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Paul Goodman
262 9th Ave.
N.Y.C.

1.

A STATUE OF "STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS"

1.

This allegorical sculpture consists of two figures, Strength and Weakness, represented by a man and a woman. Strength is constraining her on her back, more by his mass and weight than by his power, his knee in her belly and his legs pinning her knees; and his two hands have hold of her wrists, keeping her hands wide and helpless. And on the face of Strength is a look of perplexity.

The meaning of his perplexity is that Strength does not want to exert force on Weakness; yet she is intent on striking him, hoping (for a moment) to exchange blow for blow. On his left shoulder and right side of his back, Strength is marked with bleeding scratches inflicted before he pinned her down.

Being powerful, Strength wants not to strike but to rule; he wants, that is, to exert the persuasiveness of power, not its violence. But this puts him in the greatest difficulty when his power is challenged by the violence of Weakness; the difficulty expressed by the perplexity on his forehead and even more by the excessive strain of his muscles far beyond what is needed to hold her down, as if he hoped to hurt her merely by forced inaction, a violent power, not transmitting this hurtful power to the object, but constraining it within himself, so that the real struggle is in the knot of his own muscles. And if the stone could speak, his words likewise would express nothing but ineffectual perplexity, - "Do you give up?" - when she will not give up!

But Weakness, on the contrary, wants to strike and be struck

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just in order to have her own nature made manifest. What she wants is not to be ruled but to be defeated. Therefore on her face is a look of almost exultant wilfulness and guile -- she is waiting her chance. Thus it is Strength who bears the wounds and the signs of effort, whereas Weakness is as if untouched. This is a triumph of the artist, for if he tried to portray her nature by showing the effects of its powers, he would have to resort to the signs of deficiency, that are always ugly.

So these two remain fixed, by his perplexity and her wilfulness; and it is this static moment that the sculptor has seized on for his composition.

2.

It is not only in this instant of spurious external struggle that Strength is characterized by the struggle among his own forces, by an uneasy pause of contrary forces terrible if they should ever be loosed in ^{concept} ~~concept~~. The artist has seized on the present struggle to show obvious signs of this equilibrium, the knot of muscles, the frowning brow. But it is just by means of those parts of the figure of Strength that are not involved in the unequal external struggle, that he expresses the habitual inner constraint that characterizes Strength. Thus the subtler habit-formed lines of his jaws express the day-to-day perplexity of withholding his powers in the face of small opponents; and the tension of his ankles and toes express an alert composure whose meaning is telling just because these parts are unnecessary in the present struggle, for it is clear that by the weight of his knee and shoulders alone, resting in her belly and pinning her arms, he is more than able to hold her down. In these details we are shown the Strength of all

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his life, such as it is, exhibited in a particular conflict, but abiding in him in every case. And his posture, therefore, is that of a dancer, an artist, rather than a wrestler: there is something fastidious and almost effeminate in the way he seems to dole out his force in accordance with the just measure of an idea rather than the vigor of an instinct. But if we saw him in motion, it would be a wrestler and not a dancer, for the gestures of an athlete are constrained and fastidious when the resistance is weak, but they generate terrible speed and power when the resistance increases.

Suddenly he is as if saying: "Not yet the time! this is not the time!" to loose his forces. And oh, we are then overwhelmed by a sentiment of the waste and pathos of his self-constraint. When ever will it be the time?

What is here presented to us is an effigy of Fear!

Certainly not fear of something before him, but self-fear. Fear of something that he sees withing, or does not even see, but is looking for; the eyelids are tight. What crime is it that he guesses within, that restrains him from striking out, or perhaps from striking out again? Did he once strike out?

Maybe it is not for no reason that helpless Weakness is struggling now. She is in danger, and she feels this danger pressing close.

This gives an ugly sense and a dark color to those lines of baffled perplexity on the forehead of Strength. We do not like his distracted look. He is in pain.

And if we turn to the woman, we see why it is that the artist has shown her untouched. In this allegorical art where the outward shows the inward, she at least is not contorted by guilt. She is

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afraid but not in pain. Her wilfulness is -- innocence. Her hair is widespread on the ground; her lips and eyes are wide; there is nothing guarded here. Willing to scatter her resources --even to blows given and received -- for they are what they are; and screaming aloud.

In such a moment, before the perpetration of a fearful crime, the sculptor has fixed these two forever.

3.

But the figures of this statue are -- in motion. Look again; this changes the meaning of every trait.

Is not Strength in the very act of bringing down his great head and shoulders in a kiss? and she of relaxing to this kiss? His hands are slipping from her wrists to cover her hands palm to palm; and his knee sliding to rest touching her knee. We see now why he is restraining his weight: it is with the considerateness of a lover, for it is not yet time to lie full weight; but it will soon be time, when the pleasure is intense enough to transmute force and pain into its greater self. What we took to be a fastidiousness in his posture is nothing but the relaxation of beginning to change position. And the perplexity on his face is the indefinite moment of passing from one thought to another: one would say that he has just noticed that she is struggling no longer. And she, conversely, because he is moving down, is breathing up.

The artist has seized on a kind of lapse held between such strong contraries that he seems to have dissolved the fixity of sculpture into a motion; the mind cannot rest in this moment presented; it sees the next, and still sees the moment past.

Surely that moment of impasse, when Strength can merely

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hold on, as if he were himself despairing Weakness, and she is looking only to strike him but cannot because he will forever remain too strong -- that impasse will resolve itself; for something new, as yet unthought of, will well up there. It is not with impunity that, body to body, they have paralyzed their own strongest purposes and lie unprepared for whatever wells up.

Love alone can dissolve the thunderous block of place in which Strength has imprisoned himself.

This gentle violence can alone assuage the crime to which he is paralyzed to commit himself.

Weakness is the leader, for she has taught him to give in.

One would say that they were lost lovers, too completely disengaged (not like those melting loves of Rodin) from the formless rock.

Now notice how the artist has given to Strength, and to the breasts of the woman, a half-erection. In this there is nothing far-fetched; it is what would often occur in persons wrestling, and they are no longer wrestling.

Weakness is the leader, for she has taught him to give in.

The original error was the artist's when he disengaged them too completely from the formless rock. Now the Uncarved Block is borne onward with the diurnal rotation of the world.

New York City,
January, 1942-49

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Geo. Dennison
de Kooning
Un 4-8875

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The paintings can be characterized, to a large extent, in terms of their ambiguity, which is entirely plastic and the property of the art, not the observer. Combinations here do not signify, but serve to intensify their own existence, and this is such that one does not see an arrangement of shapes so much as the dynamics of a process that never precisely resolves into shapes. The first encounter with the

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It is difficult to describe the painting of de Kooning in the usual terms. I think, for instance, that realism and objectivity are involved, and yet there is nothing identifiable in the paintings. And while ambiguity is of the greatest importance, it is neither that of ambiguous shapes, nor that of paintings which depend for comprehension, like some of Picasso or Klee, on experience that is not wholly visual or sensory. I believe that this necessary modification of terms indicates the independence of de Kooning's art and is the result of its excellence.

The paintings can be characterized, to a large extent, in terms of their ambiguity, which is entirely plastic and the property of the art, not the observer. Combinations here do not signify, but serve to intensify their own existence, and this is such that one does not see an arrangement of shapes so much as the dynamics of a process that never precisely resolves into shapes. The first encounter with the

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paintings produces something of a shock. The eye is dazzled not so much by color or motion as by a vigorous and powerful activity. Where the eye would come to rest it is shuttled from one surface to another seemingly by bursts of energy, and where it would stabilize a shape there is suddenly no boundary. One form becomes another and draws the eye into a different depth. The color range is small; the pictures of the 1948 exhibition were done largely in black, white, and tan. But these colors function vitally and sharply; a loose streak of white across a movement of black does not influence the color of black, but is separate, usually at a different depth. But whatever the depth of any particular color, none of them recede; each color confronts the spectator with force. Thus, while these complex depths are varied continually there is no suggestion of distance. And one of the most important qualities about these paintings, which seem to exist beyond the categories of stability, is the complete unity of each canvas. By unity I mean the intimate and precise activity of all parts. It is not that if any part were removed the art would be destroyed; I think the precision here is of a more complex order.

When I say that objectivity seems to be involved in de Kooning's painting, I do not mean that it is part of the artist's process, but that it is something felt by the spectator. And although the paintings refer to nothing but themselves, the word "objective" still serves, in a special sense, to emphasize important

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characteristics. The ordinary sense of the word is applicable, say, to the painting of Van Eyck. It becomes of doubtful value with the Impressionists, whose brush strokes and each decision stand between subject matter and technique as ambiguous allusions. Now, inasmuch as deKooning's strokes are not concealed and his hand is everywhere evident, objectivity would seem to be a dubious claim. But there are peculiarities that must be taken into account. Where the Impressionist process, for instance, is seen in the fixed forms of its own end, deKooning's does not tend towards arrangements of shapes but is itself almost completely the picture. And since nothing is resolved, the process is seen to continue and continue. Hence, if a brush stroke indicates a decision of the artist it is only in the sense that we expect it to, for we no longer have the criteria that make decisions evident. Thus we are absorbed into a process and the artist is not seen in his work. The painting is felt as objective, then, and we are confronted by a stern grandeur that is not often encountered in works of a subjective nature.

The feeling one has of a kind of realism in deKooning's work is supported, perhaps, by the qualities already mentioned, but it involves many more. The paintings seem to exist in the pure mode of natural things and one is forced to encounter them by themselves, as it were, and see only the image that was painted. And

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"seeing" here is really visual; the reality of any of these paintings as an entity is without the ambiguity that characterizes work which in one way or another is representational. This reality is further enhanced by occasional passages in which the painting seems rather to have been acted upon than constructed. One of the canvases at the Egan gallery had been scored with a knife and the picture called Painting in the Museum of Modern Art is streaked by the running of wet paint. It is significant here that these "acts" never introduce their agent and are, in fact, so organic that to say that they had been incorporated would be to overlook their intimacy with the entire process.

2 But this question of realism can be approached in what is perhaps a larger way if I try to indicate some of the sources of my first reaction to these paintings. I saw them immediately after having seen the Durand-Ruel Picasso show and after having felt a kind of barrier between the paintings and me. Whether this was a barrier of time or of experience I don't know. It is true that the paintings are encountered at a remove from their own canvases, as it were, and while this has nothing to do with their quality it is quite possibly pertinent here. But the point is that the deKooning pictures at the Egan gallery provided a very different experience. As I have pointed out, they have an immediacy that is rarely

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encountered, but what was even more striking was that my own day-by-day experience seemed to be involved in them. Given the nature of these paintings, this implies, I think, a kind of universality; that is, they are as embedded in our times and as marked by them as we are. But while common experience is involved in them it is not felt in the way it is felt, for instance, in a painting by Klee or Picasso, where common experience has been more evidently utilized. Here ^{WITH DEKONING} we are simply involved. But we are involved, in most cases, with epics, and held by a fascination that never resolves itself into definite feelings. There is a sense of drama and urgency and the kind of amplitude and stature that go into the makings of tragedy, but nothing is resolved and we are not moved, but held. It is not easy to think of beauty or of any other of the recommendations of the theorists; one simply contemplates without benefit of the usual categories. This originality and newness is evident in terms of certain broad characteristics of modern art. The enormity of lived experience has been accommodated and transformed largely through its discreet results on the sensibility of the artist; in literature the very nerve-ends have been explored to reveal the erosion of living. This may not be uniformly the case, but I think it holds in general. The familiar indirectness and obliqueness are not simply formal pleasures. And so where most

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 paintings posit the area of another sensibility and consist in discreet selection, deKooning's paintings may be thought of as the collision of sensibility with the enormity of life. And since it is the collision of the sensibility with nothing in particular it may be construed as the collision of the sensibility with everything and, hence, on an epic scale. I don't mean here to derive this quality from my assumptions; this particular grandness is evident in the paintings and it is only this that makes my statement valid. But now another facet of his distinctive realism becomes apparent. With the general unresolvableness of lived experience the very fact of the encounter of the sensibility with objects and events has become as real in its impact as any of the things encountered. It has become as real and perhaps more meaningful. And without any of these thoughts being suggested as such by deKooning's paintings, I think that while seeing them we are made to feel the impact of this particular awareness.

What I have said may have something in common with the existential position, but this by no means classifies deKooning's work. I think that such a

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position is strictly inadequate to painting of this stature.

Other characteristics of his work are important in this connection. In some of the paintings there is an aspect of violence. It is not seen, however, simply as violence or wildness, but is felt more as a pressure or force that is part of the sense of urgency. His use of color is essential here. He is not a colorist in the usual sense, but is dealing with refinements of color that seem to be of an extremely high order. Many of his paintings (the one in the Museum of Modern Art, for instance) show an intricate and vivid interplay of light. Perhaps it is not unusual to expect white against black to function as light (or perhaps it is), but in a painting like Zurich (Egan gallery) we find the color black performing the same function. A broken black line will suddenly appear as flashes of light. The line and the color are elusive and the light flashes into consonance with the entire display. And thus while the paintings are spacious and produce large effects, they may be seen to contain innumerable subordinations. In general I think it is true that the character of the whole is repeated in all of its parts. This never tends

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towards repetition, but, on the contrary, permits an endless marvel and absorption.

It is another excellence of the painting that these refinements and nuances are never seen as the exploitation of sensitivity, but combine into a stern and vigorous image. We are thus confronted by magnitude but are not deprived of variety.

It is usually argued by certain critics that painting of this type involves a debasement of human values. This argument would insist that the glory of man is his shape, and it depends upon a simplified resolution of chaos that is so patently a conceit as to be unviable. DeKooning¹ has, on the contrary, produced a full-bodied art that is intimate in a profound and unmitigated way with the very essence of man.