

Daniel Payot, *Effigies. La notion d'art et les fins de la ressemblance*, Paris, Galilée, 1997

Review by Denis Trierweiler

"Let someone carve out a marionette so that they can see the strings.... Fiddle them out an opera which reproduces the rising and sinking of the human soul even as a clay pipe with water reproduces the sound of the nightingale—oh, what art."

Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death*, II, 3

According to Daniel Payot, the concept of *effigy* is not only a determining factor in the history of western art, but also of art—by another name. Art *as* effigy. The purpose of this subject of discussion is to show that "what we call *art* has never been strictly an exclusively *aesthetic* phenomenon, and that it has always played, more or less openly, on a representation of those producers and addressees of the images and works who contributed and contribute still to its existence and definitions. In sum, it consists of seeing in the fact of art itself ... the reflection of a community" (p. 9). Now there is something that could suggest the question of a sociological nature. But it is not at all. What we have here is an aesthetician in search of ethics, which explains why the work is clearly divided in two. The first part, "Design/Drawings¹ of the likeness," attempts to determine the emergence of the notion of art, parallel to the evolution of the verb *effingere*, the subtleties of which have been explored in great detail, from Plotinus (*poiein*) to Marsilio Ficino ("receive an image from above") and thereafter. Daniel Payot's hypothesis is that "it is within the context of a thought—and a *practice*—of resemblance that the *notion of art* was invented." Payot's notion is then fixed, developed, legitimized—and perhaps even invented, between a few lines of Dante (*Paradise* II, 124-132) and a sonnet by Michelangiolo Buonarroti (Bari, *Rime*, a cura di Enzo Noé, Girardi, Laterza e figli, 1960, No. 46). The author studies and interprets the texts closely and calls upon the Moderns for support. Firstly, R. Klein in 1967: "The villain of the piece, I mean the Renaissance, invented the notion of art on which we still live, though less and less well." Then Michel Foucault, at around the same time: "Up to the end of the sixteenth century,

resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture."² In short, it is a general ontology of resemblance that governs the relations between things and artists, artists and the Word, which spawned the notion of art that obsesses us still in one way or another. Then follows Pascal's famous aphorism, a sign that the old ontology is starting to crack: "How useless is painting, which attracts admiration by the resemblance of things, the originals of which we do not admire!"³ It seems that *the religion for departing from religion* (Marcel Gauchet) has also come down to forbidding us the universe of representation established by the Renaissance. In the world of disenchantment, the question that now arises is this: "What self-images would be produced by a being for whom images, un-legitimized by an ontology of resemblance, were no longer effigies in the strict sense of the word, a being who would nonetheless be unwilling to measure finiteness by a transcendence that resides beyond representation and figuration?" (p. 101). The problem of modern art can be posed in the following manner. "If, generally speaking, contemporary thought arises from the dissolution of the universe of the effigy ... can it nevertheless save a linking of the image, the resemblance, and the finite existent?" (p. 102). This questioning gives Daniel Payot the opportunity to put a new twist on a problem inaugurated several years ago by Jean-Luc Nancy in "The Inoperative Community,"⁴ and then later discussed by Maurice Blanchot.⁵ Where Nancy attempted to tell us what was left of the community after myth, after philosophy, and after politics, Daniel Payot examines art and what it teaches us about ourselves. Nancy: "We stand perhaps to learn ... that it can no longer be a matter of figuring or modeling a communitarian essence in order to present it to ourselves and to celebrate it, but that it is a matter rather of thinking community, that is, of thinking its insistent and possibly still *unheard* demand, beyond communitarian models or remodelings" (p. 22). Payot: "the community still only gathers in and by its written addresses;⁶ it projects itself or leans toward a You that is not inherent, to which it is devoted and toward which it directs the words inspired by its assembly" (p. 126).

We are at the heart of the second part of the work, which questions the content of the notion of art when considered outside the

world of its creation. Here we must call upon, aside from modern artists, the first thinkers of community in the sense cited earlier: the Franz Rosenzweig of *The Star of Redemption*, Kafka and Walter Benjamin on Kafka, and Georges Bataille.

Benjamin spoke of Kafka in these terms: "No other writer has obeyed the commandment *Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image.*"⁷ And Payot asks: "How can a writer, a writing, obey what is prohibited when it deals precisely with image?" (p. 133). If we are to understand him, this is where modernity comes into play, where we must recognize that "art is not the place for the advent of a transcendent action. It is but a singular activity, by which the finite and contingent experience allows itself to be seen as such, as finite and contingent; and there is precisely where its necessity lies, if not its truth" (p. 154). There is no longer place for bowing down to the absolute. Is art dead, as Hegel prophesied, and as many modern art denigrators seem to deeply regret today? It is more that we must now yield to the evidence: "the failures of art reveal to the community that it is not an entity adequately established according to principles, but a *we*, built on the mode of a finite singularity: not a work, but a happening, not a symbol, but an existence" (p. 155-156). This set of themes has the author devote several fine pages to the work by Barnett Newman in particular, pages which are rather like a challenge: say what makes the work a work of art, and not in fact a religious work or a liturgical object.⁸ And Payot cites Adorno as testimony: "Works of art, by the autonomy of their shape, prohibit themselves from incorporating the absolute, as though they were symbols. Aesthetic images are subject to the interdiction of images. In this way, the aesthetic appearance is in fact the truth" (p. 180).

There is no autotelic aesthetics, true, but one persistent question remains: what do we resemble, those of us who do not wish to and can no longer resemble anything other than ourselves? Those of us who, nevertheless, also cannot help but remember:

"Ladies and Gentlemen,

Art, you will remember, is a puppet-like, iambic, five-footed thing ... without offspring ...

Art, ladies and gentlemen, ... is also a problem and, as we can see, one that is variable, tough, long-lived, let us say, eternal."⁹

Notes

1. The French title "Les dess(e)ins du ressemblant" is a play on words, with the term *dessin* (drawing) encompassed within the term *dessein* (design).
2. Robert Klein, "The Eclipse of the Work of Art" in *Form and Meaning*, trans. Madeline Jay and Leon Wieseltier, New York, 1979, p. 180, and Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, 1970, p. 17.
3. Blaise Pascal, *The Thoughts of Blaise Pascal*, New York, 1961, no. 134.
4. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor *et al.*, Minneapolis, 1991.
5. Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris, Barrytown, NY, 1988.
6. The use of the word "addresses" comes from Fr. Schlegel's notion of the use of the written word, of correspondence, to share and communicate. One must write, one must "address" the Other.
7. Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, 1968, p. 129.
8. See this issue for the same problem in the text by Hans Belting on the theft of the *Mona Lisa*.
9. Paul Celan, "The Meridian" in *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, Manchester, 1986, p. 37-38.

Translated from the French by Mara Bertelsen