maturity: an insistence which can hardly be interpreted, though some might be tempted that way, as 'mere permissiveness'.

Death and Resurrection

My final remarks in trying to assess what is specific in Christian moral attitudes need, more than the rest of this very schematic essay, a degree of expansion which is not possible here. We have already found certain qualities as specifying 'Christian' morality, such as inalienability of conscience, dedication to communal moral enquiry and endeavour, a movement from law-regarding to person-regarding morality with its associated search for progress and accordance of freedom from coercion, an understanding of history. If we have tried to ground these specific qualities in the person and teaching of Jesus, however inadequately, it is important not to fail to identify this Jesus as the subject of death and resurrection. The death and resurrection of Jesus constitute a paradox rather than an escapism, since we have not yet come to experience the resurrection of the man who really and historically died. The death constitutes a precondition of a truly Christian morality: acceptance of death flows back over life as the condition of discipleship, and self-abnegation rightly understood is inescapable in Christian morality. But this acceptance is not a stoical one; rather an absurdly optimistic one, because it is the ground for hope in the real possibility of human fulfilment in unlimited moral progress, which is what is meant by believing in the saving resurrection of Jesus. So perhaps after all the foregoing discussion is not simply an essay in reduction but leaves fairly adequate scope for faith in a transcendent God.

Atheism and The Avant-Garde
by Brian Wicker

Defence or Sell-out?

On the face of it, the 'neo-modernist' aesthetic is radically atheistic. (I borrow the term from Frank Kermode's essay *Modernisms*, in *Innovations*, edited by Bernard Bergonzi.) For example Jean Alter has pointed out that in Robbe-Grillet's world everything is meticulously present except that which is associated with God. Wallas, in *Les Gommes*, on the lookout for ways of finding his correct route without giving himself away, asks for the post office but not the cathedral: for the town has none. The island in *Le Voyeur* has a cinema, a café, a garage and a hotel, but no church. In *L'Immortelle*

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the religious manifestations are treated simply as tourist attractions, having no religious meaning. Now, the absence of all reference to religion, despite the meticulous rendering elsewhere of visible detail, is itself highly unrealistic. It points to the real message of Robbe-Grillet's apparently neutral and value-free fiction; namely the discontinuity between human beings and the material environment. There can be no 'complicity' between man and the world for 'les choses sont les choses, et l'homme n'est que l'homme'. (*Pour un Nouveau Roman.*) In so far as religion, and the objects associated with it, exist for the sake of establishing some rapport between the world and the people God has put in it, religion for Robbe-Grillet is simply a false trail, a cul-de-sac. The whole apparatus of symbolism, sacraments and prayer is therefore ignored, as something of no account in a fiction that concerns itself with life as it really is.

Now, if Alter is right, Robbe-Grillet's deliberate and calculated refusal to include anything to do with religious activity shows that his aesthetic is not ideologically neutral, but critical. It keeps its distance from the world of 'bare facts', takes up a stance towards them. It is not really true that everything is of equal value in the Robbe-Grillet world: implicitly, covertly, values and gradations do creep in, selection is taking place, the fictional world is a humanly 'ordered' image of reality despite itself. In fact, Robbe-Grillet does not, as many critics think, reduce man to insignificance. On the contrary, if Alter is right, he merely recognizes the opposition between man and his environment, and offers an exile from that opposing world in order to cultivate a genuine humanism. He is engaged in a rearguard action whereby that which is purely and distinctively human can be kept inviolate.

Games of chance

The question arises whether a rearguard action of this kind, in which so much of the energy seems to go into describing the strategy of the enemy, and so little into organizing the defences, is really worthwhile. It is at least possible that, despite the minimal human interest that is undeniably present in Robbe-Grillet, he has in effect sold out to the enemy by conceding too much from the outset. Where does the dividing line between genuine defence and unconscious selling-out have to be drawn? In the preservation of character-delineation in the manner of the great nineteenth-century masters (especially Tolstoy) as John Bayley would insist? In preserving a sense of socio-political involvement as Raymond Williams, following Brecht, would say? In the preservation of that 'fatal complicity' between man and nature which, in a roundabout way, William Golding seems to be trying to achieve, and which Robbe-Grillet sees as a false trail? Or in simply keeping on with some successful line of fiction, which is what most novelists do? Or in fusing fiction and fact by writing novels as history, and

history as the novel in the manner of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer? I think that all of these may have their place, but none of them is quite to the point. What is irreducible, I want to argue, is the insistence on 'whole actions', in something like the Aristotelian sense. But what does this mean?

There is no single satisfactory definition of what constitutes a 'whole action'. It is rather a question of noticing when the attempt to reproduce a 'whole action' has been abandoned. There can be 'whole actions' of many kinds, in many styles, and under the rubrics of many differing and competing theories of 'mimesis'; but there are also boundaries, points of no return, places in the territory of art where it is necessary to erect signposts indicating 'no through road' and 'dead end'. Whether any particular work is, in fact, a 'dead end' can perhaps be never quite definitively established. We may come to see that we have misread a work, and be compelled by some new critical advocacy to revise our verdict on it: but the underlying concepts which we use may still remain the same. What ways are there by which a work abandons 'whole actions'? There are a number of fairly clear criteria, I think. Some derive from the mode of composition, some from the nature of the work itself, some from the nature of the demands made upon the reader or listener.

Perhaps the most obvious, and notorious, kind of case is the work which is produced by chance: that is to say, where meaningful human acts of invention or arrangement are wholly eliminated. This has been achieved more conspicuously in music than in literature. John Cage has devoted much ingenuity to devising ways of removing the 'composer' from the musical scene. From the use of chance to determine what should happen (tossing coins or using the imperfections on the paper to suggest the notes) he has moved to the point of true 'indeterminacy' in which it is impossible to tell in advance what the result will be like at all. (In *Variations IV* all that is determined is where the sounds come from, not what they are. Cf. C. Tomkins, *Ahead of the Game*, p. 132.) Yet Cage's work is after all *his* work, and not anybody else's and his way of producing indeterminate sounds is not the same as that employed by others. To that extent, even *Variations IV* is 'by Cage' and bears some mark of his personality upon it, even though, by his own theory, it should not. 'It is perfectly clear that walking along the river is one thing, and writing music is another and being interrupted while writing music is still another and a backache too. They all go together, and it's a continuity that is not a continuity that is being clung to or insisted upon. The moment it becomes a special continuity of I am composing and nothing else should happen then the rest of life is nothing but a series of interruptions, pleasant or catastrophic as the case may be. The truth however is that . . . there is no rest of life. Life is one. Without

beginning, without middle, without ending. The concept: beginning middle and meaning comes from a sense of self which separates itself from what it considers to be the rest of life. But this attitude is untenable unless one insists on stopping life and bringing it to an end. That thought is in itself an attempt to stop life, for life goes on, indifferent to the deaths that are part of its no beginning, no middle, no meaning. How much better to simply get behind and push!' (*Silence*, by John Cage, Calder and Boyars, 1968, p. 134.) From this statement it becomes clear that chance music is a way of getting behind and pushing, instead of 'composing' and so separating that activity from other activities. It involves getting rid of the idea of separate human acts with beginnings, middles and ends. Chance music is simply a continuation of the sounds provided by life. *Variations IV* is a kind of musical 'ready-made'—not an imitation of life but a piece of it.

The Death of the Past

I suppose that it is possible to 'write' literary works on the same principle—perhaps by selecting words from the dictionary by chance methods, or by making random records of utterances from conversations, radio programmes or whatever. Yet most of the recognized ways of giving an element of the unpredictable to literary works have stopped a long way short of Cage's ideals. Computer poetry has been exhibited, for example at the 'cybernetic serendipity' exhibition of computer arts at the ICA in London in 1968, and computer-written poetry has become something of a speciality for the Cambridge Language Research Unit under Margaret Masterman. Burroughs's 'fold-in' or 'cut-out' work in *Nova Express* constitutes another well-known example, in which items from neswpapers are stuck into the text alongside parts written by the author in the ordinary way. But this is very far from a chance-determined art: in fact it is a selection of highly organized items. All the same, it does serve to illustrate another way in which 'whole action' can be eliminated, by eliminating the author of it.

Behind the effort to make art out of chance, to arrive at the possibility of saying nothing (cf. Tomkins, p. 103) lies the wish to eliminate the author because he is considered as dominating and controlling the fictional world. Such dominance is felt to be a kind of hubris, a relic of the Protestant ethic and the economics of exploitation and conquest. Whatever one may think of this opinion, such a radical democracy in art is certainly very different from the search for artistic impersonality undertaken by T. S. Eliot, or Joyce, or perhaps Stravinsky in his neo-classical phase. For Eliot the sinking of the artistic personality was part of the requirement that art should consciously set itself within a tradition that was still alive. The tradition was greater than anything the individual artist could create by himself. He could change it, perhaps even

modify our view of it: but only if he sank his individual talent in the tradition to which he belonged. He could ransack it certainly, but only in order to re-create from within. Now we may have to admit that the tradition which Eliot or Joyce or Stravinsky sought to perpetuate had less vitality than they realized, even that it was practically finished (as J. H. Plumb might wish to say). Nevertheless, their conception of artistic self-extinction was not a democratic but rather an hierarchical one: submission, not to the voice of the common man or the lowest common denominator, but to the voices of the authorities, the great authors, the masters and their masterpieces. Respect for the past was the essential basis of achievement in the present. Just the reverse is the case in the neo-modernist situation. The extinction of the personality is now demanded by the death of the past, not by the need to preserve it. It is precisely because of a desire to be free of the authority of the past that the artist tries to relinquish his own 'character', to let the present speak through him instead of imposing traditions that are no longer valid. So art becomes defiantly 'contemporary', immersed in the present, uninterested in either past or future, radically a-historical, even a-temporal. Now it is, of course, impossible to get away from the fact that reading, listening, even looking at a canvas, takes time: but the sense of time, within its insidious suggestions of beginnings and endings, can be circumvented or made impotent by various dodges. A work may be made endless by becoming circular: or historical time may be eliminated by the work taking upon itself just the same temporal duration as that of the outside world (like *Last Year at Marienbad*). Or. in the case of a dramatic or musical performance, it may be uncertain when the work has begun or ended, or at what point it became (if at all) something special, in a dimension of its own (e.g. Cage's *Variations IV*).

Yet, if it is true that, however hard an artist tries, he cannot wholly extinguish himself as long as he is doing *something*, it follows that he cannot abolish time and the beginnings and endings that go with our admission of time. In fact, if Merleau-Ponty is right, time is not some 'objective' dimension set over against us, denying our deepest urge to be self-united in the instantaneous present, but is indeed something we make as we act in the world. 'It arises from my relation to things', so that I constitute time as my action unfolds. (cf. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 412.)

In so far as walking along the river is one thing and writing music is another, the continuity is broken already, even though it is not insisted on or clung to. In this sense, even the most extreme advocate of the abolition of the sense of past and future in art is unable to complete his aspiration: this bride cannot be completely stripped bare by the bachelors. (cf. Tomkins, p. 12.) Recognizing this, some writers have attempted at least to confuse their readers about the chronology of their 'fictions' by defying the temporal logic

of real events. Thus, Robbe-Grillet in *La Maison de Rendez-vous* has the victim murdered four times over, as though to defy the logic which says that once an event has become past it can never belong again to the future. But, as Bruce Morissette has pointed out (*Novel*, Fall 1967), this defiance of logic merely means that the whole novel becomes an autonomous structure, a 'psycho-fiction' with its own rules, its 'formal schematics and its principles of self-generating content and self-contained structure': and within this psycho-structure, logic reasserts itself. Temporal sequence in the real world becomes the inconsequential logic of a fantasy world. Whether this is enough to constitute a 'whole action' depends on whether the action is properly *human*, and that is a different question. But in a sense, the answer to Morissette's question 'Must we admit, then, that the omniscient author of Balzac, driven from the house of fiction by a score of novelists from Flaubert and James to Sartre, has returned through the back door of *La Maison de Rendez-vous*?' must be, Yes!

Another way of eliminating the notion of 'whole action' comes from making the reader participate in its creation to such an extent that it is up to him to decide what the action shall be. One example of this is B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, which comes in various separate sections. The reader is told to read it in any order he pleases (though since the first and the last items are fixed in their proper places, there is still a beginning and an end, albeit the middle can be changed at will). Yet whatever the order the reader chooses the events come out somehow. There is no consistent rejection of temporal sequence. Another example of an analogous kind is Henri Ponsseur's opera *Notre Faust*, in which the first Act is 'given' but in which the audience is offered various versions of the later scenes from which to choose. Thus the final outcome of the action is quite uncertain. Much more radical than either of these is the attempt, in the theatre, to reduce drama to a purely 'kinetic' form (contrary to the canons of Joyce's view of art) in which the point is not to tell a story or imitate an action, but to provoke one. (cf. Albert Hunt on this, *New Society*, 23rd July, 1970.) The audience is here not simply asked to participate at certain set points—as in pantomime—but from the start the object of the exercise is to get people to do something themselves. The 'drama' is simply a way of providing the setting in which a spontaneous 'happening' can take place. The result may be itself a complete action: it will certainly not be the Aristotelian imitation of one.

Quietism and the neo-modernists

The tendency of all these forms of neo-modernism is towards the celebration rather than the criticism of life. 'A multiplicity of styles in each of the arts, coexisting in a balanced, yet competitive, cultural environment is producing a fluctuating stasis in con-

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temporary culture', says Leonard B. Meyer (in *Music, the Arts and Ideas*, quoted in *Innovations*, p. 31). This stasis at the macro-level results from the absence of that ordered change which went with the earlier appropriation of tradition for the sake of developing it. (cf. T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent.*) In a pluralistic world of constant cultural change, ever on the boil, there can be no significant boiling *over*. As Chesterton said, there are no revolutions in a world of perpetual revolution. Now change, or the hope of change, rests upon just that sense of temporal sequence, of past and future, which neo-modernist art tries to evade. Without human action and purpose, without a teleology, there can be no meaning even in the changes that do take place, for these too become the play of mere chance. No doubt neo-modernism is a kind of protest against the 'protestant ethic' that has commended the allegiance of Western civilization for the past couple of centuries, and which, according to Richard Hoggart and Bryan Wilson, is now coming to an end. No doubt it is understandable that people should want to replace action in art with contemplation, to move 'eastwards' for inspiration (though the fate of Conrad's *Lord Jim* might give them pause). As usual, Cage has put this point well: 'He (i.e. Morton Feldman) has changed the responsibility of the composer from making to accepting. To accept whatever comes regardless of the consequences is to be unafraid, to be full of that love which comes from at-one-ness with whatever.' (*Silence*, pp. 129-130.) He backs up this artistic quietism with the following note from the *I Ching:* 'Tranquil beauty: clarity within, quiet without. This is the tranquillity of pure contemplation. When desire is silenced and the will comes to rest, the world as idea becomes manifest. In this aspect the world is beautiful and removed from the struggle for existence. This is the world of Art.' (*Silence*, p. 130.) By contrast, when we are presented with what, in the traditional aesthetic, is regarded as a masterpiece we ask, what does it have to do with life? And the answer is this: 'It has this to do with life: that it is separate from it. Now we see it and now we don't. When we see it we feel better, and when we are away from it we don't feel so good. Life seems shabby and chaotic, disordered, ugly in contrast.' (loc. cit.) The message here seems clear enough: art must not do anything to make us feel bad about the chaos and disorder and ugliness of real life. The only way of accepting such an apparently immoral doctrine is, of course, to refuse to admit that these things are the truth about 'real life', or even part of it. Or if they are, reality is so contradictory that nothing coherent can be said about it. So be it: 'The important question is what is it that is not just beautiful but also ugly, not just good but also evil, not just true, but also an illusion. I remember now that Feldman spoke of shadows. He said that the sounds are no sounds but shadows. They are obviously sounds; that's why they are shadows. Every something

is an echo of nothing.' (*Silence*, p. 131.) Thus, as usual among quietists of this kind, pretending that nothing is a kind of something, or some other such nonsense, becomes the resource when all else fails. So art becomes a way of saying nothing too. And by default, everything goes. Or so it would if men like Cage were capable of of keeping to their programme: but, as we have seen, they cannot do so. Art is continually saying things, even through them and despite themselves.

Heaven and the Rage for Chaos

What does this contemplative acceptance and celebration of life amount to in the end? What is the source of the 'rage for chaos' which, according to Morse Deckham, we are supposed to be gripped by and which neo-modernist art is trying to express? I think it lies in a kind of transcendence which is surely the opposite of everything that neo-modernist theory stands for. In trying to create an art which is not concerned with middles, and therefore not with beginnings and ends either, but with a kind of eternal present, neo-modernism is seeking an art which attains to that state of pure 'play', or pure 'praise' which is the traditional way of speaking about heaven. This aesthetic is the same as that of Proverbs 8:

> When he assigned the sea its boundaries,
> —and the waters will not invade the shore—
> when he laid down the foundations of the earth,
> I was by his side, a master craftsman,
> delighting him day after day,
> ever at play in his presence,
> at play everywhere in the world,
> delighting to be with the sons of men.
> (Jerusalem Bible Version)

Play and contemplation are activities that have no ulterior purpose, they are their own end, and in a sense this is because they are outside time. For time unfolds according to the pattern of our acts, which are directed to ends and thus to future time. The art of which Cage speaks, the fantasy that is beyond the logic of time in Robbe-Grillet, are both purely contemplative in just this sense. (And this is why the work of Samuel Beckett cannot properly be classed with theirs. For Beckett is obsessed with time and the logic of a time from which there is no escape. Eternity for Beckett, as for Merleau-Ponty, is a hypocritical yearning for it 'feeds on time'.) But the important question is whether, in fact, the neo-modernist aesthetic is a model of heaven or a model of hell. Is the 'rage for chaos' that it so often expresses a heavenly yearning or a hellish perversion? Perhaps, in one sense, there is no distinction: to be in hell is to be in heaven but not of it. Nevertheless, in so far as such art seeks for what is impossible to beings who are, in fact, in the middle of the wood, it is liable to disappoint, turn

sour. For one of the features of the artistic media is their extension in space and time: while the point of contemplation is that, at its most perfect, it takes us out of time because it releases us (if the mystics are telling us the truth) from all dependence upon material things. Play too, perhaps, is not dependent upon a material medium —at any rate the pointless kind of play that has no ulterior end, no notion of 'winning' or 'losing'. The pure simultaneity of a good pun, or of witticisms like the titles of Duchamp's pictures, are examples, perhaps, of how far play can go towards the eternal present. When art comes near to this kind of stasis, this kind of timelessness, whether it is the eternity of heaven or of hell hardly matters. What does matter is that, paradoxically, it can become— despite itself—a genuine criticism of life 'in the middest'. It can present us with something that suddenly, without warning and without deliberation, reveals to us the shabbiness and ugliness and disorder of real life. Perhaps this is the point of Cage's claim, and his allegiance to the *I Ching*. The question that it raises, however, is whether anyone can have the right to make so premature a claim as Cage makes. Is it not a greater humility to be content with recognizable 'whole actions', with the beginnings, middles and ends of things that man has to cope with in life as he experiences it here and now? If the avant-garde is seeking to dislodge the artist from his place of dominance and control over the materials he takes from the world, perhaps it is doing so only to replace that dominance with a new kind of arrogant élitism that cannot cope with the roughage of ordinary existence. It is here, if anywhere, that one must look for the sources of its atheism.

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