

Primitivism and Impossible Art

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If the guilt accumulated in the civilized domination of man by man can ever be redeemed by freedom, then the 'original sin' must be committed again

Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*

Primitivism refers to an attitude of mind working from a cultural state to an imagined pre-cultural state uncontaminated by the ills of civilization. It arises out of the suspicion (even conviction, depending on how bad things appear) that civilization has brought with it a progressive deterioration of the true state of being. It then becomes necessary to return to an exemplary pre-civilized (primitive) state in order to rediscover the fundamental realities of life, which will obviate the ills and restore modern fragmentation to wholeness. Within such thought, the essential human condition always precedes the actual; this idea shapes our location within the infinity of time, for we move continually forward to an ultimate return (Mircea Eliade). More abstractly, the Millennium always achieves the past—a perfected, mythologized past.

The kind of primitivism that sees the beginnings as idyllic has been characterized as "soft primitivism" and can be opposed to the "hard" view that sees the beginnings as bestial and therefore unenviable in any way. Thomas Hobbes, with his Nature red in tooth and claw, is perhaps the progenitor of "hard primitivism" for modern thought. More recently Robert Ardrey, in trying to explain and even to justify current political bestiality, has sought to prove (never successfully) the brutality of our beginnings as weapons-makers and killers. In this hard-headed practical view civilization, for all that may be wrong with it, is the only salvation from continual self-mutilation; civilization saves us from barbarism. The "soft" view however, with its millennial tendencies, has dominated imagination. Perhaps this is because it supplies some relief from the responsibilities of civilization and a comforting sense that things will fulfill themselves. It is in the "soft" sense that the word primitivism is used here.

All periods of what might be called high or ad-

vanced civilization have had such primitivistic longings, though some more vigorously than others. For the ancients of our tradition, Theocritus and, later, Virgil invented the mythical sweetly-sad world of Arcady where the honey and wine of eternal evening would relieve them of the burden of their own crass culture. The Renaissance pre-empted that pastoral world for its own pagan and boisterous longings. It was for that time an antidote to the sado-masochistic compulsions of medieval Christianity. Christianity itself had made this life of the earthly city a vale of tears between Edenic beginnings and eventual return to them after the retributive holocaust of judgment. Never has the longing for the future/past been so destructively conceived. Cities crumble, rain turns to fire, bellicosity rages, and for every soul saved for the state of innocence thousands are sucked into the burning ass-hole of hell. All the delicate fantasies of paradise and the saved enjoying eternal bliss cannot make up for the horror of that image.

For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, intent on enlightened education, Rousseau constructed the concept of the Noble Savage, and would educate Émile in the precepts of primitive necessities. Even as they were slaughtered as heathen, the Indians of America were idealized as dwellers in innocence close to paradise. Ironically, even some of those people whom Europeans regarded as living in a perfected state of nature felt themselves removed from the essential perfections of their own beginnings, and mythologized for themselves an eventual return to a purer state (Mircea Eliade). In face of aggressively advancing industrial and technological civilization, our own century has been absorbed with counter-notions of the primitive as a means to some sort of salvation.

At one time it might have been possible to look at modern primitivism as an extension of a wayward romanticism. But as the problems of modern society deepen, the desperation of reaching out for the "primal sanities" becomes more and more intense. Always the desire has been for a freedom that seems denied the individual in the structure of things as they exist. In this most free of times, it seems always that freedom evades us.

Artistically these preoccupations with the primitive have gone in two different directions: one (the earlier) leading to expressive freedom through primitivized form, a kind of millennium of artistic language; and the other leading to rediscovery of creative capacity through primitivized behavior, perhaps a millennium of self. In the loss of religious consciousness, art and its practice have become the means to spiritual awareness and accomplishment. If art could be free then we could be free and the millennium would be achieved.

The earlier primitivism, which Robert Goldwater has written about, involved the use and incorporation of primitive motifs and primitivizing ideas of form in painting and sculpture. Though there has been considerable

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