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Three Dialogues : III, Bram van Velde

The third Dialogue concerns the work of the painter Bram van Velde about whom Beckett had previously written in connection with his elder brother, Geer, (see *Le Monde et le Pantalon* and *Peintres de l'empêchement*). Beckett will return to his painter friend one last time (in the early sixties) by writing a short introductory piece to an art catalogue dedicated to him. Yet, the concluding text takes, again and perhaps more so than in the preceding dialogues, the example set by the painter under scrutiny as a pretext for Beckett to develop and refine his view on painting—past and present—and more generally on art as the end of the longest paragraph suggests it — incidentally, this is the longest of the three dialogues : « I know that my inability to do so » (i.e. : to make of the submission and fidelity to failure a new occasion and of the impossible act of painting an expressive act, « even if only of itself, of its impossibility », 145) « places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in [...] an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists » (ibid.). Nowhere indeed, except perhaps in the famous sentence of the first dialogue (« the expression that there is nothing to express [...] together with the obligation to express »), can we find a better formulation of the esthetic double-bind in Beckett. As a letter to Duthuit shows, « [Beckett] recognised that this was very much his own interpretation of what van Velde was doing and was perhaps closer to his own feeling than those of Bram » (James Knowlson, *Damned to fame*, note 63, 775). As a matter of fact, at one point D. is aware of B.'s propensity to substitute his own person for van Velde : « Try and bear in mind that the subject under discussion is not yourself ». However, it is also possible that « my inability to do so » refers to Beckett's wish « to bring this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion », which, as Duthuit impatiently remarks, is left unfulfilled at the end of the dialogue. At any rate, Beckett's and van Velde's inability and unwillingness to conclude, is certainly a defining feature of their works.

The opening sentence of the « concluding » dialogue sets the tone for the growing disagreement of the interlocutors. Whereas D. affected a conciliatory tone in the two previous dialogues, he becomes more and more impatient and aggressive towards what he call's B.'s absurd, « fantastic theory ». But B.s' declining to open fire is also part of his apologetic attitude towards Duthuit, who was at the time an authority on modern painting. And yet D. appears to be on a less familiar ground with van Velde than with Tal-Coat and Masson. Here D. confines himself to playing a mere maieutic role, as he encourages B. to restate and clarify his ideas again and again. It is ironic that B., who does not seem to enjoy his new leading role and is reluctant to carry on the conversation (« would it not be enough if I simply went away ? »), should embark on a long dissertation on artistic expression throughout the history of painting and what is required to move away from it. This is however characteristic of B.'s contradictory stance in the *Dialogues*, i.e. both wimpish and self-assertive. Surely B.'s submissive behaviour should also be understood as emblematic of the artist's « submission, admission and fidelity to failure ». His theatrical display of self-effacement and « fear and trembling » before D. enacts the critical statement of the dialogue.

The discussion between the Frenchman and the Irishman has now moved from perception (Tal-Coat) and space (Masson) to expression (van Velde). The object (« complete with missing parts ») in Tal-Coat and the competence (albeit resented) of Masson have been replaced by the « nothing to paint and nothing to paint with » of van Velde. Whereas Tal-Coat and Masson's works were still expressive of an experience, on the one hand, and a mere « obliteration of an unbearable presence », on the other, van Velde's painting remains « inexpressive ». B.'s main appraisal of the Dutch painter resides in the latter's getting rid of occasion without being hampered by it, as opposed to Masson. Hence B.'s insistence on construing van Velde's situation as a *destitution* and not a predicament. D.'s accusation (« But you have already spoken of the predicament of van Velde ») seems to me unjustified, unless we are to believe that B. and D.'s antagonism is unstable at times. B. soon feels compelled to reject the « pathetic possession/poverty antithesis » as a critical tool to understand van Velde's status in relation to other painters. The preceding dialogues including the third—up to this point—are indeed strewn with economic metaphors in connection with art : gain, possessiveness, value, giving and receiving, penury, commodities, etc. The analysis of « the relation between the artist and his occasion » is deemed not very productive either. For whatever their efforts to move away from the representation of an object, artists like Masson, Kandinsky or Mondrian, because they see themselves as expressive artists, are doomed to fall back to a painting of occasion. Here B.'s argument undergoes a subtle twist : the « failure » of expressive artists intent on painting the object out of their canvasses is both ascribable to the boomerang-effect of the occasion surfacing back under their brush and to the unstable nature of the object itself. In order to renounce the object, they have to isolate it first, which proves impossible considering its elusive essence. The same applies to the other term of the relation, i.e. the artist, owing to « his warren of modes and attitudes ».

While admitting the inescapability of « this dualistic view of the creative process », B. asks to concentrate on the anxiety of the relation itself, the sense of its invalidity rather than on either of its term. This should create a breach in the exclusiveness of the representer/representee relation and open up to all that was excluded from them, whatever that is. Instead of reaching D.'s astute suggestion (page 143) that a painting following such a commandment would therefore become expressive of the impossibility to express, B. propounds as an « acceptable conclusion » to substitute for the expression of *the impossibility to express* the expression of *the failure of the expressive relation*. However subtle, « there is more than a difference » between these two forms of expressions. The former, B. explains, is a way of turning tail (page 143) ; it remains confined within the circularity of the dualistic relation artist/object. The latter is a chilvarous admission to failure of the expressive relation right from the start. Submission to failure becomes a new occasion, or better, a third term in the relation. Could this triangulation have anything to do with the awe-inspiring light towards which painting has always aspired but from which artists and the public have shrunk « with a kind of Pythagorean terror » ? In the case of van Velde, the act of painting has become expressive of its impossibility and of its obligation to be an expressive act of the failure of expression. The inexpressiveness of van Velde's work doesn't lie in the expression that expression is impossible (an old tune) but in the dismissal of expression altogether. Hence B.'s reluctance to speak of « occasion » and « expressive act » in relation with the Dutch artist. Cornered to conclude, he asks for D.'s mercy : « No, no, allow me to expire ». The wish to die is also a means to

identify himself with an art that has nothing to do with « art and craft, good housekeeping, living. »

The « Yes, yes » at the end echoes the previous « no, no » in so far as it reflects B.'s submission and ultimate refusal to obey the rules of rhetoric (a speech in two parts, each of them followed by a conclusion) as D. strongly invites him to do so in a sentence reminiscent of the imperious tone of the King in *Alice in Wonderland* (chapter XI) : « Begin again and go on until you have finished ». B.'s double binary statement at the end (« yes, yes, I am mistaken, I am mistaken ») and the silence that follows convey the idea that a contradictory argument about van Velde would finally amount to the same, thereby collapsing the notion of antithesis already under attack in the dialogue. But it also offers B. a cheeky way out of two-term relations (B. & D., the artist and its object, the speaker and his subject).

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