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Three Essays on Style

By Erwin Panofsky,

Edited by Irving Lavin, with a memoir by William S. Heckscher.

MIT Press, 245 pp., \$25.00

Perspective as Symbolic Form

By Erwin Panofsky

Translated by Christopher S. Wood.

Zone Books/MIT Press,

196 pp., \$24.95

"Expulsion into Paradise" was Erwin Panofsky's characteristic remark in the spring of 1933, when he received the letter that deprived him of his chair in art history at Hamburg University because of his "race." He had been so fortunate as to enjoy the fore-taste of Paradise before, having divided his activities between Germany and the United States for some time, and soon afterward his bliss became perfect on his appointment as Professor of Art History at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, made famous by the presence of an even more eminent "non-Aryan," Albert Einstein.

It was one of Panofsky's most attractive traits that he never behaved as if his unique position was his due. The arrogance traditionally associated with German professors was wholly alien to him. "Some people are vain and others are conceited," he once remarked to me. "I may be vain, but I am not conceited." I was often privileged to experience the truth of that characterisation - indeed, I had the impression that he felt doubly obliged to help younger colleagues because of his own good fortune.

In the public mind Panofsky's name became associated with the subject with which he had introduced himself to the United States, his *Studies in Iconology*. His ingenious interpretations of Renaissance masterpieces in the light of Neo-Platonic philosophy caught the imagination of a whole generation who tried to emulate him, not always to his pleasure. But for Panofsky iconology was only one aspect of the method he had absorbed from the German tradition of art history, one which was deeply rooted in German intellectual history, but relatively new to American academic life. What distinguished this tradition was the claim to hold the key to the history of artistic styles as

an expression or manifestation of changing "world views," or Weltanschauungen. To this approach, which ultimately goes back to the Romantic philosophy of Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770 - 1831), the course of human history resembles a clockwork of wheels within wheels activated by the unfolding spirit of mankind, a spirit that animates art, no less than science, law or religion, in a precise and determined way¹. On this interpretation it is the ultimate task of the art historian to demonstrate the dependence of artistic styles on the logic of this development, as it is the task of the astronomer to explain the position of the planets by his knowledge of Newtonian physics.

Thus the art historian embarking on such a demonstration had to be familiar with most of the other historical disciplines to adduce parallels from philosophy, poetry and all the other aspects of the past. It was here that Panofsky excelled. He enjoyed the game of finding links between individual works of art and stylistic developments in other fields, and despite his notorious quip that we must "beware of the boa constructor," he was firmly convinced that such links must always be there to be found - indeed, I have described elsewhere with what emphasis he asserted his creed in the unity of stylistic periods, which I had timidly ventured to question.²

Needless to say there was more to this great scholar than his Hegelianism. Such towering achievements as his monograph on Dürer will, or should, survive the changing tides of intellectual fashions. Even so it is undeniable that there are plenty of iconoclasts about who are busy dismantling some of Panofsky's most cherished interpretations. It is all the more understandable that, wishing to remind the public that Panofsky's range extended far beyond "iconology," his faithful disciple and successor at Princeton, Professor Irving Lavin, has now undertaken to publish - or re-publish - three of his minor pieces, with the title *Three Essays on Style: a lecture on the Baroque, an essay on the movies, and one on the "Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls Royce Radiator."*

It must be feared that as an act of piety this effort may well fail in its purpose. True, the essay on "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" still deserves to be read for its many original insights and the characteristic zest with which the great scholar expresses his passion for an art form he had watched in his own lifetime developing from a vulgar and despised entertainment into a series of masterpieces. Less portentous, but much richer and more comprehensive than Walter Benjamin's well-known essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (which mainly celebrates the achievements of the Russian Film), this *pièce d'occasion* preserves something of the sparkle and human warmth that animated Panofsky's conversation. Thus, having described the film, for its cooperative character, as "the nearest modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral" he continues:

This comparison may seem sacrilegious, not only because there are, proportionally, fewer good films than there are good cathedrals, but also because the movies are commercial. However, if commercial art be defined as all art not primarily produced in order to gratify the creative urge of its maker but primarily intended to meet the requirements of a patron or a buying public, it must be said that non-commercial art is the exception rather than the rule, and a fairly recent and not always felicitous exception at that. While it is true that commercial art is always in danger of ending up as a prostitute, it is equally true that non-commercial art is always in danger of ending up as an old maid.

Alas, one would look in vain for flashes of wit in the lecture on the Baroque, here published from a typescript dating from near to the time of the author's arrival in the States. In his autobiography Kenneth Clark wrote frankly and perceptively of the temptations lying in wait for the public lecturer

(a genre in which he became the acknowledged master). He confessed to having oversimplified, and to having "cut corners" for the sake of effect. Since Panofsky's lecture deals with a movement of Italian art extending over nearly a century, taking in, for good measure, the preceding phase of "Mannerism," he can hardly have avoided that temptation. What else could he do but be selective? Even so one is surprised to find him criticising Heinrich Wölfflin's account of the Baroque in *Principles of Art History*, for "not mentioning a single work of art executed between, roughly speaking, the death of Raphael in 1520 and the full-fledged seventeenth century," without even acknowledging that in his earlier (1888) path-breaking book *Renaissance and Baroque* (which admittedly deals mainly with architecture) the same author was almost exclusively concerned with precisely that period.

Panofsky's lecture dates from the time when it was fashionable to interpret "Mannerism" (which had previously been derided) as an anticipation of twentieth century Expressionism. Cutting corners, Panofsky never told his audience that there were plenty of Italian artists in the sixteenth century who resisted being categorised by this label - Paolo Veronese, for instance, and even Titian. The term "Baroque," however imprecise, may be more all embracing, but would not be too hard to find what scientists call "counter-examples" to the sweeping generalisations in which Panofsky indulged. A few examples must suffice to show their pure Hegelian vintage:

The Baroque attitude can be defined as being based on an objective conflict between antagonistic forces, which, however, merge into a subjective feeling of freedom and even pleasure: the paradise of High Renaissance regained after the struggles and tensions of the manneristic period, though still haunted (and enlivened) by the intense consciousness of an underlying dualism.

As in Hegel the dialectic of the polarities follows a predetermined course, because it was "easily to be foreseen" that the Renaissance reconciliation (between pagan beauty and Christian spirituality) "could not last." Elsewhere he describes the Baroque as:

The experience of so many conflicts and dualism's between emotion and reflection, lust and pain, devoutness and voluptuousness (which) had led to a kind of awakening, and thus endowed the European mind with a new consciousness.

Unhappily this claim to diagnose two conflicting styles or stages of the evolving spirit even tempted Panofsky to a statement that fully reveals the weakness of the whole approach. He calls Giordano Bruno's death at the stake "an emphatically manneristic occurrence," while the release of Campanella by Urban VIII was "a Baroque event." But we know, largely from Frances Yates, that Giordano Bruno suffered his horrible fate not as a "scientist" (as Panofsky writes), but as a self-appointed prophet,³ and that Campanella was released by Urban VIII because (as D. P. Walker has shown)⁴ he felt in need of Campanella's magic rituals to ward off dangerous astrological influences. Quite apart from these contradictions, however, we must ask if it is at all acceptable thus to represent the actors on the historical stage as mere puppets of "impersonal forces."

In his autobiographical essay "Three Decades of Art History in the United States," Panofsky paid a moving tribute to the debt he came to owe the English language:

The German language unfortunately permits a fairly trivial thought to declaim from behind a woollen curtain of apparent profundity ... when speaking or writing English, even an art historian must more or less know what he means and mean what he says, and this compulsion was

exceedingly wholesome for all of us."⁵

Readers of "What is Baroque?", the first of these lectures, are entitled to assume that it had been written before Panofsky had fully absorbed this wholesome lesson. By contrast the third, "The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator" (1963), is written in the crisp and lucid language that came to characterise his lectures and publications. Yet behind the changed exterior the mode of thought is still the same. The radiator in question is composed of a severely classical "temple front" surmounted by a forward-leaning female figure in windswept drapery. We might assume that the sculptor remembered the figure of Nike of Paionios descending in billowing folds, on the Doric pediment at Olympia, but Panofsky seeks its "ideological antecedents" in the national spirit - *Volkgeist* - of the English. One reads with astonishment, and not without regret, that Panofsky had not shed the racialism that so marred German tradition. He claims to discern in the history of English art a "constant interaction of what has been called 'wild Celtic fancy' and the 'deep feeling and good sense of the Nordic races.'" Accordingly (and in tune with Hegelian dialectic), Panofsky attributes to English Gothic architecture three important innovations epitomising these two contrasting principles:

the first representing a triumph of the irrational; the second a triumph of the rational; the third a triumph of both (the decorative and the perpendicular style standing for the first and second, the fan vault for the third).

While these last-mentioned are at least familiar features of English medieval architecture, one wonders if Panofsky really thought, as he implies here, that marginal drolleries were peculiar to English manuscripts. But we are well into the argument before we hear of these unexpected "ideological antecedents of the Rolls-Royce radiator." In fact, this meandering essay opens with another "antinomy," that between the irregular layout of the English gardens and the strict regularity of the Palladian country houses they surround.

Unfortunately - and most uncharacteristically - the "boa constructor" had failed to do its homework. At any rate the editor might have drawn the reader's attention to the seminal essay on this topic, the article by A. O. Lovejoy on "The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism," first published in German in 1933 and reprinted in 1960 in *Essays in the History of Ideas*,⁶ collected three years before Panofsky's piece was published. Lovejoy firmly anchored the development of the English garden in an essay by Sir William Temple, "Upon the Gardens of Epicurus," written about 1685 and published in 1697, where Panofsky would have found an explicit description of the contrast that concerned him:

Among us, the beauty of building and planting is placed chiefly in some certain proportions, symmetries, or uniformity's ... The Chinese scorn this way of planting ... their greatest reach of imagination is employed in contriving figures, where the beauty shall be great, and strike the eye, but without any order or disposition of parts that shall be commonly or easily observed ... they have a particular word to express it ... they say the sharawadgi is fine or admirable.

Are, then the ideological antecedents of the radiator to be found in China rather than in England? To be sure, Chinese and Japanese buildings are no less symmetrical than are Palladian villas, but it may be more relevant to remember that it was the Renaissance architect Sebastiano Serlio who made the distinction between rustic masonry, "a work of nature," and the classical order as "the work of human hands,"⁷ a distinction that survived in the Italian cult of the grotto and the

grotesque.

What these examples suggest is simply that artists have frequently employed the artifice of the mutual enhancement of order and disorder, severity and playfulness, without waiting for the prompting of their genes. Need one add that John Ruskin, the most vocal of English writers on art, detested the regularity of classical buildings, regarding it as a symptom of the craftsman's enslavement, while he gloried in the regular shapes of strawberry leaves? No doubt a practised Hegelian might rejoice on finding in this further "contradiction" a convenient proof of the dialectic, but even then the connection with the Rolls-Royce radiator would remain somewhat tenuous. One does not want to be solemn about this specimen of Panofsky's whimsy if it were not for the danger that students might take it too seriously.

It may be an accident that the publication of three of Panofsky's more lightweight coincides with the appearance in English of one of his most meaty and difficult studies from the German period, entitled *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. It is amusing to note that Zone Books preceded it with a book on masochism in the same series, for I have noticed how often the eyes of my colleagues glaze over when the theme of "perspective" is mentioned. Panofsky's book quite frequently forms the starting point of these discussions. It is true that the title is better known than its argument, for the title appears to provide the welcome assurance that the dreaded discipline of perspective construction is based on nothing more than an arbitrary convention. Panofsky indeed favours the view that the visible world curves around us as if we stood inside a sphere, and that it cannot be mapped more exactly on a plane surface than can the surface of the globe on the plates of an atlas. It might be objected that this view confuses the stimulus pattern on the retina with the resulting experience, but in any case, the main point of Panofsky's argument lies elsewhere. Strictly speaking, his philosophy of change excluded the assertion of any permanent truth outside the ever-changing flux of history.⁸

It may suffice to quote the excellent summary printed on the back cover for the reader to feel on familiar ground:

Perspective in Panofsky's hands becomes a central component of a Western "will to form," the expression of a schema linking the social, cognitive, psychological and especially technical practices of a given culture into harmonious and integrated wholes. He demonstrates how the perceptual schema of each historical culture or epoch is unique and how each gives rise to a different but equally full vision of the world.

With his customary ingenuity and erudition Panofsky sets out to prove that the ancient world lacked the concept of space that would have enable its artists to develop one-point perspective. In his learned and wide ranging introduction to *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, the translator, Christopher S. Wood, has traced what Panofsky might have called the "ideological antecedents" of this approach, notably Alois Riegl's determinist reading of the history of pictorial representation; but in a sense the reader might have been spared this strenuous exercise, because meanwhile the philological arguments on which Panofsky relied have proved erroneous.

In his searching article "Ancient Perspective and Euclid's Optics" (strictly for masochists), Richard Tobin has demonstrated that Panofsky, in drawing his conclusion about ancient concepts of space, misinterpreted Euclid's text.⁹ Much earlier Decio Gioseffi had made a similar charge against

Panofsky's reading of an admittedly very obscure passage in Vitruvius.¹⁰

Panofsky was humble enough to accept such a knock to one of his pet ideas with good grace; after all it was his basic conviction that old modes of thought were bound to give way to new ones with the passage of time. But this cannot detract from the overwhelming generosity with which he responded to my book on Art and Illusion (1960), where I had written that Gioseffi's argument could not "easily be bypassed":

I have no doubt that your book will do for future generations what Riegl's book has done for me and my contemporaries. I myself am unfortunately too old and too set in the good old ways actively to participate in this development: I rather feel like the dog in Correggio's Ganymede who looks up at the skies into which his master, born aloft by the eagle, is about to disappear. But, like this dog, I have a dim consciousness of the fact that something extremely important is happening. [March 1, 1960]

Can one wonder that the writer of such a letter was idolised by his students and colleagues? Hegelian or not, he surely deserves a corner in Paradise.

Numbered Referencing

1 See my Phillip Maurice Deneke lecture of 1967, " In Search of Cultural history," reprinted in *Ideas and Idols* (Phaidon, 1979, pp. 24-59). Also my lecture "The Father of Art History: A Reading of the Lectures on Aesthetics of G.W.F.Hegel, " translated and reprinted in *Tributes* (Phaidon, 1984), pp. 51-69.

2 *The Sense of Order* (Phaidon, 1979), chapter 8, p.199.

3 Frances A.Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1964).

4 D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (Studies of the Warburg Institute, 1958), Vol. 22.

5 Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Doubleday, 1955) pp. 29-30.

6 Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 99-135.

7 See my "Architecture and Rhetoric in Guilo Romano's Palazzo del Te" in *New Light on Old Masters* (Phaidon, 1986), p. 164.

8 I refer to Panofsky's philosophical relativism in my contribution on "Idea in the Theory of Art: Philosophy or Rhetoric?", *VI Colloqui internazionale del lessico intellettuale europeo*, edited by M. Fattori and M. L. Bianchi (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1990, pp.411-420.

9 *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (Vol. 53, 1990), pp. 14-41.

10 Decio Gioseffi, *Perspectiva artificialis* (Trieste: Istituto di storia dell'arte antica e moderna, No.7, 1957).

