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# Louis le Brocquy's Philosophical *Navigatio*

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**Louis le Brocquy's Philosophical *Navigation***  
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Louis le Brocquy is probably the most celebrated Irish artist of the last century, and the commendations received on the celebration of his ninetieth birthday in 2006, including numerous exhibition retrospectives worldwide, and an RTE *Arts Lives* documentary dedicated to his life and work, confirm this estimation. Since the 1970s, an important aspect of his work has been the portrait heads series, which is a collection of paintings of famous artistic figures that includes Shakespeare, W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce and Bono, amongst others. Le Brocquy's heads are not traditional portraits. On the contrary, they conglomerate several images of the subject, often from different stages of life, into one painting. Moreover, the representation is not realistic but an attempt to represent both the outer image of the subject and his inner psychological world. Speaking of the portraits he states 'I have encouraged differing and sometimes contradictory images to emerge spontaneously' (le Brocquy 2006, 22).

This chapter will examine le Brocquy's portrait heads and his travellers series, arguing that they illustrate the Derridean undecidable: that which cannot conform to either polarity of a dichotomy. By exploring the relationship between the artist and French philosophers Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan, I will show how the portraits and paintings encourage exploration of the dualities of public perception and subjective reality; psychological and physical worlds; objective time and time as perceived by consciousness; and self and other: the other in the self, in culture and the artist as other.

Further, I will suggest that le Brocquy's heads epitomise Ireland's postmodern condition because they have no fixed, stable anchoring point. As le Brocquy states, because of photography and psychology, we can no longer portray the human being as static. Consequently 'a portrait can no longer be the stable pillared entity of Renaissance vision' (Le Brocquy 1996, 15). What emerges instead is the collapse of objective and subjective realities, across time and space, onto each other, in a manner that demands philosophical, as well as artistic, examination.

Undecidability is a concept that Derrida elaborates in order to express the impossibility of defining one aspect of a dualism without its necessary incorporation of the other aspect, often its opposite. The idea returns in Derrida's work in many different guises, such as pharmakon, hymen, and spectre. For example, Derrida's thoughts on ghosts and haunting play on the relationship between the spirit (*Geist*) and the spectre (*Gespenst*) (Derrida 2006, 156). The spirit of the individual and his or her ghost seem mutually exclusive: spectres are normally thought of as appearing after a person has died and their spirit has been extinguished. However, Derrida insists on the mutual dependency of the two terms. He states that, 'The spectre is *of the spirit*, it participates in the latter and stems from it even as it follows it as a ghostly double' (Derrida 2006, 156-7). Similarly, the spirit cannot signify without a spectre, because, as Saussure argued, meaning is differential and not integral to any one sign. The source of meaning is undecidable between the two terms, because both are necessary. Indeed, the spirit, as spectre's opposite, is itself haunted by its alternate meaning, because it can also mean ghost or revenant. This idea is transposed by Derrida onto the concept of being itself. He argues that every ontology (being) necessitates a hauntology: syntagmatic and paradigmatic signifiers through which the ontological entity is defined. He states, 'To

haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time' (Derrida 2006, 202).

Le Brocquy's inspiration for the portrait heads series is traced back to what he calls a 'blind year' (Le Brocquy 2006, 17), a year in which artistic inspiration was lacking. His wife, the painter Anne Madden, encouraged him to visit Paris, in the hope of stimulating ideas for new work. While there, he observed at the Musée de l'Homme the Polynesian image of the human head, which represented for him, as his own heads do, 'the mysterious box which contains the spirit: the outer reality of the invisible interior world of consciousness' (Le Brocquy 2006, 17-18). In these portraits, le Brocquy attempts to bring together two opposed facets of the self: the visible, tangible, physical head and the invisible, intangible, metaphysical mind. Like Derrida's spirit and spectre, there is an undecidability between the two: without a physical casing, there could be no consciousness, no thoughts, no subjectivity; without consciousness, without a brain to send signals to the heart to beat, the lungs to breathe, the mouth to eat, the physical self would die and the physical casing would dematerialise. Rather than seeing the two aspects of the self as radically different, to the extent that it is impossible to represent the two in one image, le Brocquy's portraits attempt to present the human head in both its aspects. In the past, portrait painters represented that which was visible, presumably hoping to evoke aspects of their subject's consciousness through the representation of their physicality. Le Brocquy paints that which is visible *and* that which is ordinarily invisible. Through the translucent colours, the dashes of red which seem to connote muscle, tissue, and blood beneath the skin, the viewer gets a sense of looking at and into the head simultaneously. For le Brocquy, art has the capacity to

inspire this alternative way of seeing, and to this end, he quotes from William Blake's poem 'There is No Natural Religion' that 'Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception' (Blake 2000, 42). Blake and le Brocquy share a sense that seeing, touching or hearing are only the physical elements of human perceptions. The paintings of both encourage the viewer to look not only with their eyes, but with their imaginations. Blake stated that 'The Nature of My Work is Visionary or Imaginative' (Abrams 2000, 37). So too is Le Brocquy's. In fact, le Brocquy even presents art interpretation as an irreducible tension between its two necessary components: the ability to see (vision) and the ability to see beyond (visionary). He states 'I think of the art of painting as another way of seeing, another approach to reality – another porthole' (le Brocquy 2006, 14).

Le Brocquy's portraits do not only traverse the conventional boundaries between the physical and metaphysical dimensions of humanness, they also cross the boundaries of time as they are ordinarily conceived of in portrait painting. Instead of capturing his subject at a particular moment, le Brocquy's method involves melding images of his subjects from various points in life into the portrait, so that the ontology of the subject as it appears in the portrait is visually haunted by a variety of past images of that individual. In this way, le Brocquy's portraits again attempt to represent consciousness. The consciousness of an individual at one moment in time, his or her mode of thinking and sense of self, is shaped and moulded by past experiences, and conversely, past experiences are retroactively re-narrated and re-worked in light of present circumstances. The past acts on the present through *après coup*, or deferred action. As Lacan states, history as experienced by the individual is not a chronological set of events but rather 'the present synthesis of the past' (Lacan 1987, 36). Le Brocquy

describes how this sense of the contemporaneousness of various 'pasts' is brought about in his paintings of Yeats:

The successive factual appearances of each one of us are necessarily dissimilar, since each one of us has many layers, many aspects and none more than Yeats. In the one hundred studies towards an image of W.B. Yeats...I therefore tried as uncritically as I could to allow different aspects of Yeats' head to emerge...in the hope of discovering a more immediate image – still and free of circumstance – underlying the ever-changing aspect of this phenomenal Irishman (le Brocquy 2006, 22-3)

This concept of time is linked with Yeats' 'circular lunar system of reincarnation' (le Brocquy 2006, 20) and the circular time of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* that forever returns upon itself (Le Brocquy 2006, 18). But, in relation to the portrait heads, it is also, and perhaps most importantly, a representation of the mechanics of memory in consciousness itself; a representation of the fact that we do not remember the past in a linear way, or even as a jumbled assortment of separate images, thoughts and feelings. Rather, past memories react with and act on each other, and concurrently, these changeable memories are continually re-processed by the mind in light of present conditions. Le Brocquy relates this to the concepts of emergence and disappearance, which he sees as 'twin concepts of time'. According to him, 'one implies the other and... the state or matrix within which they co-exist dissolves the normal sense of time' (le Brocquy 2006, 19). Emergence and disappearance are also related to art, because le Brocquy believes that he allows images to emerge from the canvas itself rather than transferring them from his mind, referring to images in painting as *objets trouvés*. Consequently, it seems that painting, and perhaps art in general, may be a privileged mode for allowing conscious time to be expressed.

Richard Kearney, in his article dealing with the crossover between the artistic endeavours of Joyce and le Brocquy, points to inclusivity and inconclusivity as central connections between their work. Hauntings of the past in the present, presented without hierarchy or centre-point is seen to be the common feature. He states, 'le Brocquy's 120 studies towards an image of Joyce perfectly epitomize this multifaceted (*sic*) dissemination. These studies are incorrigibly inconclusive, no single image being capable or privileged isolation, because Joyce's own logos is an interminable navigatio or odyssey' (Kearney 1987, 32). This sense of a journey without end is obviously true of the number of studies of individual subjects, but also in the sense that each one is a conglomeration of the subject at different moments in life, showing his interior and exterior aspects. However, to take note of this feature of le Brocquy's work only insofar as it corresponds with Joyce, fails to do justice to the importance of this philosophical and artistic dissembling of spatiality and temporality. On the subject of identity and its temporal dimension, le Brocquy's artistic philosophy is also very much in line with Derrida. For Derrida too, identity is never still for long enough to be captured or defined, although he argues that it has proven necessary historically to think in this way, otherwise the endless change and variation within individuals would make discussion about whole societies impossible. That there are any stable identities is a lie we must sometimes tell ourselves because to do otherwise would be impractical. The difficulty is that this necessary lie becomes naturalized, so that over time, it masquerades as the truth without detection. Because of the necessity of thinking in terms of stable identities, Derrida states that 'I would interpret identity as an artefact that I take very seriously, while trying to avoid its naturalisation or even ontologization. This means that there *is* no identity, there is only identification or self-identification *as a process*' (Derrida 2003,

25). Lacan makes a similar point about identity, which he describes through the metaphor of the grammatical phenomenon of the future anterior, in which the speaker refers to past, present and future simultaneously. For example, the sentence 'In decades to come le Brocquy will have been the pre-eminent 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish artist' conforms to the future anterior. Lacan explains this process of identity formation, and its pan-temporal characteristic, as follows: '[w]hat is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming' (Lacan 1989, 94).

The difference between the stable identity projected onto an individual and the fluidity experienced by the subject relates to another dualism that le Brocquy challenges: that of interiority and exteriority. For Derrida, the relation between an entity's inside and its outside is one of supplementarity: each is the supplement of the other. The fact that every entity requires a supplement to make it complete, means that the supplement does not provide full 'presence' for the entity, but rather underscores the absence at its heart. The address that Stephen writes for himself in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a good example of this logic: 'Stephen Dedalus, Class of Elements, Clongowes Wood College, Sallins, County Kildare, Ireland, Europe, The World, The Universe' (Joyce 1992, 15-16). He defines himself in ever-widening circles because each place needs something else to give it full meaning or full presence as Derrida says. So it is with le Brocquy's representations of the head's inside as well as outside in his paintings. He imagines the human head as a 'box which holds the spirit prisoner, but which may also free it transparently in the face' (le Brocquy 2006, 23). The cranium, the skull, holds the subject's consciousness and supports its mask of skin:



with these two elements to control the rest of the body, there seems to be no need for another to sustain identity. Yet, le Brocquy's statement implies the presence of another – for it to be known that an individual's spirit is freed in his or her face, another pair of eyes must be present.

Here, it is clear that the portrait heads are ruled by the logic of supplementarity. That which is inside the human head, experienced by the subject, is not enough to sustain consciousness: it must be supplemented by another person's gaze, who recognises the individual, and through differentiation, allows the individual to recognise his or her own subjectivity. Le Brocquy claims that his portrait heads are an attempt to, if not paint consciousness, then to acknowledge or 'recognise' this dimension of subjectivity: 'Clearly, it is not possible to paint the spirit. You cannot paint consciousness. You start with the knowledge we all have that the most significant human reality lies beneath material appearance. So, in order to recognise this, to touch this as a painter, I try to paint the head image from the inside out' (le Brocquy 1992, 13). It is this consciousness that requires the supplement of another to know itself. Lacan too, like Derrida, acknowledges the necessity for the supplement of the other in order to acquire identity. For him, the need for another is thought of as a question; a plea. He states, 'What constitutes me as a subject is my question. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me' (Lacan 1989, 94).

The way in which the arbitrary division of the interior and exterior of the human head is deconstructed in le Brocquy's work is given an added dimension when the role of the painter as creator and/or discoverer of the artistic image is considered. For le Brocquy, the face functions as 'at once a mask which hides the spirit and a revelation of

this spirit' (le Brocquy 2006, 24). Just as le Brocquy's representation of the action of the past on the composition of his portraits reflects the mechanics of memory in the conscious and unconscious, so too does his concept of the face as that which, concealed and revealed, reflects the psychoanalytic view of how the subject is structured. According to Lacan, the human mind has three distinct parts: the imaginary, symbolic and real. The symbolic represents the socializing force at work on the individual through moral codes and cultural worldview. Language is both the channel through which these mores are transmitted and itself the ultimate structuring force on the individual. The imaginary is the realm of illusory identifications that is catalysed in the mirror phase. Representing the whole, unfragmented self that exists before language has been acquired by the child, is the real. The loss of the real causes a split in the subject, between the undivided self that is submerged out of conscious perception when the child accedes to language and the laws that go with it, and the symbolic self constructed by and through language; the identity given to the subject by the collective symbolic community. From this perspective, the social self may be the mask that le Brocquy refers to, and the real, the revelation of that self, which may be glimpsed through his artistic depiction. This, perhaps, is what he refers to as the "whatness" of the image', which is 'the essence of the art of painting' (le Brocquy 2006, 16).

However, le Brocquy also characterizes the subjects of his portraits as other: completely alien to the self, as well as a reflection of self. As he states, 'In this sense, you peer at this Other, searching for a larger image of yourself' (le Brocquy 2006, 24). That a painting can be a parallel and opposite of the self at once may seem paradoxical, but in this case too, le Brocquy's thinking is reflected in Derrida's, for whom there is

always an otherness within the self – in fact, this may be the self’s defining feature.

According to Derrida,

A culture is different from itself; language is different from itself; the person is different from itself. Once you take into account this inner and outer difference, then you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity (Derrida 2001, 13).

Within the self, this otherness may well be the unconscious, what was referred to in Freud’s time as the stranger in the house. Like Derrida, le Brocquy attempts to bring together both aspects of the mind, conscious and unconscious, showing that the self is part of the other, and crucially, that the other is part of the self, evident in his assertion that ‘the painter continually tends to paint his self-portrait in all things’ (le Brocquy 2006, 26). Le Brocquy summarises his artistic philosophy of seeing beyond, being visionary; his attentiveness to otherness, both external and internal, and the function of art in creating representations of both of these, when he says: ‘In the context of our everyday lives, painting must be regarded as an entirely different form of awareness, for an essential quality of art is its alienation, its otherness. In art at most profound level, actuality – exterior reality – is seen to be relevant, parallel, but remote or curiously dislocated’ (le Brocquy 2005). For le Brocquy, not only the painter or the subject, but art itself is a mode of otherness, in its relation to reality.

In his many paintings of the travelling community, le Brocquy espouses an awareness of a culture’s difference from itself that Derrida recognizes, situating travellers as both part of Irish culture and also radically different from it. Yvonne Scott writes that ‘the very earthiness of the lifestyle, the seeming closeness to nature and lack of inhibition, placed the Travellers at the furthest remove from the mundane trappings

of settled life' (Scott 2006, 11). Le Brocquy himself refers to the travelling community as 'outcasts in society' (le Brocquy 2006a, 14). His travellers series can be regarded as representing the other of Irish society and he was careful to respect this otherness in his dealing with them, even to preserve it. In answer to speculations that he lived with the travelling community for a time, he responds, 'I learned almost immediately that I should not become intimate with them – not try to become one of them, as it were' (le Brocquy qtd. in Scott 2006, 12). Here we see le Brocquy embracing social and cultural otherness, as he embraces the otherness of the self in his portrait heads series. Scott suggests an analogy between the travellers' 'outsider' status and le Brocquy's position as a painter in Ireland. He came to the craft with no formal training, and in attempting to paint in a modernist style he was alienated to a degree by the conservative Irish art establishment. There can be no question that socially and economically le Brocquy was far more privileged than the subjects of his traveller paintings, but in terms of the artist, not the man, there is a correlation between the two. It begins with his view of the traveller and the artist as 'other' of society and plunges, internally, to the otherness within the self, encapsulated in his portrait heads. Perhaps this is why he states that, "For me the Travelling People represented, dramatically perhaps, the human condition" (le Brocquy qtd. in Crookshank 1967, 8).

Le Brocquy goes a step further when he associates this otherness with divinity. In a typically deconstructive gesture, in his travellers series le Brocquy presented the traditionally-conceived primitivism of the travellers as a form of divinity. Many traveller figures from the series are depicted with roughly triangular faces, an idea inspired by the faces of the Apostles on the Celtic High Cross in Moone, Co. Kildare (Scott 2006, 15-16). That an individual or group should be associated with the divine

power of creation resonates strongly with the work of the artist, through which a glimpse of transcendence may emerge from the hands of a human rooted in the immanent. This theme is given substance in the painting *Man Creating Bird*, which has been described as ‘the culmination of the *Tinker* series’ (Smith 1997, 28). Its carnivalesque quality may be derived from the subject’s similarity to a puppeteer. A string is visible that trails from his right hand to the figure of the bird, which he holds in his left. In the lower left-hand corner, an object that could be a cracked egg-shell seems to defy the title of the painting, which describes man as the bird’s creator. It is possible then, that we can read this painting as indicative of *desire* for divinity; the fleeting glimpses of it within humanity, rather than its possession.

It is unsurprising that travellers should be a metaphor for the creator, who is a metaphor for the artist. For le Brocquy, it may be the concept of being an outsider that enables such a connection between these three concepts. Scott claims that travellers can be regarded as ‘closest to the fundamentals of existence which have spawned the originary myths of creation, procreation and death’ (Scott 2006, 11). I would argue that it is the travellers’ liminality that connects them to religious myths: Jesus, after all, was an outsider in his own time: a man of little means, from an ordinary family, whose very divinity alienated him in the most extreme way, from human life itself. Adam and Eve, similarly, became outsiders on their banishment from Eden, displaced because of their desire for knowledge. Le Brocquy’s tapestry, *Adam and Eve in the Garden*, shows Eve picking a piece of fruit from the tree, with Adam looking on, and suggests the couple’s impending isolation with the ominous black swirls in the right-hand background. This desire for knowledge is equated with a desire for divinity in the biblical story. The serpent tells Eve about the tree of knowledge, saying, ‘in the day ye eat thereof, then

your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be Gods' (*Genesis* 3:5). The artist, and art itself, is necessarily other to society and reality, respectively. This otherness is seen by le Brocquy to be necessary for divinity, or, in secular terms, transcendence, such as that invoked by art.

It is possible that le Brocquy regards his traveller figures as providing an appropriate symbol for the inevitable otherness of the human condition, because he believes that the implosion of ontological binaries like those of past and present, interior and exterior selves, was, historically, part of the Celtic tradition which he has inherited. Speaking of his work in relation to that of Joyce and Yeats, le Brocquy presents the collapse of ontological binaries, mirrored in his own art, as distinctively Celtic: 'Is this indeed the underlying ambivalence which we in Ireland continue to stress; the continual presence of the historic past, the indivisibility of birth and funeral, spanning the apparent chasm between past and present, between consciousness and fact?' (le Brocquy 2006, 152). Although le Brocquy situates his artistic philosophy in Celtic tradition and history, he seems to have anticipated a cultural movement, as his attitudes have more in common with postmodern Ireland than they do with the Celtic past. His emphasis on difference as opposed to unity, and diversity as opposed to uniformity, resonates with the more liberal, more fragmented, but more heterogeneous culture which now characterizes the Irish nation.

Through exploring the philosophical implications of le Brocquy's portrait heads series, his deconstructive approach to self and other, the other within the self, and the other in Irish culture, is evident. His undecidable dualities of interiority and exteriority, hauntology and ontology are echoed in Derrida's deconstruction, and his views on consciousness, identity as a process, and the divergence between conscious time and

real time resonate with both Lacan and Derrida. In his portrait heads series and travellers series, he allows the viewer to participate in his expedition into the self, his discoveries about the temporally and constitutionally multifaceted nature of the internal world, and how that world relates to the world outside, in terms of art, society and culture. While Joyce's Homeric journey was a literary one, le Brocquy's 'heroic voyage' his 'navigatio' is both artistic and philosophical (le Brocquy 2006, 29).

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