Interwar Picasso Criticism

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Leiris’s text, as we’ll see, was unusual in its resistance to the idealist données of the discourse. Yet even at the outset, at this pitch of self-mockery, it rehearses certain genre conventions. There’s the assumption of genius for one, near-universal among critics at the time, and not without reason, since Picasso appeared to enact received theories of genius, whether ancient, Romantic or pseudo-scientific. (He could find special resemblances; he was a “natural” artist who had been a child prodigy; he was original and exemplary, and never explained his work; his imagery seemed mad, or at least anxious.) A topos also recurred of the otherness to discourse of Picasso’s practice. For Leiris, the flipside of the latter topos was a pious logorrhoea that sentenced criticism to death by droning. This warning against cant was no joke. Some interwar writing about Picasso was overtly theological. Leiris had in his sights mostly theology of a covert kind, both in relation to discursive obeisance before a God-like creator, and to the predominantly idealist aesthetics “(plastic, poetic, metaphysical, etc.)” of post-war Parisian modernism and avant-garde. The Documents group’s attacks on Surrealism for its idealism and religiosity are well known, and sure enough Leiris targets André Breton’s fantastical construction of Picasso in Sur-realist and Painting (published in book form in 1928). But Leiris denounces all current Picasso criticism on the grounds of servility and sublimation. To translate Picasso onto a metaphysical plane, Leiris argues, is to disown the maximally actual in his work— to deny its human REALITY. Picasso “holds himself on an equal footing with all things, treating them as familiarly as possible”; homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto is his motto— including the nonhuman. One must then speak of him in human language, rather than enshrine him on a plinth “like that funereal horror known as a ‘great man’,” like a “demi-god”— not least since his exceptional “vitality and mobility” elude such fixation.

The contradiction between idealism and materialism— always already primary in the picture—is the grandest
contradiction in a reception beset with contradictions. Leiris would seem to adopt an anti-idealist position, which is perhaps all one might hope for within discourse, but his expanded humanism remains anthropocentric, centered on Picasso the artist, at the center of the universe of things. Picasso’s universality was a common topos, and in fact there is a parallelism between Leiris’s down-to-earth Picasso and the transcendental individual spirit or author-function that Zervos affirmed as the governing unity of Picasso’s heterogeneous (over)production. As Christopher Green has recently shown, Picasso helped to reinforce this author-function, collaborating on its historiographical construction. After the 1926 arrival of Cahiers d’art, which became Picasso’s principal conduit of reproduction, from the late 1920s onwards Picasso began dating almost all his drawings and paintings to the day of completion. At around the same time, he and Zervos were planning a comprehensive catalogue of the oeuvre as a diachronic totality. To constitute the oeuvre was to constitute an author, in this case as a historical, biographical, even diaristic subject unfolding through time. The first volume of the catalogue appeared in 1932, just prior to the great retrospective, curated by Picasso, at the Galeries Georges Petit. As usual, Picasso was perverse, installing an achronological hang that collaged together works painted thirty years apart, dramatising the oeuvre as heterogeneous. Again, Leiris’s call for an unmediated, “absolutely direct, frank, spontaneous, naive” Picasso criticism, was utopian. But it remains provocative, and indeed its very insistence on Picasso’s humanity—that he was a real human being—rupts the mythism and metaphysical speculation rife in the contemporaneous Picasso criticism. To triangulate this field it might be helpful to bring in another text that demonstrates a metacritical sense of its position within the genre, from the same historical moment but the other end of the ideological spectrum. Pablo Picasso, the 1930 monograph by Eugenio d’Ors, the conservative Catalan critic and one-time associate of the artist, is a paragon of reactionary idealism. If Leiris celebrated Picasso’s “mobility,” then d’Ors disavowed it. Both at the macro level of the oeuvre and the micro level of the artwork, he postulated an essence of fixity. Picasso’s “vocation and work” were absolved “even from Time itself”; his “speculations,” whether Cubist or Neoclassical, approached the mathematical, to the point, in a version of Zeno’s paradox, of “radically excluding movement,” and, “along with movement, all change, all flux, all evolution.” D’Ors was seeking nothing less than to absolve the production from (fallen) materiality. The myths, the figurations, the analyses of Picasso are more than innocent; they are not merely anterior to sin, but inapt for any possibility of sinning. They are not chastened like an animal or a plant, but like a nebula or a star. They do not belong by any means to the Garden of Paradise, but to the Heaven of Astronomy. Their God is not a bearded Jehovah, however majestic and resplendent you like to make Him, but a triangle, only just centered by an eye. The symbol of the Enlightenment deity “only just” contacts the human, where the all-seeing eye joins that of the artist, raised into a sphere of Pythagorean geometry as a talisman against history. This identification between the artist and the Great Architect of the Universe oversees an implausible answer to the multiplicity of the production, whereby d’Ors segments its “architecture” of “spirit” into four categories, four “political symbols of the four structural types which repeat and distribute themselves” throughout the oeuvre: “Republic,” “Monarchy,” “Empire,” “Confederation.” D’Ors’s statist formulation of artistic authority seems to be unique, though his rhetoric of ascension, eternity and “obedience to exclusively artistic laws of the plastic order” echoes some modernist interpreters of Cubism, such as Maurice Raynal. Inevitably, the argument founders on its object’s insubordination, as d’Ors bemoans Picasso’s unruly habit of contradicting “those traits of heroic intellect” that have “raised him to a plane of serene majesty.” Confined to the positive claims it makes about Picasso, d’Ors’s text would be a merely curious footnote in the prosody of reactionary modernism. More useful are the negative qualifications with which d’Ors begins his argument. Under the heading, “WHAT PICASSO IS NOT,” d’Ors rejects three thematics in the critical reception: first, that Picasso is an “advanced painter”; second, that Picasso is a “Spanish painter”; his style determined by his “racial” character; third, that Picasso is not a painter but “someone more like a general reformer, a revolutionary or prophet, if not a necromancer
or a wizard, practised in the alembics of some marvelous occult science. D’Ors negates the first thematic in a move cognate with his resistance to historical or temporal movement per se; in particular he means to rescue Picasso from modernity and the avant-garde. The second thematic indexes the ethnic determinism active in Western art criticism between the wars, but also opens more generally onto that modern hermeneutic by which style expresses character (or biography). The third describes a “magic” coding that overlaps with avant-garde motifs on the one hand, and racist stereotypes on the other. It’s a rough sketch, from a prejudiced standpoint, but it serves as a map of the critical terrain.

Variants of what d’Ors termed the “accusation of magic” penetrated every level of the reception. Critics placed Picasso’s agency along a continuum that ran from the Hermetic mage or alchemist, through the cabalist, to the black magician or sorcerer. The figures of the Oriental, the Jew and the Black lurked close by, consistent with 19th- and 20th-century uses of “magic” as a term of exclusion, by which Western modernity policed its cultural, rational and historical identity. Freud’s location in Totem and Taboo of magical thinking (“the omnipotence of thoughts”) in the psychology of “savages,” children and neurotics, exemplifies this operation. At the same time, Picasso’s career coincided with the genealogy of aesthetic esotericism that ran from the French occult revival of the late 19th century, through Symbolism, to Surrealism.

In a 1905 essay collected in Les Peintres cubistes, Apollinaire had famously used the vocabulary of this aesthetic esotericism to poeticize Picasso’s early work, where the “consciousness of the demi-gods of Egypt” presided over the “mute rites” of the saltimbanques, and Harlequin was androgynous, “neither male nor female.” (The hermaphrodite—the prototypical monster of modern teratology—is a stock neoplatonic or hermetic symbol of perfection; compare the 1924 Washington Harlequin Musician [fig. 1], with his vaginal eye.) Similarly, in the poem “Crepuscule,” Apollinaire’s syncratic formulation, “Arlequin trismégiste,” recruited Hermes Trismegistos, the Thrice-Great, mythical Egyptian founder of the hermetic tradition of mysticism and magic, to inaugurate an association between Picasso and hermeticism or alchemy. Les Peintres cubistes and Alcools were excerpted and republished between the wars, and Picasso critics often called upon Apollinaire’s posthumous authority. Surveying Picasso’s career in L’Esprit nouveau in 1920, André Salmon repeated the trope of the “Harlequin-magician,” exclaiming, in parenthesis, “(Arlequin trismégiste, O Guillaume!).” It should be noted that Apollinaire’s syncretism imparts an Orientalist magic to Harlequin. Concurrent with their interest in hermeticism, the Surrealists co-opted the figure of Picasso the alchemist.

In Cahiers d’art in 1926, Robert Desnos apostrophized:

Picasso, alchemist whose laughter corresponds to painting itself, I am sure that you discovered the philosophical stone long ago. Raymond Lulle would decipher without effort the fundamental mysteries you formulate on your canvases.

The medieval Catalan alchemist Ramón Lull was a Surrealist favorite—in Surrealism and Painting André Breton compared both Max Ernst and Man Ray to this Christian cabalist. (Cabalist being the Jewish tradition of sacred mysticism and magic.) Lull’s quest for a pan-religious code for the divine meant that he stood for cosmic gnostics, although otherwise he was a strange surrealist hero, noted for his mission to convert the Muslims. The devout Christianity of the alchemical texts consulted
by the Surrealists points to the theological residue in Surrealist mysticism.17 On the other hand Lull was known for his extraordinary acquisition of Arabic. Part of the critical troping of Picasso’s painting as magic lay in a sense that it was an alien language, extending the lexis of incomprehension that Jeffrey Weiss has identified in pre-war responses to Cubism.18 As we’ll see, critics reified Picasso’s problematic in his supposedly Semitic—Arab or Jewish—heredity. The oft-repeated code-word, cabalistique, imbricates with a cultural Othering of Picasso as Hebraic. With regard to the figurative meaning of “black magic,” the contemporaneous Larousse du XXe siècle states: “Something unintelligible,” as in, “I don’t understand it at all, it’s BLACK MAGIC!” A signal case of the ambiguity between obscure and occult meaning is the use of the epithet “hermetic” to denote analytic Cubism—a convention that arose in the 1920s. In fact, as Ernst Gombrich stressed, historical magic symbols operated by means of apophatic incomprehensibility, through the effects on contemplation of contradiction and the excessive “open sign”, that is to say, a sign with indeterminate meaning.19 The lapis philosophorum or Philosopher’s Stone mentioned by Desclos is the elusive telos of the Great Work of alchemical transmutation, the magical essence that transforms base matter into the ideal. Similarly, in 1935, André Breton described Picasso’s poetry as performing an alchemical sublimation, a process of “purification and, so to speak, decanting.”20 In the first 1925 instalment of Surrealism and Painting—which reproduced the 1924 Harlequin (fig. 2)—Breton recast Picasso’s studio as the laboratory of an alchemist or magician:

From the laboratory open to the sky there will continue to escape at nightfall divinely strange beings, dancers dragging fragments of marble mantelpieces behind them, adorably laden tables beside which your table-turning counts for nothing as [...]. It has been said that there could be no such thing as surrealist painting, Painting, literature—what are they to us, O Picasso, you who have carried to its farthest point the spirit, no longer of contradiction, but of evasion!21

Breton’s answer to Pierre Naville’s scepticism about the possibility of Surrealist painting is to imagine Picasso overcoming the apparent contradiction between writing and painting—superseding, indeed, all material contradiction—by achieving the transmutation of matter into spirit.22 Picasso outspiritualizes the spiritualists, vectoring his practice towards a celestial ideal of “perfect resolution, of ideal reduction”; his Cubism is a revelation of “the enchanting vapors of what is still unknown,” where “those things that are and those things that are not” are suffused “with the same light and the same hallucinatory shadow.”23

The Cubist moment of “ideal reduction” anticipates the infamous “certain point” of Breton’s Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1930), at which “life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low collide, cease to be perceived as contradictions.”24 One might read this as Hegelian sublation—as the Aufhebung, the supersession of contradiction. One might equally read it as a transposition of the mystical theme of coincidentia oppositum—Nicholas of Cusa’s famous definition of God, filtered, to be sure, through the tradition of Romantic idealism (even if Hegel wrote under the influence of hermetic mysticism)—onto what Breton sees as Picasso’s merging of fantasy and reality in surreality.25

In Documents Leiris attacked Breton’s displacement of Picasso’s practice onto an “astral plane” (a spiritualist and theosophical shibboleth), deriding—notwithstanding Breton’s protestations to the contrary—its appeal to a “low-level marvellous of the table-turning kind” (in common parlance the Surrealist keyword, the merveilleux, applied to supernatural or parapsychological phenomena), so that Picasso’s pictures floated off into “a sort of chimerical heaven where the least desire becomes law.” Picasso’s true freedom resided not in escapism, but in his confrontation and transgression of real things.26 And yet even in the context of this realist critique, Leiris had to admit that there seemed to be “strong reasons” to consider Picasso as a kind of Neoplatonist “visionary” on the one hand, substituting a higher reality for quotidian appearances, or on the other as a subversive “black magician,” rupturing the given order of things.27

The Larousse du XXe siècle defined black magic as “Magic proper, in which certain persons claim to produce supernatural effects, through the intervention of Spirits and above all demons.” Black magic or sorcery implies malignity and demonic intervention; that is, the mobilisation of evil. Demoniaque is a compulsively re-
peated adjective in the interwar Picasso literature. Looking back in 1978, Leiris noted that his use of it in 1929 to describe Picasso rehearsed a “received idea” of “Picasso Satan.” Later, Zervos could celebrate with high seriousness the motifs of Guernica as “instruments of witchcraft” functioning to curse Franco. In 1919, Blaise Cendrars cited “sorcery” as due cause for a healthier, younger generation to repudiate Cubism:

I am sure that, examined from the point of view of occultism, Cubism will yield some alarming and terrible secrets. Some Cubist paintings remind one of black magic rites; they exhalate a strange, unhealthy, disturbing charm; they almost literally cast a spell. They are magic mirrors, sorcerers’ tables.

The assumption seems to be that the black magic of Cubist pictures will affect the viewer’s mental health. The action is malign; the effect is psychological. Similarly, in 1924, Leiris noted: “Magic in modern painting (Picasso, Chirico, Masson). [...] The artwork has no other goal than the magical evocation of inner demons.” The point is that magic in the early 20th century became psychologised; whence Picasso’s famous remarks to Malraux about the Demoiselles d’Avignon as his “first exorcism-painting,” given that “spirits, the unconscious [...] emotion—they’re all the same thing.” (Here Picasso indirectly echoes Freud’s remark in Totem and Taboo that “spirits and demons [...] are only projections of man’s own emotional impulses.”) In another 1919 article, Cendrars had described Picasso’s Cubism as “an exorcism, of a religious nature, which releases the latent spiritual reality of the world.”

André Salmon implied the psychological aetiology of demons when, in La Jeune sculpture française (1919), he stated that the Demoiselles d’Avignon was “more hallucinatory (hallucinant) than Faust’s laboratory.” Picasso critics periodically referred to Goethe’s play; elsewhere Salmon acknowledged his own habit of comparing Picasso to Goethe, while Zervos described Picasso’s Surrealist phase (a label Zervos disputed) as his “second Faust.” This identification of Picasso with the quintessential modern magician is suggestive. Goethe’s hero stands between the medieval and the modern ages; he is both a conjurer of demons and an industrialist, acting out what has been called a “tragedy of development”—a tragedy of modernization. The doubleness of Picasso as at once maximally modern and archaically irrational, is a theme of the interwar reception. Thus the eloquent reactionary Waldemar George wrote in 1930 that Picasso “incarnates the consciousness of his century. He satisfies also his desire, his will, for primitive expression.”

The psychologist Carl Jung articulated this nexus when he reviewed the 1932 Zurich retrospective. Jung’s theories themselves exemplify the tendency of modern Western occultism to translate ancient esotericism “into the terms of late 19th- and early 20th-century psychology.” He construed Picasso within a nosology of schizophrenia, with his work as a representation of the historically repressed “antichristian and Luciferian forces that well up in modern man and engender an all-pervading sense of doom, veiling the bright world of day with the mists of Hades.” The Kunsthaus’s chronological hang became in Jung’s scheme an archetypal narrative of descent to the underworld; a “journey to Hades” representative of a “descent into the unconscious.”

By a mystical twist on the evolutionist doctrine of recapitulation, by which every human being re-enacted in its development the evolution of mankind as a species, this descent into the unconscious was simultaneously a “descent into ancient times,” and a “descent into the cave of initiation and secret knowledge.” Jung aligns the movement through time of Picasso’s practice—figured by Harlequin—with the narrative of Goethe’s Faust:

Faust turns back to the crazy primitive world of the witches’ sabbath and to a chimerical vision of classical antiquity. Picasso conjures up crude, earthy shapes, grotesque and primitive, and resurrects the soullessness of ancient Pompeii in a cold, glittering light— even Giulio Romano could not have done worse! Seldom or never have I had a patient who did not go back to Neolithic art forms or revel in evocations of Dionysian orgies. Harlequin wanders like Faust through all these forms, though sometimes nothing betrays his presence but his wine, his lute, or the bright lozenges of his jester’s costume.

Jung is not concerned with (Harlequin-)Faust’s modern aspect; his magic consists in crossing the border into the archaic domain of the collective unconscious. Thus Jung signposts Harlequin’s original status as an “ancient
chthonic god”; by which he means Harlequin’s etymological root in the demon Hellekin (Alchino in Dante’s Inferno), the medieval leader of a spectral troop of night riders back from the dead. The 1927 Metropolitan Museum Harlequin, which featured at Zurich, deploys an ambiguous interplay of positive and negative profiles, to superimpose at least three “spirits,” as it were, over the baleful yawn of the Harlequin head (fig. ??). Many critics understood Picasso to be reinstating art’s primordial magical function. In 1928, André Level had it that: “Like the slave behind the triumphant Roman, a voice rises up and cries: conjurer! White magic it certainly is, magic of art, from the Magdalenians of the caves until today.”57 The reference is to Salomon Reinach’s highly influential hypothesis of the magical origin of Stone-Age art,58 which was picked up by Freud in Totem and Taboo, where art itself represented a kind of evolutionary survival of primitive magic in the modern age.60 Picasso’s work has been analyzed in relation to the anthropological discourse on magic, and the artist’s collusion with the public image of the artist as magician.61 As D’Ors himself acknowledged this complicity.62 Carl Einstein reformulated Lucien Lévy-Bruhl on “prelogical thought,”63 and Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss on magic,64 in order to theorize Picasso’s art in relation to animism.65 The proximity of Picasso’s practice to ethnographic and psychoanalytic investigations of magic was apparent to the uninitiated. In his 1929 book, Le cafard après la fête, ou l’esthétisme d’aujourd’hui (“The comedown after the party, or aestheticism today”), the dealer and acquaintance of Picasso, Adolphe Basler, wrote:

Sorcerer, forger of mysteries, Iberian necromancer in possession of all the formulae of the cabala, has he not above all seen in painting a vast speculative enterprise by which to exploit his magician’s tricks? Picasso is the great psychologist of this century. He manipulates the masses like a conjurer who turns everything into a bluff, scoffs at the sublime and lavishes his poison on a humanity of neurotics. [...] Does he not play the same kind of role in modern thought as Freud or Lévy-Bruhl? Just like those two experts [za-unti], who have dismantled, bit by bit, the mental mechanism of the individual or of primitive society, he holds the strings of illusion and magic in prehistoric, historical and savage art. Only, one is not sure about the incantatory virtue ([ver-ta incantatores]) of these fetishes, grotesques and cabalistic signs.”

There is an interesting uncertainty in this passage vis-à-vis Picasso’s distance from or complicity with magic, which mimes an ambivalence active in the reception of Freud, about the extent to which psychoanalysis disseminated the irrationality or perversity it purported to analyze. Elsewhere, Basler directly blamed Picasso’s “Hermetic writing,” his “high-cabala calligraphy” (graphie de haute cabale), for Surrealist “nihilism” and its Freudian proclivities.66 There might also be an undercurrent of the anti-Semitism that marked early attacks on psychoanalysis and ethnology, in Basler’s association of Picasso with the secular Jews Freud and Lévy-Bruhl. It is probably to Basler that we owe the trope of the Jewish Picasso. In 1925 Basler, an assimilated Jew, contributed to a debate in the Mercure de France about art and Judaism, which had seen one of its previous participants declare the complete, essential absence of “plastic sense” in the Jew.” Basler’s article, “Is there a Jewish painting?,” ostensibly argues against racism, in favor of an assimilationist model of Frenchness. “Like assimilationism itself, the text discloses tension between assimilation and ethnic essentialism, but the answer it gives to the titular question is a resounding “No”—with one exception: Picasso. Basler states that Picasso himself asked him, “Do you see something Jewish [quelque chose de juif] in my painting?,” to which Basler replied, “Definitely, your Cubism is entirely Talmudic! [Pardi, tout votre cubisme n’est que du Talmud!].” He puts Picasso’s “totally subjective art” down either to his “distant Jewish origins,” or his “Arab atavism,” as expressing a “pansemitic spirit”:

Isn’t Picasso, this inheritor of the abstract Arab ornament-makers, or the cabalist Jews of Spain, the only one who has created an art that proceeds from speculations of an entirely Talmudic nature? Think about it.”71 Picasso’s “Arab” or “Jewish” identity is cognate with the unassimilable dimension of his painting to French discourse. Semantic or sent(otic) alterity—a like the Talmud,
a foreign language, or like cabala, a secret language or symbolism—becomes reified as racial otherness. As was the case across Western science, politics and literature, the discursive formation of “race” informed French art criticism between the wars. Despite the Third Republic’s official assimilationism, a hermeneutics of ethnic determinism retained its hegemony, so that criticism apprehended style as the index of ethnocultural heredity. Picasso was particularly subject to such codification, primarily because his Malagan birth situated him on the frontier between Europe and the Orient, or Europe and Africa, in the historically Moorish realm of Al Andalus. Critics transposed Picasso’s émigré status as a Spaniard living in Paris into the figure of a motivating doubleness. His artworks played out an antagonism between French rationality and Spanish mysticism,72 or indicated liminality between Europe and the Orient. In 1922 Maurice Raynal quoted Apollinaire’s statement, from Les Peintres cubistes, that Picasso was “more Latin morally, more Arab rhythmically,” before adding approvingly: “Certainly these are the two ethnic dispositions that apply to Picasso.”73 Jean Cassou inscribed the trope in a pessimistic futurology when he wrote that Picasso “offers to our epoch, already dead in his eyes, the extreme type of a future race, of a neurotic, febrile and dry mix of Spain and the Orient.”74 Critics sought to confine Picasso’s problematic in racial hypostasis, as the return of an innate other. In the first issue of Cahiers d’art, Elie Faure asserted the heuristic power of the racialist model, describing Picasso as “a Mediterranean in whom Semitic blood is dominant.”75 The critic becomes a racial detective, attempting to divine the “counsels of the Arab ancestor in the secret movements of [Picasso’s] spirit.”76 For Eustache de Lorey in the Gazette des Beaux-Arts, the 1932 Georges Petit retrospective showed that Picasso’s images were “not at all from here, their roots lie elsewhere.”77 Picasso had been led to his “love of disorder”78 by “a sort of hereditary passion,” by his Moorish ancestry.79 This Orientalizing language participated in the contemporaneous cultural geopolitics that coded the Orient as a locus of excess, irrationalism and revolution, in antagonism with a rational, ordered Occident coterminous with France. Walde-mar George also viewed Picasso’s “infernal joy” in revolt against tradition as continuous with the artist’s ethnicity:

Not his to conserve a past with which he has nothing in common. If he struggles, it is but that restlessness is as the breath of life to him. In pouring out his overplus of energy he reveals, exteriorizes himself. Picasso clings to reality after his fashion; for not being is anathema to him. A horro vacui obsesses this Catholic, Baroque Spaniard, this painter in whose veins, it has been said, flows Jewish blood.80

Picasso’s actual Spanish nationality, his fictional Jewish ethnicity (like, for others, his “Arab” ancestry), and his arguably Baroque style, combine to explain the prodigality of his production. Interwar Picasso critics reified in “race” the contradiction and excess they perceived in Picasso’s practice.81 For the more philosophically minded of Picasso’s critics, these problems, of contradiction and excess, were equally central, both to the micro and the macro structure of Picasso’s practice. As we have seen in Breton’s Surrealism and Painting, Picasso’s painting could seem to effect a mystical resolution of contradiction. Jung inferred the coincidentia oppositorum from Picasso’s latest work (in 1932), as (ar)chetypical of the recovery period after a schizophrenic episode.82 Other critics took a more agonistic view. In 1928 Carl Einstein wrote:

Picasso has painted Harlequins, still lifes, figures, both in an archaistic-classical and—concurrent-ly—in a Cubist style. Seeing the world from both its poles at once, dividing himself in two while trusting in his own enormous strength, seeking truth and plenitude in the tension between simultaneous opposites, placing no trust in the dogmatic truth of one style, sacrificing his own discoveries. All these psychological tendencies are constantly present in Picasso.83

Contradiction is presented here as the driver of Picasso’s production. In Documents Einstein placed Picasso under the sign of Janus, as a figure of “contradiction and metamorphosis,”84 so that “his pictures are held between two psychological poles and can be spoken of as an inner dialectic, as a construction on several psychical levels.”85 Here we are entering the zone of the speculative interrogation to which the avant-garde in interwar Paris submitted binarism. As with the poststructuralist theoretical avant-garde in Paris forty years later, this consisted in a psychoanalytic elaboration, and critique, of
dialectics. Picasso's practice was an important theoretical object in this elaboration and critique, not least since it held in common with Freudian psychoanalysis and the dialectical method a dynamic negotiation of dualism. In “Picasso dans son élément,” the longest text he ever devoted to the artist, André Breton incorporated Picasso’s practice into his idiosyncratic reinscription of Hegelian dialectics, which Picasso himself demanded that Breton write for the first issue of the magazine Minotaure. At some point Breton gave Picasso the handwritten manuscript; perhaps Picasso approved the text before it was published. In part Breton was seeking to align Picasso’s “extra-pictorial” practice with his theorization of the surrealist object as a reconciliation of internal desire with the outside world (a notion which recapitulated the Cubist revelation of Surrealism and Painting). At the same time, writing in the aftermath of the Georges Petit retrospective, Breton recalled Picasso’s arrangement there, of the two versions of the Femme au jardin, one in iron painted white and the other a bronze replica, “as evidence of the ‘continuously dialectical progress of Picasso’s thought.’” Here Breton’s notion of dialectic veers towards ambivalence; but when he figures Picasso’s oeuvre as a dialectical process, he does so through Heraclitus, imagining it as a luminous flow of “revelations,” with the artworks as “shimmering, mollecular flecks, by means of which the radiant river indicates to us that it has offered itself some obstacle and has just swept it aside.” The revelatory or apocryphal quality of Picasso’s practice is a recurrent theme in the literature. André Salmon called the artist “a mute St John of the Golden Mouth—by whom the Word of art was renewed according to its very essence.” Breton’s idealization of Picasso—which is famously sufficient to sublimate a turd Picasso taunts him with, so that Breton forgets his repugnance, rapt in a vision of the “shiny, brand new flies which Picasso would conjure up”—is of a similar order. But a much different (anti-)vision of Picasso’s production existed, of course. I’m talking about one of the most radical, and one of the shortest, texts in the interwar criticism: Georges Bataille’s “Soleil pourri” (“Rotten Sun”). Elsewhere I’ve treated Bataille’s implicit critique of Surrealism and Painting in “Rotten Sun.” Bataille distinguishes the elevated, ideal sun of metaphysics—Plato’s source of the Good—from the real sun that blinds; he identifies Picasso’s painting with the latter. Bataille’s “Rotten Sun” can apply to the individual picture, but also to the production at large, which it poses as a heedless expenditure of energy. As we’ve seen, the Picasso literature was marked by a restricted, theological economy of idealism. Bataille does not reject the fictions of Picasso criticism; he simply remobilizes them through his mythological anthropology, towards excess. What results is an elaboration that gestures towards Picasso’s critical incommensurability.
is the radius of metamorphic proclivity to the artist's person.

Joseph, op. cit., p. 186.

Carl Einstein, "Picasso," New
Advocate Rundschau 4, Zurich,
1928, trans. David Britt in Mc-
Cathy, pp. 166-170, 169.

Einstein 1916, p. 154.

Ibid., p. 157.

The catalogues entitle for recent
sculptures shown at the Georges
Petit exhibition recorded three
Sculptures, one (op. 228) of a
height of one metre in "Metal
jointed in two pieces, 2,280
centimeters, no. 229 dated 1930-
and in "Bronze" and no. 230 dated
1930-31-32 in bronze. See Exposition Picasso, cit.
ca. Collection Georges Petit, Paris,
1912, 72; pulping by these entries
the first Sculpture was Tête de
femme (Spies 81), the powdered
metal construction that is one me-
ter tall, which is dated by Spies to
1929-1930, but in the Petit cata-
logue to 1931, while the second
two were the white-painted iron
Femme au jambes (Spies 72 II) and
the bronze cast of the latter (Spies
72 II) that Picasso sold Spies he
had had Gouzenac make. See
Spies, Picasso, l'oeuvre de Picasso,
Oxford, 1920, 140. The English
translation of "Picasso dans son élement" in its Boston, Sur-
rondure and Painting, pp. 100-114,
110), wrongly suggests that the
"twice" Boston refers to are the
markedly different Femmes au jambes
and the 1930 Tête (Spies 80),
which are reproduced together on
107. André Breton, "Picasso in his El-
ement," in Breton, Surrealism and
Painting, pp. 100-114, 110.

Ibid., 101.

Salomon, p. 142.


See C.F.B. Miller, "Batlle with Pi-
casso: Creuztorto (1930) and Apo-
apalypse," Papers of Surrealism,

For more on the poetics of the
Picasso-instances see Charles F.B.
Miller, The Ambivalent Eye: Pi-
casso 1928-1933, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Courtauld In-