The Reasons of Art Z L'Art a ses raisons

PETER J. McCORMICK

Suffering Art

(Comment on Danto)

TORE NORDENSTAM / BERGEN

Art has indeed suffered under its philosophical master, according to Professor Danto. It has been oppressed and paralyzed, emasculated and disenfranchised, and finally almost annihilated after a series of philosophical takeovers. The result of the harsh treatment is not only that we are unable, at the present, to understand the nature of art and its locus in the political plane, as he puts it; the paralysis with which philosophy has infected art has spread to philosophy itself. What the therapy might consist in or what the regained virility and civic rights might be used for, we are not told in this paper. But we do get a diagnosis of the malady the patients are suffering from.

The cause of the pretty horrible treatment that art has been given by philosophy is said to be a philosophical belief, viz., the belief that art is dangerous. Art is so dangerous, according to the whole philosophical tradition from Plato onwards, that severe treatment like disenfranchisement and emasculation (I am not sure which of these is worse, from the liberal point of view) has been held to be necessary by the whole venerable tradition of Western philosophy. Not that this has been very clear to the thinkers themselves: it requires some philosophical excavation-work to find the true sources of this maltreatment. Hence the need for such philosophical archaeology and aetiology as the foregoing paper sketches.

It is my impression that the state of paralysis has not spread to Professor Danto himself, who presents his case with much vigour, elegance, and wit. So there is still some hope, it seems. I share Danto's concern with the state of affairs in the philosophy of art, and I am fully prepared to accept his gloomy description as a true account of how things are, in some parts of the world. I am fully prepared to accept that art has suffered badly at the hands of philosophers; that the Platonic belief that art is dangerous lies behind this; and that the Platonic dogmas have been reinforced by Kantian efforts to persuade us that works of art are there for our disinterested pleasure, as far removed from the serious concerns of life as the embroidering maidens of the last century. This describes a set of attitudes with which we are all familiar. And since I share this concern with the present state of affairs, and since I am also concerned with the future of art and philosophy, I suggest that we consider some of the things that could be done to escape from the *misère*.

My first suggestion is to go back to Plato and Kant in order to have a closer look at what they said and thought. Plato can no doubt be said to have identified the practice of art with the creation of appearances of appearances. twice removed from the reality philosophy addresses, as Danto puts it. But the gloss he puts on this, in the name of the tradition he is fighting against. seems misplaced. According to that reading of Plato, placing art two steps away from the core of reality was meant to immunize reality against art ("It is as though Platonic metaphysics was generated in order to define a place for art from which it is then a matter of cosmic guarantee that nothing can be made by it to happen"). But the metaphysical distance between art and reality is far too short to immunize us against art. According to Plato, the potency of ideas, good and bad, is such that their impact upon human beings, particularly young ones, is remarkable even when the ideas are presented in the ontologically diluted medium of art. One should beware of imitating shameful things in the theatre, for instance, lest from the imitation one imbibe the reality, as Plato puts it in *The Republic*, book 3. Symbols of evil must be eradicated in the arts in order to avoid that the youngsters "little by little and all unawares accumulate and build up a huge mass of evil in their souls." The susceptibility of mankind to the influence of works of art can indeed be said to have made Plato regard art as potentially dangerous, but also as potentially useful, extremely useful, for educational purposes (which is, after all, the context for the discussion of art in *The Republic*). If we want to fight the immunization strategy to which Danto has drawn our attention, my first suggestion would therefore be to set Plato himself against his followers, replacing the truncated reading of Plato with a fuller account.

The same applies to Kant, and no doubt to many more, who might well be enlisted in the fight against precisely the doctrines that are the objects of Professor Danto's aetiological efforts and which I fear one would be right to ascribe to the philosophers parading in the standard undergraduate anthologies of philosophy and aesthetics under such *noms de guerre* as "Plato" and "Kant."

Kant certainly characterized art in terms of "disinterest" and "purposiveness without any specific purpose." But again, the tradition against which Danto is fighting glosses this in a way that makes it necessary to distinguish between more and less refined readings of Kant. "Disinterested pleasure" is said to be "a tepid gratification since unconnected with the satisfaction of real needs or the achievement of real goals," or even "a kind of narcoleptic pleasure, the pleasure that consists in the absence of pain." I am fully prepared to accept this as a correct account of a mode of thinking that is widespread today, and again I suggest that a good counter-move could be to look at more refined versions of thinking about art, for instance the few pages that Kant wrote about art in the context of his extended examination of

teleology in nature (in the *Critique of Judgement*). Kant seems to have been more impressed with nature than with art, on the whole, which did not hinder him from commenting appreciatively on classicistic art (Homer and Wieland being praised as geniuses who transcended established art through "their imaginative and yet at the same time thoughtful ideas"). Kant the moralist certainly accorded an important place to art in our lives when he proposed that works of art are symbols of morality, which might well be used as an argument against those who happen to think that art is useless and unconnected with the real needs of life.

Having mobilized Plato and Kant in our effort to undermine current misconceptions about the nature of art, we could then, time permitting, go on to all other poets and artists and philosophers who might agree that poetry makes nothing happen but who nevertheless, and perhaps precisely for this reason, do accord a central role to art in our lives. In his beautiful autobiography My First Circle (published in Swedish in 1982), Olof Lagercrantz writes about a novel by Giovanni Papini that made a tremendous impression upon him in his youth when he was treated for tuberculosis at a sanatorium:

Papini freed me, at least temporarily, from the fear of death. "Who says that I must die?" he wrote. "Die? All people die! Thank you very much indeed for the information: but do you really consider that a valid reason? Let those die who want to die: I am I and not 'the others'." Such words poured balsam into my heart. Not that I believed that I wouldn't die. It was the extravaganza of Papini's protest and his absurd way of expressing himself that appealed to me. He confronted reality with words. With words he created a new world where man was immortal.

Like Silenus in Vergil's sixth Eclogue, Papini meets us *poeta creator* rather than *mimetes*, as one who changes the world in the only sense of "world" in which art can change the world, viz., *my* world or *your* world or *our* world. Having said that much, I also find myself prepared to accept Auden's dictum that poetry makes nothing happen. It is an immense claim to maintain that poetry makes *nothing* happen; but it is the magic of art that this is possible. Here is one of the more important ways in which poetry can make nothing happen: Basho's seventeen syllables forever catching the frog jumping into the old pool, with its eternally whispering water.