

MAX KLINGER¹⁰

*Granting that future men, free from emulation,
from envy, from love and hate, not within themselves,
but toward others, as to be more level judges
of our matters, than our contemporaries are.*
Giacomo Leopardi, *Parini's Discourse on Glory*

Preliminary Thoughts

Germany is situated in the middle of Europe. Such a fate has raised a barrier between it and the countries of the Mediterranean and the East. Whereas the extreme perimeters of Italy and France almost touch, the former Greece and the latter Africa, Germany cannot feel the spirit of these countries or experience their torrid or refreshing winds, except through the forests and mountains surrounding it from the West and the East. Whether this circumstance has a beneficial or harmful influence on the intellectual manifestations of the country, on the works of its best artists, is something we are going to look at in the present study.

We can begin by observing that Greece's influence, initially on the Romans and later on the Italian Renaissance, was more of form than of spirit. In fact, as far as I know, there is not a single Italian poet, philosopher, painter or sculptor who was "moved" by the mystery of Greece. I do not say this as a reproach to my compatriots, who were and are moved (I would at least hope this is the case for the moderns) by other mysteries, those of our own country and of our own race, which are in no way inferior to those which arose from the art, forms or thought of the Hellenic peninsula.

France has no such compensation for its lack of comprehension of the Greek spirit. It has instead an exaggerated interest for the East where there is little or nothing to understand and loves the East for all its variegated disarray. France's poets and writers never desist from describing and extolling the magnificence and beauty of Morocco, Arabia, Egypt, European and Asiatic Turkey. A number of philosophers even concentrated a good part of their activities to the study of oriental fables, and in reading them it would seem that the mere chance of writing a complicated and elaborate name of some famous sultan or celebrated eunuch sends them into raptures. Thus we see Francois Marie Arouet, the so-called cruel philosopher of Ferney, who, in his *Vision of Babouc* delineates French and Parisian society with bitterly sarcastic criticism, with allusions taken from copious descriptions of people, society and countries of the East. In *Zadig* he brings the glories of Persian legend back to life, whilst in *Babarek and the Fakirs*, he fantasizes about India. I will omit speaking of the oriental influence of painters of genius such as Delacroix, or mediocrities such as Benjamin Constant and lastly, the flabby novels of the Turkophile Pierre Loti.

In Germany, the fact of having a strong barrier between itself and the Mediterranean and Oriental worlds obliges men of genius, when they desire to gaze deeply into these worlds, to lean out like prisoners at the bars of their high windows, to struggle, to strive, to call upon all their emotion, intricacies of thought and imagination. This distance and labour results in a greater and profounder comprehension of what they want to see and to understand. This phenomenon is similar to what happens to a man of genius, who is often better observed and understood by those who know him but little and from a distance than by his relatives and intimate friends; one can also give the example of a landscape revealing the spirit of its lines only to someone who looks upon it from afar.

¹⁰ G. de Chirico, *Max Klinger*, in "Il Convegno", a I, n 10, Milan-Rome November 1920, pp. 32-34; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 47-56.

The Mythical Hellenic Sense

In studying the works of Max Klinger, especially his etchings, one is immediately struck by the bizarre and fantastical manner in which he renders Greek myth. Many works of his present a surprising spirit, as prior to seeing a certain aspect of Greek art in them, the existence of this aspect in the art of Greece was unknown, which one then recognises in it. This shows the genius of Klinger's work which is highly fantastical and rich in ideas and might seem at a first glance, or to people who are unaware of metaphysical subtleties, as being paradoxical and nonsensical. However, his work is always based on a clear and strongly felt reality and never loses itself in vapid and obscure imaginings.

Look at the etching *The Transfer of Prometheus* from the series *Brahmsphantasie*, a work with nothing vague or foggily fantastic about it. Over a stretch of foaming sea, Prometheus, a wounded, sick man, is being carried away by Mercury and Jupiter's eagle. The *real* effort of all three in the group is evident. The portrayal of the movement of the eagle's wings forced to fly against the wind show extraordinary observation skills. Mercury seems to be a flying phantasm; to prevent the wind from carrying away his petasos he has taken the chinstrap between his teeth whilst upholding Prometheus below the knees; Prometheus clutches desperately at the eagle's wings, whilst the laurel leaves of his crown awarded him by men in recompense for having stolen the divine fire, fall one by one...

To render the scene even more real, Klinger placed it on the level of the spectator who can thus participate in the emotion of this strange flight.

The composition's genius lies in the fact that the spectator has the impression that the event really did take place. It is the same impression one gets from Böcklin's *Centaur at the Village Blacksmith's Shop* which, for an instant, makes one believe that Centaurs really did exist and that even today strolling along a road or coming out upon a piazza one can suddenly come upon one of them.

It may possibly have been Böcklin's influence that caused Klinger to develop a strange emotion through the appearance of mythological beings in numerous etchings, where centaurs, fauna and tritons are represented not only in open nature with gods and demigods as artists often do but in the company of men in a surprisingly "natural reality", which when seen for the first time gives the impression, as I have already said, that such beings actually existed.

The principal engravings by Klinger that give this impression are: *The Centaur and the Washerwomen*, in which a centaur, in the pose of a classical statue and leaning against a rock near the first houses of a village, speaks quietly with two washerwomen who are rinsing out their linen in the waters of a stream...

Another engraving entitled *The Fleeing Centaur*, shows a field of wheat on the outskirts of a town; a large centaur is fleeing with bow and arrows which he shoots off behind him like a Parthian; a number of men, bent over their horses' necks, are pursuing him; one steed falls shot in the throat by an arrow.

Klinger's landscapes almost always represent a coastline, a gulf or an island with twisted pines on rocks overhanging the sea.

His landscapes contain a profound lyrical and philosophic sentiment, akin to the sentiment that springs from the thought of a number of Greek philosophers of Asia Minor and poets of Magna Grecia: a sentiment of gentle Mediterranean serenity; the apparition of happy figures lying on the seashore in the shadow of pines; sunlight that does not scorch. A barely perceptible sense of weariness hangs over everything, over water, land, human beings, plants and animals. It holds a profound but not frightening sensation of distant horizons and a nostalgic sense of peace after achievement.

From what I have said above, it comes to light that the spirit of Klinger's landscape is utterly different from

that of Böcklin's, who felt a kind of tragedy that was more northern and continental in nature, evoking visions of remote, obscure and troubled epochs; sacred places exposed to the blowing of northern winds and to the influence of the demons of the North: the prophetic oaks of Dodona (*The sanctuary of Hercules*); certain forest-covered mountains of Thessaly inhabited by fierce centaurs, dark cypresses tormented and bent by sea winds (*The Isle of the Dead*, *The Villa on the Seashore*).

However, Klinger with his more complicated spirit, although less classical than Böcklin, often united scenes of contemporary life and classical visions in the same composition, thus achieving a highly impressive dreamlike reality.

In the engraving *Chord*, also from the *Brahmsphantasie* series, one observes a scaffolding built upon the sea and splashed with waves and foam upon which a pianist dressed in black sits, playing his instrument as if he were in the warm, normal atmosphere of a concert hall. A woman is sitting near him. Behind them, the folds of a curtain block the sight of a mysterious horizon. Beneath them, a triton is struggling to hold up an enormous harp which the wind beats back against its forehead; mermaids are playing the harp.

On the sea is a racing boat, a sort of cutter, which, driven by the wind sails rapidly towards a mysterious place; a corner of dark, tranquil sea is seen, closed in like a basin by very high rocks and sheltered from wind and tempest; in the back-ground, the white marble of a villa gleams.

In order to render this paradoxically lyrical scene even more real, Klinger placed a wooden ladder next to the pianist, like that of a bathing cabin, the first steps of which descend into the water. The "idea" of this ladder is full of extraordinary genius. Going back to my childhood memories, I remember how bathing cabin ladders such as this always troubled me and gave me a feeling of dismay. Those few rungs covered with algae and immersed in less than a metre of water seemed to me to descend countless leagues into the very heart of the ocean's gloom. I relived the same emotion when I saw this engraving by Klinger but the ladder has yet another meaning here: it unites the real scene with an unreal one, expressed through the same means and without being misty or confused as occurs at times in the works of certain painters who portray irreality in their canvases (remember *The Dream* by Detaille). It would seem that the pianist, abandoning his instrument, could descend into the water whilst the marine creatures could climb up and sit on the platform.

It is a dream and reality at the same time; to the spectator it looks like a scene he has already seen without remembering when or where.

The profundity and metaphysical sense in Klinger's vision can be compared in literature to Thomas de Quincey's account of a very strange dream he had. He narrates how he found himself in the hall of a brilliantly illuminated palace at a festival where many fine gentlemen and ladies were dancing; suddenly a mysterious voice shouted: *Consul Romanus!* and the Consul appeared with his legions; he clapped his hands thrice and at this signal all the dancers vanished, whereas insignias and banners were raised around the Consul and the legion burst forth with a loud "Hurrah!".

Few men are capable of creating and expressing with clarity similar images and it is understandable that Klinger's engravings remain misunderstood by the majority and have never caused the uproar which at times surrounds the works of certain painters whose weakness and deficiencies people strive to transmute into genius.

The Modern-romantic Sense

From modern life, Klinger drew a sense of the romantic in its strangest and profoundest aspects, from its incessant development of activities, from machines and buildings, as well as from the comfort achieved by today's progress. What is the romanticism of modern life?

It is the nostalgia that breathes over European towns, through streets black with crowds, living centres roaring with activity, suburbs and their geometry of workshops and factories, over buildings like cubic arks in the middle of a sea of houses and constructions of stone and cement that hold within their flanks the suffering and hopes of insipid everyday life. It is the lordly villa in the suffocating heat of a spring morning or in the moonlit calm of a summer night, with all its blinds closed behind the trees of a park and a gateway of forged iron. It is the nostalgia of railway stations, with arrivals and departures; it is the melancholy of seaports with transatlantics, which, having left their moorings, sail out into the night lit up like cities over the black waters of the sea. Klinger felt this modern drama profoundly and has expressed it with supreme efficiency in several of his works. In the engraving entitled *Caught in the Act* we see the nostalgic aspect of the villa of which I have already spoken, stressed by a spectral drama which can also be found in some successful cinematographic scenes. From behind the shutters of a window on the second floor a man, the husband, has just shot at an adulterous couple on the moonlit terrace beneath him. The smoking gun is still in his hand. Some pigeons, frightened by the shot, are fluttering around, white against the dark sky like birds in a Japanese painting. The lover, struck down, has fallen on the flagstones of the terrace; nothing of him is seen but his legs and the edge of his jacket; the rest of his body is hidden by a pilaster on which stands a large ornamental vase. The woman is cowering in terror, covering her ears with her hands in anguished expectation of a second shot. The plants and large leaves of the trees surrounding the scene greatly enhance the tragedy. It is one of Klinger's finest compositions. As I have already observed, he possessed the dramatic sense of certain successful moments of cinematographic productions, where the characters of the tragedy of modern life seem fixed in the ghastliness of the moment in an intensely real scenario.

In the series of engravings entitled *Paraphrase on the Finding of a Glove* Klinger adds to this modern-romantic sense the fantasy of a dreamer and of a gloomy, infinitely melancholic narrator. This series is autobiographical; it tells the story of an episode taken from his own life. One evening in a roller-skating hall, whilst skating Klinger found a woman's glove, picked it up and kept it. This is the theme of the first engraving. The artist weaves a fabulous tale, marvellous in its fantastic lyricism, around the finding of the glove. The second engraving is called *The Dream*, he is sitting on his bed, hiding his face in his hands.

The glove is lying on the table by his bed beside the lit candle; in the back of the room the wall is open, as if it were the stage of a theatre, onto a distant nostalgic spring landscape. In the other engravings various visions follow. The spring landscape changes into a stormy sea, the waves reach the bed and carry the glove away; the dreamer finds himself in a ferry beaten by the waters and strives with a boathook to catch the glove floating on the foam.

Then we see the glove, enormous in size, become a strange symbol of mysterious and haunting love, sailing triumphantly on a shell drawn by sea-horses; it is holding the reins, bending its long and empty leather fingers. In the next engraving the glove is lying on a flat rock that stands like an ark on the seashore. Great antique chandeliers burn at its sides and the waves come up spilling roses at the foot of the rock.

But now the dream becomes breathless and changes into a nightmare: again the sea pours into the sleeper's room, enormous waves reach him, in terror and anguish he turns towards the wall; meanwhile on the waves, hiding the moon that descends upon the horizon, the glove appears gigantic and swollen like a sail by the stormy wind; strange marine creatures arise from the waters and gesticulate menacingly towards the dreamer who wants to desecrate the beloved glove. But then the nightmare of the sea is dissipated and the dreamer sees the glove lying on the counter of an elegant shop; behind the counter, hanging on a bar is a row of immense

rigid gloves forming a sort of barrier and guard of honour. Here a monstrous bird passes through the barrier, picks up the glove in its beak and flies out through the window; the dreamer springs from his bed in pursuit but the bird is already far away.

The last engraving shows the epilogue of the tale. The dreamer is awake, the glove is lying on the table near the bed and cupid approaches smiling as if to say that all was but an ugly dream.

Painting

As all painters endowed with profound intelligence and clairvoyance, Klinger, in his paintings sought specifically to express with the greatest clarity, solidity and perfection, the visions, sentiments and thoughts that moved him. Therefore he never submitted to the influence of French Impressionism but instead profited greatly by the teachings of the Pompeian paintings and those of our 15th century artists. He was always striving after spirituality and completeness, and design and solidity of form. He painted in oil and tempera, tried many systems and studied at length the complicated problem of paints and varnishes.

One of Klinger's most important paintings is *The Crucifixion*. In this work he tried to elaborate the particularly strange and metaphysical aspect that actors on the stage assume, especially in old melodramas and in certain moments of symmetrical spatial organisation, where one sees the principal figures occupying the centre of the stage and the secondary figures and the chorus at the sides.

The painting is wholly theatrical but not in the sense usually attributed to this word. Whereas in some painters the theatrical aspect becomes part of the work without any conscious volition of theirs, thus greatly diminishing its aesthetic and spiritual value, in this painting of Klinger's it is the result of a desired effort, in which a uniquely metaphysical perspective (of which I have already spoken) has been used and that, instead of inhibiting, enhances the spiritual value of the work.

Behind the figures of the painting one sees in the background a panorama of the houses and towers of Jerusalem. The figures are almost all disposed on the same level, on a sort of terrace, which seems to be the top of a hill covered with stone slabs, destined to be a place of martyrdom.

The three crucified figures are attached to low crosses so that their feet almost touch the ground. Christ is seen in profile and does not appear to be in agony but rather as one who is alive and suffering, a symbol of the extraordinary man and his destiny. In front of Christ is a group of people in which we see the despairing Magdalene, apart from this group stands the mother, a severe, spectral, statuesque figure. To the left are some spectators, strange apparitions resembling wrestlers or silent characters in a melodrama. The composition is completed with a group of Hebrew rabbis and scribes.

The *Crucifixion* was exposed in Paris and despite its highly spiritual and painterly value, went unnoticed as was to be expected. Upon its return to Germany the canvas was bought by the Hannover museum, where it still remains today. The attention and interest for this painting grew ever larger and it is now considered as one of the masterpieces of modern German painting.

Another very profound painting of Klinger's is entitled *The walk*. A few men are walking by a long, low, brick wall; their shadows are cast on the ground and climb up the wall. The horizon is empty. This wall seems to be the boundary line of the world; it is as if nothing existed behind it. The entire picture is pervaded by a sense of tedium and infinite dismay; something in the line of the horizon imbues the figures, the ground, the shadows and light with a sentiment of questioning.

Where Klinger errs strongly, however, is in certain large compositions of social-philosophical leaning as

in his *Christ on Mount Olympus* and in the frescoes of the Leipzig University representing the heroic times of Hellas with Homer naked, singing his poems to the Greeks.

He errs in the posturing of the figures, in a sumptuously overcharged composition and flounders in a foggy labyrinth which was something he felt neither intimately nor deeply. And yet in the frescoes at Leipzig, despite these errors, a marvellous landscape of seacoast, islands and gulfs expresses the Mediterranean spirit I have spoken of in this text.

Sculpture

Klinger's sculpture is absolutely classical. He attempted in many polychrome statues, such as the wonderful *Cassandra*, to recover the emotion of "jewel-statues" as it must have been felt in Greece's golden epoch. It reminds one of the chryselephantine Jupiter or diamond-eyed Pallas. He managed with genius to avoid all the banalities into which almost all sculptors inevitably fall. He strove always, even in marble, to fix the human figure in its spectral and eternal form, to make it arise as an apparition, not of the passing moment but belonging rather to the past and the future, to what has been and will be.

At certain moments, however, Klinger becomes affected, as in the monument to Beethoven where, in trying to give the spectator the sensation of the inaccessible height upon which the musician is sitting, he carved a tired eagle grasping the stones of the pediment with its talons.

This work is on the same level as his frescoes and his *Christ on Mount Olympus*.

Conclusion

Max Klinger was born on the 18 February 1857 at Leipzig. He died on June 4th this year in Jena. He fell dangerously ill last year in November and the papers erroneously published the news of his death which was later retracted.

He was a painter, sculptor engraver, philosopher, writer, musician and poet. He left a volume of his thoughts on drawing and painting. He wrote numerous essays and studies on modern and classical art.

Even today, notwithstanding the fame achieved, he is to be considered as misunderstood. In Italy, many simpletons stupidly associate him with Franz Stuck and with all that is generically and contemptuously termed "German art". He is more greatly considered in northern countries but not completely understood and appreciated. In France no one speaks of him, though he exhibited more than once at the Salon and there are collections of his engravings in Parisian libraries. But how can one expect French critics and writers in general to appreciate him when Jules Laforgue, one of the greatest clairvoyant French minds, as a reader to the Empress Augusta had had the chance to make Klinger's acquaintance personally and see his work, which captured his attention, then spoke of him with a few lines of an exasperating levity, whereas he cannot find sufficient words to praise the sketches of Pissarro and Berthe Morisot? Here are a few examples of the letters he wrote from Berlin to his friend M. Ephrussi: "On this subject, did I mention an artist here called Max Klinger, who is a sort of genius of the bizarre? He sent a painting entitled *Crenè* to the Salon in Paris, which I have not seen but which must be quite striking. He is afraid it will be refused. He is going to send another four etchings in two frames. Take a look at them, you will be surprised. They are excruciatingly executed, overly worked, but extremely well intentioned and so very deep. Furthermore, if you see M.M... he will tell you about him and you can vouch for his lyric approach".

A few days later he wrote: "I saw a catalogue of the Salon and I have a vague suspicion that Max Klinger's painting has been refused. What do you say at least about his etchings? His ideas are interesting, although a bit difficult, overly prepared and sharp, lacking in bravery".

Take note of his last five words. This man did not have the courage of his own opinion. The decision of the Salon jury sufficed to deprive him of the small regard and interest that he previously had for Klinger.

Klinger is a purely a modern artist. Modern not in the sense in which this word is used today, but in the sense of a man who is conscious of the inheritance of many centuries of art and thought, who sees clearly in the past, in the present and in himself.