?”) is based on the assumption of a radical difference between an item of clothing and a “thing,” thanks to which a useful item like a coat, apparently so ordinary, is raised to an indescribable essence.

Contemporaries could not be aware that the ultimate foundation on which the Brummell phenomenon rested was the commodification of the real. This is true of even the most acute contemporaries, like Hazlitt, who was among the first to examine the mechanism of Beau Brummell’s wit, which that critic defined as “minimalism”: “He has arrived at the *minimum* of wit, managing to take it, with felicity or pain, to an almost invisible point. All of his *bons mots* are founded on a single circumstance, the exaggeration of the purest trifles into something important . . . their significance is so attenuated that ‘nothing lives’ between them and nonsense: they are suspended on the edge of the void and in their shadowy composition they are very close to nothingness . . . His is truly the art of extracting something from nothing.” Brummell’s jacket is opposed to the “thing” as the commodity is to the useful object. What is more, suppressing any ambiguous survival of use-value, the jacket overtakes the commodity itself and

renders transparent, so to speak, its fetishistic character, abolishing it in a kind of dialectical *Aufhebung* (sublation). At the same time, with his exaggeration of the irrelevant, the dandy reinvents a particular kind of use-value, which cannot be grasped or defined in utilitarian terms.

In a period that submitted hypocritically to the elephantiasis of ornament, the absence of every kind of bad conscience with respect to objects explains the almost ascetical sobriety of Beau’s wardrobe and his foundation of the criterion of elegance on elusive nuances, like the accidental folds of a cravat. The technique of tying a cravat—worthy of a Zen master—invented by Beau Brummell was rigorous in the elimination of any intentionality: it is related that his valet Robinson could be seen every evening emerging from the dressing room, his arms laden with barely wrinkled neckwear. “They are our failures,” he would explain. Beau himself, whom some of the greatest poets of modernity have not disdained to consider their teacher, can, from this point of view, claim as his own discovery the introduction of chance into the artwork so widely practiced in contemporary art (see figure 10).

In the abolition of any trace of subjectivity from his own person, no one has ever reached the radicalism of Beau Brummell. With an asceticism that equals the most mortifying mystical techniques, he constantly cancels from himself any trace of personality. This is the extremely serious sense of a number of his witticisms, such as “Robinson, which of the lakes do I prefer?”

That something very significant for the spirit of the age was revealed in Beau Brummell did not escape his more intelligent contemporaries. Byron once said that he would have preferred to be Brummell than Napoleon (the spirit of the world in the boudoir set against the spirit of the world on horseback: it is no small compliment). Bulwer-Lytton, in his novel *Peelham; or, The Adventures of a Gentleman* (whose protagonist is a reincarnation of Beau) wrote about the “trifles” of the dandy: “Flowers may be woven not only in an idle garland, but, as in the thyrsus of antiquity, also on a sacred instrument,” and “in the folds of a collar there can be more pathos than fools imagine.”

Marx and use-value

3. The position of Marx on this point is not clear and was modified over time. In the *Manuscripts* of 1844, he still seemed to consider use-value as something unnatural on a par with exchange value. “Private property,” he writes, “has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.—in short, when it is *used* by us” [*The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 139].

Natural and unnatural needs

4. It is curious that N. O. Brown and the other theorists of “liberation,” although recognizing that Marx neither explained what was meant by “excess of

use-value' nor understood the sacred origin of money, should nevertheless appeal to common sense in affirming the necessity of distinguishing between natural and unnatural needs, between the necessary and the superfluous. These theorists thus substitute for the bourgeois repression of the "natural" a moralistic repression of the superfluous. What is most revolutionary in modern art with regard to the theorists of liberation is the understanding, from the outset, that only by pushing to the extreme limits both "unnatural need" and "perversion" could one rediscover oneself and overcome repression.

Bataille and unproductive expenditure

5. The most rigorous attempt to define this principle and found upon it a science of economy is found in Bataille's essay "La notion de dépense" (The notion of expenditure) (*La critique sociale*, n. 7, January 1933), taken up and developed later in *La part maudite* (1949) [*The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Press, 1988)]. Mauss, whose magisterial "Essai sur le don" (Essay on the gift) (*L'année sociologique*, 1923-24) was behind the idea of Bataille, did not simply oppose ritual prodigality and the potlatch to the utilitarian principle, but, more wisely, demonstrated the inadequacy of this opposition in accounting for social behavior.

Genealogy of the antihero

6. Antihumanist traits are evident in an imaginary genealogical tree of the characters (or, rather, the anticharacters) in which modern artists have represented themselves: Igitur—Doctor Faustroll—Monsieur Croche—Stephen Dedalus—Monsieur the Vivisectionist—Plume—Loplop, chief of birds—Werfûronne—Adrian Leverkühn.

Eclipse of the work

7. Gottfried Benn rightly observes, in his essay on the "Problem of Lyricism" (1951), that all modern poets, from Poe to Mallarmé to Valéry and Pound, appear to bring to the process of creation the same interest they bring to the work itself. An analogous preoccupation can be noted in one of the masters of the new American poetry, William Carlos Williams. His *Paterson* is, perhaps, with *The Age of Anxiety* of Auden, the most successful attempt at the long poem in contemporary poetry: "The writing is nothing, the being / in a position to write . . . is nine tenths / of the difficulty." It is interesting to observe that the reification of the creative process is born precisely from the refusal of reification implicit in every work of art. Thus Dada, which seeks constantly to deny the artistic object and to abolish the very idea of the "work," finishes by paradoxically commodifying spiritual activity itself [see Tristan Tzara, "Essai sur la situation de poésie" (Essay on the situation of poetry), 1931]. The same can be said of the situationists who, in the attempt to abolish art by realizing it, finish rather by extending it to all human existence. The origin of this phenomenon is probably to be found in the theories of Schlegel and Solger on so-called Romantic irony, which was founded precisely on the assumption of the superiority of the artist (that is, on the

creative process) with respect to the work and which led to a kind of constant negative reference between expression and the unexpressed, comparable to a mental reserve.

Antihumanistic, not antihuman

8. Ortega y Gasset, writing in *La deshumanización del arte*, was perfectly conscious of this fact and it is curious that his authority should have been invoked to criticize the antihumanism of modern art. The polemic of modern art is not directed against man, but against his ideological counterfeiting; it is not antihuman, but antihumanistic. Besides, as Edgar Wind acutely observed, art historians are scarcely immune from the process of dehumanization. The elaboration of the formal method in the second half of the past century (which can be summarized in Wölfflin's famous remark that the essence of the Gothic style is as evident in a pointed shoe as in a cathedral) is obvious proof.