

Reflections on the Fundamental Nature of the Art of André Masson

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Abstract: André Masson was a French modern painter, regarded as one of the foremost surrealists of the early 20th century. Masson indeed left many works based on surrealist automatism, notable for their striking lines, colors, and unique compositions. His main subjects involved depictions of eroticism and cruel violence.

It should be stressed that Masson was a painter who considered and tried to express his profound philosophical ideas, mainly derived from the influence from F. Nietzsche and G. Bataille. Complete transcendental individualism, serious critical viewpoints that negate reason and Christianity resulted from the influence of Nietzschean philosophy. His startling images of sexuality, immolation and sacrifices, and the cruel violence of massacres developed from the archeological ideas of G. Bataille.

Among these themes the most remarkable characteristics of Masson's art are the expression of cruelty and eroticism. Cruelty is the essence which Masson obtained through his personal experiences of the horrors of the First World War, and the anxieties and depression of fascism before the World War II. His images of merciless cruelty and violence are thus derived from his own experience. Erotic and sexuality are closely related to both life and death, suggesting that birth is in equilibrium with death, and sexuality is equal to corruption. Continuity of life is made possible by cruel immolation and sadistic sacrifice. Sexuality is essential for this continuity of human survival. Death basically means the discontinuity that breaks the continuity of life. Therefore, sexuality and immolation are necessarily described in violent and cruel mythical expression. Masson applied the method of myth to his works, with the figures of Dionysus and the Minotaur as the symbols of the method.

The purpose of this study is to clarify Masson's fundamental ideas for art, to reveal the essence which constitutes his art, and to make clear the place of Masson's art in modern art of the 20th century.

Key words: The Method of Myth, the Minotaur and the Labyrinth, Immolation and Sexuality, Metamorphosis

1. The effects of modern Western thought on the art of the 20th century

Modern Western thought has undoubtedly affected paintings and literature in the age of modernism. Ideological influences spread on the waves international trends following various changes in European countries, altering their culture and technologies. In particular, it is noted that the economic crisis of 1929 and the First World War greatly affected art, literature, and culture in this age. While the system of globalism had been accelerated by

Western industrialized countries since the end of the 19th century, some modern Western thought had interrupted its progress through critical ideas and views. Friedrich Nietzsche (hence, Nietzsche) was one who deplored European decadence caused by the corruption of religion, morals, and the extension of enlightenment. It was natural that Nietzsche affected many artists, most of them in the age of Modernism in the 20th century. It is straightforward to conjuncture the reason why European artists favourably accepted his philosophical ideas. Nietzsche's peculiar ideas criticized European

Christianity, morals and values supported by reason and humanity which had cultivated European civilization and formed the foundation of its cultural systems since the age of Renaissance. The cultural areas of European Christianity (rather than the sacredness of God) was the target of his sardonic criticism. Deceptive values and reasons for enlightenment were not tolerated by his ideas. For him, European history and culture supported by Platonism, Christianity, and enlightened ways of thought in modern Europe should be regarded as a self-destructive system for decadence, and Nietzsche further predicted that such history and culture would fall into a formalistic, skeletonized, superficial culture in the future. Such a cultural condition can be regarded as a form of nihilism for Nietzsche. And it was Zarathustra, representing Nietzsche's ideas, who asserted absolute individualism, presenting the idea of 'overman' with absolute moral and ethical values that are never influenced by any form of reason based on logos and Christian tradition. According to Zarathustra and Nietzsche's theory, nihilism could be overcome by transcending the existing values, avoiding self-destruction damaged by nihilistic decadence. It is the 'eternal resurrection' that can overcome opportunistic, superficial European culture armed with the philosophy of enlightenment. It is thus possible to assume that Nietzsche wished to part from the Plato-Christian system of European values, and obtain more primitive, pre-Greek views and values of the world. To reconstruct the system of history and values of Europe in his age, he had to take account of values which did not belong to Greek-Christian tradition. These were based on the values of the myth of Dionysus. The symbolic implication of Dionysus is that of destruction, fertility of organisms, a god of terror commanding respect from humans and of radical and primitive sacredness interpreted as god's providence of nature. This dark conception is directly opposed to that of Apollo whose image presents the sun's energy, a positive and progressive intention which produces orderly civilization and morals, or an order of society which links to European traditional culture. It is this concept of Dionysus that some modern artists in the 20th century have wished to apply to their works through the effect of

Nietzsche, above all yearning for the destruction of existing values, moral, and reason. In particular, surrealists attempted to release humans spellbound by the construct of 'reason' that constructed Western civilization, aiming at independent humanity. As for paintings, modern art developed the style of abstraction, and did not necessarily need 'objects' to describe (like Kandinsky), European artists pursued more radical styles of arts. The movements of expressionism, abstraction, dadaism, surrealism, and abstractionism at least originated from such individualistic, subjective and radical energy, and depended on artists' creative and more independent imagination. Modern European artists thus inclined remarkably further towards avant-garde, eccentric styles for their works.

Another aspect of modern Western thought which affected modern art were the ideas presented by Sigmund Freud, which also formed a part of the foundation for surrealist paintings. Freud's explication of the 'human dream' served as a model text for artists in the age. Particularly, the idea related to a sexuality potentially inherent in human minds dramatically influenced artistic imagination. The explication that all human existence is sexual existence leads to directly surrealist motif; humans lead a never reasoned existence, rather a sexual, primitive one governed under Dionysus' ritual and providence. The conception of sexuality, or liberation of sexual expression, which now seems a trite idea in the 21st century, was so radical that many painters accepted Freudian ideas related to dreams and the sexuality of human being.

For example, works by Salvador Dali are referred to as the explication of human dreams. Dali's poly-symbolic art which provokes sexual images, wars, violence and anxieties is describing images of human dreams which transform under unconsciousness (Fig. 1.) This work shows the terror of the Spanish Civil War by presenting the image of cannibalism. Humans are always aware that they live in various dream-like images which constantly transform to other forms, meaning that everything is in alteration; sexual desire, materialism, peace, affection, commemoration, hesitation, anger and terror all of which

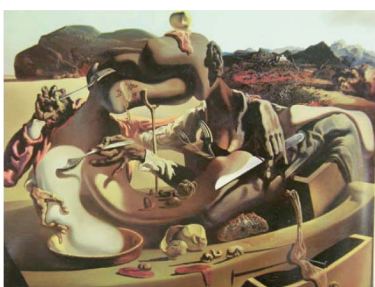


Fig. 1 Salvador Dalí *Autumn Cannibalism*, 1936.
Oil on canvas. 80.0 × 80.0 cm.
The Tate Gallery, London.

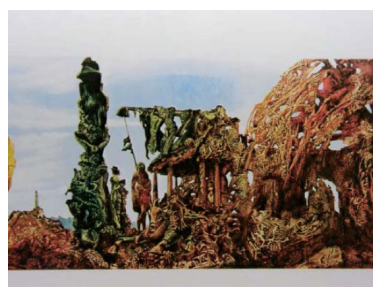


Fig. 2 Max Ernst *Europe after the Rain II (a part)*,
Oil on canvas. 55.0 × 148.0 cm.
Wadsworth Museum, Hartford, U.S.A.

are present in human hearts are always circulating, and metamorphosing in our consciousness of daytime and unconsciousness of a dream. Dalí's soft and elastic lines and forms express profoundly psychological images that extend and diffuse out of the real world to the world of dream and illusion. Thus, Dalí, surely one of the representative modern, surrealist painters, employs a methodology understandable in light of surrealist vision and Freudian theory.

Another painter, Max Ernst was also a representative surrealist painter who described sexual, and imaginative images which link to illusory imagination and phantasmal landscapes (Fig. 2.) In this work, Ernst tried to describe the destruction of Europe threatened by the Second World War. His unique fine lines and grotesque forms with imaginative colors expressed symbolic images of ruined Europe. It is possible to find a similarity between Dalí and Ernst, who both use dream-like imagination and images of sexual vision that are essential to human nature. They criticized European society, and its superficial, snobbish values. The forms, compositions and content are against the reason of a human, aiming at describing human nature through surrealist visions. This movement of surrealism produced another painter, André Masson.

André Masson (hence, Masson) was one of the greatest painters of the 20th century, often considered in first regard as a surrealist painter. But Masson's style was never fixed by one predominant artistic idea. His style of expression continued to change throughout his whole career. This characteristic seems different from that of Dalí, Ernst, Magritte, Miró, Tanguy, Delvaux and other surrealists¹. (It has in fact become to be regarded as a

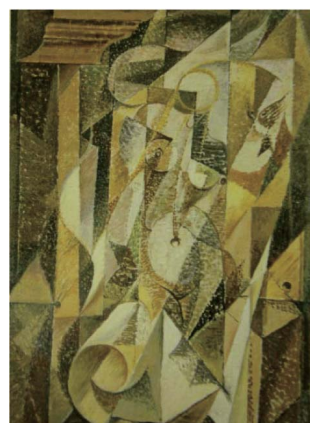


Fig. 3 André Masson *Femme tenant un oiseau*, 1924.
Oil on canvas 55.2 × 33.0 cm. Private collection.

feature of Masson, and is one reason for his underestimation as a painter.) To be sure, he frequently altered his style which makes it difficult to understand his works easily, his conception of art did not change so greatly. What he depicted was mainly figures which were symbolic and deformed, or images of distorted reality, products of his imagination. Masson was, first of all, a painter who was conscious of literature and philosophy, and which provided him with ambiguous qualities for his works; abstracted, symbolic artistic images and colors which are difficult to understand, and mythical, literary images which present myth, story and philosophy for explication of its context in paintings.

Masson's first style was similar to cubism in his early works (Fig. 3.) In this work, though the composition and analytical lines find proximity to cubism art as William Rubin points out, it can also be observed that Masson incorporated his own image of woman into this painting. Rubin indicates; 'Although Masson depicted based on

cubism articulation and construction, the morphology and form of its painting language demonstrate that Masson is profoundly anti-cubism²⁾. Analytical combinations of lines and surfaces are similar to those of cubism as depicted by Picasso or George Braque, but the deformed and analyzed figure of a woman is recognized in the sharp lines and forms. An organic entity of a bird is also placed as it softens and decomposes the cubistic tension and composition. The morphology of the woman in this work presents a prediction of Masson's representative motif of women who symbolize eroticism. Roundish lines of the woman challenge the straight lines and sharp planes. These lines would be developed in the next stages of his works. As Masson developed his surrealist ideas, affected by philosophy, his paintings became more ferocious, cruel and symbolic with loud colors, exciting lines and grotesque composition. Later, after Masson went to live in America, avoiding persecution by Nazis, the abstract style was inherited by abstractionism in the post-war era. Superficially, Masson's painting was less influential than Dali, Picasso or Ernst, but his philosophical and literary ideas affected many artists later. As Beckett explained Masson is a painter who is "skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression³⁾." Here Beckett and Duthuit particularly referred to Masson's works which use mainly space, and few and fine lines, expressing void of 'being' (Fig. 4.) The motif shown in this work is 'slaughter'. The colour of red reveals blood spurted from slaughtered livestock, and a double circle suggests a dead animal's eye. The plane of the canvas which is divided into two phases signifies the sacrifice and the human who performs it. Divided geometrical phases



Fig. 4 Masson *L'Equarisseur (The Butcher)*, 1928.
Oil on canvas. 73.5 × 92.5 cm.

suggest a merciless and mechanical slaughter system. The crushed dead body of the slaughtered animal is on the geometrical phases, showing the 'cruelty' of the sacrifice. Slaughter, or massacre, and its inherent cruelty become a major subject for Masson's art. The cruelty is depicted in the movement of the dying, bleeding animal.

It might be possible to assert that Masson evidently expressed movement of objects which include various motives: slaughter, massacre, life and death, or myth. In this sense, Beckett's suggestion is correct. Masson tried to describe what was necessary to express in esoteric dilemma violent motives such as massacre or myth. The objects he attempted to describe have always to be expressed in movement by vivid lines, colours, compositions, all of which create morphology as a painting, emitting and encouraging the true meaning of violent motives, for Masson's motif is based on themes of extreme ferocity. Therefore, both styles and motives are skewered on the dilemma of describing the objects of movement. This idea of movement leads to the style of metamorphosis as described in this essay.

Masson, influenced by Nietzsche's nihilism and the idea of eroticism and immolation by Bataille, started as a surrealist painter. It is important to note that there were some important factors which were related to Masson's ideas for art. Based on philosophical views, he was obstinately engaged in describing them. One remarkable factor is the use of myth and its mythical chimera, the Minotaur. Others are associated with the violence of massacre and immolation, or with the fundamental motifs of life, sexuality, and death. Particularly, mythical method and its motif are complexly intertwined with various factors. It is inevitable to consider the meaning of the method of a myth for Masson.

2. Myth and the method

It is certain that Greek mythology plays a part in constructing the spiritual, basic tradition of European culture. The stories associated with Greek gods are the foundation of European literature. Greek tragedies and comedies are also admired as human dramas on a par with

the world of myth, as Aristotle demonstrated in his age. Greek architectural styles have been incorporated into European modern buildings. Sculptures and the beauty of their forms have become the basis of the artistic ideal. The religious essence, the Eastern Orthodox Church, divided from Roman catholic, spread in the eastern part of Europe through Byzantine culture. Greek tradition and its culture form a fundamental part of the whole of European culture. As for myth, the stories of gods are applied to literature or folklores, and myths have partly become the basis of European cultural tradition in literature.

In paintings, it is typical and quite natural that painters uses Christian legends or Greek myth. Since the age of Renaissance, Western paintings have been based on ancient Greek-Roman culture. The image of Venus, painted by Botticelli, Giorgione, or Tiziano, is a symbol of beauty, inherited by other painters as a foundation of the beauty of a woman. It need scarcely be mentioned that Michelangelo painted Greek Gods on the wall of Rome, Piero di Cosimo painted the story of Perseus, Andromeda, Francesco Primaticcio depicted the temptation of Helene or Ulysses who met Penelope again, or that Domenichino described the detailed spectacle of Diana's hunting. The motif of 'Icarus' was selected by many painters. Thus, myth and the stories are considered to be a prototype of the images of Western art, in that they represent a part of Western culture. Greek mythology is the birthplace of European artistic sensibilities, founded in appreciation of the beauty of art, the awfulness of gods and of nature and the fables of the human world.

In the 20th century, however, in regards to how the mythical method related to modernism, the meaning and the role of myths were altered by the trends of its age. Hence, most critics should refer to James Joyce, an Irish novelist, and his masterpiece *Ulysses*, which became one of the most remarkable works to apply 'mythical method' to modern literature, as T.S. Eliot named Joyce's technique. In the case of Joyce' work, however, the same conception of the Greek era is not applied to myth. Undoubtedly, myth is an important frame for Joyce's *Ulysses*, which represents and binds the whole history and thinking of Europe, cultivated since the Greek era. Yet,

Joyce himself ridicules people living in the 20th century in the mythical frame. The main characters (Stephen Daedalus⁴) and Leopord Bloom) are not heroes in the mould of Hercules, Achilles and Odysseus (=Ulysses in Latin) in Greek myth. They are described as common people who live in Dublin in Ireland in the early 20th century, suffering the pains of reality and groping for the significance of life. Mythical method is effective in focusing and parodying modern people. Joyce's Daedalus, who decided to become a poet in his age, is not a Greek Daedalus who built the labyrinth that Masson also so frequently used as his motif. It is supposed that the myth is effective in connecting historical time and values of people with those in the ancient era. Thus, a myth can be considered a system which represents the origin and generation of a race, ethical values and taboos, forming sacredness and cultural background on which people in one area or nation depend for their technical, cultural and spiritual civilization. In that sense, myth is essentially a cornerstone of a civilization. In effect, myth plays a role in synthesizing diverse values and ways of thinking into one organic community. Myth is a set of ethics on which civilized societies depend for their social morality. Yet in modern societies, there is no myth in which people believe to attain morality and justice. People in the 20th century have experienced world wars and economic crises, and fundamentally live with anxieties and instabilities without depending on any religions. Without faith and gods, common people live their life as they are. Therefore, there are no mythical gods in modern times. In the case of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the method is no more than the frame where modern people (especially living in European urban cities) are ridiculed and satirized in the 20th century. Although myth itself is a complete story and difficult to be modified to another story, Joyce succeeded in applying it to his work, in order to create a modern and miserable parody in his age, in which heroes are lacking. Joyce intended to describe common people living in one of the most marginal regions of Europe, Ireland, in the frame of Greek myth that is regarded as a noble cultural foundation of European thought.

Not only in modern literature but in modern paintings,



Fig. 5 Giorgio De Chirico *Ettore e Andromaca*, 1970.
Oil on canvas. 30.0 × 40.0 cm.
Fondazione Gioogio e Isa de Chirico.

myth is applied as a methodology for works of art. For example, it was Giorgio de Chirico who introduced the idea of Greek myth into his modern paintings. His artistic concept, 'Pittura metafisica,' was a radical and original idea in his age. The mythical heroes and heroines were arranged and re-created in modern paintings (Fig. 5.) One of the most representative characteristics is the form of figures. The brave hero of Troy, Hector and his wife Andromaque are metamorphosed into mannequins of the 20th century. (Chirico frequently selected myth and ancient Greek and Rome motifs, Centaur, Odysseus, gladiators.) Among them, the motif of Hector and Andromaque is most favored by Chirico, making a strong and unique impression on those who view his art. Chirico's conception of myth might be similar to that of Joyce's. The architecture, the hero and heroine, the ancient clothes, all are tools for describing the modern times. The method of myth plays a role in binding the ancient era to modern cities, making people reflect on their culture and civilization metaphysically. Greek tragedy can be resurrected in the 20th century, being metamorphosed into other forms and figures. Chirico's unique attempt is regarded as myth by applied method. His work makes people contemplate the transition of history, tradition, civilization and modern societies. Myth plays a metaphysical role in perceiving and recognizing the certainty of human existence.

As a modern painter, Masson also applied myth to his own works. In his case, he notably pursued the 'Minotaur' and the myth of 'Daedalus' and its labyrinth. Masson's extreme pursuit is based on philosophical ideas influenced by Nietzsche and Bataille. He was particularly interested



Fig. 6 Masson *Rêve tauromachique*, 1937.
Oil on canvas. 55 × 46 cm.

in the "death" of a living thing, or the act of "killing" a living thing. When he was a child, he was shocked at the slaughter of livestock. Killing livestock became his trauma, and later, would become an important motif in his work as a painter. Slaughter is linked with Spanish bullfighting. One reason why Masson was so attracted by bullfighting is that this tradition of Spain is directly related to the subject of 'life and death' in his paintings. The sacrifice highlighted by a matador offers a creature who can not avoid its destiny, succumbing to the sword. A bull, albeit livestock in the present age, is a symbol of wildlife and nature. Its figuration is connected with the monstrous silhouette of the Minotaur, the chimera of Greek myth that sacrificed humans. In a Spanish bullfight, a dying bull is a ferocious, mythical creature, bleeding and panting like the Minotaur killed by is the Greek hero, Theseus. In Masson's chaotic and cruel images, the Minotaur, a bull and a matador are all blended into distorted and deformed figures (Fig. 6.) In this work, it is the Minotaur that becomes a matador, and the human matador and a bull (and a horse for the matador) are being killed by the Minotaur. The Minotaur is the symbol of destruction and cruel violence, which is an absolute evilness. Masson's curiosity about bull-fighting shows the image of offering a sacrifice. In a ritual or immolation, the sacrifice has to accept death in the process of its cruelty. However, victims of wars are also a kind of sacrifice, mercilessly killed by the planned ritual named war. Massacre and carnage are caused by war. In reality, the world wars resulted in tens of millions of deaths. Masson was the one who personally witnessed the cruelty before his own eyes.

He took part in World War I as a French soldier, and suffered extremely cruel and merciless experiences on the

front lines. (This is a common point with Otto Dix, a German painter who fought on the front lines as a German non-commissioned officer, was also possessed by the violence of the war.) The theme of cruel 'massacre' is also one of Masson's important motifs. He inquisitively depicted scenes of massacre in his paintings. The terrible stage of war, in the case of Masson, is converted into paintings not on the front lines, but on a plain field where men and women are cruelly and squalidly put to death. Masson devoted himself depicting massacre and violence⁵). It may also be noted that the Minotaur is an evil god that takes charge of the immolation. The ancient Greek chimera is applied as a sadistic, ferocious entity which governs every aspect of reality of the human world in modern art.

The fact that the image of the Minotaur is superimposed on the figure of a bullfight has already been mentioned above. The head of a bull provokes the image of both of sacredness (as a destructive god) and viciousness (as an evil destroyer.) The myth of the Minotaur, an originally evil being, is metamorphosed into another existence in Masson's art. For Masson, the Minotaur is cast in the image of the dominator of the world, and thus partly coincides with the image of ancient god, Dionysus. As Masson is affected by Nietzsche's Dionysus, both images of the Minotaur and Dionysus are simply intermingled together (Fig. 7-8.) For Masson's art, the Minotaur is a symbol of absolute destruction, of the power of massacre, and as a governor of life and death. Moreover, the image of Dionysus potentially combines with that of the Minotaur, because Dionysus is the ancient god of destruction and reproduction, of fertility of soil and harvest, and therefore of life and death for nature and human world. Since the destructiveness presides over human destiny, the Minotaur can manipulate terrestrial life with omnipotent power, conquering woman, the symbol of life and fertility. No human can resist the Minotaur which is expressed almost in the form of a huge sculpture (which exposes its organs and includes the labyrinth.) The Minotaur's form is mechanical and ferocious, suggesting that Minotaur-Dionysus which contains the labyrinth is the absolute manipulator of the

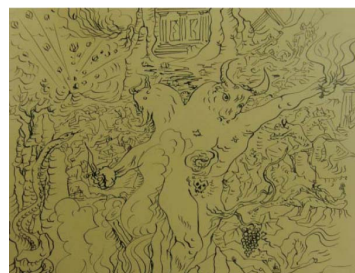


Fig. 7 Masson L' "Univers dionysiasque" (The "Dionysian Universe"), 1937 Acéphale 3/4, July. Paris, France.



Fig. 8 Masson *Dionysos*, 1937. Acéphale 3/4 July. Paris, France.

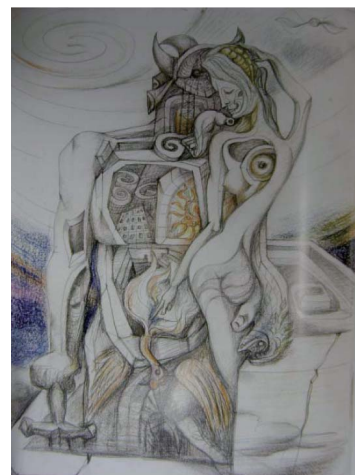


Fig. 9 Masson *Le Secret du Labyrinthe* (The Secret of the Labyrinth), 1935. Graphite and pastel. 50.4 × 36.8 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne Musée, Paris, France.

Earth. The conquered woman is beside the Minotaur, as if devoting herself to it, leaning her body against Minotaur as if she was attracted by it as a sacrifice, pointing at the Minotaur's genitalia (Fig. 9.) Her internal organs and brain are partly exposed, and the brain looks as if it were a pomegranate (the symbolic image of a pomegranate is

described later.) This woman is introduced to the land of the dead, 'Hades,' because she was violated by the Minotaur. This evil god takes charge of the ritual of violation of a virgin who faces the destiny of death after the ritual is performed. Immolation of violation is another motif related to sexuality for Masson. The image of the Minotaur, Dionysus, and the labyrinth of Daedalus are confusingly combined together in Masson's imagination, and these works are the results of the product by the mythical method. Masson's method of myth created a uniquely grotesque view of the world. Under his modern myth, an idea of cruel slaughter which is his unique characteristic is described in many of his works. 'Death' is described in the stories of Greek myth, but Masson described the cruelty of bloodshed from a different point of view. Hence, it is necessary to make a statement on the subject, 'massacre.' Masson painted many works titled 'massacre.' Many of them are expressed in scenes of massacre, in which naked men kill naked women (and vice versa.) This image of massacre is linked to the ritual elation of sacrifice in immolation. Elation caused by the cruelty of killing is obtained through the religious enthusiasm. This enthusiasm is almost the same thing as offering a sacrifice to a god. This sacred cruelty guarantees the continuity of life and, in that sense, cruelty is equal to sacredness.

Massacre is an important motif for painters. Hieronymus Bosch depicted awful suffering in his scene of hell. Albrecht Dürer described 'The Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand.' Eugène Delacroix presented 'Scènes des Massacre de Scio.' Pieter Bruegel also used the motif in his painting, 'The Massacre of the Innocents' in about 1566. This theme is based on the massacre by Herod, the king of Babylon, who ordered the slaughter of infants in Bethlehem. However, this is an allusion to Spain's invasion of the Netherlands. Bruegel attempted to describe the barbarous acts of savagery committed by the Spanish army led by Duke Alba who invaded and pillaged the Netherlands in order to force its allegiance to Spain. By painting children skewered by spears Bruegel intended to imply that the Spanish army and Duke Alba had trampled upon his country and committed every sort of atrocity



Fig. 10 Pieter Bruegel the Elder *The Massacre of the Innocents* (a part), 1566?
Oil on a board. 109.2 × 154.9 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien.



Fig. 11 Masson *Massacre au soleil (Massacre in the Sun)*, 1934. Oil on canvas 48 × 64 cm.
Galerie Pierre Levy, Paris.

(Fig. 10.) (Later, the slaughtered children were changed to hens or geese by his son's atelier who produced about 10 copies of this work.) The main theme of describing 'massacre' is to convey the inhumanity of perpetrators and leave the historical fact for the next generation. Each work has a diachronic message which claims historical, regional, racial and religious cruelty (like the painting of St. Bartholomew in 1572.) To be sure, Delacroix painted the tragic massacre of Greek people by Turkey in the 19th century, in a work that may be considered a historical testimony by a painter.

Masson's massacre is different from that point of view. He painted many works on this theme in the early 1930s. In most of his works, the forms of figures are deformed and sometimes the outlines of figures are blurred (Fig. 11.) The faces (someone have no heads, having been cut by men) are unanimously the same. What is the focus of these works is the very barbarous act of 'massacre' itself.

Masson's massacre does not have any political messages, nor does it claim merciless cruelty. The meaning of his drawing is to simply depict 'sadism.' Sadistic brutality and merciless intolerance are stressed. Masson persistently addressed this motif, because describing the sadistic cruelty of human essence is his purpose. Myth does not exist without stories of massacre. Morals, history, and tragedies are told through a circle of destiny of war and massacre. Masson considers that myth, history, and all human existence is based on the sacrifices of cruel massacre. It is certain that human civilization has been constructed through the sacrifice of innumerable people. No nation, tradition, or culture have passed transition through the ages without numerous victims. Cruelty itself is the main theme for Masson, and it has to be described in a synchronic way. Synchronicity means universality which proposes that massacre has been committed by every people, in every region, and every historical age⁶. As a primitive custom of human civilization, people offered sacrifices to the gods. Religious immolation requires human blood and appalling acts of atrocity. Masson assumes that all people can become both a sacrifice and become a murderer. For him there is no necessity to describe concrete faces, figures, landscapes as representations of reality. What is described is the abominable cruelty of violence as an insult to humanity, and cruel rituals that are latent in human instinct and human societies. Clark V. Poling provides an appropriate suggestion on the series of 'massacre.' The subject of massacre is relevant to human's violent instinct and union with the nature⁷. The loss of self means continuity of life and humans communities through immolation. This subject essentially addresses the problem of life and death with regards to that most fundamental factor of human beings...a merciless and intolerant instinct.

In this connection, it is necessary to take account of the meaning of immolation as proposed by Bataille, whose work had such a great influence on Masson's art. As Bataille developed his theory of 'Eroticism', he stressed that many instances of gods demanding a sacrifice may be observed in many regions of all worlds. Bataille referred to the offering of a sacrifice in Africa and a sacrifice to the

god of the sun in Mexico (ancient Aztec). Or he points out the tradition of sexually provocative sculptures on the wall of Buddhist temples in India. Basically, it is essential for humans to realize that an individual or a community possess an orientation of continuity of life. Death, the one thing that no one can absolutely experience, is the only thing that can cut off this 'continuity.' The lives of individuals and the community have to maintain their continuity of life through offering sacrifices to a god. Thus, gods are both omniscient and ominous beings. Offering a sacrifice is by nature a violent activity. Individuality is immersed in the group which implements the cruel rituals of the activity. The elation of immolation masks the obscene cruelty of violence, but continuity of life as a society can be maintained through the sacrifice. Primitive societies have supported and maintained the structure of the society by this system of immolation. Such rituals are closely associated with ancient religion, because a society as a group of individuals, has to be spiritually united together in order to perform the ritual. All members of the society must have faith in the importance of immolation and the existence of a fearful god who governs the prosperity and fertility of the society. In addition to this, fertility plays a very important role for a society. Reproduction and fertility are the essential factors which are able to support the society. Inevitably, reproduction of humans is related to death and life. Birth means death, and fertility means mortality. In this connection, sexuality is also linked to death. The death of a human sacrifice is paradoxically a method to secure birth and continuity of life.

In this context, according to Bataille's theory, sexuality is relevant to the recognition of death. Sexuality is the defloration of a virgin and the violation of the beauty of a woman. Pursuit of eroticism leads to death, or being offered as a sacrifice to a god. Convulsions of organs by sexual desire leads to death. These concepts — the continuity of life and the discontinuity of death, human sacrifices and the fertility of a society, the religious elation and sexuality — are undoubtedly applied to Masson's art. Since Masson is neither a philosopher nor a theorist like Bataille, he painted his ideas on canvas, in forms which

are not necessarily reasonable nor theoretical. The subjects of massacre or the Minotaur are fundamentally described in order to express the essence of cruelty. Influenced by Nietzsche, he removed all self-sufficient idealism based on reason. Christianity and modern Western thought attached idealism (which Nietzsche criticized) to religion, resulting in the formation of idealistic views and values as the pillars of modern Western civilization. Idealism supported by human 'reason' rejects the primitive and cruel values of ancient myth. Masson's paintings certainly carry no idealistic images. Merciless cruelty, squalid brutality, and morbid violation fill Masson's works⁸⁾. Myth and the method are the important essence for Masson to express his ideas. The world is governed by the god of Dionysus-Minotaur, where every conceivable violent and erotic activity is performed, suggesting that cruelty is the most fundamental instinct of human being.

Another factor which is characteristic of his art must also be pointed out to explain the essence of Masson's art. That is the factor of metamorphosis and exposed organs.

3. 'The Labyrinth', metamorphosis and the exposed organs

In his works from 1935 onwards, Masson metamorphosed human bodies, plants and animals, and inanimate objects such as furniture and instruments into grotesque figurations. In particular, human bodies are transformed into other organisms and combined with other objects into sexual images. Sexuality is directly linked with a terrible image of death, because in Masson's interpretation, as has already been mentioned, to be born is equal to dying, life is equal to corruption and sexual pleasure is equivalent to convulsive death. These are the paradoxical conceptions which derive from the influence of Nietzsche, Bataille, Freud and Greek myth as has been noted. The paradox produces distorted, metamorphosed images accompanied by peculiarly unique transformation of objects in 'movement,' which are able to express vivid, ferocious and merciless violence. Fig. 12, for example, shows the metamorphosis of a man who is cut open and

killed by a woman's grotesquely metamorphosed genitalia. This work depicts the violent, sexual sleeping image between the man and the woman, suggesting that sexuality is almost equivalent to a convulsive and cruel death. Metamorphosis of the man, the woman, furniture and instruments in the room means all are changed into violent convulsion and destructiveness (Fig. 12.) Another example (the composition is almost same) shows such sexual metamorphosis more clearly (Fig. 13.) In this work, the man and the woman are connected together by a plant-like root and partly metamorphosed into plant-like substances. They lose their human faces, the features the metamorphosed faces being ferocious, and half of their bodies are transformed into plants. Here, the image of plants suggests sexual reproduction, and flowers are genital organs (a flower is in the man's mouth). Petals are



Fig. 12 Masson *Dans la Tour de Sommeil*, 1938.
Oil on canvas. 100 × 81 cm. Musée de Baltimore.



Fig. 13 Masson *Métamorphose des amants*
(*Metamorphosis of the Lovers*), 1938.
Oil on canvas. 101 × 89 cm. Private collection.

also an allusion to genital organs. Plant vascular systems and leaf fibers signify the vascular systems of humans. The color of the river in the background shows blood and the destructive power of human sexuality. The exposed internal organs, extended genitals, ribs, deformed arms, all these reveal convulsive orgasm and death. Masson described the grotesque essence of sexual intercourse and depraved sexual pleasure through the image of metamorphosis and the exposed organs of human bodies. This painting reflects his ambiguous interpretation in which sexuality is revealed to lead to not only violent life but to death and corruption. The exposed organs signify that whole human bodies and minds are possessed by insatiable sexuality. Human bodies and organs are deformed, distorted, and altered by base lustfulness and sexual desire. There is no idealistic Platonism in the lovers, but instead we find Dionysian cruel love. This work shows excellently Masson's chaotic world of sexuality.

Metamorphosis is an important factor that can express the violent motion of organisms which are always in the process of being influenced by nature, or the universe. Masson frequently tackled works with the subject of 'the four elements', earth, water, fire and wind. As all organisms and natural phenomena are controlled by the providence of nature (which is represented by the gods of nature in myths), it is supposed that Masson thought that the destiny of everything on the earth is governed by the four elements of nature and the universe. The existence of everything is always in to its destiny (Fig. 14.) In this



Fig. 14 Masson *L'Homme emblématique*, 1939.
Oil on canvas. 81 × 65 cm.

work, three figures are described symmetrically on the sea. Acéphale is in the middle, raising a symbol of the four elements in both hands, spouting fluid to both sides⁹). The left side figure — half woman, and half man — grows from a root of a flower plant, exposing its genitalia and internal organs. The right side figure, whose head is the sun, is spouting milk from its breast and exposing its abdomen. There are galaxy-like universe, fire above their heads. This work suggests that this world is governed by nature and the symbols of the four elements. Humans, plants, fertility and death are all governed by Dionysian-Acéphale. Symmetrical and geometrical composition shows the providence of the Dionysian universe. The exposed internal bodies of the human figures show their organic vitality and sexuality which symbolizes the eternal circulation of life and death. Everything is always changing, affected by grotesque transformation and movement. The movement of form, color, and composition are always vivid in his works. Consequently, the impact of metamorphosis of objects gives a violent and resonant impression, and plays a crucial role in expressing close and strained time and space. Masson thought that animals and humans, and all things on the earth can be attributed to the primitive rule of nature, or the universe. Organisms which are born, live, reproduce, die, and are corrupted through the process of decomposition in the cycle¹⁰). Depiction of distorted bodies spouting fluids and blood, and exposed organs is necessary to express the fundamental essence of organisms which are incorporated in the circulation of the absolute providence of nature, governing life, death, reproduction and corruption, and sexuality. Acéphale or Dionysus synthesize the world and for that reason Acéphale is placed in the middle of the work.

With regard to the depiction of exposed of organs, one special symbol must also be pointed out in Masson's works: the image of a pomegranate. In Christian society, it is a symbol of the resurrection of Christ, blessing from the God, eternity of sacredness, intelligence, chastity and synthesis. Originally, the pomegranate tree grows from the blood dripped from Dionysus. It is the symbol of the principle nature of a woman, fertility. In Greek myth,



Fig. 15 Masson *Portrait du Poète Heinrich von Kleist*, 1939.
Oil on canvas. 38 × 55 cm. Private collection.

since Persephone had eaten seven grains of the fruit, she could not escape from the land of the dead, 'Hades.' Because of this, it serves as both a symbol of death and regeneration, or the fruit of 'Hades.' Masson often described pomegranate-like fruits in his works. A fractured human head is shown as resembling a pomegranate. Fig. 15 is the portrait of a German poet, Heinrich von Kleist who died by committing suicide (Fig. 15.) Masson's comment on this painting is very important "My portraits are symbolic, particularly that of Kleist is very important. I have painted his suicide... In this age, I was haunted by the idea that Europe would be placed in the fire and the blood¹¹⁾." In the late 1930s, Masson was depressed and afraid by the crisis engulfing Europe. Since the Spanish Civil War, Masson was in despair at the absurdity of fascism and other political ideologies which engendered conflicts between countries. The broken brain of Kleist's head is like a broken pomegranate, a symbol of the chaotic situation of Europe. The face of the last agonies of death suggests the crisis in Europe. The image of a pomegranate is, at least in Masson's works, a symbol of death, meaning the fruit of 'Hades.'

In the metamorphosized form, 'The Labyrinth' is regarded as one of Masson's masterpieces. The form, color, and lines carrying Masson's peculiar characteristics succeed in creating this grotesque image of the labyrinth and the Minotaur (Fig. 16.) In this work, the labyrinth is



Fig. 16 Masson *Le Labyrinthe (The Labyrinth)*, 1938.
Oil on canvas. 120 × 61 cm.
Musée National d'Art Moderne. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France.

subsumed into the Minotaur's body (like Fig. 9), forming part of the Minotaur's exposed organs. The sea in the background is painted in dark and murky colours and waves on the sea swell ominously (this image of the sea is somewhat similar to that of 'Pygmalion', and Masson often uses it, showing the anxieties and sinister atmosphere in allusion to the terrible age which engulfed Europe in the early 20th century.¹²⁾ The head is certainly that of the Minotaur which is shown in an oil painting named 'Le Chantier Dédale' (Fig. 17.) The deformed head contains, instead of cerebrum, grotesque organs and a bloody red, ominous tongue in the cavity. After dealing with the subject of massacre, Masson persistently painted the 'Minotaur,' deformed and with its bull's head transformed into grotesque shapes. Nevertheless, despite the extreme deformation, the horns prove it is the Minotaur's head.



Fig. 17 Masson *Le Chantier de Dédale*, 1939.
Oil on canvas 65.0 × 81.0 cm. Private collection.

The motif of the Minotaur was an essential 'form' used to create Masson's modern myth. In 'Le Chantier Dédale,' the subject is Daedalus and his studio in which the labyrinth was created. The powerful figure of Daedalus is expressed in front of the canvas on which the labyrinth that confined the Minotaur was composed¹³. The color of red symbolizes Daedalus' tenacious and persistent creative energy. In his subsequent work, 'The Labyrinth', Masson concentrated his attention more keenly on the Minotaur containing the labyrinth. As a result of the ultimate effect of metamorphosis, the most grotesque combination is created. The Minotaur moves with destructive energy, partly changing its form into other structures (stairs, walls, a Greek pillar, a bird, or plants.) The Minotaur, which was itself confined in the labyrinth in the ancient Greek myth, now confines every aspect of Masson's symbolic images: uneasiness of the age, violence, sexuality, cruelty, massacre, terror and myth. The malevolent single eye stares into the distance, giving off a sadistic and cruel brightness. The exposed organs (the skull, the red heart, the esophagus, the abdomen, genitalia and thighs) and metamorphosized bodies succeed in expressing Masson's cruel, nihilistic, and sexual images. The most impressive aspects are the 'metamorphosis' and 'exposure of the organs.' The foul and disturbing lines and colours reveal Masson's unique morphology, suggesting that the world is fundamentally in confusion and chaos, infinitely and historically threatened with something terrible. Humans are completely vulnerable to the destructiveness of the Minotaur, the providence of nature, or the destructive Dionysian

universe. The exposing of internal organs is explained as a means to demonstrate Masson's ideas on 'life and death.' Life-Death, the most fundamental of all subjects, must be described in a vivid and sadistic way. The Minotaur containing the labyrinth is a symbol of a fierce, sadistic, mythical modern god, an allusion to the modern Dionysus and fascism in his age¹⁴. Masson's chaotic world is demonstrated in the overwhelming metamorphosized creature. The Minotaur-labyrinth which contains all of the aspects and factors which Masson had accumulated throughout his artistic career, exposes its evil and sinister mythical energy to the real world. Although Poling's suggestion is correct, it is inevitable to explicate the meaning of this work, not only from the point of Masson's self identification as an artist, but from a consideration of the background of his age, before World War II and when the political violence of Nazism threatened Europe. This unprecedented monster signifies every kind of destructive, violent cruelty found in our world.

'The Labyrinth' is Masson's monumental work, completed just before the war. The mythical method, the Minotaur, Dionysus, metamorphosis and Masson's painting technique were synthesized to realize this work. It is not evident whether Masson intended to convey the message that his age was threatened by the terrible destruction of war and massacre in this work. However, it is possible to infer and explicate that interpretation from his comments and other works. The factor of metamorphosis is mostly effective in expressing a cruel and merciless world in which no room is left for idealistic views, and in showing Masson's ideas on violent sexuality. The figuration of the Minotaur-labyrinth which is achieved through grotesque transformation reveals the essence of Masson's art.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

André Masson was a painter who created his works based on his philosophical ideas. It is certain that he was much influenced by Nietzsche's nihilism and the idea of overman (or Zarathustra), and Bataille's ideas on immolation and eroticism. Dionysus became the main



Fig. 18 Masson *Diodème*, 1934. Etching. 39.5 × 30.5 cm.

image of the primitive and awful deity that signifies violent, sexual, and cruel power. That image and shape are overlaid with the Minotaur (or Acéphalae.)

Although his style is surrealistic and he certainly took part in the movement, he was not a painter who worked within one narrow definition of art. Rather he was determined that his own style was shaped and developed by his philosophical ideas. As many critics have mentioned, depiction of cruelty and sexuality is the main subject for Masson. In his vision, human beings and history are significantly moulded by these two essences. Immolation and sacrifice of humans and animals are the basic concepts used to express violence and cruelty, an idea which coincides with that of Bataille's. Merciless cruelty and violence are the essence of the world which is governed by primitive, animistic and destructive gods such as Dionysus. The cruelty of immolation demonstrates the fundamental essence of humans and human society. In addition to this, it appears that Masson equaled the value of human existence to that of animals. Life and death are closely connected by the offering of sacrifices to the gods. Fig. 18 shows horses and animals killing and eating Diomedes (Fig. 18.) The bright, cruel eye of the horse that bites the flesh of Diomedes signifies the essence of Masson's cruel expression. Humans are absolutely vulnerable to nature, and human bodies are easily bitten and killed by animals. The morphological essence for expression of violence and sexuality coincided with the age of international conflict in the 20th century, when Masson lived as an artist.

After the World War II, (Masson moved to the United States during the war in 1941) his art influenced the new



Fig. 19 Masson *Traité du désespoir(II)*, 1961. Oil, sand, and metallic paint on canvas. 88 × 130.0 cm. Private collection.

movement of abstractionism in America, which developed into 'action painting.' Masson himself also recognizes the importance of Chinese art, and drew inspiration from the India-ink drawing which introduced oriental composition to his works, in a way much different from his paintings before the war. His new works were oriented much more to imaginative abstraction (Fig. 19.) The figuration is altered into new kind of expressionism. The use of the subjects of sexuality and violence greatly declined. In the post-war era and his new environment, Masson found new possibilities of expression (A consideration of Masson's way of abstraction in the post-war era would require an even more detailed examination, but also afford new perspectives on Masson's art.)

With regard to critical views on surrealism in art, it is necessary to recognize and understand that surrealistic arts are the products of 'excessive' romanticism, or else may be viewed as fairy tales which are created by self-sufficient resistance to human reason. Undoubtedly, the activities inspired by surrealism contain self-contradiction and unreflecting anarchism. Arts based on anti-reason tend to fall into excessive subjectivism and self-sufficiency. Masson's Dionysus is not able to signify universality nor to express a truth which is common to every region of the real world. It is also possible to explicate that Bataille's idea of immolation and eroticism is a form of closed values that are only reflected within Christian societies. Bataille's ideas are not accepted in many regions of the world. There are diverse values and views on religion and the explication of myths in every region and race. Expression of cruel violence and

sexuality might be a self-complacent, distorted world-view, meaning that such expression of sexuality only encourages an excessive and unlimited and thoughtless release of expression in regards to violence and explicit description of sex.

Therefore, the essential value of Masson's art may be attributed to the age in which he survived and created his works. The early 20th century was an era of international disturbance and conflict between political ideologies, and the new movement of surrealistic figuration occurred in the context of this confusion. It is thus certain that 'The Labyrinth' is Masson's master work, meaning that the fundamental essence coincided with the destructiveness of the age.

Notes

- 1) Rene Magritte, Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy, and Paul Delvaux were also representative surrealistic painters. Masson parted from the group twice, criticizing Breton's way of leading the movement. Masson thought that art and its activity should not be controlled by one specific ideology, or by people who took leadership of a movement.
- 2) Yokohama Museum of Art. 1994. *Masson et Matta Les Deux Univers*: 32. William Rubin suggests: "En dépit de leur construction et articulation cubistes, la morphologie — le langage formel en quelque sorte — de ces premiers Masson est profondément anti-cubiste." (English translation in the text is by the author.)
- 3) Samuel Beckett. 1976. 'Masson' in *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* John Calder: 110-111. Beckett suggested in this dialogue on Masson: 'Here is an artist who seems literally skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression. Yet he continues to wriggle. The void he speaks of is perhaps simply the obliteration of an unbearable presence, unbearable because neither to be wooed nor to be stormed.'
- 4) Stephen Daedalus is the other self of Joyce. Of course, Joyce uses this ancient Greek artisan as a symbol of an artist who is resurrected as a poet in the 20th century.
- 5) Masson describes his terrible and horrific experience of the war in his book published in 1977. The front line was the place of massacre, and the battlefield was the merciless, bloody insanity for Masson. André Masson. Translation by Tono Yoshiaki. 1977. *La Mémoire du Monde*. Shincho.
- 6) Françoise Levailant, translation by Tanigawa, Chiba, Oota, and Hirota. 1995. *Massacre De Signes*. Misuzu Shobo, Tokyo: 208. Levailant points out the essential violence of humans, and that base cruelty and violence are closely related to the ideas of religion, history, and myth. She also refers to Bataille's idea which proposes that humans wish to transfer this base instinct of humans to religious ritual in order to survive and maintain the continuity of life.
- 7) Clark V. Poling. 2008. *André Masson and the Surrealist Self*. Yale University Press: 83. Poling suggests the following: 'Masson's *Massacre* thus express as a wide range of the ideas of Bataille and other contributors to *Documents* (the journal), as well as concepts from diverse sources, from Sade to Freud. Bringing together ethnographic and psychoanalytic points of view, the series shows the loss of self in the group, in an archaic or primitive society, subject to the eruption of violent instincts and ambivalent sexuality. The identification of subject and object operates not only in collectivity but also in the union of the self with the earth and in the function of sacrifice, serving as a substitute for the subject's own actual death. Finally, the specifically Bataillean concept of baseness as offering liberation from bourgeois morality and idealism is seen in the *Massacre* scenes, in the orgiastic destruction and the orientation to the earth.'
- 8) Levailant critically defines Masson's immolation as 'violation and killing of a virgin as a sacrifice.' *Massacre De Signes*: 183.
- 9) Acéphale (An acephalous man in English) is the journal edited by Bataille. The first publication was in June, 1936. Masson accepted the request from Bataille to produce the illustration of Acéphale. The image and the shape of this acephalous man became one of the subjects of Masson's art. The destructive, violent figure (which always has a knife and fire) is overlaid with the shape of Dionysus and the Minotaur (as Fig. 9.) This is Masson's other mythical figure.
- 10) With regard to the bodies of massacre, Masson leaves his comment; 'the explosion and dispersion of bodies corresponded to an idea of reunion with the universe.' *André Masson and the Surrealist self*: 80. In reality, Masson saw numerous dead bodies in the war, and it is supposed that the idea that bodies return to the soil remained with him.
- 11) *Masson et Matta Les Deux Univers*: 51. "Mes portraits

sont symboliques, celui de Kleist ourtout, très important, j'ai peint son suicide... A cette époque j'étais évidemment hanté par l'idée que l'Europe allait être mise à feu et sang." (English translation in the text is by the author.)

- 12) Pygmalion(two version are known) was painted in 1938. It is famous for its transformation of furniture into monster-like figures. According to Ghislain Uhrly, Masson described the works because he worried about a Europe gradually menaced by fascism and war. (*Masson et Matta Les Deux Universe*: 48.)
- 13) This figure is described in his work *Oedipus*'(1939.)
- 14) Poling proposes his idea; 'the labyrinth, while a place of confusion, danger, and the chaos, nevertheless has a positive role in the pursuit of the self.... Masson conveys Nietzsche's idea of the transformation of the self.'

André Masson and the surrealist self : 102-107. Poling proposes that the labyrinth represents the chaos of sexuality of Ariadne and Theseus, chaotic Nietzsche — Zarathustra's pursuit of identification for overman in the eternal recurrence. And Masson, affected by Nietzsche, expresses his chaotic self in the labyrinth-Minotaur. Poling's suggestion, based on the detailed analysis of Ariadne-Theseus, Zarathustra, and Bataille's ideas, is correct. Beside his analysis, the Labyrinth's allusion is not only relevant to the pursuit of identification, but also to the crisis of an age menaced by fascism. Masson himself refers to the absurdity of his era threatened by extreme political ideologies. The image of the labyrinth, Pygmalion, or the portrait of Hinrich von Kleist expresses the anxiety of Europe in that age.