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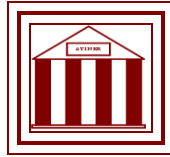## ATINER

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Pablo Picasso and the
Truth of Greek Art

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Abstract

In a brilliant article for the exhibition Picasso and Greece, organized by the Basil and Elise Goulandris Foundation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Andros in 2004, Niki Loizidi, Professor of Art History at the University of Thessaloniki discusses the role of classicism in Picasso's art as a counterpart to Modernism. According to Loizidi, Picasso juxtaposes the character of the Apollonian youth in some of his works from the early 1930's to the figure of the Minotaur, a symbol of modernist distortion. "The juxtaposition of the Minotaur-Picasso and the Apollonian figure of the young girl may embody the symbolic juxtaposition of two formative turning points of western art: the classical tradition and the modernist revolution". The final death of the Minotaur is interpreted as a victory of classicism over modernism. It is argued that in spite of Picasso's decisive contribution to the modernist revolution, the artist did not hesitate to honor a classical structuring of reality, a declared "truth" that he searched for throughout his life. Loizidi's argument is corroborated in the present paper by examining it under Timothy Clark's (2013) recent proposal that Picasso's work (and in particular cubism) involved a form of classical framing of reality: He states: "Physical reality is something the mind or imagination can only reach out to incompletely, for objects resist our categories; and painting can speak to this ultimate non-humanness of things very well; but only by giving their otherness the form of a certain architecture, a certain rectilinear—indeed, 'cubic'—constructedness." While classicism and the presence of the Apollonian frame declare victory in the end, as Loizidi contests, I would claim that this still allows Picasso to establish the permanence of an ungovernable reality (the monstruous Minotaur) as an external "untruth," that is simply impossible for the human eye to fully conceive. It is only through the infrastructure of classical art that reality can even be thought of, it is the only "truth". To quote Clark, "Painting's ultimate coldness is only excusable (only nontrivial) because it follows desire's path. It mimics the process—the geography—of splitting and projection, but only by having those movements of mind and feeling become nothing but moves in an aesthetic game. 'Expressiveness' cedes to choreography." The paper examines a range of artworks by Picasso from the late 1920's and 1930's that were clearly under the influence of Greek art, and analyses the recurrring presence of "monsters" in these compositions as instantiations of a reality ("untruths") that Picasso finds it difficult to accommodate to his classical framework. In the end, Picasso must accept a partial defeat. As the artist openly declared: "We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the

truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. If he only shows in his work that he has searched, and re-searched, for the way to put over lies, he would never accomplish anything."

In an article for the exhibition Picasso and Greece, organized by the Basil and Elise Goulandris Foundation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Andros in 2004, Niki Loizidi, Professor of Art History at the University of Thessaloniki discusses the role of Classicism in Picasso's art as a counterpart to Modernism. According to Loizidi, Picasso juxtaposes the character of the Apollonian youth in some of his works from the early 1930's to the figure of the Minotaur, a symbol of modernist distortion. The final death of the Minotaur is interpreted as a victory of Classicism over Modernism (cf. Fig. 1). It is argued that in spite of Picasso's decisive contribution to the modernist revolution, the artist did not hesitate to honor a Classical structuring of reality, a declared "truth" that he searched for throughout his life. Loizidi's argument is corroborated in the present paper by examining it under Timothy Clark's recent proposal that Picasso's work (and in particular Cubism) involved a form of Classical framing of reality: He states: "Physical reality is something the mind or imagination can only reach out to incompletely, for objects resist our categories; and painting can speak to this ultimate non-humanness of things very well; but only by giving their otherness the form of a certain architecture, a certain rectilinear—indeed, 'cubic'—constructedness." While Classicism and the presence of the Apollonian frame declare victory in the end, as Loizidi contests, I would claim that this still allows Picasso to establish the permanence of an ungovernable reality (the monstrous Minotaur) as an external "untruth," that is simply impossible for the human eye to fully conceive. While it is only through the infrastructure of Classical art that reality can even be thought of, "painting's ultimate coldness is only excusable (only nontrivial) because it follows desire's path. It mimics the process—the geography—of splitting and projection, but only by having those movements of mind and feeling become nothing but moves in an aesthetic game. 'Expressiveness' cedes to choreography," to quote Clark. In the end, Picasso must accept a partial defeat. As the artist openly declared: "We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. If he only shows in his work that he has searched, and re-searched, for the way to put over lies, he would never accomplish anything."

Figure 1. *Minotaure blessé et Naïade. Paris. 1-January/1938. Oil and charcoal on canvas. 46 x 55 cm. The Picasso Estate. OPP.38:018*

In 1917 Picasso had travelled to Italy with Jean Cocteau, Léonide Massine and Sergei Diaghilev, with whom he was collaborating on Erik Satie's ballet *Parade*. By this time Picasso had been developing an increasingly Classical style, with a strong influence of Greek and Italian art, an extreme deviation from the Cubism that had formerly dominated his work. As his relationship with the ballerina Olga Koklova began, this Classical style blossomed even further (see Fig. 2). This change had actually been brewing for some time. During the last two years of the Great War, Picasso had moved away from the other Cubists and had decided once again to orient himself toward more representational values, creating works that were deeply indebted to tradition, with an increasing fascination for Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres.

This significant transformation, which appears at first so startling coming soon after the breakthrough revelation of Cubism, was partly due to the artist's response to a dominant French nationalist theme of a return to the discipline and order of Classicism, which emerged from the War. France at the time saw itself as the direct descendent of antiquity, a return to the values of the ancient world common to all the Mediterranean, and, as usual Picasso was once again in the forefront. Historically, Classicism pledged explicit allegiance to the aesthetics of ancient Greece, implying a mode of representation best described as idealized naturalism, a formal treatment that fundamentally took its bearings in mimetic fashion, but aimed to enhance the image through symmetry and balanced proportions. However, as Warncke and Walther point out, symmetry

and balanced proportions, those purported features of an idealizing treatment of natural form, are conspicuous not merely by their absence from Picasso's works, but also by his constant refutation of them. In contrast to Greek Classical tradition, the Spaniard's style ignores principles of balance and shows a preference for monstrous and disproportioned physical mass. While others were aiming at overall compositional harmony, Picasso tended to go in the opposite direction.

Figure 2. *Portrait d'Olga dans un fauteuil. Montrouge. Winter/1917~1918. Oil on canvas. 130 x 88,8 cm. Musée Picasso, Paris. Dation 1979. OPP.17:008*

As Cowling asserts, space was now perceived as ambiguous and unstable. The self-sufficient proximity of things, on which Cubism had rung such endless changes, suddenly began to be experienced as airlessness and repetitiveness, mere elegance, a set of tricks and tropes. Objects were reduced to flat tokens. The picture's object–world seemed to vaguely congeal into humanoid ghosts (see Fig. 3). According to Clark, figures in these compositions are merely given weight and identity by being enclosed —by existing in relation to their own finitude. "Being" become "being in." However, this kind of enclosure had to be brought to life in each painting, almost arbitrarily, and doing so could only be managed through structural difference:

an "inside" only existed in relation to an "outside," to what it was not. Hemce objects lacked substance in their very essence—presence required absence. Shapes could only be understood as masks covering a void.

Figure 3. *Trois nus féminins. Paris. 12-March/1921. Pastel on paper. 57,5 x 72 cm. Nichido Gallery, Tokyo. OPP.21:073*

The important role of the void as a defining feature of objects (human or otherwise) is one of the central tenets of Jacques Lacan's framework, as Ross explains. Any attempt at understanding or simply thinking of objects in reality is necessarily governed by what he calls the Symbolic order. The entry into the Symbolic makes an intersubjective situation of all signification, as the speaking Subject defines itself in relation to the object it symbolizes; to do so, it must take a position within that Symbolic network —essentially, it must be himself a signifier, in Saussure's sense. Indeed Lacan designates the Subject as a function of the signifying chain, a linguistic phenomenon produced by the Symbolic which the individual enters in the initial moment of self-articulation. As a result of such a "play of signifiers," the Subject becomes basically an absence, whose truth is deferred and decoyed by the signifier.

For the French psychologist, it is within the framework of language that the Subject emerges. It actually invents the Subject as an effect of itself, generating the role of the speaking individual at the same moment as that individual seeks to signify the absence of someone/something. As the only way in which humans can express their thoughts, the Symbolic reigns over any approach to the other two orders: the Real and the Imaginary. The Real is something the mind can only reach out to incompletely. It resists categories. Painting —as a language— can speak to this ultimate non-humanness of things

only by giving their Otherness the form of a certain architecture, a certain "cubic" constructedness.

As many critics have maintained, Picasso's main interest during Analytic Cubism had been in painting as a symbolic construct —a language —that defined not only the surrounding reality, but also his own creative Subject. Parsing the various morphological units that constituted a pictorial figure, he then proceeded to assemble them in formal configurations on the canvas. In Lacan's terms, we could state that Analytic Cubism deals primarily with the Symbolic, constituting essentially "a linguistic dimension". To reach this goal, he strictly enforced the elimination of any reference to surface lighting effects, for example, also cancelling the demarcation of contours in the fragments that make up a perceptual object. He was particularly eager to reinforce the structure of the composition so that it could assume a definitive leading role. The resulting architecture of fragmentary, overlapping shapes managed to dissolve into a carefully arranged, subtly modulated set of facets which were meticulously distributed in conformity with the unity of the picture. As the breakdown of space into fragments merged the figure with the background and created a new formal unity, the relationship of the Subject with the outside world was transformed. The Subject ceased to be outside, and the accent was placed on the features shared by the internal world of pictorial language and the external world of material reference.

We could label this stylistic variant "Afferent Cubism," as it concentrated primarily on the surface, its force being contained, directed inwards. Most often it seemed aware not just of the two dimensions of the object it was making, but of the object's enclosing outline (see Fig. 4). Every shape inside the picture rectangle, or picture oval, somehow took cognizance of the shape that contained it. But as Clark notes, Cubism was more than a pictorial syntax. It was also a semantics. It proposed itself as a view of the world. The artist persona seemed to be in the grip of an idiom, a new means of enunciation, whose parts interlocked and had a logic of their own; whose grammar contained and constrained them, but at the same time could be seen to open onto more and more combinations, transpositions, intensifications, like the grammar of a language, it was strict, but also generative, but always within strict principles.

As Golding has established, Cubism marked a trend towards "conceptual art" from the start, in that painting was more the representation of objective categorial features than the depiction of the objects's circumstances. By spring 1912, Picasso took an even bigger step with the implementation of Synthetic Cubism. In his first *collage*, the artist lays on the surface of the painted composition a piece of oilcloth printed with a caning pattern. Afterwards, Cubist painting would frequently use this process of fitting synthesized parts together by *analogy* and *disanalogy,* in MacCormac's sense. In this regard, as Kozloff has declared, *collage*'s main focus on the combinatorial process of picture-making might have been first adopted as a short-cut toward metaphorical expression. He proposes that in caring for his metaphorical inclinations more than for naturalistic psychology, Picasso jolts together our

often contradictory motor sensations, physical memories, and fantasies, hostile or otherwise. Facetiously, the dismantling of the figure could be seen as the equivalent of a craft or industrial operation. It was a simile that was bound, also, to conceive of the body as an inorganic assembly of parts —mere anatomical signs, fair game for optional redistribution.

Figure 4. *Femme nue. Paris. Spring/1910. Pencil & India ink on paper. 51,5 x 41 cm. Národni Galerie, Prague. (Inv K 33 590). OPP.10:072*

In Poggi's opinion, it is the severe restriction in the repertory of formal elements in Picasso's canvases that allowed each unit to take on an astonishing range of values. As Daix argues, the amplitude of signification is due to the fact that the structural configuration makes only the slightest reference to appearances. Reality henceforth is treated as a collection of discrete items of synthesized information which one must rearrange according to independent formal principles. The objects in the composition are constructed in separate planes, whose arrangement in no way relates to any real form, but whose function is to carry meaning by the metaphorical association of categorial features. Picasso's metaphorical play on the possible formal contrasts and analogies between mask/woman and violin/guitar, to give one example, will pervade many of the works from 1912 onwards (see Fig. 5).

Figure 5. *Femme nue ('J'aime Eva'). Paris, [Fall] Winter/1912~1913. Oil and sand on canvas. 75,6 x 66 cm. Columbus Museum of Art, OH. Gift of Ferdinand Howald. OPP.12:027*

Following Jakobson, we assume that metaphor is linked to the substitutive axis and metonymy to the combinatorial axis of language. The former can be seen as having a vertical relationship, in which the line between the signifier and the signified is crossed, as the signifier passes over into the signified and a new signifier is produced. The latter involves a horizontal movement along the chain of signification, as one signifier constantly refers to another in a perpetual deferral of meaning. Metaphor is a process of substitution, whereby one signifier comes to stand in for another in relation to a given signified, while metonymy is a movement above the barrier separating signifier from signified. More specifically, metaphor is the direct substitution of one signifier for another such that the second signifier supersedes the first in relation to the signified. In Lacan's theory, this process is the basic structure of identification as it occurs in a second order which he labels the Imaginary. While the signifier is the foundation of the Symbolic, the signified and signification are part of the Imaginary.

The Imaginary is the realm of unarticulated (but articulable) identifications and idealizations which are the building blocks of the ego; it is the most basic

level of self-conception, the precursor to subjectivity. The difficulty with conceptualizing the Imaginary is that once it has been symbolized it ceases to be Imaginary. As soon as it is articulated or elevated into consciousness, it falls victim to the structuring imperative of the Symbolic. This fundamental incompatibility with symbolization despite its openness to being symbolized, points to its status as the middle ground toward the Symbolic in terms of the topology of subjectivity.

The incessant search for identification seems to be at the heart of Synthetic Cubism. Picasso's infinite number of stylistic incarnations defy easy categorization and the astonishing rapidity with which he usually worked allowed him to produce a great number of seemingly disparate styles within a single season, fusing one pictorial method with seeming effortlessness into another. Commenting on Picasso's "stylistic 'Don Juanism,'" Léal observes that even as early as 1901, "Picasso was cheerfully, promiscuously mixing two very different forms of representation in a single work, the academic and the caricatural, for example (caricature being Picasso's antidote to the academic figurative norm). Picasso's stylistic flexibility took a major role through the 1920s, becoming what one may term an exercise in self-liberation.

According to Judkins, this type of fluctuant representation is a fundamental objective of Synthetic Cubism. We find outlines of objects which, upon being extended, immediately or ultimately become outlines of other objects, so that the two become brought into the same plane in a delayed rather than immediate way. If at a turning point in the outline of an object, the outline makes that turn but at the same time continues in its original direction and in so doing either immediately or ultimately becomes the outline of another object, the two objects will inevitably be drawn into the same plane by their common edge, and this despite the fact that one of the objects may otherwise be manifestly in the foreground while the other, either by nature or by rendering, obviously belongs to the relative background. This independent continuity may continue uninterruptedly on its course to form the successive edges of two or even three of more objects. Or it may temporarily disappear from view only to reappear in continued extension, in which case the successive object, even though removed from the original, will still tend to hover in the same two-dimensional plane. Or as often again it may continue uninterrupted but adjoined in part by the arbitrary tones of "synthetic translucency." We may refer to this as "Efferent Cubism."

By the 1920's Picasso seemed intent on reducing the composition to solids and transparencies. He aimed to abstract out from the object-world the qualities that make for equilibrium among its parts. Balance in such a framework is recognizable, but it can blow away at the next puff of wind. Indeed for Gray, one of the most important concepts in Synthetic Cubism was the equivalence of form and space. Both are treated as if they had a positive material existence. The forms of space are made to interpenetrate those of solid mass in such a way that the two often become indistinguishable. Solid form, surrounded by space, is at times replaced by an equivalent space form surrounded by material form. It is in this period that "iridescence" (formal ambiguity) appears as one

of the most characteristic elements. Forms are broken apart and recombined in other abstract units. Elements perform multiple functions, reading at times as displaced representational entities, and at others, as parts of geometrical patterns. Forms in space seem to have multiple and often conflicting positions, depending on the conceptual context in which they are read.

Figure 6. *Femme assise. Juan-les-Pins, Summer/1924. Oil on canvas. 24 x 19 cm. The Picasso Estate. OPP.24:049*

As Clark explains, shapes and orientations have solidified, and particular objects seem on the verge of coming to life, but they share a feeling less for the specific identities of things than for the conditions of their being together in our field of vision. A process of interlocking and juxtaposition is at work. One gets a sense that objects are most fully themselves for us at their edges, as clear-cut shapes that touch others but also detach themselves to establish their separate identities (see Fig. 6). The artist was wrestling with the problem of how best to state what it is to be an object. Wittgenstein's picture of how the world is constituted seems to move between strong assertions that the world is substantial, and equally strong ones implying that form is what lies at the root of things. The two directions may be ways of expressing the same thing. The problem is to decide which of the two modes of appearance we have been

looking at gets closer to the way things are. It is the problem, according to the critic, that drives Picasso forward. And always on the horizon is the possibility of the two models not just coexisting but coming together. A work of art that presents a "world" to us, but expects us to see and accept that such a world is unbelievable. It is the world as it might be, or ought to be, if everything had its being, and derived its energy and specificity, from its becoming fully an aesthetic phenomenon. We become aware of a seemingly fundamental human wish to deny the world and denounce the life we have in favor of another transfigured one, far from the senses, far from the realities of power.

It is important to note that Picasso's simultaneous implementation of Classicism and Synthetic Cubism between 1917-1923 takes place in a period during which he was associated with the *Ballet Russes*. The principles of stage-set constructions were introduced to the still-lifes of this period which often resembled layered cut-out collages, bringing the viewer from one stage to the next. For Baldassari, the coexistence of heterogeneous, even antagonistic, entities in the same space and time created a breach in the system of representation, thus undermining the principle of artistic totality. In his program notes for *Parade*, Guillaume Apollinaire was the first to publically use the word "Sur-realism" in associated with Picasso's oeuvre. Above all, it entailed for him a transposition of reality. When writing of the overall schema, the French poet was probably thinking of a comment by Picasso: "Any artist worthy of the name must give the greatest possible plasticity to the object he wants to depict. So, in depicting an apple, if we draw a circle we are showing the first level of the model's plasticity. But an artist may want to take his work to a higher level of plasticity, and so the object to be depicted will wind up in the form of a square or cube that in no way negates the model." Picasso himself would return to this idea somewhat differently in his statement from 1926. "I think the source of all painting lies in a subjectively organized vision, or else in an inspired illumination a little like Rimbaud's." Even later, he would clarify that "one of the fundamental points about Cubism is this: Not only did we try to displace reality; reality was no longer in the object. Reality was in the painting... We always had the idea that we were realists, but in the sense of the Chinese who said, 'I don't imitate nature; I work like her.'"

Picasso lived through the crisis of Truth that characterized European culture in the early twentieth century. For Clark, High Cubism is a last effort in art at truth-telling —at a deep and complete and difficult encounter with things as they are. But such Truth might be beyond the reach of human comprehension. Indeed Untruth for Nietzsche in philosophic vein is simply the realization that Truth is not to be known (and if we knew it, we could not bear it). It is the idea that the Otherness (the mere materiality) of the world we are part of can only be figured, not encountered —and certainly not measured, not investigated or experimented on. Such undecidability is one of the essential features of a third order which Lacan calls the Real. Insofar as it is impossible to imagine and impossible to integrate into the Symbolic, the Real is utterly unavailable to the very categories of thought by which humans organize their worlds. Any attempt to think the Real, then, is defeated in its effort to make the

Real conform to the standards of the Symbolic (the conceptual and linguistic apparatus by which reality is perceived/configured). Nonetheless, even though the Real is inherently unrepresentable, it constitutes a part of the individual and must, therefore, be at least obliquely available to intuitive understanding. The Real can never be directly experienced, but the individual can infer its existence from the effects it has on the world in which he moves. It insistently makes its presence known through periodic irruptions into the other two orders, unsettling their modes of organizing the world and insisting on its equal, if rather more obscure, place in the topology of subjectivity. Existence is appearance. In Picasso, the Real (Untruth) may be the ultimate proposal: there may be nothing behind the figure's mask. But that proposal is only interesting (only persuasive) if it is made, in practice, in the face of Truth. Untruth is nothing without resistance. It only is by dint of what it is not. Untruth in Picasso is a pressure from elsewhere— collapsing space, producing disfigurement.

Organic deformation and the dissociation of sub-forms as a fundamental expansion of formal syntax have been associated repeatedly with Picasso's surrealism, according to Müller (see Fig. 7). For the surrealist. "metamorphosis" as Friedrich Nietzsche used the term, was not a turning away from the natural state but a heightening and potentiation of being. Picasso probed the Minotaur myth for its concrete autobiographical projection and idealization potential and thus personalized the surrealist body of thought in his world of images. Picasso's first Minotaur is a bodiless monster, consisting of just a bull's head on two nimble human legs. As Vautier points out, he broke away from the style of Classical representation which had prevailed in his oil paintings of the twenties and, in 1925, started to explore the metamorphosis of the body. As a symbol of the obscure forces of the subconscious, the Minotaur was a source of fascination for many artists seeking a way to express their innermost, repressed urges and their desires for transgression. In Picasso's case, his inspiration was built primarily on impulses from empirical reality which he then transformed through deformations and dissociations. "There is no abstract art —the artist would say— You always have to start with something. Afterwards you can remove all traces of the real. There is no more danger than anyway because the idea of the thing has meanwhile left an indelible sign ... I always try not to lose sight of nature. I am concerned with similarity, a deeper similarity that is more real than reality and thus attains the surreal. This is also how I understood surrealism, but the term was used quite differently."

Figure 7. *Femme dans un fauteuil. Paris, Spring/1927. Oil on canvas. 71,7 x 59 cm. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. (Inv 63.2). Gift of Mr. & Mrs. John Cowles, Sr. OPP.27:106*

It is interesting to note that Picasso's progressive concentration on the ungraspable Real coincides with the early 1930's, a period which was witnessing the rise of fascism in Europe and the imminent terror of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. There was a feeling of a monstrous presence, like that of the threatening Minotaur (see Fig. 8).

The Real, though never directly encountered, is everywhere felt in the radical contingency of daily life. It forms the lie-giving truth that underwrites both of the remaining orders, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In their basis upon and opposition to the Real, then, the two other orders have it built into their very fabric (if only by vehemently excluding it), and one is compelled to read any disruption in either one as potentially an irruption of the Real (even if it is somehow masked). It is precisely the Real that Picasso clearly hints at in many of his works from the late 20's and 30's. Ecstasy, meaning "ex–stasis," is often represented: being out of place, losing one's stance on the ground, exiting from all categories. The words most commonly used to define the Real are "ineffable" and "impossible": "it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the Symbolic, and impossible to attain in any way. Indeed, the

chief qualities of the Real in Lacan's scheme are that it is unsymbolisable and unrepresentable, that it precedes, exceeds, and supersedes any attempt to give it a coherent and comprehensible form". Approachable only asymptotically, the Real is most often defined by way of paradoxes; it lies beyond the network of signifiers, yet causes an uncontrollable upheaval within it. It is firm and obdurate, yet its intrusions upon the Subject cannot be anticipated or forestalled. In all its modes, it successfully resists the intercessions of language.

Figure 8. *Suite Vollard L059 (III) (Scène bacchique au Minotaure). Paris. 18-May/1933. Etching on Montval. 29,2 x 36,6 cm. Kunstmuseum Picasso, Münster. (GMP.01.SV.B351). OPP.33:006*

The fascination with the Minoan world and the Palace of Knossos (reconstructed by the British archaeologist Arthur Evans in 1928) responds to the need to link up with primitive roots which as yet had not entered a decadent phase. Suddenly pictorial art in Europe found that the pursuit of Truth could no longer be its driving force. As Clark suggests, the nature of the Truth they laid claim to was now so disputed and obscure, so detached from observable experience, that the concept itself seemed a mere rhetorical leftover. Monstrosity moved the picture out of the realm of art and into that of the Real. The task for art —the task for culture— was to shape illusions that would admit monstrosity but keep it in check. The clear outlines that contain the Classical figures in Picasso's works try to do just that. They are the forms illusion must take in the face of chaos: real forms, that is, hard and clear forms, but in the end only enclosures. From time to time the outlines seem to break

and the distance between us and desire's attempt for a return to the Real threatens to collapse. Only the Classical illusion manages to keep the Minotaur at bay.

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