Three Biographies in Search of an Artist

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- 1 People who read biographies are trying to satisfy varying degrees of curiosity. Discovering conditions of historical, sociological and psychobiographical possibility, and of certain works and even of the biographical subject—if it is possible—defines the biographical project in a schematic way. If the function of this type of text is indeed to contribute to a better acquaintanceship and knowledge, the exercise wavers between two restrictions: it complies with the historian's serried task, it establishes verifiable facts, events, and dates, it is essentially referential; a biography also culminates in a set of viewpoints, it is thus already interpretation, which requires sharing, it calls for strategies. The three biographies that have just been published on two major 20th century artists—Marcel Duchamp, with the books by Bernard Marcadé and Judith Housez; Jean Dubuffet with the work by Marianne Jakobi and Julien Dieudonné—proceed by way of this immense data-gathering and the choice of a style. How is the reader to be persuaded that the author has properly grasped both the enigmatic œuvre of Duchamp and the discreet complexity of his psychology? How is Dubuffet to be described, and the genesis of a canvas commented upon? What attitude is to be adopted in relation to certain features of his personality? The biographical undertaking is infinitely delicate. J. Housez's book (on Duchamp) is not short of verve: noteworthy are certain 'felicitous turns of phrase', a thoroughly winning break in narrative (the phatic success, with regard to the relations between Duchamp and Picasso, in chapter 21, represented by the internalized shift to a

probable Picasso). But this book stands out by virtue of an (in)sufficiency which does not seem associated with any wish on the part of the publisher: the erudite apparatus is meagre. The simple statement, always slightly performative, is needless to say not without discursive elegance, the decision to be somewhat summary might prevail, but this shortcoming—the absence of precise notes, relating to a more detailed bibliography—irks and, for future researchers, compromises the use of this book, which is a pity. A non-illustrated piece of information and an opinion brutally delivered here seems invariably to flirt with the peremptory, and revelation—and not the oculist's precision required by the biographical exercise. The process suggests to the reader: "... this is what I, who have worked on the subject, reckon, so this is what you should think about it". But this too is the flaw in the quality of J. Housez's book: it is a book not of popularization, which it might well have been, but a book of opinions. How, for example, can you saw that Duchamp went to Munich "to heal himself of his painter's disillusionment thanks to an art free of affects"? How is it possible, today, to write that the mechanical efforts of Raymond Roussel with language "voided the author's psychology and subjectivity"?... when it is said further on that "the affects are never totally got rid of"? How can the snow shovel "be liked by everyone"? Does the readymade consist in "a simple addition of his signature"? Did Duchamp often re-read Stéphane Mallarmé? Etc, etc. The list of imprecisions is more distressing. "The legend that has it that" Duchamp refused a contract of \$10,000 a year with the Knoedler Gallery has its source in Duchamp himself in the *Entretiens avec Pierre Cabanne* (Paris: Belfond, 1967)... With regard to Jean-Pierre Brisset, the information is often wrong. The author of the book *L'Art chez les fous : le dessin, la prose, la poésie* (Paris : Mercure de France, 1907) is Marcel Réja. The « R » of *Belle Haleine, Eau de Violette* is not graphically reversed or indicated as such, etc etc.

- 2 The apparent work of accreditation involves an "effect of reality" which can be a good thing in the case of a biographical text. It helps to separate the approximation of what is attested to, the speculation of a demonstration. The biographical discourse cannot easily do without the task of working out the work, the mechanics, and this engine of accuracy.
- 3 The biographies by B. Marcadé (on Duchamp) and M. Jakobi and J. Dieudonné (on Dubuffet) construct historians' books, works that the jargon has rightly become wont to describe as "reference". Here is nothing scary about this—on the contrary. To get an idea of who Duchamp and Dubuffet were, and about their work and their lives, it is helpful to know a few clues, a few exhibits, and what props to cling to. Work (and life) are the outcome of historical, sociological and emotional factors, which have to be unraveled. Deductions and interpretations then involve agreement—or otherwise.
- 4 A successful biography must thus try to give a better understanding of the emergence of a talent and an output within a given period and society---in affective surroundings. It must also achieve that literary prowess that brings back to life the character, the "biographical subject", in particular by way of "trivial true facts", which sometimes say a whole lot more. If dealing with the subject's œuvre is the end purpose of the research, biography, among other forms of study, is to the researcher what it is to the person curious to make a necessary reading. It describes the arrangement. It tries to set down the conditions of appearance. It helps to give a better understanding. If Duchamp read Max Stirner (which is what B. Marcadé strives to show by describing as painstakingly as possible the anarchist atmosphere in which Duchamp often lived), then his life and work in some way represent an interpretation of this text, its being put to the test. This is a powerful viewpoint.

- 5 As Dubuffet mystifies (in his autobiographical writings) and endlessly confronts himself (with a family, with certain contemporary figures in art and literature, with institutions, with Jews....), authors, faced with the sole choice left by this sort of attitude, find themselves forced to adopt the viewpoint of distance, of scientific assessment that underpins a harsh task of archival investigation (helping to re-establish facts). The biographical is above all adaptation to its object. The relationship with writers and art dealers is thus well examined. In Dubuffet's case, we should also bear in mind his fondness for subversion, his attraction to a non-standardized use of both language and art (which steered him towards what he called: art "*brut*"). But how are we to reconcile these few salient factors and how do they concern the creative process and the praxis peculiar to Dubuffet? All texts (and probably all semiotic productions), it is duly noted, complete their course in the destiny of a consciousness.