Max Ernst: The Rhetorical Beast of the Visual Arts

Among the producers of pictorial animal images in modern painting and sculpture, Max Ernst, even more than such practitioners of "animal perspective" as Franz Marc, critiques anthropocentrism with an antihumanistic attack on reason, idealism, and conventional morality. I also find him enacting the bestial gestures of Nietzsche and Darwin, a view that challenges two established versions of the Surrealist genealogy. Neither a Romantic heritage, like the one Herbert Read and Hugh Sykes Davies see reflected in the antibourgeois behavior of the Surrealists, nor the neo-Platonic quest for a primal content or a superior reality that Anna Balakian infers from Breton's writings, seems to me adequately to account for the representational and technical ruptures in Ernst's works. Both explanations of classical or Romantic influence seem to me to ground Ernst in an older metaphysics of idealistic residue that blunts the radical implications of his violent content and form. I hope to show that Ernst, whose interest in the philosophical and pathological aspects of the irrational preceded his interest in art, embarked on a doomed quest to wrest art from reason and culture, where a long humanistic tradition had enshrined it, and restore it to irrationality, to the libido, to free association, to puns and Derridean freeplay, to chance—that is, to the human animal itself.

While studying at the University of Bonn as a young man, Max Ernst read Nietzsche's Die fröhliche Wissenschaft ('There, if ever... is a book which speaks to the future. The whole of surrealism is in it') and was, apparently, profoundly impressed by its resistance to the domestication of "the fundamental wildness of human nature." Nietzsche may also have adumbrated for Ernst the radical implications the return of the human beast poses for art, although Ernst's antiaesthetic theories were equally influenced by the modern psychoanalysis of his Freudian age. We see a major shift in the artist's role as early as Ernst's Dada period, when behavior was given primacy over production and
art became an “act” rather than an artifact. These early experiments in spontaneous and improvised performance were particularly important for the visual artists of the period as attempts to overcome the Apollonian implications (of conscious and rational production, the projection of ideal form, the creation of logic and order, among others) of their media. Restoring the chthonic to art, artists liberated themselves from service to society and culture as repositories of humanistic virtue. Following Nietzsche’s revaluation of morality, the artist was no longer a “good” person, an idealist, and indeed, Surrealist artists asserted their return to ferity with the celebration of Violette Nozières, the oedipal criminal whose partly successful parricide represented to them the restoration of libido to the bourgeoisie. Indeed, art became for Ernst, as for many of his Dada contemporaries, a mission of malice.

But insofar as Ernst practices his art as a bestial gesture, and he does so far beyond donning bird masks and investing himself in an imaginary bird familiar, his ontology (and consequently his method) differs somewhat from Nietzsche’s. Where Nietzsche “forgets” the “other,” cultivating the genuine oblivion of animals toward the consciousness of others as subjects, Ernst practices instead a cunning, and sometimes violent, attack on the “other.” Where Nietzsche rebuffs and negates his readers and critics, Ernst teases, traps, discomfits, and shocks them by outraging their expectations and ideals, confronting them with the limitations of their reason, and extorting from them libidinal responses by implicating them as voyeurs in his unholy fantasies. The viewer of *The Blessed Virgin Chastises the Infant Jesus Before Three Witnesses: A. B., P. E. and the Artist* (fig. 1), for example, is necessarily embarrassed because Ernst, Breton, and Eluard function as witnesses not only of the scene, but also to our voyeurism in seeing the scene. We are seen seeing. Yet finally Ernst’s aims appear to be no more messianic or pedagogic than Nietzsche’s as he seems to embrace the same sort of fatalism that renders all efforts to reform or improve mankind pointless and hopeless. His malice is not that of the satirist with moral pretensions, but a purer, simpler, more self-reflexive and literal “beastliness.”

As Ernst uses the “other” structurally in his disanthropic enterprise, so he uses the social and the cultural thematically. Because the reclamation of human wildness must be effected through culture, Ernst’s efforts produce not naïve or primitive figures like those of Henri Rousseau, but images marked with

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psychological crookedness, perversity, and the twisted, devious forms of pornology. This quite corresponds to the psychoanalytical recognition of hallucination as the form of the return of the repressed, of foreclosed thoughts and instincts. Ernst found an excellent precursor for techniques of derangement and estrangement in Lewis Carroll, the master of infiltrating Victorian social rituals (tea parties, croquet games, quadrilles, recitations) with infantile libidinal preoccupations (food, aggression, play, growth). Although Ernst’s most direct acknowledgments of his debt to Carroll do not appear until the 1940s, Carroll’s influence is already much in evidence in Ernst’s work of the two preceding decades. The shocking, and embarrassingly funny,

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collage novels of Max Ernst particularly echo Carroll’s subversions of polite society with madness, metamorphoses, and physical functions (like Alice’s deluge of tears). The eruptions of erotic and libidinal behavior are, of course, more explicit in Ernst’s collage novels than in Carroll’s children’s books, and nature’s reappropriations of culture are more violent, as in the destructive invasions of domestic interiors by the elemental forces of flood, storm, pestilence, and plague.

If these subversions were purely thematic, then Carroll’s and Ernst’s aims might be construed as primarily satirical, as moralistic criticisms of one or another human excess or social folly. But Ernst, like Carroll, deranges form, function, relation, and structure as well, and thereby shifts his endeavor from the merely critical to the virtually deconstructive. Even more than Carroll, whose hybrids function as neologisms or new lexical creations (“‘toves’ are something like badgers; they’re something like lizards; and they’re something like corkscrews”), Ernst’s monstrous zoo reflects a free invention and distortion of form unthinkable in the pre-Darwinian age. Moreover, Ernst’s monsters announce no “difference” or “deviation” in their forms, and therefore, like Darwinian “abnormalities,” serve to abolish the normative function of form. Giants are “abnormal” only in the context of a convention of size; Ernst’s outsize fingers reaching blindly through the windows of Oedipus Rex (fig. 2) lack any relative measure. Since the very concept of the “ideal” is implicated in such normative thinking, in the fantasy of absolutely abstracting matters of measure and relationship, the endless variability, inconsistency, and incoherence of Ernstian figures refutes any neo-Platonic significance. Indeed, since our critical language is itself thoroughly grounded in normative thinking, the description and analysis of the Surrealist aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) poses a whole set of discursive challenges that will surface in the course of my discussion.

Finally, in Ernst, as in Carroll, we find a proto-Freudian experiment with semiotic derangement, with the creation of more or less unintelligible messages, whose function is not only to demonstrate the inadequacy of reason when confronted with the irrational, but also to frustrate and dislodge the “other,” the reader, the viewer, as subject. If Carroll yet maintains hermeneutical efficacy by having Humpty Dumpty translate or explicate “Jabberwocky” for Alice, Ernst’s creation of seemingly unintelligible ciphers and hieroglyphics in the 1970s is a triumph of nonsense, of the irreducibility of his pictorial “signs.”

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extreme later experiments in a kind of negative discourse are already adumbrated in the collage novels, which must be “read” not as symbolic productions but as aggressive acts aimed at the reader’s rational faculties. No less than the *frottages* of an earlier period, the pictorial rubbings created by arbitrary or free interpretations of the chance features of wood grains and cloth textures, the collage novels plunge the reader into an oxymoronic “delirium of interpretation” that yields only fractured sense, uncertain meaning, and conflicting affects. Ernst’s picture books reduce us to illiterate children by frustrating our appropriation of the text. It is in this respect—in neutralizing the usefulness of our conventions as a key to understanding, and in deny-

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ing us control or authority as readers—that Ernst's collage novels fundamentally differ from the Gothic genre to which they are substantially indebted. For if the Gothic generally reintegrates our deranged perceptions and restores us to a sane grasp of its bizarre behavior and irrational events, then we can see Ernst gradually dismantling the residue of its conventions, as he abolishes its narrative structures (dispensing with the dream frame after Rêve d'une petite fille qui voulut entrer au Carmel) and rhetorical devices (deleting all but prefatory texts in Une Semaine de bonté).

Firstly, I will explore mainly Ernst's early works, those of the 1930s and before, with special attention to the self-reflexivity inherent in his works. A study of his forms is simultaneously an anatomy of representation, a study of the problems of conceptualizing form. Secondly, in considering the treatment of function in his major formal Surrealist paintings, I hope to show that in the case of such relations as "entrapment," for example, the represented function and the function of the representation are the same. And thirdly, I will explore Ernst's last major collage novel, Une Semaine de bonté. I will, of course, be mindful of my own confrontation with Ernst's pictorial texts, and my activity will probably seem less a "reading" than a documentation of Ernst's assault upon the kind of "other" described by Derrida in "White Mythology," the Westerner who believes his own myths and who mistakes his language for divine Reason itself. "A white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture: the white man takes his own mythology (that is, Indo-European mythology), his logos—that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that which it is still his inescapable desire to call Reason." While scarcely escaping this attack altogether, I expect to expose my own limitations and entrapments in confronting Ernst's art, and thereby to pay the price of a limited authority as critic. Like the other artists of the biocentric tradition, Ernst's own bestial gesture shifts us out of the "human" cultural realm, in which we study art and literature to become better Bildungsphilister (to borrow Nietzsche's term) into the fierce but unselfconscious arena of the modern beast.

It is a commonplace in Ernst criticism to assume that his great themes are Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. Consistent with the psychoanalytic bias of Surrealism, the lost paradise is thought to be as much prenatal as prelapsarian. John Russell finds Ernst's nostalgia for the womb in the image of the German Wald. Yvon Taillandier goes even further, attributing Ernst's
fragmented and hybridized forms to the loss of the prenatal paradise. "(In the voice of an eagle-human hybrid) I commemorate and celebrate Edenic gestation; but, since the distance and the difference between this Paradise and the Gehenna we must cross to reach the open air are as great as those existing between humanity and animality, even when aquiline, my double and antinomic nature is my testimony to the hell of being born, like a perpetual summons and eternal incitement to invent a new world and a new life."

Ernst's reputed hallucination of his own conception contradicts this notion. The ingredients of the father's gestating vase or top are already monstrous animal forms, which he creates by drawing with a crayon. "Breathing loudly he hastily traces black lines on the imitation mahogany. Quickly he gives it new, surprising and despicable forms. He exaggerates the resemblance to ferocious and vicious animals to such an extent that they become alive, inspiring me with horror and anguish." Not only Ernst's writings, but his paintings also, contest the notion that prenatal life offers some wholeness or integrity of form. In fact, if the floating forms in After Us—Motherhood (fig. 3) can be taken to represent fetal forms, then Ernst depicts the phylogenetic process as one of fragmentation and hybridization: birds with lacunae for eyes, elastic arms, webbed feet, clawed paws, cat's whiskers, and transparent tadpole tails. Taillandier's proposed prenatal paradise ultimately represents a valorization of the concept of form that designates the concept of Platonic ideal form or essence as superior, and the concept of forms hybridized, fragmented, deformed, or incomplete (I am forced to use words that themselves reflect the Platonic bias in our language) as inferior. Yet Ernst himself introduces his collage novel La Femme 100 têtes with the sentence, "Crime or miracle: a complete man."

Anna Balakian writes that "one of the basic characteristics of the surrealist mind is its uncompromising will to find a foolproof unity in the universe." This premise is echoed by Whitney Chadwick in an article on sexuality and creativity in Surrealist art that proposes the figure of the androgyne as a symbol of precisely such a unity, "the metaphysical fusion of male and female into the perfect being." According to Chadwick, the Surrealists consciously adopted the ideal of androgyny from Plato. Yet again, Ernst's art constitutes an anti-Platonic comment on ideal or classical form.

Although Werner Spies maintains that his extensive documentation of the "sources" of Ernst's collages will not explain

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their meaning ("Work with the patterns belongs unequivocally to the realm of production-aesthetic"), I would argue that the "source" is precisely the referent of many of Ernst’s distorted and deformed classical figures. Ernst’s donnée, as it were, appears to be the subversion of the process of idealization itself, for his "sources" include not only Greek and Roman figures but idealized forms as interpreted by later artists (Botticelli, Titian, Ingres, Blake) as well.

In the series of "First Visible Poems" from *Une Semaine de bonté*, Ernst inverts classical forms, quite literally. The male figure in "First Visible Poem, No. 3" (fig.4) appears to be modeled after a classical male figure with the proportions of a Greek *Doryphorus* and the posture of the Roman *Augustus of*
Primaporta (except that in each case the position of the legs is reversed). But Ernst flays the figure and hollows it, to render it incomplete or imperfect. He further replaces the head with a plantlike form, perhaps to mock the Greek ideal of the harmony of mind and body. He once wrote of himself in the persona of a little girl, "He is a brain and a vegetable at the same time." In an early 1920 collage entitled La Santé par le sport, the Greek athletic ideal appears to be mocked not only by the contemporary hockey stick in the figure's hand, but also by the crocheted butterfly in place of the face. Not only does the butterfly create a juxtaposition of diverse textures, but it may imply an ambiguity of gender as well, a reference to either Greek homosexuality or the "ideal" of androgyny. This comment is also repeated later...

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when Ernst outfits the burly figure of Hercules ("At eye level / Paramyths," Beverly Hills, Calif., 1949) with a beribboned and ruffled ladies' parasol.

The back view of the female figure in "First Visible Poem, No. 4" likewise recalls the proportions and posture of artistic idealizations of the female body, a Greek Venus, or even Botticelli's more florid goddess, who is particularly evoked by a number of Ernst's inversions in the picture. The figure rises not from the famous half-shell but from a bleached rib cage, suggesting also the unfortunate Eve (in *Histoire naturelle*, Eve is also represented by a view of the back of her head). Instead of the luxuriant hair, Ernst's Venus sprouts an insect or a crustacean and a headdress of fruits and transparent petals, like the adorned figures in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Ernst replaces Botticelli's cool, fresh seascape with an arid, rocky desert strewn with corpses.

Ernst attacks the concept of idealization in art at several levels of philosophical sophistication. At the simplest level, his collages are pictorial parodies of classical forms and figures, their aesthetic harmony and proportion destroyed by alterations that render them unbeautiful and ludicrous. For example, in his picture of the Venus de Milo on p. 29 in *Paramyths* (fig. 5), he destroys her grace of form by substituting an incongruous, tilted rectangle in place of her face. The butterfly hair or headdress is a recurrent motif in Ernst's work (as we have seen) that suggests either atrophied wings (his pictorial lexicon abounds in winged forms, celestial, satanic, avian, entomological, and reptilian) or infestation (particularly the infestation of monuments, like the rat- or dog-infested Sphinx in "Oedipe" of *Une Semaine de bonté*), elements that diminish and humble the classical form.

But Ernst subjects the Venus to more serious debasement by using in his collage not a direct representation of the statue in the Louvre but an illustration from Bulfinch's *Age of Fable or Beauties of Mythology*, an imitation of "low" art rather than "high" art. Ernst's use of popularized materials (*Le Magasin pittoresque*, Reuleaux's *Buch der Erfindung*, *La Nature*, and trashy, sensational serials like the *Mémoires de Monsieur Claude*) constitute what Spies calls a *Kulturputsch*. But Ernst's intentions go beyond mere iconoclasm to a philosophical dismantling of form. By using popular illustrations of the *Venus de Milo* he reminds us of the cultural reversions that constitute a hermeneutical spiral in classical art. The sculpture of the Venus in the Louvre itself represents only a representation, a pictorial figure
of the goddess who is herself only a rhetorical figure, a personification of ideal beauty.

By rendering Venus's drape like a topographical chart, Ernst further subverts the aesthetic image by reminding us that it is invested in a physical form no different in its essential physical features (elevations and angles of curvature, for example) from any other physical object. Furthermore, the representation of *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*
that physical image is also subject to a perceptual reversion of forms: the topological chart reminds us that Ernst gives us a two-dimensional form to represent a three-dimensional form. He also reminds us of the ultimate two-dimensionality of his Venus by rendering her face as a circle (not a sphere) superimposed by a parallelogram simulating a tilted rectangle, or the illusion of a rectangle in three-dimensional space. The circular and straight arrows on the rectangle appear to represent an illustration of a magnetic field, an image that might serve several functions. The lines crudely trace a pattern resembling the orbital shape of eyes and an intersecting nose or proboscis, a pattern suggesting the exaggerated and grotesque features of an insect. Ernst might also be using the magnetic field as a scientific analogue of Venus’s aesthetic and emotional power to attract and control. Furthermore, the magnetic diagram is itself a pictorial representation of an abstract concept, like Ernst’s Venus herself.

In his Venus Ernst gives us a complex semiotic image that virtually self-destructs by parodying and debasing its source, by revealing its own cultural reversions (high art imitating low art imitating high art imitating myth) and formal reversions (copy of copy, representation of representation, illusion of illusion) and by asserting that, whatever their rhetorical intention, aesthetic symbols are mere signifiers of abstract concepts, with no more privileged status as shadows of the Platonic ideal than a scientific diagram or a word like *beauty*.

Ernst’s Venus lacks arms, his *Victory of Samothrace* lacks a head, not only in imitation of the originals but, judging from his own “mutilated” or “amputated” figures, as though they were originally armless or headless, like his own *femme sans têtes*. His fondness for the “cut-up” body raises questions about the nature of metonymic thinking that are philosophical rather than psychopathological. Chagall claims to decapitate figures for purely compositional reasons. “If I had the idea of separating her head from her body it was because I needed a space just at that spot,” he writes of *To Russia, with Donkeys and Others*. In contrast, Breton evokes the sadistic intention that informs the mutilation of the body in Surrealist art. “A head adheres to the shoulders only because the blade of the guillotine is withheld.” But mutilation and fetishism play different roles in pictorial and verbal art. According to Roland Barthes, Sade needs the fetish in order to overcome the inability of language to describe the whole body except in insipid and perfect terms. “Being analytical, language can come to grips with the body

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only if it cuts it up; the total body is outside language, only pieces of the body succeed to writing; in order to make a body seen, it must be either displaced, refracted through the metonymy of clothing, or reduced to one of its parts." Because of the simultaneity of the picture medium, the visual artist suffers no such representational limitation and has therefore no similar need for the fetish. Ernst does not appear interested in either individualizing the parts of the body or investing them with the power to arouse desire for the whole. In "Yachting" (fig. 6), a scene from La Femme 100 têtes, the serenity of the sailboat-strewn sea, the sailor's apathy toward the two outsize, trussed limbs on which his back is turned, and the extreme discrepancy in size between sailor and limb all undermine the notion that an amputation has occurred, that somehow these limbs were severed from a gigantic figure now hiding its mutilated bulk somewhere outside the picture. Instead, we have the impression that these limbs represent not a mutilation or amputation at all, all of which imply a total body and an original wholeness of form, but that they are objects that are not parts, belong to no whole, and must be viewed as "original fragments," which is a conceptual paradox.

Ernst's body parts, mutilated bodies, hybridized creatures, and otherwise distorted forms betray an intention to challenge the metaphysical framework that gives rise to concepts of wholeness, of the unity of the body, of the expected relations of parts to whole. The process of deconstruction is precisely a thinking of "the structurality of structure," in Jacques Derrida's terms. The deconstructive thinking reveals our entrapment in a language that is embedded with the metaphysics of presence. I cannot even think or describe what Ernst depicts without already contradicting in my words that which I wish to express. I cannot speak of a body without skin (skinless, flayed) without implying the original presence of skin.

Perhaps this is why Ernst resorts to words, titles, and captions that circumvent the logical principle of noncontradiction with the rhetorical device of the oxymoron. La Femme 100 têtes, with the pun cent / sans, hundred / without, expresses simultaneous presence and absence, like the zero suffix in linguistics. Other oxymorons expressing simultaneous presence and absence occur in this work such as "eyeless eye," "flesh without flesh." "Two bodies without bodies lie down alongside their bodies, falling out of bed and bed-curtains like phantoms without a phantom" combines multiple logical contradictions with semantic

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contradictions, since "phantom" is already constituted semantically of a present absence. *La Femme 100 têtes* is a work grounded in paradox at all levels. Thematically, it deals with creation and its opposites, "l'immaculée conception manquée" (rendered by Tanning as "the might-have-been Immaculate Conception") and infanticide ("to tenderest youth, extreme unction," "eviscerated baby"), or conversely, with death that is not death, as in the form of Lazarus—all presided over by the twin sisters, or *la femme 100 têtes* in her contradictory aspects as *Germinal* and *Perturbation*. Technically, Ernst does use the relationship of text and picture in his collage novel to create contradictory expressions, although he sometimes resorts to utterly conventional techniques to express the inexpressible, for example, representing phantoms with levitating figures, unshaded line drawings, or figures shrouded in greyish drapes. But sometimes the pictures symbolically present a contradiction found in the text, as when he sets a pretty drawing of pale, demure Psyche stepping into her pool (from Thumann to Hamerling's *Amor*.

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und Psyche) into a scene of massacre to illustrate "the tranquility of future assassinations." At other times the captions simply "lie," as when "sea of serenity" is depicted by a violent storm at sea, sinking the large vessel and inundating the hapless survivors on the raft in a maelstrom. Occasionally Ernst uses a complicated "surreal" image to depict a logical impossibility, such as having a single figure occupy two places at once. "Loplop, dumb with fear and fury, finds his bird head and remains motionless for 12 days on both sides of the door" does indeed show a door flanked by a split figure on either side, half male and half female, the male half crowned with the slender neck and head of a swan.

La Femme 100 têtes is an apocalyptic book thematically, but one that reveals the chaos not only at the end of the world but at the beginning as well. "The Eternal Father tries vainly to separate the light from the shadows" reads one of the captions. This inability to separate light and darkness constitutes an interplay of presence and absence (Is light a presence, or an absence of darkness? Is darkness a presence, or an absence of light?) that, according to Derrida, constitutes freeplay. "Freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence, but if it is to be radically conceived, freeplay must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence; being must be conceived of as presence or absence beginning with the possibility of freeplay and not the other way around." In Ernst's works freeplay takes the form of hybridization, for once the artist divests himself of the concept of the body as an integrated and unique presence, then bodies and their parts become mere supplements for absences that can be infinitely substituted, according to Derrida's principle of supplementarity. Ernst's hybrids range from conservative substitutions that retain the "syntax" of the body while playing havoc with the "lexicon" (human bodies with animal heads) to mutations that produce essentially unintelligible forms (human torsos with human legs in place of the head, bodies with vegetable, mineral, and unrecognizable prosthetic parts).

Supplementarity implies a temporal element, continuity, since the possibility of infinite substitutions is realized paradigmatically, that is, in time. It is precisely because of this temporal element that identity, the continuity of form and personality over time, is a more salient concept in literary enterprises than in visual art. Although shape-shifting and identity games always played a large part in Dada and Surrealist high jinx (Marcel Duchamp's portrait in transvestite attire as Rrose Sélay, or

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Ernst’s own identification of his hawk-nosed profile with Loplop, the Bird Superior), Ernst best transcended the formal limitations on identity play in visual art with his generic innovation of the collage novel. He found a number of ways of simultaneously creating and subverting identity, as when he not only gives la femme 100 têtes alternate names and functions but endows her with spare heads as well, held in Germinal’s lap or carried on a stick, like a mask, by Perturbation’s partner. He seems to say that if there is freeplay in the system, a body might just as well have a hundred heads as none, particularly if they do not occupy the shoulders simultaneously but supplement the absence there one at a time.

During his Surrealist period, Max Ernst exceeded the attacks of Dada and Surrealism on political, moral, and aesthetic establishmentarianism by attacking the conceptual medium itself: the way form is conceived and perceived and the way it is abstracted and valorized. His strategies are varied and ingenious, ranging from parody of classical forms and interplay of high and low art and of presence and absence, to generic and technical developments that reveal the extent to which concepts of form are governed by notions of time, particularly “significant” time. Time is implicated in the way form is valorized, precedence in time being equated with priority in value as form becomes “source” or “model.” It is not surprising that during his stay in Arizona following World War II, Ernst grew to admire the Hopi Indians for their “time-less” language, which had so entranced Benjamin Whorf. “Pour eux,” Ernst wrote, “le temps à l’état aboli.”

Ernst’s formal Surrealist paintings (formal because they are full-size, representational oils executed with traditional craftsmanship) invite a naive response to their content to enhance the effectiveness of their surreptitious attack. We feel the sharpness of their critique of myth the better for having first assumed them merely to represent myths. The resonance of earlier paintings quickly reveals itself as parody that de-signifies our idealizations of great art. And Ernst deceives us, with the lure of familiar conventions, into recognizing our deception by convention, as he restores the libidinal matter that traditional representational language represses.

There is nothing subtle about Ernst’s subversion of religious iconography and Christian mythology in The Blessed Virgin Chastises the Infant Jesus Before Three Witnesses (1934) (fig. 1), a picture he painted at the suggestion of André Breton. By
shifting his artistic rhetoric from reverence to sacrilege, from devotion to malice, Ernst transforms the icon of Madonna and Child from a sentimental image to a shocking picture designed to disgust and repel the pious and amuse and gratify the malicious. The viewer is forced to abandon a virtuous posture and obliged to contend with an array of libidinal affects: outrage, secret pleasure and recognition, shame, and so forth. Ernst deliberately chose Parmigianino’s portrait *Madonna with the Long Neck* as the target for his stylistic parody. The violent agitation of Ernst’s scene contrasts dramatically with the artificial postures that constitute the Mannerist excess of this formalistic composition. Furthermore, he translates Parmigianino’s elegant elongations of torsos and limbs into nightmarish exaggerations of the Virgin’s powerful arms and the infant’s long expanse of back extended across the entire breadth of his mother’s knees.

Yet by reducing the number of “angels” from five to three (the “bad angels,” Breton, Eluard, and Ernst), and emphasizing them as three “witnesses” in the title, Ernst creates two points of reference in the life of Christ that become the subject of his inversions: the Adoration of the Magi, and the Agony of Christ. By inverting the familiar relationships of the Biblical motifs, distorting their “normal” syntax, as it were, he allows certain Freudian elements to emerge from the religious myth. The scene of the Magi’s bringing of gifts is changed to a scene of punishment, gifts and punishment serving as a common pair of antonyms (cf. the Wolf Man’s dream) in the experience of childhood. The three witnesses in this way change from worshipers of the Infant to voyeurs of Christ’s suffering, as representatives of the Christian faithful. The infliction of pain on Christ is itself the central aspect of the salvation myth. Ernst merely displaces the role of tormentor from Roman military to Blessed Virgin, and the role of victim from divine scapegoat to hapless Infant. Other elements are distorted as well. The discarded halo, which so scandalized *Der Spiegel,* evokes the crown of disgrace, the crown of thorns (there are no haloes in Parmigianino’s picture). The poignant moment in the *via crucis* when Christ is stripped of his garments is here reduced to its most humiliating infantile counterpart, the child’s bottom bared for spanking.

By deranging the traditional iconography of Nativity and Crucifixion scenes, Ernst demythifies the Christian salvation myth by stripping away the religious signification of the actions and representing them in their de-signified secular form. He seems to ask whether it is less perverse to revere an image of an adult

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Christ stripped, whipped, and crucified, than of an infant laid across its mother’s knee and spanked. His critique of the myth is both psychoanalytical and political, revealing the extent to which religious imagery and belief mask sadism and masochism and, by a similar fraudulent signification of suffering, justify political and social oppression in the name of discipline and self-sacrifice.

Ernst extends his iconoclasm to other religious icons, such as his 1923 Pietà, or Revolution by Night. Unlike his Madonna and Child, where he primarily inverts the posture of the figures, here the posture of an older figure cradling a younger is all that remains as an iconographic link to the religious tableau. A bourgeois man, derived from Chirico’s Brain of a Child, replaces Mary as the grieving parent, and a clothed figure with the head of a statue, also derived from Chirico, replaces the dead Son. Uwe Schneede interprets this painting entirely as an autobiographical allegory. “The father in the picture has given life to the youth, just as Mary has to Jesus. Mary seeks to temper the sufferings of her son through love, although she does not understand them; but this father takes over from her only the gesture of protection. He is holding a dummy; there is no inner bond between father and son. In his father’s arms the son is as cold as a statue.” I am inclined to interpret only the posture (signifying mourning or bereavement), not the nature or relationship of the principals in relation to the icon of Christ and His Mother. The identity of the principals is perhaps revealed by their literal appearance: the bourgeois man in neat suit, moustache, bowler hat, mourning the grey sculpture whose significance may be not unlike that of the sculpture in Chirico’s painting, a fragment of dead and sterile culture, an irrelevant monument out of place in the modern world. If so, the “revolution” in the title is the Surrealist revolution itself, forcing the bourgeoisie to relinquish its inheritance of monumental art and aesthetic ideals. I suspect that Ernst uses the Pietà precisely to show that it is a god, or an ideal, that has died, an idol that has fallen, but that such gods or ideals exist only in our icons or representations of them.

Ernst’s later painting, The Robing of the Bride (1939) (fig. 7) may also have a religious source, if not a specific Biblical reference. The female body of the hooded figure unmistakeably resembles the figure of Eve from the Van Eycks’ panel of The Ghent Altarpiece: small rounded breasts, rounded protruding belly, and a graceful hand shielding the pubic region. Furthermore, the elaborately cloaked bride in Ernst’s painting may refer
to the heavily draped woman in Jan Van Eyck's famous wedding picture of *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*. The thin, fur-clad groom in stocking feet bears a vestigial resemblance to Ernst's hybrid, feathered groom, and both pictures have a "mirror" on the back wall. Van Eyck's mirror adds two figures to the scene, while Ernst's subtracts two figures. The grotesque little androgynous, hybrid fetish with exaggerated sexual characteristics may represent Ernst's perverse counterpart to the small domestic dog in Van Eyck's wedding picture. The title of *The Robing of the Bride* is, of course, ironic because the picture will foil our conventional interpretations of its meaning. We might expect the "robing" to symbolize a rite of passage from innocence to experience, a crossing of the boundary of carnal knowledge marked
by the assumption of a symbolic garment. Perhaps Ernst chose Van Eyck’s Eve for this very thematic reason: because, as the first mythological creature to pass from Nature to culture, Eve was first to come to self-consciousness of nakedness (that is, of being seen by an “other”) and to don a garment (or, in Van Eyck’s portrayal, to clutch a fig leaf to her groin).

But instead of recapitulating this mythic gesture, Ernst’s painting reverses the ritual and produces the opposite of a wedding, a kind of antiwedding. It is the function of the wedding ceremony to repress or displace the sexual act at its center in order to transform biological and animal behavior (mating) into a cultural event. Indeed, Van Eyck’s Arnolfini wedding displays in virtually encyclopedic form the whole symbolic language of marriage as a social contract and a cultural act. Ernst’s “robing,” however, is designed to achieve the opposite effect. The “robe,” an animal mask, is donned to delete virtually all human or cultural traces (face, hair, clothing, expression) from the picture in order to restore the “bride” to a purely sexual function that the resemblance to Van Eyck’s Eve, a figure with particularly individualized sexual characteristics, makes especially conspicuous. Ernst also substitutes red, pinks, and oranges for the somber blacks, browns, and greens of Van Eyck’s domestic interior to introduce yet further erotic conventions into the picture. And yet Ernst’s Robing of the Bride is not primitivistic but decadent, not a return to nature but an invocation of pornological conventions (particularly the use of theatrical devices, such as the mask that reveals rather than conceals, so central to Sadean costuming) that use culture subversively and hypocritically to deny and conceal their libidinal intent. And as in pornography, in which the “other” reigns supreme and voyeurism is therefore a central mode, we are implicated by the mirror in the picture. It identifies us as “witness” of the perverse wedding (as Van Eyck acts as witness, via mirror, to the Arnolfini wedding) not as seeing subject but as a pornological object, a double of the bride. The scene practically becomes a dramatization of Sartre’s argument that if we are seen looking at an obscene object, we become an obscene object: a voyeur. Ernst’s picture traps us in its gaze; it sees us, and shows us to ourselves in ways we can scarcely countenance.

If in The Robing of the Bride entrapment is a product of pictorial rhetoric, of the manipulation of the viewer, it appears as an explicit thematic content in many other Ernstian works. In the 1923 There Are No More Real Hydrcycles, for example, we

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find a bird entangled in a contraption, a prevalent syntax of machine-traps-creature, whose origin may be traced to Ernst’s fascination with a nineteenth-century book on bird catching with ruses and mirrors by C. J. Kresz entitled L’Aviseptologie française, ou traité générale de toutes les ruses dont on peut se servir pour prendre les oiseaux. But except for the stylized later depictions of birds in cages (the “Aeolian Harps” series), the theme of entrapment is of more than pictorial consequence in his works. Ernst frequently interchanges the subjects and objects of entrapment, to create an ambiguity that is itself a trap, a lure to misunderstanding. His theme of entrapment therefore becomes self-reflexive, moving from the realm of representation to the realm of interpretation.

During the same years that Ernst painted the Hydrocycles, he also created metaphors of bird / machine function in the sky, but with far more somber historical overtones. The Massacre of the Innocents, a collage produced in 1920–21, depicts a winged, flying thing, which could be either bird, insect, plane, or exterminating angel, threatening silhouetted figures over an aerial view, depicted by photomontage, of towns, buildings, and railroad tracks. If the scene of impending destruction is here presented from the point of view of the bomber, then in Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale (1924), the danger is perceived from the point of view of the victims on the ground. These figures assume attitudes (prostrate woman, figures fleeing, babes in arms) not unlike those of Picasso’s 1937 mural commemorating the bombing of Guernica. The nightingale functions as a metaphor for a military bomber. Ernst exploits the optical illusion of huge planes appearing as tiny as birds in the sky; he exploits also the wonder that such a seemingly harmless flying thing could inspire such fear.

These paintings reflect Ernst’s shock after a war of such arbitrariness that he and Eluard discovered afterward they had fought on the same front on opposite sides. They further reflect an awareness of the instability of signs, as the signified of the plane changes from toy to weapon, from the cavorting aerobatic machines that had so delighted Europeans before the war,32 to the terrible engines of destruction during the war.

In Ernst’s 1934 series of paintings called Garden Airplane-Trap, the political statement disappears altogether in the interest of inverting the syntactic function of planes once more, from subject to object, destroyer to victim, like the hapless birds of Kresz’s book. Furthermore, Ernst renders subject and object

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interchangeable, so that the sentence becomes entirely ambiguous and could mean either "garden traps airplane" or "airplane traps garden." If the Garden Airplane-Trap pictures are thought of as companion pieces to the earlier paintings, then the inversion of a bomber trapped by a hangar camouflaged with vegetation lends special credibility to Gilbert Lascault's thesis that these images of circular entrapment show Ernst's anti-Platonism in his affinity for Greek *metis*, or wily intelligence. Although Lascault does not mention him, the great paragon of Greek *metis* is Homer's Odysseus, whose most famous trap is the Trojan Horse, a disguised military trap like Ernst's garden.

Like Lascault, I also see Ernst's development of the theme of entrapment in his paintings as having an ultimately self-reflexive end, as referring to a devious and illogical way of thinking. This self-reflexivity is part of the deconstructive process of exploring and undermining the preconceptions of our way of thinking, of our language. Instead of exploring the ways in which our language traps us to think of form, Ernst's play with interchangeable functions in his paintings explores the way our language entraps us to think of relationships. The word *trap* itself necessarily implies a subject and an object. The verb is an obligatory transitive, as it were: something must trap, and something must be trapped. As in thinking and speaking of "skinless" and "headless" bodies, so it is impossible, for example, to think or speak of "lies" that no one speaks or hears. Since "trap" cannot be imagined without an implied trapper and trapped, Ernst again evokes the principle of complementarity, letting subject and object be supplied by a series of potentially infinite substitutions: plane, bird, or insect lured by the garden as though by a carnivorous plant, and putrefied plane, bird, or insect as polluter and destroyer of the garden. Just as Ernst's trap, the garden, eventually traps itself, so the word *trap* traps us in the epistemology embedded in our language.

Ernst's most powerful representation of "doubled" entrapment is, of course, the *Oedipus Rex* of 1921 (fig. 2). Bird / entrapment / machine are organized into new syntactic arrangements here. The fingers protruding through the window are skewered by the instrument whose functions, among others, may be that of a bow for projecting the arrow lodged in the nut / seed / eyeball-like object held by the fingers. The subject / object reversal is here ironic, "man shoots bow" having become "bow shoots man" as well. But although critics note the self-skewering, generally no one relates it back to the Oedipus myth.

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If Lucy Lippard does so, it is only in the most general sense that the Oedipus myth has something to do with sex.

Given the title and the myth as the point of departure, each viewer will interpret it in the framework of his own experience and perhaps expertise in Freudian or Jungian analysis. One can mention the “soaring” analogy which appears here, too, or the penetration, the pressure to open the rounded or split female form held by the huge hand of authority, and the painfully misplaced penetration from the sides by the sharper, smaller phallic forms, the “fenced-in” or imprisoned female bird, and so forth.

Yet the Oedipus myth is precisely about trappers trapping themselves, or skewers skewering themselves, if you will. Laius orders his infant son Oedipus skewered by the ankles, an entrapment that doubles back on him when Oedipus later kills him. Ernst clearly had the ankle-skewering motif in mind because one of the plates in “Oedipe” (Une Semaine de bonté) shows the bird-headed protagonist holding a naked figure skewered by the foot (frontispiece). Also the companion picture of Oedipus Rex appearing in Paul Eluard’s Répétitions shows protruding fingers holding a microscope clamped on a bird’s foot, like a vise. As Laius’s attempt to kill Oedipus doubles on himself, so Oedipus’s attempt to trap the murderer of Laius doubles on himself. He discovers that he is the murderer, and so traps himself. If Russell and Schneede were correct in calling the nutlike object an eye, then the painting might include a further reference to Oedipus’s blinding himself with Jocasta’s brooch.

Ernst has some of the same deconstructive aims in Oedipus Rex as in his other paintings. Just as it is impossible to think of a hand without a body, so it is impossible to imagine an action without an agent, a deed without a doer. This is the “anthropological reflex” responsible for such syntactic forms as “it rains,” “il pleut,” and “es regnet.” Yet if we could, we might try to imagine the fingers in Oedipus Rex as pure instruments guided by no consciousness, no sight.

By the same token, the wide, glassy eyes of the bird heads stare out of the picture with no apparent object in their sight: “seeing” yet “not seeing,” like Oedipus, who is blind when he sees and sees when he is blind. The birds, whose only function is sight, are incapable of action, and yet fail to “see” the action so close at hand. The disjunction between sight and action propels the evil destinies in Oedipus Rex. By rendering this disjunction
between sight and action, Ernst renders the most compelling psychoanalytic axiom of the Oedipus myth: the tyranny of the unconscious, the ultimate entrapment.

Although Ernst's last collage novel, Une Semaine de bonté ou Les sept éléments capitaux (1934), has no text or picture captions, Ernst seems to transform it into a symbolic system, like that of a liturgical or a political calendar (cf. the French Revolutionary calendar) by attaching a series of ostensibly significant categories (day of the week, element, example, color, literary maxim) to each book. But these categories ultimately fail to signify. There is no evidence, for example, that the “water,” however destructive, is punitive, like the Biblical deluge; this is a strategy consistent with Ernst's overall de-signifying and demythifying enterprise in this work. He foils and fools the “other” (the reader, viewer, us) by confronting us with a text we cannot read except negatively, as a museum of dysfunctional symbols and fractured significations. I will argue that the elements, animals, viscera, are intended as ironic intrusions of insignificant Nature into a culture stifled in signification, and as failed restorations of the libidinal in the cultural landscape, the libidinal being defined as force that refuses to signify. Both significant time (the heroic past, mythic time) and significant objects (monuments, landmarks, sacred artifacts) will be stripped of their meaning. Ernst uses “novelistic” form subversively, to critique the historian's function that public art is made to serve. The frozen forms (statues, medals, buildings, myths), which bear the excessive signification of the past, are unfrozen and set in motion again, this time according to the postures and actions of bourgeois melodrama, pulp adventure, or old-fashioned pornography, all of which suffer from insufficient significance. "Le Lion de Belfort" fails to narrate the siege and battle, "Oedipe" fails to narrate the myth, and "L'Île de Paques" fails to reveal the sacred rituals that prompted the construction of the giant heads on Easter Island. Instead, each of the books depicts through a series of private fantasies sordid adventures of the bestial impulse filtered through culture.

If Ernst uses novelistic conventions to render monumental art, myth, and architecture commonplace, he does so only ultimately to disrupt them, as though to remind us that even popular forms can in time become aesthetically elevated and canonized. He therefore develops strategies simultaneously to create and disperse identity so that “protagonists” (of sorts) emerge that can never crystallize into “heroes” of consistent form or purposive

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action. Several of the “protagonists” of *Une Semaine de bonté* are hybrids: the lion-headed man of “Le Lion de Belfort,” the dragon-winged woman of “La Cour du dragon,” the bird-headed figure of “Oedipe,” the rooster-headed male of “Le Rire du coq,” and the man with the sculptured Easter Island head in “L’Ille de Paques.” The hybridization itself disrupts identity, which Ernst further complicates with variation. As the “narrative” progresses, the lion of Belfort sports not only a variety of costumes in different frames (denoting various occupations and social classes: military uniforms, dress clothes, rags, and the like) but also a variety of heads, though all of them chiefly feline. But Ernst’s choice of lion’s head does not seem purely arbitrary. Monumental, sculptured lion’s heads seem to top military uniforms and distinguished dress, while the ragged street cleaner wears a natural, animalistic head. Appropriately, a figure with a lion’s-head door knocker seems to be defending a heavy double gate with battle-ax in hand (or menacing the suspended, half-clad female figure, or inadvertently cutting his own throat)—perhaps a literal dramatization of Colonel Denfert-Rochereau’s epithet. This irregularity of pictorial representation from frame to frame, a major departure from traditional picture books, might be attributed merely to the technical conditions of collage art, which require Ernst to use different sources for his lion’s heads in order to represent his figure from different angles and with different facial expressions. However, in “Oedipe,” where Ernst unabashedly tops his figures with the heads of a variety of species of birds (eagles, crows, turkeys, and so on), it becomes clear that these capital variations are a deliberate attempt to disrupt identity. His purpose may be clearer in “Oedipe” than elsewhere, because the Oedipus myth is about shifts and confusions of identity and includes references to androgyny (Tiresias, made to take male and female form) and hybridization of form (the Sphynx) and function (Tiresias given the ability to understand the language of birds).

One of the deceptions of *Une Semaine de bonté* is that it appears to rupture identity in order to let the beast escape, in order to restore the animal to culture by invoking the literal residues of the metaphors and totemic epithets that define the protagonistic roles, such as the lion-hearted warrior, the priapic cock, and the insinuating dragon. But the beasts that erupt into culture restore no Nature to their denatured worlds, for they are “domesticated” brutes, not in the sense of having their ferocity abolished, but because they have been appropriated by the Beasts of the Modern Imagination
human. They appear as "received" forms not only technically, as representations of cultural images of the beast, but also conceptually, as human projections and fantasies of what constitutes "bestial" behavior. This, finally, has little to do with the natural behavior of animals. Ernst's lions do not stalk and devour their prey: they kidnap it in carriages and hold it for ransom (plates 1:16, 1:17). Throughout the numerous Orpheus allusions in the "Lion of Belfort" section, there is no Dionysian sparagmos, no rapturous surrender to animalistic fate.

If we look at a scene like that of plate 1:2 (fig. 8), of a couple strolling through an art gallery, we can see the subtlety with which Ernst exploits cultural conventions to produce a thoroughly denatured Apollonian climate. A beautifully dressed male in cape, sash, saber, and boots strikes a gallant pose with graceful gestures of hands and feet, while a young woman clings adoringly to his arm. But this genteel propriety, however theatrical, is subverted neither by the man's noble lion's head nor by the "art" on display in the gallery: a largely nude female sculpture, and a picture of an enlarged female breast in an oval frame. These artifacts are disturbing not for the sexual element they inject into the scene but because they announce sexuality only as repressed, displaced, and sublimated. They deny the living body, the warm flesh, the procreative instinct, both by their artificiality, and by further conceptual constraints Ernst places upon them. The nude female sculpture is fitted with bands and contraptions, one of which looks like a chastity belt. Her representational function therefore shifts from displaying a natural body to exemplifying its frustration and oppression. She further introduces the "other" into the scene, for chastity belts imply rivals that shift the locus of sexual gratification from the body to the ego, from matters of appetite and pleasure into the cultural realms of competition and prestige, prerogatives, and property. The man ogling the portrait of the breast displays further mediations and displacements of lust with his voyeuristic, vicarious, and fetishistic behavior. The little cultural world of courtship and art appreciation created by the semiotics of clothes and posture in this scene is wholly exteriorized, given over to forms and their viewing, to concealing and fragmenting the body, and to replacing the flames of animal passion with the social drama of human desire.

Une Semaine de bonté is filled with scenes of overwrought behavior, a series of violent actions and motions that, according to Renée Riese Hubert, are consistent with the predominance of

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verbs in Surrealistic writing.\textsuperscript{39} But in "Le Lion de Belfort," for example, violent and destructive action (so ironically in contrast with Denfert-Rochereau's lifesaving at Belfort) is rendered not only futile and absurd but also emptied of the Dionysian excess of its cruelty. The result is a fragmented recapitulation of the Orpheus myth, in which there is neither retrieval of life from the land of the dead, nor an ecstatic final abandon to animal ferocity and violence. Plate 1:12 (fig.9), for example, depicts the lion-headed figure in motley garb playing the flute or pipe of a snake charmer to a viscus, a chunk of meat (human or animal) that was probably once an organ with muscle attached. In this fragmented, decontextualized state, viscera are not living flesh despite their organic nature, and they lose their metonymic power to represent the whole body, the living body, as they lose their power to respond to music. The female nude in the picture, her pose as artificial and stylized as a statue, wears a heart

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over her genitals, like a fig leaf of feeling and affection repressing the site of sexual activity. But she also will be unable to respond to the music, for her heart is not a visceral heart, a living, feeling heart, but the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a purely symbolic heart signifying the suffering of the mortification of the flesh. Scapulars, medallions, and sentimental jewelry of the Sacred Heart function as life-denying fetishes throughout the chapter, signalling lack and displacement of life; they are often paired with the ubiquitous medals, whose function, since medals certify recognition and invite the gaze, is to introduce the “other” into the scenes. Ernst chooses his representations carefully for their cultural or acultural functions. In two further plates of the Lion of Belfort series we see pornological tableaux given a macabre twist that virtually destroys their residue of libidinal energy. In plate 1:28 (fig.10), a lion-headed male tickles the soles of a female bound to a bed. This picture could be regarded as a companion to the Orphic pipe playing of plate

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1:12 since, in both, the active agent attempts to force an involuntary, living response from an inert creature. But the entrails of plate 1:12 recur here as well, spilling from the body of the eviscerated female on the bed. The gesture is futile and doomed; a corpse cannot be tickled to life any more than it can be beaten to life (cf. the recurrence of viscera in plate 1:29, in which an eviscerated female is whipped). This mad, perverse beastliness of Ernst’s Lion of Belfort is not an animal beastliness, and he inherits not the animal kingdom of living creatures that is his traditional portion but, like a doubly failed Orpheus, the lifeless, skull-bestrewn plain of the land of the dead (1:33).

Given the dominant effect of cultural conventions in “Le Lion de Belfort,” it is not surprising to find the markings of gender (as the cultural signification of sexual differences) of great importance in this chapter of Une Semaine de bonté. But because the content of this section is so markedly androcentric, that is, dominated by male action and male desire, the viewer is
put into a curiously female position, like that of the women who hang adoringly on the Lion’s arm, or sit obligingly on his lap. We are captured, as viewers, by the “other”: invited to admire his medals, to marvel at his feats, to concede his splendor and superiority, to give him recognition and respect. This not only puts us, as viewers, in the castrated position of having yielded all significance to the picture, but it also implicates us unpleasantly as the relatively benign early representations of the Lion become increasingly malevolent and sadistic as the series progresses. By the time we withdraw our recognition and become critical and reproachful, it is too late to avoid all self-incrimination.

In the second book of Une Semaine de bonté, the book entitled “L’Eau,” the gender perspective changes. The chapter is dominated by the female as much as by the water, and, indeed, the female’s kinship with water belongs to the conventional relegation of woman to Nature and her corresponding extrusion from culture, which feminist critics see as characteristic strategies of the androcentric imagination. But its effects in “L’Eau” are interesting to contemplate, because from a biocentric perspective the female’s slumbering, passive role becomes curiously empowering. The first three plates of “L’Eau” depict the destruction of all cultural avenues of escape from the deluge: railroad bridges and great suspension bridges are spectacularly destroyed, and even the last sure refuge in times of flood, that of altitude, is denied the victims, as water inundates the tops of cathedral spires in plate 2:30. But the females of plates 2:2 and 2:3 appear oblivious or indifferent to the devastation around them (as do the girls who play with watch chains, balls, or bagpipes in the last three plates), and they thereby establish the major motif of the book, which Renée Hubert calls “Sleeping Beauty”: a female figure slumbering in a comfortable bed amid the swirling deluge—clearly cousin to Henri Rousseau’s figures in The Dream and Sleeping Gypsy. But “Sleeping Beauty,” with its implication of a passive female dependent upon heroic male rescue, may not be a fitting epithet for Ernst’s figure after all. Whether totally alone and unseen as in plates 2:8 or 2:12, or witnessed by the still, gazing men of plates 2:9, 2:10, and 2:11 (fig. 11), the sleeping woman is safe from the flood that washes drowned males into her bedroom. The implication of these scenes is that the withdrawal from consciousness and culture, the retreat into oblivion and indifference that restores sleepers and dreamers momentarily to Nature also restores to the female the elemental power that is equal to the flood. The flood

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may destroy her (there are a few drowned females in the book) but it does not frighten her, and it seems as though her sleeping form holds it in abeyance. As viewers, we share, this time, the androcentric perspective of the silent men keeping vigil at her bedside. Ours is the only consciousness active in some of these turbulent scenes, but our awareness only makes us vulnerable to the anxiety of understanding the significance of things without being able to do anything about them.

After the agoraphobia of “L’Eau,” the claustrophobic little bourgeois rooms of “La Cour du dragon” might seem a welcome haven if they did not threaten to smother us with their fussy wallpapers, carpets, and overstuffed furniture, not to mention the dragon vapor that hangs like so much cigar smoke over some of the scenes. But the human drama of indeterminate intrigue that plays itself out in this building makes one positively long for the nasty individualism of the Lion of Belfort. The ontological space of “La Cour du dragon” is dense with the life of the

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"other." The violence of the earlier works is replaced in this book with a different kind of power play—the tendering of homage, obeisance, reverence—as figures bow to the "other," grovel, kiss hands and coattails, kneel at people's feet, beg and pray, in gestures of humility and dependence (fig. 12). Since many of these gestures are performed by a man in foreign dress (an Algerian, perhaps, given the Parisian setting) this chapter replaces with a racial element the sexual victimizations of the first chapter. Besides exhibiting itself in this semiotics of the master / slave relationship, the "other" recurs throughout the chapter in eavesdropping and spying, tasks in which even the paintings and mirrors in the apartment seem to play a role as they seem, at times, to capture the protagonists in their gaze and betray their hidden emotions and secret passions. Finally, the "dragon" seems to take Manichean forms as satanic or angelic figures, an appropriate antonymy in a chapter given over to overestimation and underestimation. With respect to our role as viewers, Ernst here exploits his medium most effectively to extrude us from the scene. We are indeed voyeurs: we may even be one of the mirrors on the walls that "watches" the figures below like a great eye. But we cannot hear, we are deaf; the rooms and their denizens are dumb to us. The rooms are filled with putative verbal language of which we can infer from the gestural language of the figures only its rhetorical forms: pleas, thanks, reproaches, anguish. The "other" in its most social form, in the intersubjectivity of its discourse, eludes us.

If our perspective in "La Cour du dragon" is restricted by our deafness, then in "Oedipe" it is doubled, as befits the Oedipus myth, which is all about double perspectives or seeing the same set of events from two points of view. The major visual motifs of "Oedipe" are those of pursuit and imprisonment, and using our cultural perspective we readily interpret this as a chapter about crime and punishment, a reading consistent with the Oedipal themes. But when we see a bird shoot a man, the way a man might shoot a pheasant, then it occurs to us that this might merely be "hunting" rather than murder. From an animal perspective, much of "Oedipe" merely reverses roles and does to humans what is normally done to animals: shooting, caging, and beating them, like circus mammals, into tameness. The actions of "Oedipe" are therefore suspended in ambiguity, hovering between fullness and emptiness of signification, presence and absence of morality, the Nietzschean ambiguity of morality as the cicuration or domestication of the beast. The bird-headed

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man visiting the jailed woman is like a human attending a caged bird—except for the recurring *corpus delecti*, which adds the signification of crime (fig. 13). “Oedipe” has a circus sequence in which trussed humans are transported into large, portable circus cages and trained with a whip by bird-headed figures. The large human hand reaching out of a tiny window over the heads of scurrying birds is a scene from the vantage point inside a birdcage, and we viewers are, at that moment, birds of a feather. The scenes of “Oedipe” are lent a mysteriously affective ambience by virtue of being set at night, under a dark, sometimes moonlit, sky, or in interiors lit by lamplight. This element of the night, too, is ambiguous, for it provides either cover of darkness and the promise of freedom to criminals and fugitives, or a firmament that is itself the dome of a cosmic cage, a prison house of fate, like that encircling an Oedipus who lives in the delusion that he is free.

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By the time we reach the last book of *Une Semaine de bonté*, which combines the last three days of "kindness week" into one volume, we realize that the humanistic title of the work has been a fraud and a trap. There has been no kindness shown to man or beast, by man or beast, in the representations. Culture has yielded only cruelty and death, as in "Le Rire du coq," the most Gothic of the "tales," whose laboratories and crypts become sites of vivisection and torture. Primitivism provides no alternative, as "Ile de Paques" explores the triangular plays of cultural desire in the jealousies, vanities, and competitions we have encountered in the earlier volumes. Nor does Nature provide a haven, as Ernst transforms the Romantic moonlit landscape of the last plate of "Oedipe" into a land from which living creatures have been extinguished except in their negated form, as skulls, as the dead. Nor has kindness been shown to us as readers.

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of Ernst’s collage novel. None of our talents at deciphering texts, at perceiving conventions and translating gestures, were sufficient to overcome the ruptures of these narrative experiments: to separate polyvalent images, to compensate for the missing dialogue, to adjust to the shifting standpoint of our perspective throughout. The final images of *Une Semaine de bonté*, of a woman tumbling about in a vacuous space in which gravity has been suspended, while the bird, whose aerial role she performs, remains securely perched on the useless ground (fig.14), surely represent us, as viewers and readers, paradoxically “trapped” in an outer space of semiological freplay.

But if Ernst is not a satirist bent on preserving a reformed culture, neither is he a nihilist. He yet speaks for the beast, the unconscious, the libido (as does much of Surrealism), not transparently, in a primitive language, but deviously, maliciously, negatively, by disrupting the cultural, social, and aesthetic conventions that maintain the hegemony of the “other” in the *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*
world. His beast creates ruptures in that fabric of understanding
and appreciation that knits artists and their public into cultural
communities. His beast practices an antirhetoric whose aim is to
frustrate discourse and communication and to promote the kind
of nonsense that best forces us to confront our flawed and vul-
nerable apparatus of literacy. If Ernst were an idealist, he would
not create forms governed by chance, disruption, fragmentation,
and contradiction, which paralyze the conventional idealist rhet-
oric of reverence and overestimation. If Ernst were a pornogra-
pher, he would not disrupt the obsessional formalism of porno-
graphic conventions that make reason the site of the libido.
If Ernst were a serious neo-Gothic artist, he would not caricature
the density of its cultural exaggerations and its emotional
extremes. Instead, Ernst is one of the beasts of the modern
imagination, who abide wherever life-denying culture is
abolished.

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