

DEATH AND TRANSCENDENCE IN NORTHERN EUROPEAN ART

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## INTRODUCTION : THE NATURE OF MAN AND ART IN NORTHERN EUROPE

Time has revealed two distinct tendencies in the history of thought and art in Europe. That development in European culture which began in Ancient Greece is marked by a positive confidence in the relationship of man to his world. Parallel with, but in opposition to this development is a separate progression in culture. The continuity of art in Northern Europe appears to be associated with the adherence of Northern man to a negative, fatalistic sense of being - to a spirit which is in conflict with a hostile, violent environment.

The purpose of this investigation is to determine, through art, the nature of this sense of being in Northern Europe. No direct definition would be capable of conveying the fullest meaning of that spirit. It is a feeling.

To understand this morbid fatalism, it is therefore necessary to refer to the pre-Christian religion of the Germanic Barbarians, through which the Northern spirit manifested itself in the form of ragnarök. Ragnarök, which can be translated as meaning obscurity, shadows, twilight, fateful destiny, was a term used by Nordic bards in its broadest sense to describe the end of the world : the inevitable destruction of life.

Ragnarök also encompasses the emergence of a renewed state of being from the old, resulting as a consequence of total destruction. This implies that physical death is a transition from worldly existence into a state beyond worldliness, and hence, ragnarök can be interpreted as a metaphorical description of spiritual revelation, which, like physical death, also entails a transition, or a transcendence beyond worldliness. Similarly, the attainment of spiritual release can only be brought about by a vehement denial or annihilation of worldly essence. This latter concept forms the central theme of this investigation.

## RAGNARÖK : THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

Nordic myth tells of the god Baldur, son of Odin. He was the embodiment of light and goodness, loved by all except Loki, the malevolent joker, who symbolised all that is wretched and ignoble in man.

Baldur became overcome by omens of dread that his death was imminent. His mother Frigg, perturbed by these omens, obtained a guarantee from all living things, with the exception of the mistletoe, that none would harm her son. The gods, confident of Baldur's immunity, took to playfully hurling missiles at him to test his invulnerability.

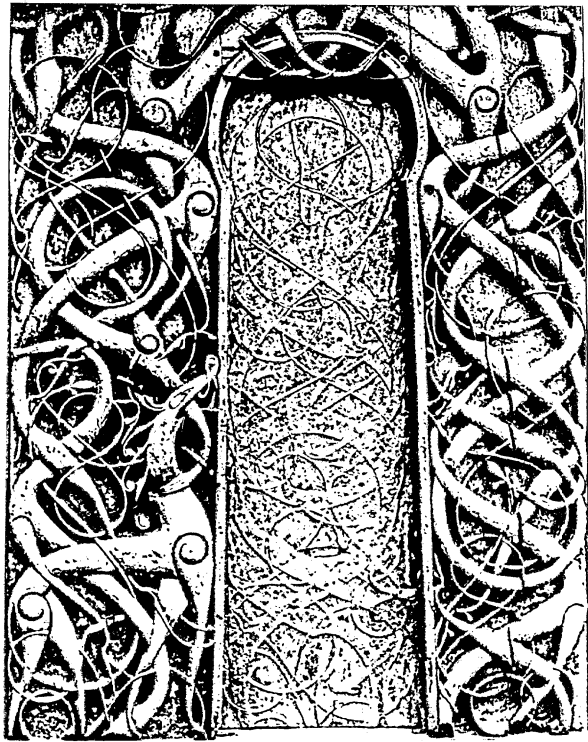
Loki, meanwhile, disguised as an old woman, obtained from Frigg the secret of Baldur's invincibility. He then had an arrow of mistletoe fashioned, and he presented this to the blind Hød (the night), persuading him to cast it at his brother, Baldur. Loki guided Hød's bow, and the arrow killed Baldur instantly.

In deep sorrow, the gods prepared a funerary ship, and Odin, the father of the gods, whispered mysterious words into his dead son's ears. Thereupon, Baldur was sent on his journey into the Halls of Hell, where it was ordained he was to remain until the end of the world, when he would be released to enlighten a new universe with his brightness and the wisdom of Odin.

Thus, treacherous Loki, or human folly, forced on all existence the inevitability of doom, for it could only be through cataclysmic destruction that a new and pure world, enriched by the goodness of Baldur, could emerge.

The violence and universality of this fate was made clear by the ancient poems of the Eddas. The most fearful

forces which hitherto had been held in check released their destructive energies on all things. However, the conflagration failed to consume the wood of the world ash tree, Yggdrasil. Yggdrasil, the hope of man, held in its trunk the ancestors of the future race of men who were to build a new world on the wreckage of the old.



## CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN EUROPE DURING THE DARK AGES

During the Iron Age in Northern Europe, a loose scattering of culturally and linguistically linked Germanic clans were to be found living in a nucleus around the Baltic and North Seas. Between the second and fifth centuries occurred the *völkerwanderung*, when these people expanded southward toward the Danube; and later, under pressure from the Huns, who were advancing from the east, these Germanic people burst further southward and eastward into the crumbling Roman Empire. These uncouth invaders set up a succession of short-lived Barbarian kingdoms, but were on the whole too weak and disunited to introduce any lasting cultural influence, and were thus absorbed into the local cultural idiom.

The Germanic peoples were never militarily subdued by Imperial Rome, which they eventually destroyed, yet ironically the invaders themselves were overwhelmed by cultural impulses emanating from Rome in the form of Christianity. The invading tribes who settled in the stricken Empire looked to their vanquished for spiritual leadership, and so became engulfed by a Christianity which was essentially Latin in form.

Such was not the case in Britain, where the influence of Rome was abruptly severed by the violent appearance of Angles, Saxons and Jutes from Northern Germany who ousted or absorbed the indigenous Celts, implanted their language in England, and slowly established a culture there which was Northern. The advent of Christianity among the English did not herald a new cultural orientation towards Rome, as was the case in France, since Christianity came to England from Celtic Ireland, which, though deeply involved in the new faith, developed in spite of Rome.

With the advent of Frankish hegemony in Western Europe, one witnesses a calculated effort on the part of this Germanic

people to re-organise a new Empire styled on a Latin basis. In an apparent abhorrence of the chaos and barbarism which was the outcome of the collapse of Roman order, the Franks found themselves compelled to turn towards the Church in Rome; the result being that they, and particularly among them Charlemagne, forced a Latinising influence to hold sway among the people of their conquered lands. This, coupled with the fact that the territory of the Franks had previously been a Roman province, had far-reaching cultural consequences. It meant that France, particularly in the north, was to become a melting-pot for the cultures of North and South, so that the Northern spirit, though apparent there, was seldom consistent.

So the Germanic people who inherited the Empire, confronted as they were by Christianity, were forced to adopt a cultural language which was alien to their own, for the native heritage of the Christianised Barbarian was not yet prepared to assimilate Christianity, and thus a Christianity which was compatible with Northern culture was not to come about until the emergence of the Gothic era.

The Latinising influence which asserted itself through the Roman Church during the Dark Ages reached far into the Germanic world, so that few escaped its effect. Those who did retained and developed a culture which was their own, so that whilst their brethren elsewhere in Europe experienced an inconsistency between their own spiritual and artistic background and that of an alien culture, the indigenous art of the Northern people, in particular that of the Vikings, thrived and developed with vitality.

## BARBARIAN ORNAMENT AND THE DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS GOTHIC ART

Before the advent of Christianity among them, the Germanic Barbarians of Roman times, and later the Vikings, though scattered over a wide area into separate warring tribes and clans, shared the same harsh environment and a similar language, religion and culture. Underlying their regional or tribal differences was a strong, uniting ethnic force which was consistent enough to cause unmistakably similar characteristics to appear in the art of widely scattered areas. The principal art form of the pagan Germanic peoples was ornament, and the character of that ornamental art survived the coming of Christianity, becoming incorporated, though somewhat incongruously, into the artistic forms of the new cultural idiom.

The disturbing, restless quality of Northern art, which came to terms with Christianity during the Middle Ages, was already strongly evident in the art of the Barbarians. The common article, such as the buckle or sword hilt, ornately patterned, assumed a significance beyond its utilitarian value. It became an object of art through which man attained a higher state of being. Curves, zigzags and spirals interweave in a violent struggle of wild and restless abstract line - sometimes obstructed or cut short, at other times turning in on itself. At all points there is an increasing anxiety to move, and the multiplicity of line, increasing momentum, escalates to a pitch of intensity. Always denying placation of the senses, always deluding natural progression towards a natural conclusion, the artist refuses the comfortable satisfaction of an organic, natural flow which is in sympathy with the senses.

The abstract line, in its quest for release, slashes across the senses and liberates the being from worldly

sensation by exciting its energy and tension to a point of intoxication. Thus, through the continuous generation of a force towards confusion and chaos, and by an almost masochistic liquidation of natural sensation and continuity, the being is transported into a state of non-being.

Northern man is denied spiritual and artistic fulfillment through an acceptance of natural values whereby his art would express man as having arrived at a wholesome, balanced equilibrium with his environment. The mind exists in a state of constant tension with nature. A climax of artistic activity rising out of an acceptance of nature in a world which is hostile would be meaningless. Therefore art sought to penetrate beyond the limits of worldly, sensual experience, to discover release beyond the senses in abstract, spiritual experience.

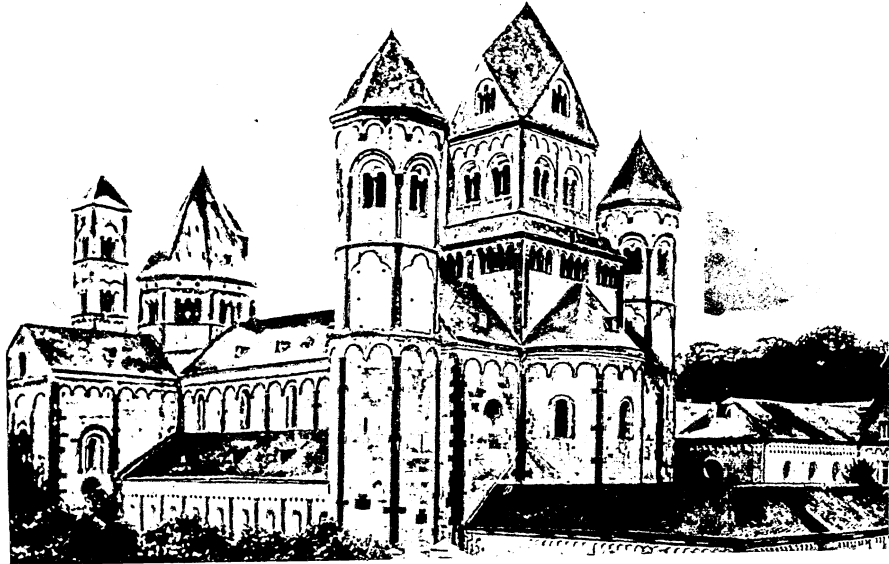
Gothic is a triumph of this Northern attitude. The Gothic cathedral, which seems to defy the natural limitations in architecture imposed by gravity and weight, freed expression from the earth-bound limits of a purely worldly experience, and forced a destruction of conscious, delineated space and a transcendence into unlimited void.

Development in this direction was already evident in Romanesque architecture, which attempted to express the supernatural by a superficially imposed verticality. In an effort to emancipate the heavy, alien basilica from its earth-bound horizontality, the Romanesque builders, according to their own expressive urge, induced a forced vertical appearance by an almost haphazard addition of towers. The structural and expressive deliverance of the church from its gravitational limitations was only to come about through the increased use of vaulting, and by the application to the structure of the pointed arch, adopted after contact with Islam during the Crusades.

Unhindered by the technical problems confronting the architect, Romanesque sculpture was able to develop beyond any restrictions imposed by imported values. This develop-



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ment was closely linked with the past, particularly in Northern France, where the linear quality and intensity of expression in sculpture recalled the art of the Barbarians.

The elongated figures of Romanesque sculpture are possessed by an agitated, disturbed ecstasy, a morbid spiritualism which is identifiable with ragnarök. The forceful intensity of the line and the pathos of the human figure express not static form, but excited and exaggerated movement, which is associated with the strongest urges to intensify passion to a state of trance, in which a consciousness of corporeal being no longer exists.

Whilst the ability of the sculptor to express freely his need for transcendence had been fully realised during the Romanesque period, the corresponding architecture of the period must be relegated to the role of a transitional phase towards maturity, which was to be realised in the Gothic cathedral.

Gothic architecture is the climax of expression of Northern Christianity, as distinct from the more truly Roman-orientated Catholicism of Southern Europe. This distinction was exaggerated by the Reformation, but it had existed during the Gothic era and before.

The basis of the difference between the two lies in their manner of approaching God. The more positive attitude of the Roman Church accepted the world as good, and thus the relationship of nature to man and man to God was direct and clarified, and expressible in concrete, finite terms. On the other hand, the approach towards God in the North is indirect. It is motivated negatively by fear of Satan and by a rejection of worldliness as an extension of Satan. Therefore, the way to God and the attainment of salvation was through denial of worldly pleasure, and Christian piety was relative to the vehemence and feverishness of this denial.

In accordance with this attitude, the Gothic architect

appeased God by defying nature. He did not build to glorify the actual substance of his structures - he arrived at expression in spite of his materials, the point being to create a building which expressed values beyond substantiality, beyond consciousness, beyond life.

The complex ribbing of the nave roof relieved much of the weight of the ponderous barrel-vault, and did away with the need for massive supporting walls. As the supporting structure of the cathedral was reduced to a skeleton-framework, so the nave, freed from excessive weight, gained height. The weight of the entire roof-structure was conducted downward through piers, and conversely, the eye was forced upward in direct opposition to the flow of weight. Thus, through this reversal of forces, the substance of the building was dematerialised - that is, spiritualised. The upward surge originating in the piers, soaring heavenward, exploded into a myriad confusion of line, destroyed any perception of scale, and transported the spectator into the infinite void.



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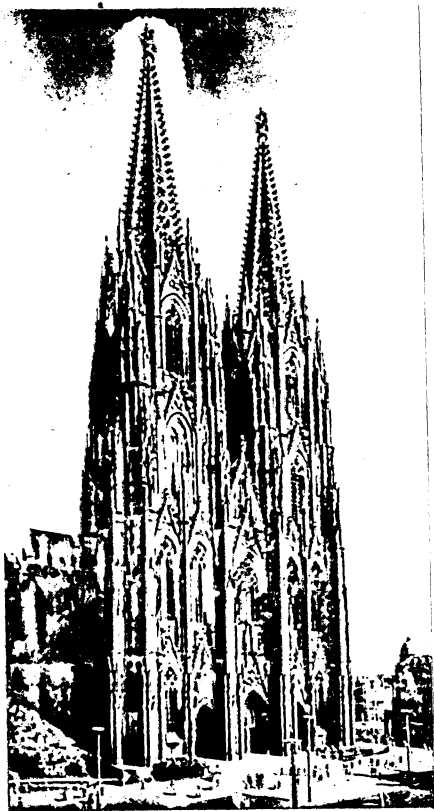
## THE SPIRIT OF ROMANTICISM

The sixteenth century brought about a renewed introduction of influences from abroad which made the artist conscious of functioning in a far wider sphere. A new awareness of the individual emerged - an awareness which placed man at the centre of the universe as an image of the divine. As the earthly embodiment of God, therefore spiritual excellence entailed an endorsement of this man/God affinity through the emulation of divine perfection.

This new attitude of direct striving for perfect form was typified in Germany by Albrecht Dürer. Though it took root there, the Renaissance ideal was diametrically opposed to the Northern spirit, which cannot reconcile divinity with worldliness.

The Renaissance, rather than infuse worldly confidence into the turbulent Northern mind, produced new anxieties by alienating man from his heritage. Without the unity of purpose with which the Gothic artist worked, the sixteenth century artist found himself isolated and left to his own individual devices.

However, this detachment suffered by the artist also caused the emergence of a more personal, and sometimes more intense expression of the Northern spirit. Thus the German Renaissance, in spite of the alien currents which accompanied it, cannot be considered altogether as a termination of that development in art which ran through Barbarian ornament and the Gothic cathedral. The art of Matthias Grünewald indicates that it also produced a strong desire to express the



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deepest impulses of the Northern spirit. This same desire is also reflected in the emergence at this time of Protestantism. The Reformation, as an expression of the vast differences which existed between the Churches of North and South, was similarly an emphasis of the differences in thought and art. As the Reformation continued the characteristic nature of Northern religion, so the German Renaissance produced art which was a continuation of the thought of previous centuries. Thus Grünewald, who is identifiable with the Gothic past rather than the Renaissance, represents a vital link in the development of Northern art from Gothic to Romanticism and Expressionism.

Grünewald's principal work was the ambitious altarpiece painted for the Antonite house of the sick at Isenheim. The series of panels, with its central work the Crucifixion, embraces the theme of suffering, death and salvation. The Crucifixion is an image of extreme pathos and ruthless physical torment. It lacks the emotional detachment and objective considerations of formal purity which characterise much of the art of his time. Grünewald's crucifixions are images of a personal religious experience which demands to be revealed visually with the most intense power of expression.

To this end, every part of the crucified form evokes the excessiveness of Christ's agony. The head, crowned by a menacing tangle of thorns, and stained with blood, hangs limply with the mouth feebly groaning in final protest before death. The sallow, punctured torso seems to twitch in the last spasms of life, and the sinewy limbs are tensed, their torture culminating in the brutally contorted expressive force of the hands and feet. The painting is a violent, almost sadistic evocation of pain - the body is subjected to the extreme of suffering and anguish, yet it is only through the severity of this anguish and cruelty that one attains fulfilment and spiritual release.

In Grünewald's art, Christianity and Northern spiri-

tualism have become inseparable. This spiritualism, centring on death as the means to purification, has become interpretable in terms of Christian imagery - in other words, the crucifixion of Christ has become synonymous with the Nordic universal destruction. Thus, in terms of painting, Grünewald can be regarded, like Gothic architecture, as a high-point of Christian art in Northern Europe, since his art represents a synthesis of Christian and Northern sentiments.

The Reformation, with its sympathy for Northern spiritualism, ought to have provided a renewed impetus for art - instead, the bigoted, puritanical zeal of Calvinism and Lutheranism reduced art to blasphemous idolatry, or at least to a banality which few - notably Rembrandt and Jacob van Ruisdael, rose above. On the other hand, the liberalism of the well-travelled artist of the seventeenth century towards art in other countries tended to establish Catholic Baroque as a flexible international style which was readily adaptable to the expressive needs of artists of widely different backgrounds.

Baroque, with its basis in spiritual unrest, allowed itself to be developed in terms of the emotional or spiritual needs of the Northern artist, who sought to explore a dynamic flux of forms which would perpetuate itself into limitless space through the use of *tromp l'oeil* devices and the dematerialisation of form into fluid, brilliant light. By creating a confusion of forms in architecture, stucco-work, sculpture and painting, in the same way that the Barbarian created a confusion of lines, the artist precipitates a metamorphosis of form - as he had done in the Gothic cathedral. Matter becomes incorporeal and intangible, eventually losing itself in the illusionistic weightlessness and spacelessness of the fresco in the dome.

This homogeneity of Baroque with his artistic past naturally appealed to the Northern artist. In spite of its alien vocabulary, Baroque filled a vacuum, enabling the artist to emerge from an artistic stalemate and to

mature in the more truly Northern renaissance of the nineteenth century.

"...it was the Germanic genius, more than any other, with its preference for intuition rather than logic, that took the plunge into the mysteries of the unknown - the mysteries of the cosmos and of the darker zones of the inner life alike, situated outside the sway of reason. The time had come for a new assault on the Latin world. According to Schmidhauser, the Reformation 'broke upon the Platonic and Aristotelian theology of the Middle Ages, just as the German barbarians had overrun the Greco-Roman civilisation'. In the nineteenth century, this observation acquired new topicality : the antagonism referred to is indeed recurrent." (Huyghe : p.210)

The artist of the nineteenth century sought a revival of religious and artistic meaningfulness through a reappraisal of the relationship between man and God. This entailed a fresh interpretation of the human predicament and its relationship to forces beyond man's control - an interpretation which derived its revitalised clarity through a rejection of traditional Christian imagery in favour of a renewed belief in physical nature as a tangible reflection of the supernatural and metaphysical.

Thus the Northern Romantic painter found expression in the form of pure landscape or seascape - not in a Dutch realist sense of a direct, sometimes topographical interest in nature, but landscape as an experience of infinity in nature. Nature becomes an all-powerful extension of God, a worldly outlet for divine wrath.

In common with German Romanticism, the omnipotent power of nature over man constitutes the central feature of French Romanticism. The latter, however, sees nature as a violent, overpowering turbulence which is expressed in terms of the human form. German Romanticism, on the other hand, expresses this power of nature as nature itself. The landscape becomes



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a cathedral, where man appears either as a meditator or as an evil intruder. In terrible solitude, he is overcome by a death-wish - he succumbs to the inexorable, silent energy of infinity and finds relief in the numbness of eternal oblivion.

The extent of the difference in attitude between the French and German Romantics is suggested by a comparison between Géricault's "Raft of the Medusa" and Caspar David Friedrich's "Monk by the Sea". Géricault's violent sea acts as a setting for a human drama - the direct focus of his interest is in the human condition - the suffering of the people on the raft, whose writhing, tortured forms suggest metaphorically the overpowering forces to which man is subordinate. Friedrich's attention, however, centres directly on those forces themselves. His vast and mysterious sea cannot be bound to any palpable measure or condition. Man himself becomes imprisoned by a scale which is beyond his worldly comprehension. At the mercy of an intangible vastness, he loses himself in a vision of infinity.

Friedrich perceived nature as symbolic of the human condition, where life is dominated by the certainty of death. Questioning his recurrent choice of death as a subject in painting, he himself stated his belief that frequent submission to death is the necessary prerequisite to the attainment of everlasting life. Death can never be isolated from the afterlife, which is the consummation of the life/death/rebirth cycle. Death only becomes meaningful in conjunction with life and afterlife, between which it forms a link.

"Monk by the Sea" reflects this concept clearly. The monk, who is probably a self-portrait of the artist, stands in mourning on the dunes in the foreground, which signifies present life. He is overwhelmed by the consuming vastness of the dark and deathly mass of the Baltic beyond him, yet he presents himself before the infinite with a

yearning to be drawn into and across the sea. He is overcome by the superior force of the void which confronts him. It dwindles his earthly life into insignificance. Beyond the sea, the emergent morning light signifies the expectation of rebirth and the conquest of darkness.

This painting was executed in conjunction with "Abbey in the Oakwood", which clarifies the life/death/afterlife cycle further. The centrally-placed abbey is flanked by bare, silhouetted oaks, which together form a barrier between the foreground (death), and the background (afterlife). The group of monks in the dark foreground act as pallbearers, who carry the coffin of the deceased monk through the passage of death towards a gateway in the abbey. Beyond, the forms of the landscape become absorbed in a fluid, mysterious haze through which the light of the hereafter begins to penetrate. The sequence of the two paintings reveals the total cycle - the first the transition from life to death; in the second the journey through death into the afterlife.

Pervading Friedrich's work is a clear, powerful mood, which is always present whether supported by an understanding of his intended symbolism or not. It is filled with a spirit of melancholy and a vibrant expectancy, which suggests his ever-present preoccupation with the inevitability of death and the futility of man's efforts against the forces of a divine nature. These forces are always expressed, or suggested in terms of the natural landscape, which Friedrich transforms into an image of the supernatural.

The English Romantic, John Martin, invokes a similar melancholy spirit, but conceives it in terms of the fantastic rather than the natural landscape. The scale and destructiveness of his landscapes escalate to a pitch of irrationality. Man, at the mercy of a fiery, nightmarish vision, perches dangerously at the brink of a fathomless abyss which pulls him inexorably deeper into its malevolent darkness and chaos. In hopeless despair and solitude, he



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is exposed to inevitable doom in the midst of a cosmic battleground which recalls, in pictorial form, the universal conflagration of Nordic mythology.

Whereas Martin's landscapes confront man with forces which are fantastic and unreal, Turner transforms feasible reality into an apocalyptic image. Thus the actual experience of a storm at sea becomes a symbol of a feeble human struggle against infinitely superior forces; or a burning ship at sea becomes a universal inferno in which sailors engulfed by the flames of the actual occurrence of such a disaster have descended into the fires of Hell.

If Romanticism is a term used to describe a movement in art, then that "movement" died out in the mid-eighteenth-hundreds. The fixing of the term to a specific period or group of artists is a misunderstanding engendered by the art critic. Romantic art is characterised by a mood which is felt and personally interpreted by the individual, who belongs to no movement. Romanticism is not a discipline or code of ethics - it is free expression of the creative will, and as such has existed at least since the Renaissance artist became aware of his individuality. Thus it may be said that Grünewald and Van Gogh, as much as Friedrich, were Romantics.

Linking artists in such a way, however broad a label may be, presupposes that Van Gogh is "like" Friedrich or Grünewald. The term Romantic is convenient only in that it signifies a spiritual link between artists of different periods. At the same time, the intensely personal vision of these artists must be stressed. Van Gogh is a Romantic insofar as he forms a spiritual bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Van Gogh's unique vision, though bearing many similarities to that of Friedrich, was intimately bound to the tragedy of his own life. The hostility of the world towards a precarious human existence was expressed in art not because it was merely an idea, but because that was



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his experience of life. Van Gogh's art reflected the fears and uncertainties of a man possessed by a melancholy, deeply introverted and tormented nature. The intensification of melancholy satisfies the melancholy spirit. The fact of life is only meaningful in that it is justified by death. Life passes, but death persists - or, as Van Gogh quoted Victor Hugo : "Les religions passent, Dieu demeure". (Rosenblum).

This came to mind when he had been painting the village church at Nuonen, which had started to fall into ruin in 1885. The peasants had stopped tilling the soil that their ancestors, interred in the church's graveyard, had tilled for centuries. The roof of their earthly symbol of faith had fallen in, the walls were beginning to crumble, autumn leaves had fallen from the trees, and snow fell on the graves. All that remained constant was death. The tilling of fields, the passing of the seasons, and the life and death of peasants in the Nuonen pictures constitute a complex cycle of life, constantly dominated by the presence of death.

This presence of death is evident in even the most apparently innocent of Van Gogh's paintings. A vase of sunflowers lives and dies. Each flower is an individual, with its separate source of vitality. Some are radiant with youthful brightness, others begin to wilt, the old have withered and died. Together in the vase, the total cycle of life and its compulsion to move towards death is revealed.

The components of nature are each a primal source of energy. Nothing is static. The landscape possesses an immense, vibrating cosmic power, the sky is a wild and turbulent force, and the sunflower is a microcosm which reflects the ultimate life-giving energy. Nature, in the same way that Friedrich perceived it, is a vehicle of the supernatural.

Although Van Gogh may not have intended any conscious

symbolism, the fact that there is this presence of some mystical force in his paintings justifies an interpretation of the symbolic significance of certain features of his work over a purely aesthetic evaluation. "Starry Night" of 1889 symbolically identifies the spiritual struggle of life with the ultimate triumph of death. The dark, writhing mass of the cypress tree in the foreground thrusts sharply into the vigorous energy of the starry sky - it is the shape of death, through which man is transported from his worldly being into the total energy beyond. A Gothic spire rises from the distant village. Echoing the cypress, it pierces the horizon and rises into the sky, like man's striving to transcend. The cypress dominates the composition as death preoccupies the artist's life. The echo of the village spire confirms and reinforces that dominance - religious activity is merely a preparation for life's conclusion. The worshipper attempts to grasp the total meaning of life - he finds it only in the fact of his mortality. Therefore, he moves toward death.

In July, 1890, Van Gogh painted "Crows over Wheatfields", which is a premonition of his imminent death. The traditional perspective device of the Renaissance is inverted, so that the eye is drawn not outward towards an inaccessible horizon, but inward towards the self. The lines of force converge on the beholder, who by his extreme introspection has isolated himself from his world, which no longer holds meaning. He is alone, aware only of the ominous flock of black crows which surges towards him. It is only a matter of time before the swarm overwhelms.

Shortly after, Van Gogh committed suicide.

Man is created, yet created man destroys himself. Life is overcome by the ultimate futility of living. Vulnerable man is at the mercy of his own passions - he is born with the certainty of death within him. He is his own cycle of life, therefore the artist turns inward to discover the microcosm that is within his own being.



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The totality of the life/death struggle exists in the human form. The landscape, as Edvard Munch saw it, ceased to exist as a direct expression. The human form dominates - the landscape reflects the cosmic forces at work within man; that is, it emphasises or sympathises with the human predicament.

Munch's people relate to external nature with an ominous, almost sinister tension; as if nature has hypnotized its victim. A woman stands with a silent lonely presence, her frontally-directed eyes gaze out in a strangely remote vacancy. She resists and yields to incomprehensible, irresistible forces which torment her. These forces are symbolised by the sun/moon image, which had appeared frequently in Friedrich's paintings as an image of the divine - the force that rules. Munch's symbol is a phallus which possesses the human will. Sexuality is a fearful, inescapable force of evil; puberty is the end of youthful goodness. It imposes a dual fate of procreation, on the one hand; and desire, temptation, jealousy and self-destruction on the other. The Creator and the Destroyer are one and the same. Thus woman, the innocent victim of her sexual powers, is the temptress - the vampire that originates folly and death.

She moves through the "Dance of Life", from virginal purity; to erotic, engulfing, fruitful sexuality; to dark, sinister and deathly fulfilment, like the witch who has cast her cursing spell. Whirling couples dance in frenzied passion, imprisoned by sex, spellbound by the heavenly phallus which looms over them, absorbing their lives into its power.

Like ancient Baldur's death, the phallic sun/moon is an omen of doom - a symbol of the futility of earthly life, and the triumph of forces towards chaos and darkness. The presence of these destructive forces appears again in Munch's pictures on the topic of grief. Empty, black-clad figures stand aimlessly in starkly bare sickrooms and death



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chambers. Death is a terrible abstract power. It bears grief, and grief consumes the living. Each mourner is absorbed in total solitude - their vacant faces register nothing for they are possessed; paralysed by something unworldly.

Munch's world is a nightmare peopled by lonely, ghostly souls who move silently through a threatening life beset by dread. The only complete relief from life is death. Like the gods of their ancestors, they await their inevitable destiny.

Expressionism, which is closely linked to the morbid intensity of Van Gogh and Munch, specifically refers to the art in Germany between 1905 and 1918 which was a conscious reaction against the rational aesthetic of the Impressionists. In a broader sense, it goes further than the two movements - Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter, to which most Expressionist painters were identified. These painters were distinguished by their dissimilarities rather than similarities - their art, like that of Van Gogh, Munch or Friedrich, was the outcome of a personal creative will.

The basis of the Expressionist painter's motivation appears to have been identical with that of the Romantic - that is, it derived from a disturbed sense of being which would transform nature into an image removed from the natural. Expressionism, however, is Romantic extremism - it reflects a more severe rift between the spirit and the senses; a starker estrangement from the real world.

The artists of Die Brücke, who operated in conjunction with each other before the First World War, derived a deliberate contempt for currently accepted artistic norms from the Fauves. The Expressionists were wild beasts with their emotions exposed in the rawest state. They disregarded the respectful observation of nature which the Impressionists had lauded. They allowed the painting to work itself out spontaneously - to let the wild beast loose



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to express itself in its most fierce intensity of violent colour, chaotic brushstroke and feverish line; exposing panic, haunting melancholy and deepest obsession. By increasing its tension, the expressive will releases the beast; detaches, annihilates and transforms it.

The Expressionists were subject to the growing hysteria of a sick society which was losing touch with nature and losing control of itself - as if uneasily balanced between insane laughter and uncontrollable gloom - the icy shiver and sweat of delirium. This feverish intensity is at its extreme in the unrestricted emotional violence of Emil Nolde's religious paintings. Like a Goya carnival, or Ensor's street, his characters are no longer themselves - they are as if drugged, and the raw essence of their being exposes itself. Their faces are gone - people live in a wild hallucination behind grotesque masks.



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## THE IRRATIONAL AND THE RATIONAL IN MODERN ART

On the eve of World War One, two directions, both closely associated with the Northern artistic past, began to emerge in extreme opposition to each other, both coming to fruition in the troubled and violent years between the two World Wars, and together reflecting the extreme (Communist versus Fascist type) polarity of the time.

The Dada cult of the absurd, and the highly irrational Surrealism, stemmed from a desire to emancipate art utterly from the limitations of reason, and to create spontaneously without the hindrance of the preconceived notion of reality.

An opposing, ultra-rational direction, which had its roots in the analytical Cubism of Braque and Picasso, attempted to free art from the imperfections of the human creative will, and thus to discover absolute truth in nature beyond the clouded and confused variability of free individual expression.

The principal figure of German Surrealism, Max Ernst, was closely associated with the Parisian school, and was thus part of the mainstream of Surrealist thought. He adapted the medium of collage to suit his own particular direction. The perceptive reality of the photographic image was ideal in that it supplied a ready-made "truth", which, when placed out of context, assumed a weird and disturbing new meaning. The estrangement of an object from the presupposed, familiar association with other objects; and the chance, incongruous meeting of unrelated objects resulted in the unexpected, unreal, superreal poetry of a dream-like vision,

which was transported from familiar nature by a total denial of reason. Ernst reorganised the organic and mineral world at will. Plants or creatures remained neither vegetable nor animal - they became part of a fantastic growth; vitally living, but removed from this world to some dark and primal existence in the depths of the subconscious.

The artist frees the wild beast within him, for logic is the enemy of art; the animal, its means. There are no absolute truths. Life is a mystery - it is not born in a test-tube; it is not a formula. Death reveals life - death is not a quod erat demonstrandum of a formula carried out under clinical laboratory conditions. Life is the eternal mystery - its secrets are revealed beyond life. Destroy conscious knowledge of life and its total meaning becomes known. The wild beast finds its own way - it knows its way. It lurks in the dark recesses of death, moving without being seen - knowing without knowledge. "One must submit oneself many times to death", said Friedrich, "in order some day to attain life everlasting." (Börsch-Supan, p.7). Because in death the creative will feels its way unrestricted by rationalised "truths".

Art is irrational. Irrationality dissolves the limits imposed on the creative will by the absoluteness of the laboratory-made logical truth. The glorification of ultra-rationalism in modern science is the triumph of spiritual cretinism. What cannot be proved is consigned to the dusty shelf - it does not exist! Total understanding is bypassed by the quest for the half-truths of (fragmented) knowledge for knowledge's sake. Total experience is felt, not rationalised. The beast knows the way in the dark.

But feeling is the enemy of ultra-rationalism. The perfect society of Platonic or Marxist rationalism exists without feelings. Feeling is the source of folly and imperfection. The cogs of the social machine work according to plan - human imperfection rusts the parts, therefore it must be rooted out.

Anti-methodical art is the enemy of machine-made society, which loves the machine-made idea, like the so-called "positive mysticism" of M.H.J. Schoenmaekers which influenced the "computer-programming" art of Mondrian and De Stijl, the Suprematists and the Bauhaus. "We now learn to translate reality in our imagination into constructions which can be controlled by reason." (Schoenmaekers, as quoted by Herbert Read, p.198).

The Northern artist has always been aware that the wild beast lurks in dark places - that darkness reveals light (Rembrandt); that death reveals life. He seeks to reveal the mysteries of the cosmos by exploring beyond reason in the black depths of his melancholy nature. Piet Mondrian is no exception to this. His earlier art revealed tendencies which were Romantic in character, but his subsequent work developed towards a negation of Romanticism. The wild beast within him turned on its own tail and consumed itself.

Mondrian's paintings of dunes on the Dutch coast, executed before 1912, are stark and uninhabited. The viewer finds himself in hopeless solitude perched on the edge of an unnatural vastness which recalls the deep melancholy of the death-wish in Friedrich's "Monk". The landscape has been reduced to its most essential simplicity - it has become transformed into an image which evokes a spirit, a yearning, beyond nature. Similarly, his trees, also painted before 1912, have become a metamorphosis - a vision beyond the palpable tree.

Northern art tends toward nihilism. The mysteries of life exist beyond life; the mysteries of reality beyond the real. Tangible reality is a manifestation or creation of the cosmic force. To know the totality of the cosmos, the artist must reverse the creative process - that is, he must dematerialise and destroy tangible nature in order to get beyond, or above it.

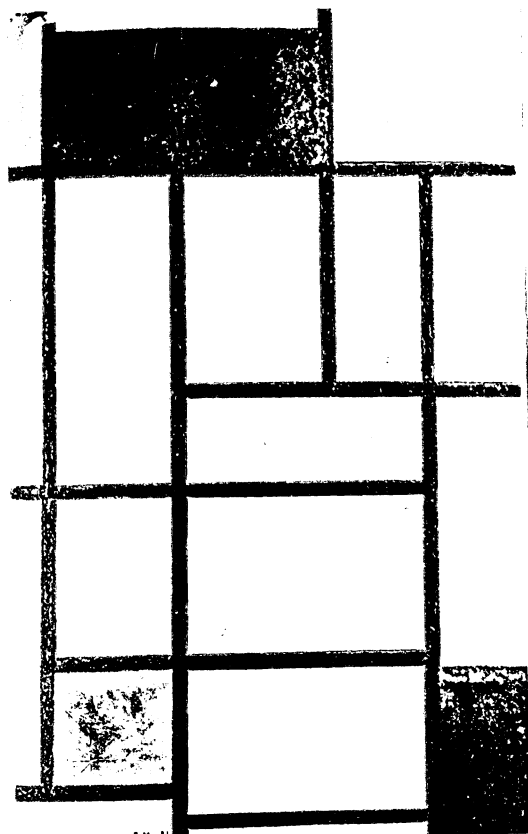
The progress of this dematerialisation can be observed in Mondrian's painting through his treatment of the tree motif after 1912, in which his early analytical Cubism becomes processed and reprocessed to the point of total rigidity - the logical conclusion. Mondrian was here motivated by the mathematical philosophy of Schoenmaekers, which held that the penetration of nature's complexity reveals an inner construction which is definable in terms solely of logic. Thus, from the point of view of Mondrian's art, the multiplicity of the cosmos can be reduced to a mathematically formulated image which would reveal the fundamental structure of nature.

Mondrian arrived at this imagery through a systematic dematerialisation towards stylised simplicity. The nerve-like grid of branches, gradually losing its tree-like identity, became a criss-cross grid of lines - a skeleton or basic construction of nature. Taken to its furthest extreme in this direction, the image loses all resemblance to nature and becomes a two-dimensional, geometric pattern of uncompromising, Puritanical rectangularity, which demanded the exclusion of all tones between the extremes of black and white; of all "polluted" colours (that is, non-primaries); and of all line which did not conform to the absolute vertical or horizontal.

So between them, Mondrian and Schoenmaekers had nature's mysteries in a nutshell. Easy nature! - even a machine can understand it. De Stijl is tailor-made for mass-production. But the totality of nature does not live in a straitjacket. Mondrian's extremist desire for a total objectivity devoid of any potential margin of imperfection is anti- the individual, anti-expression, anti-art. In its development it is seen to have originated from the Northern creative will, yet it is an antithesis of the same. The wild beast has devoured itself! Mondrian glorified the ultra-rational method of modern science - but who can blame him? He was living in a technological desert which was banging its head against the wall.



XXII



XXIII

## "GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG"

The twentieth century has subjected man, in particular the Northern European, to the most terrible and destructive wars in history. Technological man had devised an unprecedented efficiency for annihilating life and devastating cities. The battles of heroes were over - the new enemy was superhuman. Like the supreme, world-ending Nordic conflict, the wrath of forces beyond comprehension tore the world apart.

The holocaust had its prophets. Der Blaue Reiter became increasingly conscious of the tensions which were about to snap. Franz Marc had a premonition of the impending devastation - in 1913 he painted "Fate of the Animals", which equated the imminent conflict with the final universal conflagration of the gods.

Marc merged the human viewpoint with the animal soul. His fascination for the animal is an extension of the Romantic attitude, particularly of George Stubbs and Eugene Delacroix, whose violent struggles reflected the turmoil of nature's vital energies. Marc, however, concerned himself with the more extreme concepts of genesis and cosmic destruction, painted with the turbulent dynamism of a style derived from the Futurists. "Fate of the Animals" depicts the end of the world - a spiritual upheaval in a forest of writhing, tortured creatures which perish in the sharp violence of blinding flashes of light and conflicting electric colours. The fiery turmoil consumes all but the persistent central tree - the indestructible world-ash Yggdrasil, which holds in its trunk the hope of purified



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deliverance from a conflagration which annihilates a world of evil degeneration.

The theme of a spiritual purge was repeated in terms of Christian imagery in "Tyrol", which was not completed before war became a reality and Marc had already seen action. The painting depicts an earthquake or similar natural catastrophe. The violent movement of light and dark planes against each other dissolves solid matter and transforms it into an amorphous flux - an abstraction or energy out of which emerges the barely-discernable form of the Virgin and Child. The phenomenon of a natural disaster has become the scene of some universally destructive havoc out of which is born a regenerated pureness - a revelation of the Virgin.

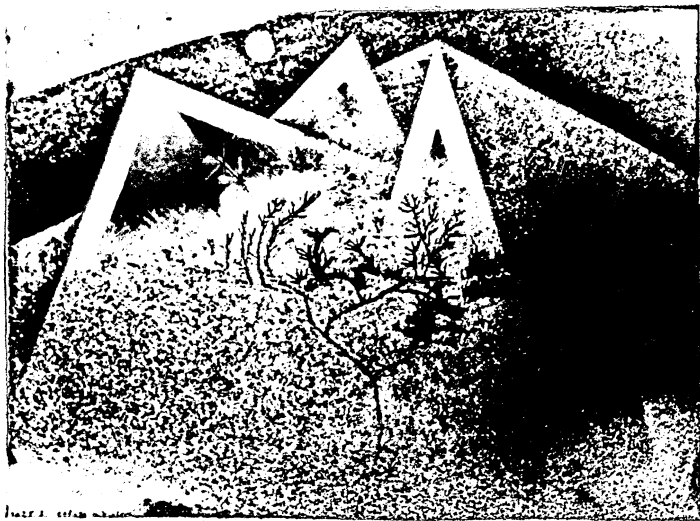
The reality of war had become a dream, a nightmare, a revelation. The enemy was unseen - it fought spiritual battles in the mind. War was an impending, impalpable doom which struck and destroyed without warning. Like Marc's fighting forms, it was an amorphous abstraction, a turmoil of non-literal forces.

Wassily Kandinsky rejected the specific statement in the expression of a non-specific idea. The abstraction of war revealed itself in his work in terms of the medium itself - through the collision of line, colour and shape. Thus the immediate expression of conflict, resolved in terms of the paint, was preferred to the literal, objective image; the metaphorical statement or symbol, in that it was a direct and therefore purer experience.

Paul Klee joined Der Blaue Reiter, sensing an affinity to the work of Marc and Kandinsky - namely, the search for a more honest artistic language which would be capable of conveying spiritual truth. He infused in his work a child-like clarity, creating pictures of a simplicity capable of expressing the core of his vision of nature. His stark paintings reflected the starkness of his world; or as Klee believed - the more horrifying the world, the more abstract



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XXVII

its art. His awareness of this starkness became intensified by the deaths of his associates, August Macke and Marc; and the presence of death remained seldom far from the surface in his paintings.

The Alpine scene becomes a terrifying, icy infinity pervaded by an uncanny silence and emptiness. The arid void is engulfed by the cold light of a divine sun. The austerity of the landscape is relieved only by the frail branches of a tree, pitted, like man, against a deathly environment.

The tree-form as a symbol of man becomes a metamorphosis - a reflection of man's merciless movement towards his destiny, which in 1929, when Klee painted "Before the Snow", amounted to the plunge into the Great Depression. The life of the tree evolves towards death - the vital greens turn to rust, and finally, the winter absorbs the life-force into its cold white, and the branches seem to writhe in agony against the looming darkness beyond.

The Second World War induced a renewed intensity of expression in England. In the grip of a fearful upheaval, man is exposed to the devastating violence of immense forces. Human activity becomes divine violence - waves of Luftwaffe bombers become the implements of cosmic wrath. Man is the pitiful victim of the gods.

Graham Sutherland, like Klee, used the form of a tree as a symbol of man. Disembowelled by the impact of a stray bomb, a blasted oak becomes a metaphor of human suffering. Exposed to extreme torture, the gaping trunk of the tree seems to scream in pain; the gnarled roots become fingers which claw the ground, desperately fighting pain before submission to death.

The symbolic expression of human suffering is again apparent in Sutherland's "Thorn Cross", which was executed after the war. The experience of pain in human terms is denied. Rather an empathy with the crucifixion is created



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through the harsh, jagged thorns of an icon of death, which suggests an unfamiliar, unworldly suffering. The painting may recall the experience of a battleground. The cross is like a man-made thing with its meaning distorted and changed by war. The crucifixion is a shattered fence with a bizarre tangle of barbed-wire and the debris of destruction crowning the post - a symbol of war, devastation and suffering.

"Totes Meer", painted in 1940 by Paul Nash, is a powerful vision of universal and eternal death, reflecting the ever-recurring waves of destruction during the Blitz. The wreckage of German warplanes forms a sea - a twisting, writhing tide of destructive monsters which rear up and crash onto the beach, wave upon wave, endlessly. The sea of death is unrelenting - no hint of salvation, no deliverance. Death is as persistent as the waves break. Death is total.



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XXXI

## EPILOGUE

The world trembled before the brutal storm of blitzkrieg. Sirens whined the death-knell and men heard the distant drone of their approaching destiny. Cities perished in the whirling inferno hurled on them from the sky. Man had fashioned his own fate - he had become like the gods, and the gods were destroying themselves.

Yggdrasil survived the conflagration. A new race sprang from the rubble of ruined cities. Men, heroes and gods live together in contentment in a modern suburban Valhalla. The wild beast is dead. The last echoes of Thor's old-fashioned thunder died away in 1945; and bright Baldur, having amply lit his brave new world with Hiroshima mushrooms, now plays peacemaker at the U.N.



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SOURCES OF THE ILLUSTRATIONS

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