

‘Modernist Abstraction and the Suppression of History’

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As some of this paper was material that later appeared in a different form elsewhere,
I am leaving it on Academia. References not really completed.

Abstraction

I want to talk today about modernist abstraction, or at least one aspect of the topic. It is an issue we often feel we are familiar with; definitional to modernism; confronting us whenever we enter an art gallery, or try to read Gertrude Stein. Yet it is also a topic which is slippery, particularly in its relation to literature – as opposed to painting, sculpture or music. The question of what the abstract is or does in literature does not seem to have received a very clear answer; and indeed a great deal of what has been written on the subject either refers us to painting or *ekphrasis*, as Charles Altieri’s book does, or considers literature which deals with the *idea* of abstraction – Wallace Stevens’s eminently lucid work above all.

The reason for this is of course that writing is a referential rather than a directly perceptual medium. Words – even if isolated or piled on top of each other randomly – carry traces of meaning. What could be the equivalent, in literature, of the abstraction of Malevitch’s ‘Black Square’ or Pollock’s doodle? For this reason we more readily speak of difficulty or obscurity in relation to the written; a term which immediately places us more on the side of the reader – the question of having a key – than of the producer; reception rather than creation, so that we do not readily think of obscurity as a *practice*. In the same semantic field is vagueness (which had a philosophical elaboration in Russell and Wittgenstein); the use of chance or automaticity; – and, a little closer to my topic here, the aesthetic of emptiness, of a resistance to the world in the refusal of closed meaning – a resistance articulated in formal terms by Wallace Stevens and in more political terms by Theodore Adorno.

Abstraction historically has two main streams of definition attached to it – though it is important to note that they overlap. In one, abstraction is a taking away, a removal of materials from a pre-existing object; sometimes even a defiling of that object or of the means of representation, since abstraction has darker connotations: in its origins to abstract can mean to purloin, to steal away. Picasso famously writes: ‘A picture used to be the sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions. I do a picture – then I destroy it. In the end, though, nothing is lost: the red I took away from one place ends up somewhere else.’



In the other definition, abstraction is a kind of pure creativity, often conceived in ideal terms. In the latter definition – for example in Worringer or Stevens – it is often figured as taking us back to the origins of art, a primal shaping: the primitive ‘something that came first’, as John Rajahman puts it; Stevens’s ‘First Idea’. Abstraction is in this mode, for Kandinsky and others, linked to the purity of the spiritual, or to the values of the imagination. In the pre-history of the abstract in this mode takes in the romantic sense of the numinous; of a symbolism attached to the unspecified – as in the genealogy proposed by Robert Rosenblum, which takes us from the Northern Romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich to Rothko. ‘Black winds from the north / enter black hearts’, as Williams put it

in making his own case for a minimalism of materials in *Spring and All*. That which is abstracted here implicitly *contains* the whole (as opposed to the extract, the fragment).

In what follows, I want to consider a particular aspect of modernism that works dialectically between these opposed positions; between deformation and the stripping away of contexts and the evocation of a myth of renewed and distilled meaning. I want to consider the status of what is removed, or ‘cancelled’, to use Wallace Stevens’s term. Is it somehow still present by implication, as in the model of repression? Or is it passed over and denied?

1. Brancusi and Ideal Sculpture

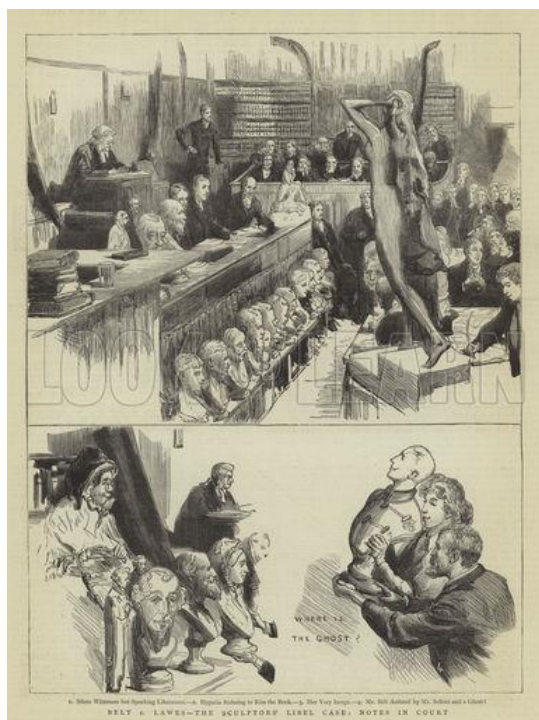
My first example is the work of the sculptor Constantin Brancusi, and his turn around 1908 to direct carving – a key break with Rodin, in whose workshop he worked briefly, and with the sculptural practices of the nineteenth-century. Those practices, derived from the ideal sculpture of Canova and Thorvaldson at the beginning of the century, had involved the artist constructing a clay model which was then scaled up and converted to marble or bronze by teams of workmen, with the artist, supposedly, applying the authenticating finishing touches. I’ll begin with something of an excursus on these practices.

Within such a system of ideal making, there is a constant anxiety over the status of labour which gives ideal sculpture its name. The artist has the ideal conception, but requires teams of workers to translate it into marketable commodities – into the multiples in which these statues were usually sold. One result is that accounts of sculptural making in the nineteenth-century are haunted by the ghost of labour; of the question of what making *is*. The other result is that the artworks themselves – like say Hiram Power’s *The Greek Slave* – often have a curiously abstract character (I would call it a pre-modernist abstraction); they have a curiously blank character which refers us to a hidden meaning.

The many controversies that ensued over the use of assistants



came to a magnificent climax in *Belt vs. Lawes* (1882-4), the last great case to be heard in Westminster Hall, described by one newspaper as ‘the most portentous piece of modern litigation’ after that of the Tichbourne Claimant.¹ The sculptor Charles Lawes accused his fashionable rival Richard Belt of producing art on which he had not worked – effectively, of running a factory.² Belt sued and was, after a six-month trial involving 43 court days and scores of witnesses, eventually vindicated, and awarded a record £5001 in damages.³ The trial was spectacular, involving many society figures (mostly clients testifying for Belt) and Royal Academicians (appearing for Lawes), and a courtroom cluttered with sculptures which the public could see on viewing days.



The case provides the first citation in the OED for ‘ghost’ meaning ‘one who secretly does artistic or literary work for another person’ – though clearly the phrase had been in use for some time. The sculptural ‘ghost’ thus precedes the ghost-writer, because sculpture, with its laborious, multi-stage processes, involves delegation and surrogacy. *The Times* expressed surprise that this trial was the first of its kind, noting that ‘often before sculptors have not been visited and called to account by their “ghosts”, true or false’.⁴ Belt was portrayed in terms of gothic substitution and trickery – with accusations that his ‘ghosts’, Verhyden and Brock, climbed up a ladder to a concealed cubby-hole at the back of his studio.

What underpinned the trial was class, and the issue of who may form the ideal and direct others. Belt had begun as a ‘machine boy’ for the Engineer of the House of Commons, and taken art classes at a Working Men’s Club; his first sculpture was worked on waste stone with a nail. Lawes, who later inherited a baronetcy, had been a well-known sportsman at Eton and Oxford; he and Belt trained in the same studio and he employed Belt briefly. The appearance of many Royal Academicians for Lawes (including Lord Leighton) reflected this social divide, as did Lawes’s description of Belt as ‘a statue-jobber and a tradesman’ (*H* 237). Belt’s portrait, published in *Society* in 1883, shows him as a workman in an apron holding a mallet, with the legend ‘My mind alone conceived it: no hand but mine touched it’. In contrast Lawes’s portrait, in *Vanity Fair*, shows the haughty aristocrat and sportsman.⁵

The question raised by this issue of class is whether Belt *could* produce sculpture, so he volunteered to make a bust of



his assistant Paglianti in a room adjoining the court. One of the reasons the defence failed was that when he had done so, the Royal Academy cohort rushed the bench to declare that the earlier sculpture of Paglianti on display was far superior, and obviously ‘ghosted’ – when they had not previously questioned its attribution, and a witness had seen Belt make the earlier figure. But the more fundamental problem was a paradox: the Royal Academicians wished to defend an ideal making, using a system of delegation *which they themselves employed*. When Leighton was questioned on his use of an assistant for his famous ‘Python’, he replied: ‘I made a highly finished sketch in clay. It put it into the hands of Mr Brock, who caused it to be set up and descended to various operations for which so skilled a sculptor is not required’ (H 249). These are the same terms with which Belt himself supported an idealized view of sculpture. Asked how much an assistant should do for a competition work, Belt replied: ‘The assistant may have as much or more ability than the competitor – it will be the difference between execution and mind . . . Many people employ persons superior in art.’ (H 242). Indeed, he was willing to describe the sculptor as a god-like maker: ‘With a mask and a “squeeze” we produce animation. I do not take measurements from living persons and give them to my assistants . . . No hand but mine touches these heads from start to finish. Many others do it, but I do not, as a fact; but I do not think it very wrong . . . No one has ever put animation or expression into any head for me.’⁶ But from Leighton’s point of view, Belt was simply the wrong type of person to make these claims: his was a body that should be directed by others, not one which animates.⁷



Lord Coleridge’s dissenting judgment at the appeal hearing focused unerringly on the question of the animation or generation of the work as described by Aristotle. Noting that to some extent the Royal Academy itself had been on trial, he commented:

I have already stated what I conceive to be the true question in this case; it is perhaps better that I should also state what I conceive it was not. It was not whether Mr. Belt could make a passable model, one which to an uneducated or uncultivated eye would pass muster as a piece of sculpture. Most men of the least dexterity of hand could do as much as this. The question was not this, but whether fine works of art, admitted on all hands to be so, were really his work or the works of other men; and as to this, again, whether, in the long course of working upon them, he may not now and then have actually handled the clay, or even carved the marble, but whether the completed work, the art in them when they had art – what I believe logicians call ‘the formal cause’ of them – that which made them what they are, was Mr. Belt’s work or another’s. . . . In sculpture, in the long and various process from the slight clay sketch or drawing to the completed marble, there is so much which is necessarily mechanical, and which a competent carving mason can do just as well as a Phidias or Michaelangelo. Help, therefore, up to a certain point, every sculptor

from the highest to the lowest has, or may have, with absolute integrity; indeed with universal knowledge and acceptance. But there comes a point in modelling, and I should have supposed, but for what I have heard of Flaxman, there comes a point in the carving too, where mechanism ends and original art begins. I imagine that this point is almost impossible to state in words with any approach to accuracy. (*H* 256-7)

Coleridge's formulae struggle to distinguish the maker as abstract 'formal cause' from making as craft, equated with the 'mechanism' of reproduction: is the touch of the hand a mere mechanical process; or is it the animating cause? His dissenting judgement was that we must trust the experts – the aristocrats of taste, the Academicians – but that is simply to understand the circularity of the argument; the fact that the power to claim authorship is simply power itself.

Faced with the mystique of sculptural labour, it was almost impossible for the judges to say who was 'right': Lawes lost mainly because of contradictions in his evidence. Creation remains a secret lodged in the interaction of 'hands'; Belt's and those he employed. Indeed, one could argue that after Coleridge's failed stand on behalf of the academy, the field is open for anyone to claim the power of authorship. The issues remain with us: in the teams of workers employed by artists like Jeff Koons or Damian Hirst and their entanglement in accusations about the use of others's ideas, or in questions about Hirst's drawing ability, the question of what making is – or whether it is simply the signature – remains with us.⁸ The extent to which the work of the assistant can be rendered invisible is part of this complex.

One terminus of thinking about ideal sculpture – as well as a bridge to modernism – is the German sculptor and theorist Adolf Hildebrand's influential 1893 essay 'The Problem of Form in the Fine Arts' – a work which in some respects anticipated Worringer on abstraction by over a decade.⁹ Hildebrand does away with (or at least disparages) the clay model, since the modeller in clay is bound to the real form he creates rather than a pre-existing idea or form. Perception is to be analysed in terms of the *visual*, a stable and distant view, and the *kinaesthetic*, the actual view close up, imbued with the shifting physical contingency of the body. Sculpture is in his view linked to the visual: to the relief; to a framed, architectural view rather than one which must be seen in the round. The role of the sculptor working in stone is to 'release' or 'free' the pre-existing visual ideal from the stone, as a series of planes suggesting depth, aiming to 'translate its ideal form into a real kinaesthetic idea' (275). He asserts his mastery over the real. The modeller in clay, in contrast, clumsily builds up and responds to volumes: 'the visual impression thus plays only the role of a critic; it has no influence over the initial idea of form' (275).

Hildebrand's theory is in one sense the apotheosis of ideal sculpture: the ideal sense of the artist is privileged over execution; the actual focus on the making of a form is minimized. His preference for cutting stone quickly rather than modelling in clay mirrors the activities of assistants, while attempting to reclaim that dangerous ground for the artist (indeed, the use of an assistant is nowhere mentioned in his essay; the 'ghost' is dispensed with). And the mere physicality or objecthood of the sculpture is abstracted as the ideal image is 'freed'.

The sculptor becomes ‘master’ of materials as he develops a series of forms subordinated to the ideal: ‘The more masterly the treatment of the stone, the more decisive and the more definite will be the form that emerges onto the surface. Our instinct demands that a positive form step forth from the general spatial fog as quickly as possible’ (274). The stepping-forth imagined here is virtual; an abstract image rather than a statue given life by the ‘animating force of our imagination’ (261).

We can return to Brancusi with this in mind. Seemingly abandoning the tradition he inherited, he declared that ‘Direct cutting is the true road to sculpture’, a declaration is echoed by Gaudier and other modernists, most succinctly by Ezra Pound. Form is to be released from materials through a struggle with their materiality, as for Hildebrand. Brancusi writes:

Generally, sculptors proceed with matter by addition when they ought to act upon it by subtraction. To use a soft material and keep on adding to it until preconceived form is attained and then to influent it upon a hard and permanent material is a crime of lese-matter. All materials have within themselves the sculpture that the man wants; he must must labor and get it out, eliminating the superfluous material that covers it.¹⁰

But – and here is the turn - at the same time, after his earlier and more rough-hewed ‘direct’ carvings, Brancusi linked his claim to formal purity to their finish, to a process in which he did use assistants (Isamu Noguchi is the best known; though he made few references to them, and seemed to have avoided being photographed with them). ‘High polish is a necessity’, he wrote, ‘which certain approximately absolute forms demand of some materials’. Indeed one might speculate that it is the polish of the sculptures which enables the abstract to be materialized, the golden bird to be an idea: ‘There are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realistic, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.’



The sculptures which result have in that sense a hidden complicity with that nineteenth-century inheritance which Brancusi denies: they are an abstract idea produced by a process of polishing and delegation. Brancusi's slogan was ‘create like a god, command like a king, work like a slave’ – a formula which attempts to heal the historical wounds in sculptural making – though one could say they nevertheless still present in his work.

Some of the tensions involved are suggested by Loy's poem ‘Brancusi's Golden Bird’ (which was published in *The Dial* alongside the first American printing of ‘The Waste Land’): both the lopping of inessential appendages and an absolute revelation of essence; both violence done to the real and polished hyperaesthesia; both sounding gong and dumb object. In 1926 one of Brancusi's works – ‘Bird in Space’ - was held by customs en route to the

Brummer Gallery and then Steichen's home and subject to a surcharge as it was designated an industrial object. This is illustrative of what Anna C. Chave calls a 'repressed crisis' in Brancusi's works; the question of what stops them from collapsing into being 'furnishings'.

Brancusi vs. United States works through the same range of topics as *Belt vs. Lawes*: the question of casting; the question of multiples; of whether the artist worked on the polishing himself or whether it was made by a mechanic; the question of the 'idea', its history and power to designate sculpture art; the question of the competence to judge.¹¹ At one point an artist is asked whether a polished rail might be an artwork: the answer is only if an artist sees it like that, as no 'mechanic' can see it as art: 'He can polish it up but he cannot conceive of the object' (28). This is Steichen questioned by Justice Waite on the power of naming, confirmed rather than challenged by abstraction:

Q. What makes you call it a bird, does it look like a bird to you?

A. It does not look like a bird but I feel that it is a bird, it is characterized by the artist as a bird.

Q. Simply because he called it a bird does that a bird to you?

A. Yes your Honor. (19)

Here, as in ideal sculpture, abstraction operates at the right to name. It also involves, as I have suggested, as the removal of the work, and even the bodies, of others; as an economic process. Glenn Adamson, in *Thinking through Craft*, comments that 'For the [modernist] art work to emerge in its autonomous totality, craft must absent itself from the proceedings'.¹² Brancusi's objects achieve their abstraction, to put it deliberately over-bluntly, by the effacing of context, including their own histories and the history of the genres which precede them; but they do so in continuity with the practices of the nineteenth-century.

2. The Waste Land

My second example is drawn from the most enigmatic section of *The Waste Land*, a poem whose difficulty – and here again there are questions about that word abstraction – involves a complex dialogue of absence and presence, produced by the tension between its discontinuous fragments and its hints of deep structure. That fact that it is relatively indifferent to transitions and its meanings often point outside the text in terms of the footnotes, allusions and paratexts makes it an example of abstraction in the sense of taking away; though abstraction as essence is also present in the hints as to the poem's status as a primitive ritual bound together by Frazer's 'sympathetic magic', the rain-song of the culturally dessicated.

There are just 10 lines in 'Death by Water'. What Eliot jettisoned, at Pound's prompting, included a long, 83-line, account of a disastrous cod-fishing voyage into the north Atlantic, ending with wreck on the ice. In many ways, reference to the Sirens apart, it is a fairly paradigmatic shipwreck narrative: brackish water, short rations, weevils in the biscuit, a storm driving the boat before it. What is *left* describes, in words Eliot salvaged from a poem he had written in French in 1918, how 'Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead, / Forgot

the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell / And the profit and loss’.

We have been taught to see this decaying body as central to the poem, explicable in terms of the vegetation rites and the figure of the scapegoat described by Jessie Weston and Sir James Frazer. Frazer notes that in some Greek isles, ‘it was customary to cast a young man every year into the sea, with the prayer “Be thou our offscouring”’ (579). And indeed, *The Waste Land* is normally read in terms of a syncretic approach to sacrifice – assimilating the hanged man; the corpse in the garden; the drowned sailor into a mythopoesis which offers diagnosis and even – for Cleanth Brooks at least – healing.

What I would suggest is that we attend to the deletions, and to the suppressed generic context the drafts offer: that of the many hundreds of shipwreck narratives which were a staple of late eighteenth century and nineteenth-century popular literature (and which surface from time to time in the novels of Poe, Dickens and others): dramas in which commercial enterprise and its human cost, distance and pathos, and the issue of sacrifice – most literally in narratives of drawing lots for cannibalism – is also present. The deleted cod-fishing voyage and shipwreck, for all that it must have seemed anachronistic to Pound, suggests a deeper and more obdurate history. The main source of nineteenth-century accounts shipwreck in the ice of the North Atlantic was not cod fishing, as in Eliot’s draft, but the timber trade: overloaded timber boats readily capsized, and drifted as hulks; owners sacrificed the lives of their seamen and collected the insurance money – by the 1830s this had become a scandal raised in parliament.

The transposition of the foreign merchant or shipwrecked Jew into this history – literally in Eliot; more metaphorically in Pound – involves a historical sleight-of-hand, a scapegoating which itself has, of course, a long history. Some of the history alluded to in Eliot’s draft could be very specific: the cry at the end of the draft, ‘My God man theres bears on it’ seems, for example, to evoke Landseer’s famous painting ‘Man Proposes and God Disposes’, held at my own College’s art gallery, with its polar bear and bodily fragments evoking memories of the Franklin expedition and the rumours of cannibalism which surrounded it.



Some could be elaborated in relation to Phlebas and the drowned Bleistein of the drafts:

Antoninus: 'And that the state shd / have benefit / from private misfortune, / not in my time, not under me'. In 'A Visiting Card', his Italian essay of 1942, he provides an example of that illicit benefit: shipwreck. This is a reference to what is known in legal tradition as 'unjust enrichment', a notion which does arguably have its first application in the notion of general average used in maritime insurance – which states that losses should not fall randomly on one member of a community of risk. This is also, implicitly I think, an attack on the notion of the scapegoat. One might seem Pound's later maritime writings as an extended excavation of the history which he had suppressed in editing and abstracting Eliot's poem.

Conclusion

What are my conclusions from these examples? I asked whether that which was effaced in the modernist artwork was repressed and somehow still present? On passed over and denied? My answer is, I think, that while it is not possible to offer anything like a 'theory' of modernist abstraction, one can suggest that it often involves something like the triple effacement seen here: that of history of making or labour; that of genre; and that of history. But in each case the history of the reception of the artwork involves processes of recontextualization which force some of that context into view – not least because the blankness of the abstract artwork, in an interpretive version of Worringer's 'space-shyness', seems to impel us to returned to its cast-off 'context' – which is not of course a context at all of course, but part of the totality of its meanings, the web from which its escape is in the end simply gestural.

Pound wrote a short article in 1937 whose entire text runs:

I would put up a dozen brass tablets to one phrase of Constantin Brancusi's:
 ONE OF THOSE DAYS WHEN I WOULD NOT HAVE GIVEN UP FIFTEEN
 MINUTES OF MY TIME FOR ANYTHING UNDER HEAVEN.
 There speaks the supreme sense of human values. There speaks WORK unbartered.
 That is the voice of humanity in its highest possible manifestation.¹⁵

This is a concise version of the ideology of abstraction: of concentration in both its meanings. But work and time are also that which are effaced from Brancusi's birds in their architectural spaces; or Eliot's poem in its fragmented automaticity; and Pound's proposing a *dozen* tablets also re-introduces just a whiff of the workshop. So Pound's praise opens up a pathway towards a re-examination of abstraction, considered as what I suspect is something close to the process which Malcom Bull calls coming into hiding; a process, that is, which challenges us with its display of an object in its essence – thought embodied – but which we must ultimately sully with its historicity in order to do it justice. In this paper I have perhaps spent too long in the court room; or fossicking about with Eliot's tailings; but that is where we are with the absolute claims of the abstract, looking for some way to bring it before the bar and asking that it might tell us its secrets.

NOTES

¹ *Glasgow Herald*, Fri. 29 Dec, 1882.

² The original article was written by a barrister working for *Vanity Fair*, August 20, 1881, working from a deposition by Lawes. Lawes then wrote to the Lord Mayor of London, who was considering Belt for a public commission, drawing his attention to the piece.

³ Joseph Dean, *Hatred, Ridicule or Contempt: A Book of Libel Cases* (London: Constable, 1953), p. 235ff (subsequent references in text as *H*). See also: Montague Williams, *Leaves of a Life* (London: Macmillan, 189-0), II 220-33; and *Times* law reports 22 June 1882–18 March 1884.

⁴ *Times*, Fri. 29 Dec. 1882, 7

⁵ Supplement to *The Society*, Feb. 24, 1883; *Vanity Fair*, 12 May 1883.

⁶ *Times*, Sat 24 June, 1884, p. 6; partially cited Dean, p. 242.

⁷ Brock was in fact a sculptor on his own right.

⁸ See e.g. Dalya Alberge, 'Damien Hirst faces eight new claims of plagiarism', *The Guardian* Fri. 3 Sept. 2010, p.13, among many other articles.

⁹ Adolf Hildebrand, 'The Problem of Form in the Fine Arts' (1893), in *Empathy, Form and Space*, pp. 227-279.

¹⁰ Brancusi cited in Anthea T. Spear, *Brancusi's Bird* (NYUP. 1969).

¹¹ On the case, see e.g. Rebecca Beasley, *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹² Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft* (New York: berg, 2007), 21.

¹³ The figure – lower than the 10,000% return sometimes described – is from Peter Earl, *The Wreck of the Almranta: Sir William Phips and the Search for the Hispaniola Treasure* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 201.

¹⁴ Pound, *Selected Prose* 272.

¹⁵ *Demarcations, British Union Quarterly*, 1937 (*SP* 283); cf. Canto 85.