Joe Wallace

Painters of Impediment: Translation

I said all that I had to say on the painting of the van Velde brothers in the last issue of the of the Cahiers d’Art (unless there has been another published since). I have nothing to add to what I said there. It was not enough, it was too much, and I have nothing to add to it. Happily, it is not my concern to say that which has not yet been said, but to say again, as often as possible and in as little space as possible, that which has been said already. Otherwise one unsettles [trouble] the amateurs. That first and foremost. And modern painting is already so unsettling in itself without wishing to make it more unsettling still, in saying that now it is perhaps this, now perhaps that. One ends up unsettling oneself, unnecessarily. And one is already unsettled enough, of necessity, not only by modern painting, without wishing to unsettle oneself more, in attempting to say that which has not yet been said, as far as one knows. For to give in to this ignoble temptation of saying that which has not yet been said, as far as one knows, is to expose oneself to a grave danger, that of thinking that which has not yet been thought, so that it may be known. No, what matters, if one does not wish to add to one’s trouble and to that

---

1 In my translation I have tried to preserve the stylistic qualities of Beckett’s prose. His style is very formal and repetitive, which demonstrates the dual purpose of this essay: both to mock the pedantic pronouncements of art criticism and to emphasize his point that art should strip away allegorical meaning from objects and instead focus on formal qualities. Accordingly, I have consistently used the same English word or phrase for the corresponding word or phrase in French. For the French text I looked prepared by Ruby Cohn in Disjecta, op. cit. 133-137. This article was originally commissioned by the art journal Derrier le Miroir in 1948 as a follow-up to Beckett’s longer article La Peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon [The Painting of the van Veldes or the World and the Pants], which appeared in the 1946-47 edition of the Cahiers d’Art. Painters of Impediment is at once a distillation and expansion of the previous essay.

2 Beckett spent the first half of his previous article on the van Veldes providing an introduction to modern art for the amateur enthusiast. He mocks the trite enjoiners given to amateurs on how to appreciate art correctly, and soon after transitions into his own theory of art as obscurcation and impediment.
of others regarding modern painting and other subjects of essays, is to assert [affirmer] something, without precedent or with, and to remain faithful to it. For in asserting something and remaining faithful to it, no matter what happens, one is able to end up by producing a judgment [opinion] on nearly anything, a good, solid judgment capable of lasting one’s entire life. And judgments of this kind, made to resist the ages, should not be disregarded, and doubtless they never were, even in the first Middle Age.³ And that seems to be especially true of the judgments pertaining to modern painting, about which it is not possible to make a judgment, even a flimsy one, by ordinary methods. But in asserting, one beautiful day, with firmness and again the next day, and the day after that, and every day, that modern painting is this, and this only, then in the space of ten, twelve years one will know what modern painting is, perhaps even well enough to be able to benefit one’s friends, and without having had to pass the best part of one’s spare time in so-called galleries, narrow, clogged, and ill-lit, straining one’s eyes. Which is to say, one will know all that there is to know on the adopted method [formule adoptée], that which constitutes the end of all knowledge. To know what one wants to say, that’s wisdom. And the best means of knowing what one wants to say is to want to say the same thing every day, with patience, and to familiarize oneself thereby with the employed method [formule employée], in all its shifting sands. Until finally, on the classic enigmas of expressionism, abstraction, constructivism, neo-plasticism and their antonyms, the answers become immediate, complete, definitive and, in a manner of speaking, mechanical. The aesthetic security and the feeling of well-being which results from them [the sure answers] have the advantage of allowing study in the company of the modern painters themselves, who will tell you, despite not being assiduously asked, and even

³ Spanning the sixth century to the year 1000 A.D.
without being asked at all, exactly of what modern paintings consists, and exactly of what it does not consist, but with preference given to that of which it does not consist, at all hours of the day and night, and who will reduce to nothing all that which resists their argument in less time than it takes them to draw a circle, or a triangle. And their painting itself, which all the same should not be confused with their conversation, happily carries the same mark of certitude and of irrefragability. Insomuch that of the two things, the canvas and the speech, it is not always easy to know which is the egg and which the chicken.

We understand at the present time, not only from the mouth of the usual crocodiles, one eye full of tears and the other aiming at the stock market, but from that of the most serious and respectable connoisseurs, that the School of Paris (meaning to be determined) is finished or nearly so, that its masters are dead or dying, even its small masters [petits maîtres], and the epigones lost in the ruins of the great decline.

This signifies either that the effort, the efforts of the last half-century of painting in France have dissolved, the problems resolved, the wheel stopped, or that the trade has turned up short due to lack of practitioners. Either nothing remains to be done, or what remains to be done has not been done, because there is no one to do it.

I suggest that the painting of the van Veldes is an assurance that the School of Paris (check Greenwich Time here) is still young and that a brilliant future lies in store for it.

An assurance, a double assurance, for the same grief leads one of them far away from the other, the grief of the object.
The history of painting is the history of its relationships with its object, those relationships evolving, necessarily, first in scope, then in acuity. What renews painting is first of all that there are more and more things to paint, and then a way of painting that is more and more unique \textit{[possessionelle]}\textsuperscript{4}. I do not mean by that a first phase entirely in expansion, followed by a second entirely in concentration, but merely two attitudes bound one to the other, as repose is to effort. The first shudder of painting in gaining knowledge of its limits carries it towards the confines of those limits, the second in terms of depth, towards the thing that hides the thing. The object of representation always resists representation, either on account of its accidents, or on account of its substance, and especially on account of its accidents, because the knowledge of accident precedes that of substance.

The first assault given to a chosen object, independently of its qualities, in its indifference, its inertia, its latency, that is a definition of modern painting which is doubtless no more ridiculous than others. It has the advantage, without being any kind of value judgment, of excluding the surrealists, whose preoccupation, bearing strictly on questions of repertoire, remains as distant from its great contemporary\textsuperscript{5} as the Sienese Sassetta and Giovanni di Paolo from the active profundity of Masaccio and Castagno.\textsuperscript{6} Giovanni di Paolo is a charming obscurantist. It likewise excludes those esteemed

\textsuperscript{4} The word Beckett uses is a jurisprudential term meaning that which marks something as a possession, or \textit{manifests the right of possession}.

\textsuperscript{5} The School of Paris.

\textsuperscript{6} Beckett is saying that Surrealism is out of touch with what makes contemporary art great, much as Sassetta (1394-1450) and Giovanni di Paolo (1403-1483) were out of touch with what made the works of Masaccio (1401-1428) and Castagno (1423-1457) truly great. The point is fairly abstruse, though perhaps Beckett is commenting on the "Masaccio Revolution" in art, which consisted of a greater attention paid to quotidien reality and a more realistic style utilizing the new rules of perspective. It is unclear whether Beckett intends the analogy in an exact sense, or if he merely intends a general comparison between competing paradigms.
abstractors of quintessence\textsuperscript{7} Mondrian, Lissitzky, Malevitsch, Moholy-Nagy. And it expresses what is common to those independents as diverse as Matisse, Bonnard, Villon, Braque, Rouault, Kandinsky, to only cite a few names. The Christs of Rouault, the dead nature the most Chinese of Matisse,\textsuperscript{8} a conglomerate of Kandinsky from 1943 or 1944, issue from the same purpose, that of expressing how a clown, an apple and a red square form only one thing, and from the same dismay, regarding the resistance that keeps this unity from being expressed. For they are only one thing in this, that they are things, the thing, thingness.\textsuperscript{9} It seems absurd to speak, as did Kandinsky, of a painting liberated from the object. Rather, what painting has been freed from is the illusion that there exists more than one object of representation, perhaps even from the illusion that that one object allows itself to be represented.

If this is the latest status of the School of Paris, after its long pursuit not so much of the thing but of its thingness, not so much of the object but of the condition of being, then it is perhaps right to speak of a crisis here. For what remains that is able to be represented if the essence of the object is to refuse representation?

It remains to represent the conditions of this refusal. These will take one or the other of two forms, depending on the subject.

One will say: I cannot see the object, in order to represent it, because it is what it is. The other: I cannot see the object, in order to represent it, because I am what I am.

There have always been these two kinds of artists, these two kinds of impediment, the object-impediment and the eye-impediment. But these impediments used to be

\textsuperscript{7} Alchemists. Beckett’s phrase, \textit{abstracteurs de quintessence}, is a reference to Rabelais’ anagrammatic pseudonym, Alcofridas Nasier, described as an “esteemed abstractor of quintessence.”

\textsuperscript{8} “Dead Nature” is the blending of life and death in still life paintings. Matisse made no secret of the influence of Chinese calligraphy on his work.

\textsuperscript{9} Fr. choset, like Latin \textit{quidditas}, the Thomistic universal quality of things.
accounted for. There used to be conversion. They did not form any part of representation, or only barely. Here they do form a part of it. One might say the largest part. That which is painted is what impedes painting.

Geer van Velde is an artist of the first kind (in my faltering opinion), Bram van Velde of the second.

Their painting is the study of a state of privation, in the one a study borrowing the terms of the outside, light and emptiness, in the other of the inside, obscurity, fullness, phosphorescence.

So for one the resolution comes from the abandonment of weight, density, solidity, and from a rending of all that which wastes space, which interrupts light, from the outside sinking under the conditions of the outside. For the other among the unwavering heaps of an outspread being, shut away and always turned towards itself, without traces, without air, cyclopean, with brief flashes, the colors from the spectrum of darkness.

An unveiling without end, veil after veil, layer upon layer of imperfect transparencies, an unveiling towards what cannot be unveiled, the nothing, the thing once again. And the shrouding in the unique, in a place of impenetrable proximities, a prison cell painted on the rock of the prison cell, art of incarceration.

This is what you have to look forward to when you let yourself get dicked into writing about painting, short of being an actual art critic.

The painting of the van Veldes, free from all critical concern, comes out of a painting of critique and refusal, refusal to accept as given the old relationship between subject and object. It is evidence that every work of art is a readjustment of this
relationship, but without being a critique of it so that the best modern painting becomes a
critique which, in its latest manifestations, strongly resembles what one says, with a stick, to
the tardiness of a dead donkey.

To leave all this for a moment, there remain three paths that painting could take. The path of
return to old naïveté, though the winter of its neglect, the path of the
repentant. Then there is the path which is no longer one, but a final attempt to live in a
conquered land. And finally the path in front of a painting that concerns itself as little
with an expired convention as with the relics and preciosities of wasted efforts, painting
of acceptance, foreseeing in the absence of relationship and in the absence of object the
new relationship and the new object, a path that already forks, in the works of Bram and
Geer van Velde.
2. The Painting of the van Veldes or the World and the Trousers

[Translated from “La Peinture des Van Velde”, in Disjecta, by Mary Traester.

Copyright: not to be circulated without permission.]

The Client: God made the world in six days and you, you can’t bloody be bothered to
make me a pair of trousers in six months.
The Tailor: But Sir, look at the world, and look at your trousers.¹

To begin with, let’s speak of something else, let’s speak of ancient doubts, long forgotten,
or absorbed in ill-conceived choices, in what are commonly known as masterpieces,
works without value, and works of merit.

Doubts of a connoisseur, of course, of a very wise connoisseur, just as the painters
dream him, who arrives arms swinging and arms swinging leaves, his head heavy with
what he thinks he has glimpsed. What a joke, the worries of the creator, next to the
agonies of the connoisseur, that our cheap iconography has stuffed with dates, periods,
schools, influences, and who can distinguish, he is so wise, between a gouache² and a
watercolour, and who from time to time believes he can guess what he loves, keeping an
open mind all the while. For he tells himself, poor sod, that nothing in painting should
remain a mystery to him.

¹ An expanded version of this joke appears in Beckett’s Endgame. It is based on an old Yiddish joke. See
pp. 14-15 for the full text. For evidence that Beckett may have had such an encounter with a tailor in
Berlin, who at last supplied him with an ill-fitting midnight blue suit, see James Knowlson, Damned to
² Opaque watercolor obtained by admixture of white pigment.
Let's not speak of critique in the strict sense of the word. The best, that of a
Fromentin, a Grohmann, a McGreevy, and a Sauerlandt, is Amiel all over again.
Hysterectomies with a trowel. And how could it be otherwise? Can they only cite? When
Grohmann shows echoes of Mongolian graphics in Kandinsky, when McGreevy draws
Yeats to Watteau so rightly, where do the lines go? When Sauerlandt pronounces, with
finesse and – let's be just – parsimony, on the case of the great, unknown painter that is
Ballmer, where does this lead? *Das geht mich nicht an,* said Ballmer, who was made to
suffer horribly by Herr Heidegger's writings. He said it very modestly.

Or one does general aesthetics, like Lessing. That's a charming game.

Or one does anecdote, like Vasari and Harper's Magazine.

Or one does *catalogues raisonnés,* like Smith.

Or one frankly gives oneself over to disagreeable and confused prattle. That is the
case here.

With words we only tell our stories. Even lexicographers open up. And even in
the confessional we betray ourselves.

Couldn't prudence be outraged elsewhere than on these surfaces painted almost
always with love and often with care, and that themselves are confessions? It seems not.
Unnatural copulations are much coveted, among connoisseurs of the beautiful and rare.
There is no choice but to bow down before the savoir-vivre.

Completed, brand new, the painting waits, a non-sense. For it is still nothing more
than a painting, it still lives only a life of line and colour, has offered itself only to its

---

3 Properly, MacGreevy. Beckett misspelled the name of his closest friend and confidant until 1938. See C.J.
4 This is none of my business.
author. Observe its situation. It waits to be brought out. It awaits eyes, eyes that, over the centuries, because it is a painting of the future, will burden it, blacken it with the only life that matters, that of the bipeds without feathers. This will kill it in the end. No matter. It’ll be fixed up. It’ll be gotten back together. They’ll hide its sex and stick a bra on it. They’ll put a leg of mutton in the place of its buttocks, as they did to Giorgione’s Venus in Dresden. It will get to know cellars and ceilings. They’ll attack it with umbrellas and spit, as they did to Lurçat in Dublin. If it is a fresco five meters high by twenty-five meters long, they’ll lock it in a tomato hothouse, having taken care in advance to vivify the colours with nitric acid, as they did to Mantegna’s *Triumph of Caesar* in Hampton Court. Whenever the Germans don’t have the time to move it, it will transform itself into a mushroom in an abandoned garage. If it is a Judith Leyster it will be attributed to Hals. If it is a Giorgione and if it’s too early to be attributed to Titian, it might be attributed to Dosso Dossi (Hanover). Mr. Berenson will discourse about it. It will have lived, and propagated joy.

This is the reason paintings look so much better in museums than at home.

This is the reason Balzac’s *Unknown Masterpiece* is by so many bedsides. The work spared from human judgment finishes by expiring in terrible torments. The work considered as pure creation, whose function stops with its genesis, is consigned to nothingness.

Just one connoisseur (enlightened) would have saved it. Just one of these gentlemen, their faces hollowed by unwarranted enthusiasm, their feet flattened by innumerable stations, their fingers worn by fifty Franc catalogues, who look first from
afar, then from close-up, and who probe the relief of the impasto with their thumbs, in particularly thorny cases. For we’re not talking about the grotesque and despicable animal whose spirit squats in studios as that of the normaliennes squats in the dorm rooms, but rather of the inoffensive madman who runs, as others run to the cinema, into galleries, to the museum and even into churches in the hopes—hold on tight—of pleasure. He doesn’t want to educate himself, the pig, nor become better. He thinks only of his enjoyment.

It is he who justifies the existence of painting as a public thing.

I dedicate the following remarks to him, carefully fashioned so as to better befuddle him.

He only asks for enjoyment. The impossible was made to keep him from it.

The impossible was especially made so that whole slices of modern painting would be taboo to him.

The impossible was made so that he might choose, so that he might take a side, so that he might accept a priori, so that he might reject a priori, so that he might cease to look, so that he might cease to exist, before something that he could simply have liked, or found ugly, without knowing why.

He is told:

'Do not approach abstract art. It’s assembled by a band of crooks and incompetents. They wouldn’t be capable of doing anything else. They don’t know how to draw. Ingres said that drawing is the probity of art. They don’t know how to paint.'

---

5 Thickly applied opaque paint.

6 The students known as the normaliennes attend L'École Normale Supérieure in Paris. They are the intellectual elites of France. Beckett would take over MacGreevey’s former room when he arrived for study in 1928.
Delacroix said that colour is the probity of art. Do not get close to it. A child could do as well.'

What difference could it make to him if they were crooks, so long as they procure his pleasure? What difference could it make to him if they didn’t know how to draw? Did Cimabue\(^7\) know how to draw? What does that mean: know how to draw? What could that mean to him, that children could do as much? That they might do as much. That would be marvellous. What holds them back? Their families perhaps. Or they don’t have the time?

He is told:

‘Do not waste your time with the realists, with the surrealists, with the cubists, with the fauvists,\(^8\) with the tamed, with the impressionists, with the expressionists, etc., etc.’ And each time he is given excellent reasons. They’ll soon be telling him not to associate with the deplorable centuries of painting before Cézanne.

He is told:

‘Everything that is good in painting, everything that is viable, everything that you can admire without fear, is located on a line that leads from the caves of the Eyzies\(^9\) to the Gallery of France.’

It is not specified whether this is a pre-established line, or if it is a track that unrolls progressively, like the slime of a slug. He isn’t shown by what marks he can tell whether a given painting fits in. It is an invisible line. Would it be by chance a map, their line?

He is told:

\(^7\) Giotto’s master
\(^8\) The term “Fauvists” comes from the French fauve, meaning “wild beast.” The fauvists, such as Matisse, experimented with vivid, unnatural colour set free from its traditional, descriptive role.
\(^9\) Prehistoric people in France
‘Only he who is capable of direct expression has the right to abandon it. Distorted painting is the refuge of all failures.’

Right! Since when has the artist, as such, not had all of the rights, that is to say none? Soon it might be forbidden him to exhibit, indeed, to work, if he can’t prove so many years in the academy.

The same bleating saluted free verse and the tonal scale 150 years ago.

He is told:

‘Picasso, that’s good. Proceed with confidence.’

And he will no longer hear the Homeric snores.

He is told, with great goodness:

‘Everything is an object for painting, not excluding states of the soul, dreams, and even nightmares, on the condition that their transcription is made with plastic means.’

Would it be by chance the use or the non-use of these devices that would decide the presence or absence of a given painting on the prescribed line?

In any case it would be useful, and even interesting, to know what is meant by plastic means. Yet no one will ever know. Only the initiated can pick up the scent.

But suppose the definition was to be acquired, once and for all, such that any gummy-eyed fool before a given painting could shout: ‘It’s good, the means are plastic,’ and thereby establish that only the painting that makes use of it is good. What would be said, then, of the artist who would renounce it?

This calls forth vast and shadowy problems of practical aesthetics; I speak of those that refer to the pompier,\textsuperscript{10} the hypo-pompier, the hyper-pompier and the

\textsuperscript{10} A nickname coined for the pretentious Neo-Classic painting popular in France in the nineteenth century. Reportedly taken from the seventeenth-century technique of posing warrior models in fireman’s helmets
deliberately pompier, to their reciprocal relationships and zones of cleavage, and, generally, to the legitimacy of, pardon me, to the opportunity of, the willed creative defect.

He is told:

‘Dali, that’s pompier. He couldn’t do anything else.’

That’s what’s called leaving nothing to chance. First we strangle, then we disembowel.

Today, twinned judgments prosper. They say a lot about the judges.

I propose the above specimen as an example of the genre. It is short, clear, well balanced (affirmation first, negation second), nicely transcendental, easy for Anglo-Saxons to pronounce, and impossible to answer. In other words, if there were a reply it would have to be begun around the age of fifteen, at the latest.

Ten volumes of nauseating analysis couldn’t extirpate the enormous and evil misunderstanding that has, on the level of ideas, so deeply poisoned the relations between painters, between connoisseurs, and between painters and connoisseurs.

Because, if it’s not Dali, it’s another, and if it’s not pompier, it’s something else.

Simply consider the questions that arise, if we admit that pompier has a sense and that Dali, voluntarily or involuntarily, bears its stigma.

Why wouldn’t he make the pompier deliberately, if that’s what he’s at?

Couldn’t we conceive of the pompier and the non-pompier reunited, one at the service of the other? Would the prose of the *Princess of Elis* be as beautiful, if there were no versification? Do Claude’s landscapes really owe nothing to staffage?¹¹

---

*pompier* is French for fireman. Salvador Dali was known to have admired William-Adolphe Bouguereau, the consummate pompier artist.

¹¹ Small figures and animals used in a painting’s composition. Secondary artists often painted the staffage.
How can we know that he couldn’t do anything else? Did he sign a written statement during trial? The fact that he never did anything else? And why wouldn’t he have created the pompier, nothing but the pompier, from his earliest childhood, if that’s what he was about?

And why, knowing how to make nothing other than pompier, couldn’t he draw something admirable from it? Because admirable pompier is a *contradictio in adjecto*?

And so on.

That’s just a minute part of what the connoisseur is told.

He is never told:

‘There is no painting. There are only paintings. Not being sausages, they are neither good nor bad. All that can be said is that they translate, with more or less loss, absurd and mysterious thrusts towards the image, that they are more or less adequate in relation to obscure internal tensions. It’s not up to you to decide the degree of adequation, since you’re not in the maker’s skin. Even he knows nothing about it most of the time. Besides, it’s a coefficient without interest. For losses and profits count equally in the economy of art, where the silenced is the light of the said and all presence absence. All you will never know about a painting, is how much you like it (and strictly why, if that interests you). But that is another thing you will probably never know, unless you become deaf and forget your letters. And the time will come where of your visits to the Louvre, because you will never go anywhere but the Louvre now, you will retain only memories of time spent: “Stopped three minutes before the smile of Professor Pater, looking at him.”
Here is a miniscule part of what the connoisseur is never told. It’s not manifestly truer than the rest. But it would change him.

The painting (since there is none) of Abraham and Gerardus van Velde is little known in Paris, in other words, little known. They have worked there, however, for twenty years, for sixteen years.

A. van Velde’s is particularly obscure. His paintings have never left the studio, so to speak, unless we count as an outing the annual ventilation, heads down, at the Independents. From this long reclusion they emerge today as fresh as though they had never ceased, since their debuts, to be admired, tolerated, and reviled.

Not a single exhibition in Paris, not even a modest one, has ever gathered all of the canvasses, of either brother.

Conversely, an important exhibition of G. van Velde took place in London in 1938, at the Young Guggenheim Gallery.\textsuperscript{12} Strange encounter. A number of his canvasses remained in England.

They worked mostly in Paris and in the immediately surrounding areas. A. van Velde did however spend time in Corsica (1929-31) and in Mallorca (1932-6).

I nearly forgot the most important part. A. van Velde was born in The Hague in October 1895. That was the moment of mist. G. van Velde was born near Leyden in April 1897. That was the moment of tulips.

What follows will be nothing more than a verbal disfiguration, a verbal assassination, of emotions that, I realize, concern only me. Disfiguration, properly considered, is less of an affective reality than its risible cerebral imprint. For I have only to reflect on all the pleasures that the paintings of A. van Velde gave me, on all the

\textsuperscript{12} Beckett wore his ill-fitting midnight blue suit to the exhibition (See Knowlson, p. 263).
pleasures that they give me, and on all the pleasures that the paintings of G. van Velde gave me, on all the pleasures that they give me, to feel them escape me, in an unceasing avalanche.

Thus, a double massacre.

As far as the form it will necessarily have the attractions of a chain of apodictic propositions. It’s the only way not to put oneself first.

From the outset it’s important not to confuse the two bodies of work. They are two things, two series of things, absolutely distinct. They draw apart, more and more, the one from the other. They will draw apart, more and more, the one from the other. As two men who set off from the Porte de Chatillon without really knowing the way, and who take frequent stops to keep their spirits up, one towards the Rue Champ-de l’Alouette, the other towards L’Ile des Cygnes.\textsuperscript{13}

Next it is important to understand their relations. That they resemble each other, two men walking toward the same horizon, in the middle of so many shared sleeps, sittings, and flights.

First let’s speak of the elder. Of the two his originality is, if not the easier to grasp, the more surprising. G. van Velde’s painting is excessively reticent, enacted by irradiations that are felt to be defensive, skilled in what astronomers call (if I’m not mistaken) a great escape velocity.\textsuperscript{14} While A. van Velde’s seems fixed in a lunar void. The air has left it.

I exaggerate.

\textsuperscript{13} Their directions would be roughly northeast and northwest, respectively, to two roads in Paris.
\textsuperscript{14} Speed necessary to escape gravitational field.
I’m thinking in particular of the last canvasses that G. van Velde has just brought back from the South of France, and that A. van Velde completed in Paris in ’40 and ’41 (he has done nothing since). The contrast was less perceptible ten years ago. But it was already striking.

This distribution of roles is most unexpected. Everything would have led us to anticipate the inverse. And I’m afraid we’re heading towards statements that in effect will reverse them, for anyone worried about coherence.

Whence this impression of thing in the void? From the style? It is as if to say the impression of blue comes from the sky. Let’s look for a more ample circle.

With Abraham van Velde we are tasked with an effort of apperception so exclusively and doggedly pictorial that our lot, whose reflections are all in murmurs, cannot conceive of it but with difficulty, cannot conceive of it but in dragging it in a sort of syntactic round, in placing it in time.

(I note, literally between parentheses, a curious effect, to which I have stood witness more than once, that these paintings produce in the spectator of good faith. They deprive even the most prompt at commentary of the use of speech. It is not the silence of the bowled over, to judge from the eloquent refutations that manage to flow out in the end. It is a silence, almost of propriety, like that which we keep before a mute, even while wondering why.)

To write purely visual apperception, this is to write a sentence devoid of sense. Obviously. For each time words are called to perform a veritable act of transshipment, each time they are called to express something other than words, they line up in such a way as to cancel each other out. This is, no doubt, what gives life all of its charm.
For it is not at all about becoming conscious of ourselves, but about becoming conscious of vision, becoming conscious of sight and nothing more. Nothing more! And about becoming conscious of vision in the only field that occasionally lets itself see without more, that doesn’t always insist on being imperfectly known, that now and then grants its faithful the chance to ignore all that is not appearance: in the interior field.

Space and body, complete, inalterable, plucked from time by the maker of time, in the shelter of time in the factory in time (who spent his day at Sacré Coeur in order to never have to see it again?), that is what is worthy of Barbizon and the sky of Pérouse.\(^{15}\) In any event it is, in a sense, the end goal.

Birds have fallen, Manto is quiet, Tiresias is ignorant.

Ignorance, silence, and the immobile azure, that’s the solution to the riddle, the absolute last solution.

For some.

To what have the representative arts always aspired? To want to stop time, by representing it.

How many flights, races, rivers, arrows. How many falls and ascensions. How much smoke. We have even gotten a jet of urine (lamb of the divine Potter\(^{16}\)), highest symbol of the flight of hours.

We will never be sufficiently grateful for this.

But perhaps it was time for the object to withdraw, here and there, from the so-called visible world.

---

\(^{15}\) The school of Barbizon was a community of markedly anti-establishment landscape artists near the Fontainbleau forest. Pérouse likely refers to La Pérouse, the explorer.

\(^{16}\) Paulus Potter (1625-1654). Dutch Baroque painter known for his etchings of animals.
The ‘realist,’ sweating before his waterfall and railing at the clouds, has not ceased to enchant us. But don’t let him come to annoy us with his stories of objectivity and his perceived objects. Of all things that no one has ever seen, his waterfalls are surely the greatest. And if there is a place where it would be better not to speak of objectivity, it’s indeed that which he furrows, under his solar topee.

A. van Velde’s painting would thus primarily be a painting of the thing in suspension, I would happily say of the still [mortè] thing, ideally still [mortè], if this term didn’t have such bothersome associations.¹⁷ In other words, the thing one sees there is no longer represented merely as suspended, but strictly as it is, really frozen. It is the thing alone, isolated by the need to see it, by the need to see. Immobile thing in the void, this at last is the visible thing, the pure object. I see no another.

The cranial box has the monopoly on this article.

There at last time occasionally grows sleepy, as the meter’s wheel when the last bulb is extinguished.

There at last one finally begins to see, in the dark. In the dark that no longer fears a dawn. In the dark that is the dawn and noon and evening and night of an empty sky, of a frozen earth. In the dark that illuminates the spirit.

There at last the painter can tranquilly wink at us.

We are far from the famous ‘right’ of the painting to create its objects. It’s the open air that calls this operation audacious.

Equally far from the surrealist bambochades.¹⁸

---

¹⁷ I.e., with nature morte, ‘still life.’ Morte is French for ‘dead.’
¹⁸ Derived from the Italian bambocciante, or ‘little clumsy one.’ Refers to the incorporation of everyday subject-matter, such as peasants and street scenes, into painting. Popular with Dutch and Flemish painters in Italy during the seventeenth century. The Surrealists were also accused of being pompier.
From the great school of painting critical of its objects, critical of its means, critical of its goals, critical of its criticism, and with which we’re still no further along than the magnificent Sienneses.  

There was once a man who was called the great Thomas…

Pointless to seek the originality of A. van Velde outside this prodigious objectivity, for it is here that the rest aligns, certainly not as consequence, nor as effect, but as that which is elicited by the same occasion. I refer to everything unreasonable, ingenious, non-combined, poorly executed this painting presents.

Impossible to apply reason to the unique. In reasoned painting each touch is a synthesis, every tone the elected of among thousands, every trait a symbol, and it reaches its end in the twist of the enthymeme. It’s a still life of a butterfly. It’s the suturing machine on the operation table. It’s the figure seen frontally and in profile at once. It’s no doubt also the lady with dorsal breasts, although this isn’t certain. It produces masterpieces after its own fashion.

Impossible to want otherwise the unknown, the finally seen, whose centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere; neither the only agent capable of making it cease; nor the goal, which is to make it cease. For this is certainly what it is all about, no longer to see this adorable and frightening thing, to go back in time, into blindness, to go bore oneself before the never-still [morte] tornadoes of meat, and shiver under the poplars. So it is shown, in the only manner possible.

Impossible to put order into the elementary.

---

19 Sienna school of painting known for its technical drawings based on sketches of machines.
20 Rhetorical figure also known as a “truncated syllogism” in which either premises or conclusions are not explicitly stated.
It is shown or it is not shown.

Conjectural painting has furnished him with the tool. Its undertaking goes no further. A. van Velde has since modified this tool. Its provenance is nonetheless felt. He adapted it to the needs of his work, which is not at all conjectural.

Certain canvasses by Braque have the appearance of plastic meditations on the techniques at work. Whence the strange impression of a hypothesis that frees itself. The definitive is always left for tomorrow. This remark should be pertinent for a great part, and not the least, of what we call modern living painting.

Nothing similar in A. van Velde. He affirms. Not even. He states. His means have the specificity of a speculum, existing only in relation to their function. He doesn’t take enough interest in them to doubt them. He only interests himself in what they reflect.

Here we approach something fundamental that could permit us to grasp the means by which, since Cézanne, a whole school painting has become entirely cut off from its antecedents (how much time it lost in wanting to reattach itself), and the means by which, in turn, A. van Velde’s painting detaches itself.

Art loves leaps.

To pass from this massive fidelity to the painting of G. van Velde is to pass from The Man in the Helmet to the View of Delft, from the Sistine to the Loges (I compare the relations).

It is a difficult passage.

What is there to say about these maps that slip, these contours that vibrate, these bodies that appear to be dressed in mist, these equilibriums that nothingness must disrupt,
that shatter and reform as we look. How to speak of these colours that breathe, that pant?
Of this teeming stasis? Of this world without weight, without strength, without shadow?

Here everything moves, swims, flees, returns, is given away, is recovered.
Everything ceases, without cease. Akin to the insurrection of molecules, the interior of a
stone a thousandth of a second before it disintegrates.

This is literature.

It would be preferable not to expose oneself to the risk of these two manners of
seeing and painting on the same day. At least early on.

Let’s put things more crudely. Let’s end by being ridiculous.

A. van Velde paints extension.

G. van Velde paints succession.

As, before being able to see extension, and more pressingly before being able to
represent it, it must be immobilized, the former turns away from the naturally extended,
that which spins like a top under the whip of the sun. He idealizes it, makes it into an
internal sense. And it is precisely in idealizing it that he could realize it with this
objectivity, this purity without precedent. That’s his discovery. He owes it to an extreme
need to see clearly.

The latter, on the contrary, is entirely turned towards the outside, towards the
tohu-bohu of things in the light, towards time. For one cannot become conscious of time
except through the things it agitates, that it keeps from sight. It’s in giving himself
entirely to the outside, in showing the macrocosm shaken by the shivers of time, that he
realizes himself, that he realizes man, if you prefer, in what is most unshakeable, in his
certitude that there is neither present nor rest. It’s the representation of the river where, according to the modest calculation of Heraclitus, no one descends twice.

It’s an amusing kind of *memento mori*, the radiant painting of G. van Velde. I note it in passing.

No relation to the painting of a stopped watch, that which, having allotted to the water lilies two minutes a day out of the psalmist’s eternity, believes it has blocked terrestrial rotation, not to mention the boring perpetual tack of the lower stars. In a G. van Velde, time gallops; he spears it with the frenzied jab of a Faust in retreat.

‘This is what we are’ say his canvases. And they add: ‘Luckily.’

With that it is a calm and extraordinarily gentle painting. Decidedly, I understand nothing of it. It makes no noise. A. van Velde’s makes a very distinctive noise, that of the door that slams far off, the little muffled noise of the door that one has just banged to the point of ripping it from the wall.

Two works that in sum seem to refute each other, but that in fact reunite in the heart of the dilemma, which is the dilemma of the plastic arts: How to represent change?

They have deprived themselves of indirect approach, each one in his way. They are not musicians, or literati, or hairdressers. For the painter, the thing is impossible. It’s from somewhere other than the representation of this impossibility that modern painting has taken a good part of its best effects.

But neither one has what is required to take part plastically in a plastic situation without issue.

Basically, this is because painting doesn’t interest them. What interests them is the human condition. We will return to this.

---

21 Literally, memento of death.
Should they renounce the representation of change, what would remain of the representable? Is there something outside change that allows itself to be represented?

What remains is the thing that submits, the thing that is changed, for one, for the other the thing that inflicts, the thing that causes change.

Two things that finally become representable in their detachment, one from the executioner, the other from the victim, have yet to be created. These are not yet things. That will come. Indeed.

These are two profoundly different attitudes, whose principles, hastily erected in antithesis, have always been delicacies for psychology, since the dyskolas and eukolas. They are rooted in the same experience. That is what is charming. Don’t you agree?

If it explains nothing, the analysis of this divergence will perhaps aid in situating the two bodies of work in relation to each other. It could especially elucidate the stylistic divide acknowledged between them, divide whose depth must be penetrated if one wants to avoid constructing an entirely superficial confrontation upon it. The point cannot be overstated. The kind of categorical negligence that in the elder translates the urgency and primacy of the interior vision so well would become an irreparable fault in the other. For the latter isn’t working on the thing alone, cut from its moorings with everything that turned it into a simple example of perdition, seemingly cut from its moorings to itself, and whose salvage demands precisely this mixture of mastery and boredom, but on an infinitely more complex object. Actually, he is working not as much on an object than on a process, a process felt with such acuity that it has taken on the solidity of hallucination or ecstasy. He is always working at the composed. It is no longer natural composition,

---

22 The Platonic distinction is between dyskolas (man of difficult disposition; grouch) and eukolas (man of easy disposition).
blotted in its mournful quotidian flickering, but the same elements are still present.

Confronted by this impenetrable block, A. van Velde blew it up, to liberate from it what he needed. For the other, this solution was excluded in advance.

The two things must remain associated. For we represent succession only by means of states that succeed one another, by imposing on them a slippage so rapid that in they end they melt together, I would say they finish almost by stabilizing themselves, in the image of succession itself. To force the fundamental invisibility of exterior things until the invisibility itself becomes a thing, not a simple consciousness of limit, but a thing that we can see and make seen, and make, not in the head (painters don’t have heads, so wherever I deck them out with one, read instead a big empty canvas, or a stomach), but on the sheet there is a work of such diabolic complexity, that requires a technique of such extreme suppleness and lightness, a technique that insinuates more than it affirms, that would only be positive with the flimsy and accessory evidence of the large positive, of the only positive, of the time that ferries.

Is there a solid ground of illusory things behind these big scribbles? Would they be able to trace a rainbow without the aid of a compass? To lend, what am I talking about, to give relief to the rear of a bolting horse in the rain? I never asked them.

The van Veldes’ painting has other secrets, which would be easy to reduce (to the point of meaninglessness) with the aid of what precedes them. But I don’t intend to lose everything.

I don’t overlook the fact that many of these developments must seem arbitrary, schematic, and little suited to the images that themselves provided their opportunity and nourishment, to the images of images. To give them more decent, more persuasive, airs
by means of stacks of restrictions and nuances undoubtedly wouldn’t be impossible. But it’s not worth it.

But anyway, it has at no moment been a question of what these painters do, or believe they do, or want to do, but only that which I see them do.

I am bound to repeat this, for fear they might be taken for intellectual pigs.

Yet we cannot conceive of a painting less intellectual than this.

A. van Velde in particular mustn’t even begin to realize what he has done until about ten years later. Let’s listen. He knows each time what is right, in the manner of a fish in the high seas that stops at the right depth, but the reasons are spared him.

That seems to also be true for G. van Velde, with the qualifications (here we are at last) that his very different attack imposes.

They make me think of Cervantes’s painter who, when asked ‘What are you painting?’ responded: ‘Whatever comes out of my brush.’

To conclude let’s speak of something else, let’s speak of the ‘human.’

That’s a term, and no doubt a concept as well, that we reserve for times of great massacre. It’s necessary to have pestilence, Lisbon, and a major religious slaughter for beings to dream of mutual love, of making peace with the neighbour’s gardener, of being simpletons.

It is a word that we let fly today with unequalled fury. Dum-dum bullets, you might say.

It rains on artistic milieus with a very particular abundance. It’s too bad. For art doesn’t seem to need cataclysm to be able to exert itself.

The devastation is already considerable.

With ‘it isn’t human,’ all is said. Into the dustbin with it.
Tomorrow we will demand that cold cuts be human.

This is nothing. It’s even habitual.

What is properly horrible is that the artist himself has become involved.

The poet who says: I am not a man, I am only a poet. Quick is the way to make love rhyme with paid vacations.

The musician who says: I’ll have the trumpet with the mute play the siren. That’ll be more human.

The painter who says: All men are brothers. Come on, a little cadaver.

The philosopher that says: Protagoras was right.

They are capable of demolishing poetry, music, painting, and thought for 50 years.

Above all, let’s not protest.

Do you want a presentable reality? Give it a black eye. Jeer at it.

Space interests you? Make it crack.

Time torments you? Let’s kill it together.

Beauty? Man reunited.

Goodness? Stifle.

Truth? The fart of the greatest number.

What will this solitary painting become, in this mess, solitary with the solitude that covers its head, with the solitude that holds out its arms.

This painting whose least morsel contains more true humanity than any of their processions towards the happiness of sacred sheep.

I suppose it’ll be stoned to death.

There are eternal conditions in life. And there is its price. Unhappy those who would make the distinction.

In the end we might content ourselves by howling.
Whatever it is, we will come back to it.

For we’re only beginning to say stupid things about the brothers van Velde.

I open the series.

It is an honour.