

## Dichtung und Wahrheit

By Richard Padovan, September 2004

Asked in a 1983 interview what he did before he began to paint, Hieron Pessers claims that he grew up in the backstreets of Naples. There he was found by an English earl, who kept him and taught him to read, write and paint. To the protest of his interviewer, Harriet Calo, that 'in other words, you won't answer that question seriously,' he replies: 'Dichtung und Wahrheit: quite legitimate.'

His use of Goethe's title is far more, I believe, than the flippant evasion of an unwelcome question. It reveals something quite profound about his work and his attitude to life. Goethe famously says in *Dichtung und Wahrheit (Poetry and Truth)* that throughout his life he converted 'whatever delighted or tormented or otherwise engrossed' him into an image or a poem. That also provides a clue to Hieron's paintings. They portray his own psychological tensions and those of his friends. In conversation he did much the same. Like a novelist, he constantly converted his own life into fiction, reshaping or exaggerating its delights and torments and erasing what did not fit into the beautiful or terrible drama he felt compelled to construct.

We all do this, of course: it is the human condition. The gulf we suppose to exist between image and reality, subject and object, poetry and truth, is itself a fiction. In *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer defines subject and object as inseparable halves of the world that is our representation: 'inseparable even in thought, for each of the two has meaning and existence only through and for the other.' Our everyday perceptions of, and scientific theories about, the world are hypotheses. The truth about our world does not lie around us, waiting to be discovered; we must each assemble our own truth from the fragments of experience. Hieron's work and life highlight this universal condition to an exceptional degree.

I feel compelled to call the artist by his first name, because from 1966 to 1975 we were lovers, and I think this is my main qualification for writing about his work. I was, I suppose, that fictional 'English earl'. We first met in London, however, not Naples, and Hieron was no more an illiterate street-urchin than I was an aristocrat. Far from I teaching him, it was he who in many ways educated me, especially about French, German and Dutch literature. (His friend the writer Ethel Portnoy once wrote that she was astonished when he told her he intended to abandon his fashion career to become a painter, because she had always thought him far too intelligent and too verbal for so manual a craft. Artists, she said, tend to be burly, hairy-handed, inarticulate fellows, and his real talents, to judge from his conversation and letters, seemed to lie in the direction of literature.) Since my perception of Hieron's work is grounded in our relationship, what I have said, as well as what follows, applies only to the paintings made in the years we still kept in contact, roughly 1973 to '83. The later work is entirely different: its themes tend to be social or religious, and the mood satirical and rhetorical rather than private and personal.

When I first knew Hieron he had begun to establish himself as a fashion designer. If he later gave up fashion for painting, and in interviews avoided mention of his earlier career, the cause was not any lack of talent or achievement in that field; on the contrary, it was that he was too much the creative artist, too much the maker of unique pieces, to adjust to the inevitable slide of *haute couture* towards ready-to-wear. This was coupled with a

growing realization that he was too unbusinesslike to survive in that increasingly cutthroat commercial world. In 1968, just five years before Hieron took his decision, his paragon, Cristobal Balenciaga, who had always refused to make concessions to that world, had abruptly closed his house, declaring: 'It's a dog's life'. So Hieron returned to his first ambition, to paint. His first painting, *A sad story*, was, I maintain - despite his own later dating, 1979 - substantially completed in 1973. In order to work away from our house, he borrowed as a studio a nearby 18<sup>th</sup> century gazebo. The painting portrays his sister Marion holding a tragic mask modelled on his own face. To follow the work in progress was an intriguing experience.

What light do these biographical excursions throw on the paintings themselves? First, as I have said, Hieron himself and his relationships provide much of their subject matter. This is most clear in the work that I regard as his masterpiece: the triptych self-portrait *Me, myself and I* (1977), in which he looks at himself alone. He shows himself from three sides, as in a police photo, and moreover naked to the waist. He wears a mask, however, or mask-like makeup. Does he conceal while seeming to expose himself? I see it rather as a portrait of the artist as a tragic clown or court fool. The repetition of the mask motif recalls its importance for such poets as Wilde and Yeats.

Secondly, I believe that the years he spent working in fashion reveal his determination to master the technique of whatever art he undertook. The aim of art was for him not just the self-expression of the artist but also the expression of the object made. The art of Balenciaga and the other great *couturiers* that he admired and emulated lies in the cutting, together with a complete command of the nature of fabrics and the complex geometries that result when flat shapes are draped on a curved, moving body. It always suggests to me an impeccably crafted architecture. When Hieron took up painting he strove to achieve a parallel command of the new medium.

The combination of technical exactitude, and thus objectivity, with an intense subjectivity, is a quality that his early work shares with that of the Dutch Neo-Realists of a previous generation, notably Pyke Koch. Koch too, incidentally, became a painter only after abandoning an earlier career, and in both cases there was a rapid evolution from an initial expressionism towards a cool, hard-edge naturalism. Compare Koch's early *Woman with a gramophone*, 1928, with *A sad story*, and his 1937 *Self-portrait with a black band* with *Me, myself and I*.

If in the first aspect, his psychological subjectivism, Hieron appears as *poet*, the second shows his equal striving for objective *truth*. Once more, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: the powerful impact of these paintings is due to the combination of both factors.

Richard Padovan, September 2004.

**Brief list of principal publications** (just in case you might wish to include descriptions of all the authors; otherwise ignore).

'Richard Padovan is an architect and writer on architecture. Publications include:  
*Dom Hans van der Laan, Modern Primitive*, Architectura & Natura, Amsterdam, 1994  
*Proportion*, E&FN Spon, London, 1999  
*Towards Universality: Le Corbusier, Mies and De Stijl*, Routledge, London, 2002.