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# On Harold Rosenberg

Dore Ashton

Although Harold Rosenberg was one of our highly visible extroverts, our own Baudelairean *flâneur* (and also *causeur*), and although his writings were like an endlessly renewed discussion in the kind of café where they only drink tea, I suspect that he was a brooder. No matter how far he ranged in his themes—for he was an inveterate wanderer—his insights were strung upon a taut cord at either end of which stood an opponent. If this tightrope walker, so much like Nietzsche's acrobat trembling midway, goes back, there is a voice telling him that it is a retreat from the here, the *is*, the present, the particular. If he goes forward, another voice tells him that there can be no future without a past. The one whispers that the word is sacrosanct and must be defended from impostors, the other shrills that deed alone counts. The one insists that the best of a man lies in his fantasies, artifacts, and works of art, the other maintains that art is not enough. In this agon Rosenberg ordained from the beginning that art would win, but, like Dostoyevsky, to whom he returned after each sortie, he knew he must have his doubts. He brimmed with the most fruitful doubts.

Rosenberg was a chronicler and a good one, yet much of his inner dialogue was not with the present so much as the omnipresent artistic past. The central question, posed early in his life, concerned a man's individuality. Dostoyevsky had called it his "dearest" possession. At no time, even in his Marxist youth, did Rosenberg relinquish his vision of the individual as the central, most important player in any drama. Rosenberg was positively possessed with Dostoyevsky's doubts. One can hear the rant of the man from the underground repeatedly in Rosen-

berg's written works—the stubborn hero who maintains the right even to be absurd and to “desire for himself what is positively harmful and stupid” if he claims it as a *right*. The right of the individual to live up to man's nature which, as Dostoyevsky said, “acts as one whole, with everything in it, conscious or unconscious” was Rosenberg's most consistent ideal.

The individual he most admired, both in himself and in others, was the artist. But only in spite of everything. No one was more alert to the tartufferie that bedevils the world of the artist. Rosenberg craved sincerity with the same kind of passion for it he had found in Dostoyevsky. Art and artifact would not be a substitute for ethics and hard thought. Rosenberg's deepest conviction is revealed in his 1960 essay, “Literary Form and Social Hallucination,” which begins with Dostoyevsky complaining about literature that does not lead to truth. Rosenberg then cites a long passage from the opening of Dostoyevsky's *The Raw Youth*, which Rosenberg says is “a serio-comic pantomime of art pretending to get rid of itself”:

It has suddenly occurred to me to write out word for word all that has happened to me during this last year, simply from an inward impulse, because I am so impressed by all that has happened. I shall simply record the incidents, doing my utmost to exclude everything extraneous, especially all literary graces. The professional writer writes for thirty years, and is quite unable to say at the end why he has been writing . . . I am not a professional writer and don't want to be, and to drag forth into the literary marketplace the utmost secrets of my soul and an artistic description of my feelings I should regard as indecent and contemptible. I foresee, however, with vexation, that it will be impossible to avoid describing feelings altogether, and making reflections (even, perhaps, cheap ones), so corrupting is every sort of literary pursuit . . . I vowed I would eschew all literary graces, and here at the first sentence I am being seduced by them. It seems as if writing sensibly can't be done by simply wanting to.

Since Rosenberg believed that Dostoyevsky's aim was to defeat literature in behalf of revelation, his “recital of facts is inadequate, if not impossible, . . . art will get you if you do watch out.” Dostoyevsky protests that art *has* got him, “but like all anti-artists he is protesting with his tongue in his

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cheek; his attack on 'literary graces' has become a defense of them, because he really wants most of all to create a work of art, though he has a bad conscience about it."

A similarly constituted conscience spurred Rosenberg to meditate on the old aesthetic conundrum of "be" and "seem." His fondest speculations occur in a 1947 essay on *Hamlet* published in *Possibilities*. "Seems, madam! nay, it is; I know not 'seems.'" Like the early moderns whom he deeply admired, from Baudelaire to Jules Laforgue to Max Jacob, Rosenberg was preoccupied with the Hamletism of the age. He extracted from Hamlet's "Seems, madam!" speech the mysterious line "But I have that within which passes show" in order to find again his own dichotomous thread. The concrete presence of what Rosenberg called a "denoted" individual might, in fact, pass beyond the player, and it was the Hamlet who longed to get outside of the big show that most affected Rosenberg. *Hamlet* was the tragedy of a man "who attempted in vain to seize his life as particular to him." The conflict, as Rosenberg saw it, was between art and life. Real art, he hints, conquers the living doubter, provided he can sustain his doubts.

But real art (Rosenberg rarely resorted to fashionable diction and avoided the notion of "authentic" art) is threatened at all times by pedants and con men whom Rosenberg early fingered. Throughout his work he sparred like a boxer, feinting and dodging to avoid submission to systems and false gods. He attacked his fellow intellectuals with great aplomb, sometimes tracking them down to the same lairs to which he himself repaired, such as academe, little magazines, and business consultancies. Here again he kept Dostoyevsky's caveats in mind. In "The Intellectual and His Future" (1965), he pointed out that the intellectual was a type that might show up in any layer of society but under the indispensable condition that he be out of place in it. Dostoyevsky was thinking about the new Russian intelligentsia when he wrote that

everybody segregates himself, keeps aloof from others. . . . Everybody seeks to invent something of his own . . . never before heard of. Everybody begins with his own thoughts and feelings. Everybody strives to start from the beginning. . . . Everybody acts by himself.

This, Rosenberg gibes, has little to do with contemporary intellectuals who replace the lonely rugged individual with "the professor, laboratory specialist, and consultant, heir to the savant and the counselor of kings." These types, organized into a collective caste, will never know what independent, free, speculative thought means. They are worse even than Dostoyevsky's intellectual who, "if he doesn't act, wishes he could act. . . ." "True," Dostoyevsky added, "a great many people are not starting anything and will never start. . . . They stand apart, staring at the empty

spot." Even staring at the empty spot appears to Rosenberg preferable to succumbing to institutionalized intellectualism. What worried him was the increasing surrender to the standards of the mass and its effect on the solitary artist. In 1948 he wrote an essay with the insolent title "The Herd of Independent Minds" in which he defended (earnestly, with none of the sarcasm of his title) the individualist artist from the doctrinaires:

And this art communicates itself as an experience to others, not because one man's experience is the same as other men's, but because each of these others, like the author, is unique to himself and can therefore recognize in his own experience the matchless experience of another human being and even perhaps the presence of some common situation and the operation of some hidden principle.

I suspect that Rosenberg quickly separated himself from the *clerics* when he emerged from college in 1927 with a degree in law. His fondness for artists other than writers was obvious. During the 1930s he had cultivated the company of painters and was the house poet of that downtown Bohemia he later so richly described. He would explain his affection for painters and sculptors by saying that they really differed from intellectuals. He liked them because they were "unkempt" and because they disregarded the signals from *Partisan* and *Hudson* reviews. This romantic view was true. It kept Rosenberg close to the source of what he felt to be real.

The depression years during which every intellectual worth his salt was in some way captive to a Marxist viewpoint did not leave Rosenberg untouched. He knew his Marx. So much so that when Merleau-Ponty prepared the volume *Les Philosophes célèbres*, he invited Rosenberg to write the chapter on Marx. For a boy from Brooklyn whose grandfather was a *schochet* and a *mohel*, and who more than once harked back proudly to his Jewish tradition, the temptations of Marxism were manifold. Justice ranks high in Jewish ethics, and a body of doctrine is always beckoning the serious Jew. But Rosenberg saw Marxism in the light of his own fierce individualism. He thought the vulgar notion of communal wholeness naive and found in Marx what he sought, even if it was a minor note in the magnum opus: "A genuinely human society would be not a supraindividual entity to which all individual members conformed, but one in which, as the young Marx put it, nothing could exist independently of individuals." Rosenberg's independence also made him challenge the materialist conception of history. He once remarked that history will continue to behave like history, that is, it will bring forth everything except what is logically expected of it.

Rosenberg was probably able to resist orthodoxy because of his in-

tense scrutiny of its traps. He had undoubtedly seen his grandfather and the religious Jews of his youth led to the ways that contravened an individual's rights, and he had plenty of time in the 1930s to observe orthodoxy's sinister and comic effects among the local Marxists. He resisted the Marxist pontiffs just as he resisted the rabbis; they drew his fire as much as the posturing aesthetes. I imagine his brief stint as editor of the artists' radical journal *Art Front* terminated because the more naive believers found his intellectual resistance uncomfortable. His natural impatience with chatterers did not exclude even his cohorts on the progressive magazines that hashed and rehashed political theory. When the dangerous doctrinaire years were over, he took the left-wing intellectuals to task in "Breton, A Dialogue" published in *View* in 1942. André Breton had recently launched a call for a "new myth," and Rosenberg has three archetypal leftwing-intellectuals, Rem, Hem, and Shem, seated "in a comfortable room" so unlike the chilly cafeterias that were the sites of so much discourse in the 1930s, analyzing Breton's idea. Hem argues: "We need a new myth and a new communion. Without beliefs man cannot act." Shem, an orthodox Marxist, counters with: "The desire for a new myth is reactionary. Society must be organized by science." Rem offers: "It requires a primordial upheaval, a fundamental revolutionary rejection of the past, and is therefore a matter of feelings and objective conditions, as well as of knowledge." The three ramble on in hopeless circular confusion, shifting positions and becoming practically interchangeable. Rosenberg's contempt for their scholasticism is unmistakable and was probably conditioned by the fact that he himself had long since sided with the visual artists who were by nature disdainful of such exercises.

Rosenberg's concurrence with Tenth Street's Bohemia brought him into the precincts of art criticism in the late 1940s. He continued to write about all the things a man of letters writes about, but his art criticism took on a special life. He found his sources for inspiration in the Romantic literature of the nineteenth century. He read Baudelaire thoroughly and found himself in agreement with him: criticism must be passionate and partial and must recognize the heroism of modern life. On the few occasions when Rosenberg defined the role of the critic, Baudelaire stood in the background. For instance, in "Spectators and Recruiters" of 1967, he wrote: "It is the function of criticism to focus the history of the separate arts upon one history, the history of man, and the insights of the past upon the understanding of the present." After Baudelaire came Paul Valéry whose brilliant, often ironic, questions always inspired Rosenberg and whose art criticism offered endless vistas to a restless, nondoctrinaire spirit. Another beacon was Wallace Stevens whose sensibility refused the standard clichés about the visual arts and who sought in them the sources of his own poetry.

Baudelaire's thirst for the new, so fervently expressed in his poetry

and pervasive in his art criticism, suited Rosenberg's temperament. Rosenberg's profound suspicion of all formulas and formalisms readied him for the shocks the American painters were about to administer to the Western world. Watching de Kooning, Pollock, and Gorky, among others, Rosenberg understood by the early 1940s that something different, something new, was stirring. He knew before anyone that, somehow, the new had to do with the rejection of form as the principal criterion in the creation of a work of art. This was tantamount to the rejection of the most recent tradition in modern art, and Rosenberg understood that the rejection was in itself a reflex of the modern tradition. Octavio Paz argues in *Children of the Mire* that what is characteristic of modern thought is the rejection even of modern thought and comments on the title of Rosenberg's first major book of essays, *The Tradition of the New*:

Although the new may not be exactly the modern—certain novelities are not modern—this title expresses clearly and succinctly the paradox at the root of the art and poetry of our time, the intellectual principle simultaneously justifying and denying them, their nourishment and their poison.

The paradox never failed to excite Rosenberg. In *The Tradition of the New* he set out to trace its convulsive effects throughout American culture and, in the course of his exploration, found that American painters embrace the paradox completely. They were literally beyond orthodoxy because only in that way could they avoid the snares of the powerful modern tradition in painting. Their manifold rejections culminated in what Rosenberg correctly and with remarkable prescience defined as a point of view about existence, a philosophy. They were the artists in American culture who with the most alacrity undertook the risky task of living in the present, unlike the "caste of intellectuals" whom Rosenberg castigates in the same book for refusing the living tradition.

The visual arts elicited some of Rosenberg's raciest prose, perhaps because he wrote to the loft community who would rise to a gag or a raw metaphor but not to a learned disquisition (and also probably *pour emmerder les clercs*). The good professors would surely have blanched at the catchy metaphor he used in "Parable of American Painting." There, Rosenberg called attention to the defeat of Braddock's Redcoats during the American revolution. It occurred, he said, because Braddock expected a *style* of military action which the Americans did not possess. Their opponents, however, the Coonskinners, were in search of the principle that applies, even if it applies only once. Redcoatism, he said, had haunted American painting which, like Braddock, behaved for a long time as if it were elsewhere. A few staunch American artists, however, among them Rosenberg's favorites—Melville, Whitman, Poe,

Eakins, and Ryder—moved with the freedom of the Coonskinners, but it was only after the Second World War that the Coonskinners—those who practiced what Rosenberg called “transformal” art—really took over; the “creative watchword of the new American painting might almost have been adapted from Melville’s ‘So far as I am individually concerned and independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sorts of books which are said to fail.’”

Although Rosenberg got in as close as he could to watch the inner workings of the new American painting, he was essentially a cultural historian, more interested in the broad outlines than the details. Culture was for him everything that was there at any given moment, but also everything that had been there. He was wise enough to know that today’s Coonskinners are tomorrow’s Redcoats. Even so, he had that rare sense (all too rare, we now see) to find the best at any given moment. His broad understanding of the zeitgeist did not rule out his first principle—his jealous Dostoyevskian love for the individual. It came through even in his most celebrated essay, “The American Action Painters,” in which he masterfully laid out the large canvas and sketched the lineaments of the new movement called abstract expressionism and, after Rosenberg’s intervention, “action painting.” To this day it is the best characterization of that odd development in the 1940s and ’50s. In a single short paragraph Rosenberg offered his public a way to think about the new painting that has not been surpassed:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or “express” an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

Like Baudelaire, Rosenberg had a good ear for studio talk. His concision here covers a whole range of preoccupations which artists at that time discussed at length. The notion of a painting’s being an “event” was endemic to the painters Rosenberg most esteemed, above all Willem de Kooning, about whom he would many years later write a fine monograph. It was certainly de Kooning, with whom Rosenberg spent many hours in his Tenth Street loft in the early 1950s, he was describing when he said that “the American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville’s Ishmael took to the sea.” De Kooning, for Rosenberg, was the archetypal individualist whose adventures on the canvas (often begun with a random scribble or a chance letter or number) most resembled Rosenberg’s vision of action painting. He buttressed his argument with a quotation from Wallace Stevens on poetry—that it is “a process of the personality of the poet.” In effect, the new painting, for Rosenberg, had the character of a philosophical ges-



ture having little to do with aestheticism: "The apples weren't brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and color."

A decade later, in *Artworks and Packages*, Rosenberg returned to his speculations about action painting. He was now concerned with "The Concept of Action in Painting"—a slightly different and more challenging problem. He probed his own earlier arguments in order to isolate the strongest philosophic current—one which could transcend, as he said criticism should, the separate arts and cover the experience of the modern individual. He once again argued that action painting implied a repudiation of aesthetics as an objective (in the same quasi-ironical sense Dostoyevsky had repudiated aesthetics) and that *modern* modern art—art since the World Wars—"arises from the conviction that the forms of Western culture, including its art forms, have permanently collapsed." In this relative wasteland, the *modern* modern poet or painter "picks his way among the bits and pieces of the cultural heritage and puts together whatever seems capable of carrying a meaning." The action painter puts it together in an original way. He asserts an action and "observes what kind of image it will magnetize out of the formal accretions piled up in his mind. He is a kind of archeologist, one who digs in himself, not just among art movements."

Such art Rosenberg had long since designated "transformational," and its product, he said with unusual pessimism, is only a fragment. Going further, he maintained that human action is primarily form making: "It is the common denominator that animates work, combat, and sign language." In an explanation that faintly echoes Poe's "Marginalia," Rosenberg says that if someone asks him a question his answer will come from the surface of his mind. But if he starts to write the answer, or to paint it, or to act it out, the answer changes. The materials—words, paint, or gesture—become the means for reaching new depths, for unveiling the unexpected. Therefore, from the action painter's first gesture, "what he seeks is not a sign representing a hidden self, the unconscious, but an event out of which a self is formed, as it is formed out of other kinds of actions when those actions are free and sufficiently protracted." In a 1966 essay, "Virtuosos of Boredom," he assayed still another definition: "Action Painting was an attempt to overcome the individual's loss of identity by concentrating on the act of creation and self-creation as the exclusive content of painting." For Rosenberg, Shakespeare's idea that the play's the thing was never surpassed.

In 1967, Rosenberg became the art critic for the *New Yorker*. His intense concentration then on the visual arts resulted in most of his subsequent books, although he made time to write numerous other essays on literature, politics, and culture which far exceeded the narrow confines of the New York art world. In 1969, for instance, he published a keen analysis of the term "avant-garde" which, he said, subsists in a

modernist universe of psychic states, forces, and processes. The avant-garde artist is committed (and condemned, he implies) to the condition of ephemerality. "What seems to the ordinary mind solid fact is with the avant-gardist infiltrated with process." He must always change his act and always seek the attention and patronage of the bourgeoisie. The avant-gardes are actors in the bourgeois drama and, as such, are fated to live on an ephemeral plane. The strenuous requirement that it call attention to itself inevitably scuttles the value of an avant-garde work: "The result in every case is a dilution of the movement and a dulling of its edge. In the last analysis, all modern art movements are movements toward mediocrity." After this judgment that certainly did not endear him to the pundits of avant-gardism, Rosenberg returned to his abiding theme: that the inevitable movement to mediocrity might explain "why most advanced thinkers, writers, and artists of the past century and a half . . . preferred to function *on the fringe of the avant-garde*." Among those he honors with this thought are Marx, Rimbaud, van Gogh, Picasso, Klee, and Kafka.

Responding to the artificial floriation of movements during the 1960s, Rosenberg rushed about the contemporary scene, scanning it for signs and, above all, for weaknesses which he relentlessly exposed. Against the well-organized brouhaha around the fabricated movements, particularly in the visual arts, he set up his defense of the fringe figures whom he regarded as the real artists. They, unlike the generation of the 1960s, did not indulge in learned exegeses of their own work. They rested in the poetic world that Rosenberg most admired. "Every artist is in a sense a primitive, a *naïf* as Baudelaire thought of him, *ce civilisé édénique* as Mallarmé called the poet." They resist packaging. Such real artists needed to be defended from the packagers, and art itself needed to be defended from "its mass of fabricated doubles." He watched all the so-called new movements, from earthworks and conceptualism to minimalism, and commented on them, seeing them as part of the restless avant-garde which he associated with the antiart tradition. The epitome of the antiart tradition was the Dada period during the First World War. The difference between the historic Dada enterprise and what Rosenberg referred to as "the current fundamentalists" was in the way they treated the spectator: "Instead of goading him into indignation at the desecration of art, the new Dada converts him into an aesthete."

On this point Rosenberg was adamant. He attacked with his sharpest stiletos the professorial critics whose prolix pedantry tended to aestheticize experiences that Rosenberg knew should be richer and more profound. In some of his sallies he deliberately invoked the pungent vulgarity of the ad man in order to make sure that no one would mistake him for one of the good gray professors.

By the time he published *The De-Definition of Art* in 1972, Rosenberg had built up a lot of steam at the *New Yorker* and was ready to take on all

comers. He again castigated the critical packagers in "Art and Words" after having acknowledged the necessity of writing about art: "A contemporary painting or sculpture is a species of centaur—half art materials, half words." The problem is that contemporary criticism goes about it in the wrong way since "instead of deriving principles from what it sees, it teaches the eye to 'see' principles." The 1960s, as *he* saw them, were spoiled by the heavy pedagogical stress, which was hardly to his taste. For all that, he was able to make pertinent comments on several of the artists who emerged then, among them Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Claes Oldenburg. In fact, he showed surprising sympathy with Oldenburg whom he saw as the most imaginative and perhaps the most significant artist to have surfaced during the decade. Judd and Morris posed other problems. Rosenberg saw that they were engaged in the struggle to de-aestheticize art—an activity he could hardly oppose since he had believed for so long that art must be more than sheer aesthetics. But he felt they went to futile extremes: "Despite the stress on the actuality of materials used, the principle common to all classes of de-aestheticized art is that the finished product, if any, is of less significance than the procedures that brought the work into being of which it is the trace." While he never explicitly stated it, Rosenberg believed in the artists who never quite succeeded in de-aestheticizing art, who more or less took the ironic position and, in spite of everything, did guard the object, the product of their process, with considerable passion.

Finally, it was passion that stirred Rosenberg and brought out his deepest sympathies. In an early (1947) essay in which he discusses Jewishness (and it must be said that he most emphatically did not wish to be segregated in his Jewishness from the big stage), he evinced profound respect for certain Jewish traditions that lingered in him:

Jewish passion illuminates the inescapable particularity and concreteness of existence. It is hopelessly at odds with the neutral arrangements of good sense, but one may see in it some of the wonderful gifts of unreason by which great peoples and classes give life to what truly concerns them.

With wit, exuberance, and passion, Rosenberg had given life to what truly concerned him.