

190

pointing to *Guernica*, asked: 'Did you do that?'. Picasso is said to have answered: 'No, you did'. Autonomous works of art too, like this painting, firmly negate empirical reality, destroy the destroyer, that which merely exists and, by merely existing, endlessly reiterates guilt. It is none other than Sartre who has seen the connection between the autonomy of a work and an intention which is not conferred upon it but is its own gesture towards reality. 'The work of art', he has written, 'does not have an end; there we agree with Kant. But the reason is that it is an end. The Kantian formula does not account for the appeal which issues from every painting, every statue, every book.'⁸ It only remains to add there is no straightforward relationship between this appeal and the thematic commitment of a work. The uncalculating autonomy of works which avoid popularization and adaptation to the market, involuntarily becomes an attack on them. The attack is not abstract, not a fixed attitude of all works of art to the world which will not forgive them for not bending totally to it. The distance these works maintain from empirical reality is in itself partly mediated by that reality. The imagination of the artist is not a creation *ex nihilo*; only detraint and aesthetes believe it to be so. Works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality, which reject intellectual creations and throw them back on themselves. There is no material content, no formal category of artistic creation, however mysteriously transmitted and itself unaware of the process, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free.

It is this which constitutes the true relation of art to reality, whose elements are regrouped by its formal laws. Even the *avant-garde* abstraction which provokes the indignation of philistines, and which has nothing in common with conceptual or logical abstraction, is a reflex response to the abstraction of the law which objectively dominates society. This could be shown in Beckett's works. These enjoy what is today the only form of respectable fame: everyone shudders at them, and yet no-one can persuade himself that these eccentric plays and novels are not about what everyone knows but no one will admit. Philosophical apologists may laud his works as sketches from an anthropology. But they deal with a highly concrete historical reality: the abdication of the subject. Beckett's *Exce Homo* is what human beings have become. As though with eyes drained of tears, they stare silently out of his sentences. The spell they cast, which also binds them, is lifted by being reflected in them. However,

⁸ *What is Literature?*, p. 34.

Adorno on Brecht 191

the minimal promise of happiness they contain, which refuses to be traded for comfort, cannot be had for a price less than total disposition, to the point of worldlessness. Here every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art -- that polemical alienation which Brecht as a theorist invented, and as an artist practised less and less as he committed himself more firmly to the role of a friend of mankind. This paradox, which might be charged with sophistry, can be supported without much philosophy by the simplest experience: Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays, or the truly monstrous novel *The Unbearable*, have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomimes. Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand. He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away.

Yet the greater the aspiration, the greater is the possibility of foundation and failure. The loss of tension evident in works of painting and music which have moved away from objective representation and intelligible or coherent meaning, has in many ways spread to the literature known in a repellent jargon as 'texts'. Such works drift to the brink of indifference, degenerate insensibly into mere hobbies, into idle repetition of formulas now abandoned in other art-forms, into trivial patterns. It is this development which often gives substance to crude calls for commitment. Formal structures which challenge the jingling positivism of meaning can easily slide into a different sort of vacuity; positivistic arrangements, empty juggling with elements. They fall within the very sphere from which they seek to escape. The extreme case is literature which undialectically confuses itself with science and vainly tries to fuse with cybernetics. Extremes meet: what cuts the last thread of communication becomes the prey of communication theory. No firm criterion can draw the line between a determinate negation of meaning and a bad positivism of meaninglessness, as an assiduous soldiering on just for the sake of it. Least of all can such a line be based on an appeal to human values, and a curse of mechanization. Works of art which by their existence take the side of the victims of a rationality that subjugates