

Gaston Lachaise (1920)
[E. E. Cummings]

To get rid altogether of contemporary “sculpture” is perhaps the surest way of appreciating the achievement of Lachaise.¹ This coup of unadulterated intelligence has already been given by Mr. W. H. Wright in four sentences which I lift from the masterly sixth chapter of *Modern Painting*—

“After Michelangelo there was no longer any new inspiration for sculpture. After Cezanne there was no longer any excuse for it. He made us see that painting can present a more solid vision than that of any stone image. Against modern statues we can only bump our heads: in the contemplation of modern painting we can exhaust our intelligences.” [(155)]

I say masterly, because so long as the author keeps one or more eyes on Cezanne it must be admitted by any intelligent person that his analysis is unspeakably correct. Were the entire book devoted to a consideration of Cezanne our own task would be confined to proving that Lachaise does not produce “modern statues.” Unfortunately this is not the case. Elsewhere the author remarks that Swinburne brought the rhymed lyric to its highest development. And at one point he mentions that “the aesthetic possibilities of the human form were exhausted by” his old friend Michelangelo, with which it is a trifle difficult to agree. How about the renowned Pablo? Or, to take two far-from-colossal geniuses: Lembrach, in his [lean girl](#) at the [Armory Show](#) (1913), and Brancusi, in his [Princess Bonaparte](#) at the Independent of is it three years past, did something more than exciting.² In the first case a super-El Greco-like significance was pitilessly extorted from the human [end page 13] form, in the second the human form was beautifully seduced into a sensual geometry. In his feeling for his material, moreover, Brancusi showed for some time genuine originality. But he reached an impasse very soon. Judging from the recent bumps and buttons at the De Zayas Gallery he is at present as dead as a doornail.

It must be admitted that Wright is Johnny on the spot when it comes to Paulanship—a “sound” man, of course, but no slave to the Rodin tradition, nor the Saint Gaudens tradition, nor whatever may have produced those fattish girls helplessly seated on either hand as you enter the Boston Public Library.³ Manship’s statues, including the enlightened Injun at the Metropolitan, remind one a good deal of the remark (which appeared on the back page of I have forgotten which French funny paper while la guerre was still with us) of one *gonzesse* to another—“J’ai un bon truc chez les boches. Je leur dis que je suis française; ça prend toujours.” [“I’ve got a good game going with the Germans. I tell them that I’m French; that always works.”] Not that Manship tells us that he is *française* (gender aside) but that in his sculpture he is always *chez les américains*,

¹ [Gaston Lachaise](#) (1882-1935) was born in France, but moved to the United States in 1905. His sculptures are held by major museums in the U.S and elsewhere.

² Wilhelm Lehmbruck (1881-1919), German sculptor. EEC refers to his [Kneeling Woman](#) (1911). Brancusi’s sculpture is also called [Princess X](#) (1915-16).

³ [Paul Manship](#) (1885–1966), American sculptor. The “enlightened Injun” is probably [Indian](#) (1914). During the nineteen teens, Lachaise worked as Manship’s assistant. (See Nordland 15-16.)

besides having in everything a *bon truc*, a certain cleverness, a something “fakey.”⁴ One wonders whether his winning the Prix de Rome accounts for the fact that in the last analysis Manship is neither a sincere alternative to thinking, nor an appeal to the pure intelligence, but a very ingenious titillation of that well-known element, the highly sophisticated unintelligence. At any rate, he was formerly very popular, just as Nadelman (who appeals less subtly to the H. S. U.) is at present supremely popular. Fundamentally Manship is one of those producers of “modern statues” whom Wright’s four sentences wipe off the earth’s face. His work is, of course, superior to the masterpieces of such people as French, Barnard, Bartlett, the Borglums, and Bela Pratt—in so far as something which is thoroughly dead is superior to something which has never been alive.

Wright is, after all, correct in his main thesis. We have bumped our heads altogether too often on “modern statues.” Until recently we gave them a bump every time we passed the celebrated Arc de Triomphe at Twenty-third street.⁵ And if we have been caught in the modern sculpture section of the Metro- [end page 13] politan we have received gratis such a massage of bumping as probably could not be duplicated in any one place in America. Let us then turn to Lachaise and exhaust our intelligence for a change, assuming that we can boast thereof.

In the light of contemporary “criticism” this assumption is decidedly daring. Lachaise has, in the past few years, made a large number of artists extremely enthusiastic, and a great many gallery goers very nervous, not to mention the ladies and gentlemen who may have died of anger. But the official “critics,” perhaps realizing the disastrous consequences to “criticism” of a genuine reaction on their part to work of overwhelming aesthetic value, have as it were agreed to risk nothing. An exception which proves the rule is Mr. McBride Of The Sun, who on Sunday (February 17, 1918) said, in the course of some hair-raising platitudes, “I like this statue [[Elevation](#)] immensely,” generously adding, “If the ribald laugh at it and call it a fat woman they may.” In regard to Lachaise’s personality The Dealers In Second-hand Ideas (Strictly guaranteed. Good as new.) are content to quote from the preface which Lachaise wrote for the catalogue of the American sculptors’ show (Bourgeois Galleries, Spring of 1919). As to his work, the consensus of “critical” opinion seems to be that it has “dignity” and is the “buoyant” product of a Frenchman who was born, and came to America.

This ducking and side-stepping of Lachaise and his work by the “critics” is more than very amusing. It is extremely valuable as drawing a nice line between his personal achievement and contemporary “sculpture.” Like some people who have to have their heads rubbed before they can go to sleep, the “critics” must have theirs bumped before they can go to “criticism.” But in Lachaise (as we shall, it is to be hoped un- “critically,” see) these gentlemen are up against a man who not only refuses to bump their heads for them but demands a profoundly intelligent expenditure of sensitivity.

⁴ See *The Enormous Room*, p. 224.

⁵ Cummings refers to the [Dewey Arch](#), a temporary structure of plaster and wood erected to commemorate Admiral George Dewey’s victory at the Battle of Manila Bay in 1898. The arch stood from 1899 to 1901 at Madison Square in Manhattan, New York.

“Criticism” or no “criticism,” to attempt an analysis of Lachaise’s personality strikes us as being almost equally futile and impertinent. And yet, given the important negative obscurity in which the “critics” would plunge that significant and [end page 14] essentially positive part of him, a few however random and obvious remarks on the subject may not be wholly without value. Three things Lachaise, to any one who knows him, is and is beyond the shadow of a doubt: inherently naif, fearlessly intelligent, utterly sincere. It is accurate to say that his two greatest hates are the hate of insincerity and the hate of superficiality. That Lachaise is supremely and incorrigibly enthusiastic about his adopted country would appear (in the light of that country’s treatment of him) perfectly unreasonable, had it not its reverse side, which is the above-mentioned disgust with superficiality and contempt for insincerity—two qualities which he attributes in a high degree to his native land. As his work proves, he has no use for prettiness. This work of his, a crisp and tireless searching for the truths of nature as against the facts of existence, negates Rodin incidentally, as Cezanne’s solid strivings incidentally negate Monet. Temperamentally Lachaise is about as far from the typical Frenchman (more especially from what America likes to believe is the typical Frenchman) as can be imagined; as far, that is, as Cezanne, whose famous hate of contemporary facility and superficiality drove him to a recreation of nature which was at once new and fundamental. Lachaise’s perhaps favourite (French) word is simple. Applied to his work, it means something quite different from, as in Brancusi, a mere economy of form through the elimination of unessentials; it means form which completely expresses itself, form that perfectly tactilizes the beholder, as in the case of an electric machine which, being grasped, will not let the hand let go.

We confess that in the sumptuousness of certain of his perfectly sensuous exquisitely modulated vaselike nudes we have felt something pleasantly akin to what are known as the least imperfect specimens of Chinese art. This brings up an interesting trait of Lachaise’s character. He believes that the Orient fascinated him at one time to the point of hypnotism and is resolved that the experience shall not be repeated. Significantly in contrast to Gauguin, he turns his eyes to the north. There is one thing which Lachaise would rather do than anything else, and that is to experience the bignesses and whitenesses and si- [end page 15] lences of the polar regions. His lively interest in Esquimaux drawings and customs stems from this absolutely inherent desire—to negate the myriad with the single, to annihilate the complicatedness and prettinesses and trivialities of Southern civilizations with the enormous, the solitary, the fundamental. Lachaise’s work is the absolutely authentic expression of a man very strangely alive. Every one has read, and no one has heard him boast, that he “studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts 1898-1903, exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français 1899, worked with Lalique and Aube 1901,” took various prizes, and so forth. What no one knows, outside his immediate friends, with whom he is preternaturally frank, is Lachaise’s attitude toward triumphs which would have seduced a mind less curiously and originally sensitive. The fact is that he regards them with something between amusement and disgust. This is not a question of modesty, but of direct and fearless thinking—at which, as had been already stated, Lachaise is a past master. Of the man who in his twenties has captured beyond question every trick of academical technique we ordinarily expect that he will amuse himself for a few years at least, if not for the remainder of his life, by the

little game which Mr. Huneker has (if we remember correctly) called “exploding firecrackers on the steps of the institute.” If he doesn’t do this, it means (to use the conventional argument against art schools) that in the realization of academical ideals whatever originality the pupil may have had at the outset has been, if not entirely eliminated, at any rate irrevocably diluted. Lachaise’s personality profoundly negates the possibility of self-advertising. As for the instinctive art thesis, his work makes this answer: that the man who by the gods has been fated to express himself will succeed in expressing himself in spite of all schools; that the greatest artist is the man whom no school can kill.

Even if Lachaise could have enjoyed making chumps of his teachers for the pure fun of the thing, it is safe to say that he would never have done so, any more than his genius would ever have made the mistake which Rodin made, of accepting the technique which it had so easily conquered and with that as [end page 16] a basis proceeding to surpass conventional standards, thereby creating another academy. For a Lachaise, as for a Cezanne, academies hold nothing beyond a knowledge of tools. For this reason both men are intrinsically great geniuses. The significance of their production lies in the fact that it goes not beyond but under conventional art.

Frequent allusions having been made to “Lachaise’s work,” it is high time that we become specific. Last Spring at Penguin Lachaise had on show, in addition to a bust and an alabaster bas-relief, a thing seventeen inches long which he called [The Mountain](#). It is not the slightest exaggeration to say that, to any one genuinely either cognizant or ignorant of Art As She Is Taught, this thing was a distinct shock. Surrounded by a gurlly sea of interesting chromatic trash it lay, in colossal isolation: a new and sensual island. Merely to contemplate its perfectly knit enormousness was to admit that analysis of, or conscious thinking on our part about, a supreme aesthetic triumph, is a very pitiful substitute for that sensation which is impossibly the equivalent of what the work itself thinks of us. It is difficult to conceive any finer tribute to The Mountain than the absence of “criticism” which it created. Bust and bas-relief came in for their customary meagre share, but, so far as can be discovered, The Mountain was never once mentioned: which fact may partially, at any rate, excuse the sentences which follow.

Its completely integrated simplicity proclaims The Mountain to be one of those superlative aesthetic victories which are accidents of the complete intelligence, or the intelligence functioning at intuitional velocity. Its absolute sensual logic as perfectly transcends the merely exact arithmetic of the academies as the rhythm which utters its masses negates those static excrements of deliberate unthought which are the delight of certain would-be “primitives.” Let us as a specimen of the latter take a painter: say Zorach.⁶ In being spectators of his work we are charmed, lulled, by the lure of shapes which imitate and we are tempted to say duplicate the early most simple compositions of mankind. Our intelligence is as it were temporarily numbed into inactivity by the work’s “emotional appeal”— [end page 17] but only temporarily, since it is obvious that no art which depends for its recognition upon the casting of a spell on the intelligence can,

⁶ William Zorach (1887–1966). Perhaps Cummings was thinking of paintings like [Randolph, New Hampshire](#) (1915).

except in the case of an undeveloped mind, endure beyond a few moments or a few hours at best. The spell wears off, the intelligence rushes in, the work is annihilated. Herein is discovered the secret of that “fakey” feeling with which we are inevitably left by the designs of this unquestionably sincere artist.

In contrast to this self-consciously attempted naiveté on the part of a twentieth-century adult there is unself-conscious expression, that of the child who has not yet inherited the centuries and the savage whose identity with his environment has not yet become a prey to civilization, which—eminent aestheticians to the contrary—is of the utmost significance to aesthetics. The stories by Harlow Atwood in a recent number of *Playboy*, which unfortunately caters habitually to the Zorach audience, are a supreme and exquisite example. Two of Denise’s paintings that Lachaise has, which she did before sophistication set in, are another.⁷ With Harlow and Denise, A.D. 19—, are the authors respectively of that most amazingly beautiful of all American Indian folk tales, [The Man Who Married A Bear](#), and certain forms and colours out of Africa. All these demand for their complete appreciation that, far from being mere spectators, we allow our intelligences to be digested; and not until this occurs do they cease to excite in us amusement or *mépris*, and reveal their significance. That is to say, they require of us an intelligent process of the highest order, namely the negation on our part, by thinking, of thinking; whereas in an “art” which emulates naiveté through intelligent processes the case is entirely different. In the work of Zorach and his ilk our role is that of spectator, never anything more. But the inexcusable and spontaneous scribblings which children make on sidewalks, walls, anywhere, preferably with coloured chalk, cannot be grasped until we have accomplished the thorough destruction of the world. By this destruction alone we cease to be spectators of a ludicrous and ineffectual striving and, involving ourselves in a new and fundamental kinesis, become protagonists of the child’s vision. [end page 18]

To analyze child art in a sentence is to say that houses, trees, smoke, people, etc., are depicted not as nouns but as verbs. The more genuine child art is, the more it is, contrary to the belief of those incapable persons who are content merely to admire it, purely depictive. In denying that the child “represents” and substituting for “representation” some desperately overworked word like “expression,” these people are only showing their hostility to the academies, just as when they tell us (which is true) that the bad artist is the representational artist. But, as has been sometimes pointed out, the artist who represents is bad not because he represents: he is bad because he represents something which a camera can represent better. This means that he is depicting something that is second, or rather nth, hand, which a child most distinctly is not. Consequently to appreciate child art we are compelled to undress one by one the soggy nouns whose agglomeration constitutes the mechanism of Normality, and finally to liberate the actual crisp organic squirm—the IS.

Academies are when everything included in the abstract and therefore peculiarly soggy noun Nature is accepted superficially or as a noun, and as such declined. In this case “art”

⁷ Probably Cummings refers here to French painter [Maurice Denis](#) (1870–1943), having heard Lachaise refer to him by his last name only. I have been unable to trace Harlow Atwood.

is technically nothing but an important prepositional connective—Mr. Sargent’s portrait OF Some One, Mr. French’s statue OF something (to take the worst painter and the worst sculptor in America) —between two nouns: an artist and a sitter (if we may make so bold as to say that Grief is it sat for Mr. French).⁸ But painting had its Cézanne, whose incredulous and otherwise energetic intelligence resented the doctrine that walking in the wake of some one who is smoking a cigar is vastly superior to smoking the cigar yourself, and by whom the academies, and their important fattish remarks about facts by means of colours, were significantly undermined with minute sculptural shocks of chromatic truth. Insofar as to understand something is, not completely to taste or smell or hear or see or otherwise to touch it, and to believe something is, not completely to understand it, Cézanne was compelled to mis- or disbelieve and to dis- or misunderstand “Nature”; and he disbelieved and misunderstood it at the age of faith and hope so violently and so [end page 19] carefully as to present us with a significant conjugation of the verb which is just as inherently intense as, from the plastic standpoint, declensions and nouns are inherently flabby. Precisely in this sense Cézanne became truly naïf—not by superficially contemplating and admiring the art of primitive peoples, but by carefully misbelieving and violently misunderstanding a secondhand world.

To the vocal gesture which preceded grammar Lachaise is completely sensitive. Consequently, in his enormous and exquisite way, Lachaise negates OF with IS. To say that the 1918 exhibition at the Bourgeois Galleries drew from the “critics” more statements of ungentle unintelligence, and from the gallery-going public more expressions of enthusiastic ignorance, than any one-man show of sculpture previously held on the Avenue, is but to do justice to all concerned, including Monsieur Bourgeois. The Elevation, which, as we have already noted, occasioned, in the case of Mr. McBride, the sole unbiased reaction of “criticism” to this exhibition, was responsible for, on the one hand, more unclever exasperation and on the other more fulsome ecstasy than all the rest of the show put together. Lest any should accuse us of hyperbole, we will quote a sample of each “point of view” and let the reader decide for himself whether or not one is more incredibly meaningless than the other.

“It might be a satire on the stout woman who pinches her waist and wears high heels that stand her on her toes for life, or it might be an idealization of her. The answer is in the point of view. Mr. Lachaise is himself not very definite on this score. If it is a satire, it is curious that he should employ the figure as a motif so often. Mr. Lachaise is one of those modernists who hark back to the serenity of Greece and forward to new rhythms which shall be more active.

“She is the mother of men, with the scorn of wisdom and dominance on her brow. She is an unathletic—a queen bee- Amazon, different both from the ‘clinging vine’ or the pioneer companion that her mothers were. She is the creature toward which creation groaneth. She is man’s old ‘delicious burden,’ [end page 20] buoyed by his reverence like a mist above the ground.”

⁸ Daniel Chester French (1850–1931), sculptor of a seated Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Perhaps EEC refers to French’s [Mourning Victory](#) (1912-15).

Perhaps it should be stated that one “critic,” instead of mentioning *The Elevation* by name, presented the world with a synopsis of what he, she or it is pleased to call “modernism.”

“One regrets that an artist so evidently serious in his aims should sacrifice too often to the extraordinary cult of ugliness which seems to have taken the place of beauty on the altars of ‘modernism’ à outrance. Strength, power, individuality, all of these qualities, must be conceded to Mr. Lachaise, but the tendency to emphasize and glorify the unsightly because it is supposed to represent force and have some deep symbolic meaning, can only lead to the apotheosis of ugliness, a consummation scarcely to be desired, even by the most ardent exponents of modernism.”

The reason why all official and unofficial “criticism” OF [The Elevation](#) fails, and fails so obviously as in the specimens quoted, is this: *The Elevation* is not a noun, not a “modern statue,” not a statue OF Something or Some One BY a man named Gaston Lachaise—but a complete tactile self-orchestration, a magnificently conjugation largeness, an IS. *The Elevation* may not be declined; it should not and cannot be seen; it must be heard: heard as a super-Wagnerian poem of flesh, a gracefully colossal music. In mistaking *The Elevation* for a noun the “critics” did something superhumanly asinine. In creating *The Elevation* as a verb Lachaise equalled the dreams of the very great artists of all time.

On the ground that it leads us to a consideration of Lachaise’s new show at the Bourgeois Galleries, which event is after all the excuse for this article, we ask the reader’s pardon for boring him with a final specimen of “criticism.” The author is a distinctly official “critic,” Mr. Guy Pène du Bois of the *Evening Post*, of whom it may fairly be said that he succeeds in taking himself more seriously than all the other members of his very defunct profession put together. He is speaking of the exhibition of American sculptures before mentioned. [end page 21]

“Indeed, in the instance of many of these exhibits, when one has said that they are amusing, full credit has been done to their creators, This is entirely true neither in the instance of Lachaise nor of Diederich. It is true that they are of the ultra-fashionables of sculpture, but it is also true that they are more than this—that they are exceedingly intelligent men, endowed, moreover, with more than the usual allotment of talent. Just now they reach for a very small and very particular audience, one jaded by experience in art, and demanding certain definite shocks, rare expressions, in order to be aroused. Lachaise’s figure of a woman is a real contribution to the so slowly growing gallery of portraits of her.”

Unless all signs err, Mr. Guy Pène du Bois is due to get—or should we say has already got, since by the time *THE DIAL* appears the new Bourgeois show will be in full swing—what may without exaggeration be called the surprise of his “critical” life, when he looks over the menu of the latest Lachaise exhibition. For in contrast to the previous show, in which the titles (*Rythme*, *Anéantissement*, etc.) were chosen by Monsieur Bourgeois, the elements of the present show are, as we trust, to be named by Lachaise himself; in which case the “critic” of the *Evening Post* will find himself confronted by at

least two titles which not only knock his “reach for a very small and very particular audience, one jaded by experience in art, and demanding certain definite shocks, rare expressions, in order to be aroused” thesis into a cocked hat, but will, we are confident, give him an attack of goose flesh into the bargain— *id est*, Love and Home. And why? because while any one except Lachaise might stand accused of insincerity in applying these stand-bys of morality to work whose inherent—which is to say ultimate—significance is purely for aesthetics, Lachaise has never stood and never will stand, apropos either his personality or his work, accused of this particular thing. Were it possible so to accuse him, Mr. Guy Pène du Bois would in our opinion be incurring considerable personal danger in so doing. It looks to us as though the gentleman is in the extraordinarily painful, not to say peculiarly undignified, position of being up [end page 22] a tree. At least we may expect of our “critic” that in this predicament he will comfort himself with the last line of that most popular wartime song, [America I Love You](#), which goes, “[And there’re a hundred million others like me.](#)”⁹

Unless some unforeseen accident occurs, the present exhibition should include a number of drawings (which totally negate the favourite contention of “criticism,” to the effect that Lachaise’s work constitutes the doing of one thing over and over), the bas-relief [Dusk](#) (already reproduced in the January DIAL), two reclining figures (Home and Portrait), a diving figure, the colossal Love, and last—and to our thinking best— The Mountain. We have already, in all probability, talked too much and said too little (to use a peculiarly conventional phrase) about The Mountain; yet it is without shame that we are guilty of a parting word, for which Lachaise’s infrequently paralleled mastery of stone is wholly responsible. In The Mountain as it appears in this exhibition Lachaise has completely enjoyed an opportunity to work directly in the stone Himself as he calls it. He has enjoyed it as his contemporaries to whom stone is not a tactile -dream, but a disagreeable everyday tangible nuisance to be handled by paid subordinates, can never enjoy it. In the transformation from the patina’d plaster (which was at Penguin and later, unofficially, at the Bourgeois Galleries) to [the stone now on view](#), several vastly minute and enormously significant changes have occurred—changes dictated purely by the superior medium. To speak accurately, now for the first time The Mountain actualizes the original conception of its creator; who, in contrast to the contemptible conventionally called “sculptor,” thinks in stone whenever and because stone is not, and to whom the distinction between say bronze and alabaster is a distinction not between materials but, on the contrary, between ideas. In The Mountain as it IS Lachaise becomes supremely himself, the master of every aspect of a surface, every flexion of a mass, every trillionth of a phenomenon.

The reader who expects an analysis of the other work which we have mentioned as being included in the exhibition (Dusk, Portrait, Love, etc.) is due for a pleasant disappointment. The [end page 23] very good reasons for our not attempting such an analysis (or rather analyses, since, once again—the whole tribe of Defunctives to the contrary—Lachaise’s “point of view” never repeats itself) are briefly: first, we do not feel

⁹ “[America, I Love You](#)” (1915), popular song with words by Edgar Leslie and music by Archie Gottler. The chorus is as follows: “[America, I love you!](#) / You’re like a sweetheart of mine! / From ocean to ocean, / For you my devotion, / Is touching each bound’ry line. / Just like a little baby / Climbing its mother’s knee, / America, I love you! / And there’s a hundred million others like me!”

that we are up to the job; second, if this *essai* means anything whatever it means that the only very great sinners are the Gentleman Dealers In Secondhand Thoughts. God knows that in the course of the preceding pages we have sinned deeply enough. Rather than despicably to descend into mere praise of an artist who, if only for the reason that we profoundly admire him, does not merit from us a so conventional insult—a man in relation to whose extraordinary achievement praise cannot but constitute a sumptuous impertinence—we prefer to maintain or perhaps to regain silence.

From *The Dial*, February 1920. E. E. Cummings had long championed the artistry of Gaston Lachaise. For an exhibition of the sculptor's work at the Weyhe Gallery, N.Y.C. (December 27, 1955-January 28, 1956), Mr. Cummings wrote: "It was many years ago that The reborn Dial saluted Gaston Lachaise. Those years comprise (among other drolleries) a complete reversal of public untaste; 'nonobjective art,' once anathematized, being now de rigueur. By contrast, the achievement of Lachaise remains passionately and serenely itself—a marvel and a mystery: the spontaneous and inevitable expression of one fearlessly unique human being."

[end page 24]

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