

The Future of a Negation: Abstraction in the Era of Religious War

If September 11th. was a world historical turning point, then art also must be different now, yet there is no clear sense of what that difference might be. But then perhaps uncertainty itself is the best evidence. A friend of mine recently described the current mood in New York as "...like a general 'loss of reality' effect...like the rug's been pulled out from under someone(they no longer know where they stand." While we're looking down at that missing carpet, I'd like to draw attention to the small fact that Pollock's first thoroughly resolved drip painting was entitled Lucifer. It's not wise to give too much importance to this or any of Pollock's titles; many of them were likely thought up by someone else. But at the same time it would be equally unwise to underestimate this one, for it directs us to the very core of Pollock's work—to the way it engages history, to its expressiveness and to its future potential. Call it a lucky circumstance that can allow us to think about abstraction at a moment when the public discourse is full of images of the Satanic, from America as "the Great Satan" of the Islamic fundamentalists to the almost exactly mirroring treatment of Osama bin Laden in the western media.

The invocation of this original fallen star is the clue that helps us to understand that Pollock's practice, in which paint falls onto a canvas lying on the floor, is a kind of mimesis of a particular fall, albeit an emblematic and universal one, and his landing place a place from which there is no returning upwards movement. The materialism of Pollock's pictures, their matter-of-factness, makes them Satan's landing place, because Satan's landing place is nothing less than everyday reality, our banal present. It should be axiomatic that this world is hell—or for those who prefer a safer, more reasonable style of expression, that Hell, in particular the Hell of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is a trope or metaphor for modernity. This is Milton's politics, and the politics of any artistic subjectivity since, and it is therefore Pollock's politics, and the politics of modernist abstraction. This politics could become a political discourse if we remember that modern subjects emerge in a context of terrorism, religious war and colonial

adventures, among other things.

The Thirty years War, the Gunpowder Plot, Cromwell's invasion of Ireland—these were external events that accompanied the inward labors that formed the modern subject. Islamic Jihad, the bombing of the World Trade Center, the invasion of Afghanistan—if anything these events should give us a feeling of *déjà vue* for they are the birth pains of modernity in the developing world, our own history come back to haunt us.

To understand the fall as a trope of beginnings in modern art we also have to know that the Protestant side during the civil war and revolution was split, and it was that space into which Satan fell. The artisan and merchant classes who were creating modern capitalism—replacing subsistence agriculture with waged labour and communal land with plantations and rents—did not share the same values as the more radical groups—so-called Diggers, Ranters, Quakers and Levelers—whose millenarian and communist ideas centred around utopian images of the same rural world that was disappearing. But radical Protestant thinkers such as Winstanley, Nayler, Muggleton and Clarkson held views breathtaking in their modernity, views that were not widely heard again until the twentieth century: that the Bible is an allegory, that there is no afterlife and no immortal soul, that religion is an instrument of class rule and that priests cynically kept the people under a spell of superstition, that heaven and hell were conditions of life in this world, there being no other. The exponents of these ideas were themselves Satanic figures, but to them, a base materialism was good—for them, a world without God and his priests was a real material, secular paradise. After the restoration, thanks in no small part to this tradition of critical theology, the true hellishness of the presumed "natural" social order was clear and Satan then took on his negative aura.

Paradise Lost was written in the period just before and after the failure of the English republic and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and Satan is therefore a typical inhabitant of the post-revolutionary fallen world—our world. He was also one

of the strongest Romantic paradigms of the artist, a model of a disillusioned realism that yet refuses to surrender to the reality principle. That knows that heroism lies in what one makes of the present, yet understands just as well what a failure such success must be; both Pollock's ambition and his despair, ordinarily conceived.

As a fully realized creature of the imagination, Satan cannot be securely placed on one political side or the other—he is both critic of the established order and co-creator of it. His many-sidedness is what makes him an adequate model of a modern artist and also a model of what abstraction aims to be. Art always take sides with the defeated, with the expropriated peasants, with those expelled from the garden, but it is also of the essence of modernization itself, and it must make use of all the tools that change creates.

The parallels between the Protestant origins of our modern world and the turmoil of contemporary development are not exact—they may even be misleading. The split between globalizing capital and the local resistance to it is pretty much the same, but if there is no strain of anti-clericalism in Islamic society, if there is no progressive position opposed to the mullahs that isn't tainted by pro-western attitudes, there may be nowhere for Satan to fall. But those societies are modernizing regardless, and so they are necessarily creating modern individuals and modern artists.

There is a hope in some quarters that abstraction can be revived as a major contemporary practice. This hope is naturally associated with concerns about American primacy in the arts; the enormous attention paid by the New York art press to the recent Pollock retrospective at MOMA—Art in America ran three stories, Artforum two, the latter by art historical heavy hitters Thomas Crow and Michael Fried—at the very moment when globalism had become a new watchword, when Latin and Asian artists were more visible than ever before, and when an African had just been chosen the curator of the first Documenta of the new century, seems to signify something—a certain anxiety as much as the powerful interests involved. But the rest of the world could have a use for Pollock, and maybe a better use. Modernist abstraction is not the

property of America because it is grounded in universal historical experience. And Pollock's lesson to all the world is that the negation of meaning—which means in practice the negation of official religion—is the fall into freedom.

Logically, and perhaps politically, westerners are not qualified to speculate about the form such a response should take, yet the world is not so cleanly divided. East and west can exchange perspectives on each other, and do. As one example, it is a cliché of western art that Chinese and Arab and Persian calligraphy are already abstract—but calligraphy cannot be the medium through which we appropriate each other's cultures. Chinese calligraphy is far advanced in aestheticism, but still too linked to writing and reading, even when it is illegible, and calligraphy in the Arab world is too much grounded in pre-modern standards of craftsmanship and quality. Pollock's anti-calligraphy is different from both—far from writing and completely distant from the small precisions of medieval craft—and it promises a new amplitude of being and acting even as it drops out of the metaphysical and condenses into a reduced and obdurate materialism. Pollock writes a calligraphy for the future, when we will have greater capacities of imagination and perception than we have today. Its very unreadability makes it both dictionary and grammar for the translation of future experience.

Sept. 11th was an emblematic instance of conflict between past and future, and it demonstrated how intense desire for the one violently proves the inescapability of the other. The pilots of the planes believed that through death they would regain the garden, but what they didn't understand is that their very gesture of resistance is just one moment of a process that is casting all peoples into post-millennial modernity, meaning a global consumer culture in which all national and ethnic histories pass through the same crisis. It's the inevitability of that process that gives the metaphor of the fall its vividness and relevance. And it's abstraction that gives us the best idea of what it feels like to fall—and to arrive at where we are, still falling, but with the memory of where we're from still traceable in the Satanic negations of art.

Robert Linsley 2002