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Picasso

*Edited by Daniel Halpern*

# WRITERS ON ARTISTS

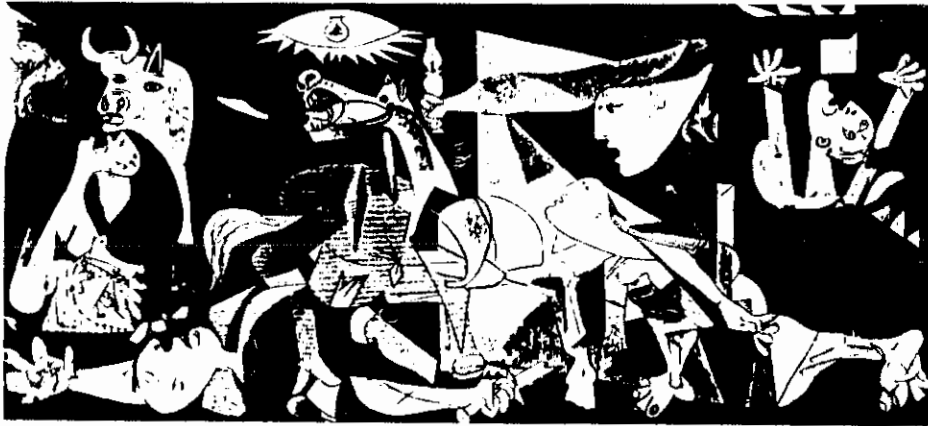
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FRANCIS PONGE

1953

## Picasso



Pablo Picasso: *Guernica*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 11'5½" × 25'5½". The Prado Museum, Madrid. Photo: Giraudon/Art Resource, New York. SPADE/MARS.

Picasso—but you know it better than I: on this page and at this moment, your name quite simply in its rightful place—as it is now.

For Picasso, in the dawn of this century, raised his standard *urbi* and *orbi* (*urbi* was Paris, the balcony in Montmartre, *orbi* our entire world). It is surely his name that will remain throughout the centuries as the flag of ours.

This is also why, at the commencement of this text, I have had to plant this name like an oriflamme at the head of a pike, of an intellectual offensive in which, when my eyes received the revelation of this phenomenon in 1920 or thereabouts, I was at best a persevering sapper. The world was effectively seized at that time. Today, however, it is some thirty years since the regular progression of Time's revolving sidewalks promoted me to the surface and its works. Of necessity my first gesture, at the top left of the first white page on my work table, has been to firmly draw from top to bottom that vertical line which mimics the planting in earth of a pike-staff. Forming immediately at its head is the brief flag of the second stroke, which is to float held taut by the wind over the summits of the conqueror, the victorious invader sweeping all before him, at times for the fun of it. He has outdone Genghis Khan in circling the world many times, always returning (in order to immediately start out again) to his point of departure, France, to check the gallop of his mount. This pennon also flies tautly from its staff, from left to right.

At that time the "starting-post" of my text was driven into the ground, marked in an even more signal manner than by the aforesaid pennon of the initial letter, was immediately redoubled below by the starting line itself—and then magically tricolored by the three syllables of the name: those three pure syllables, "pure" de-

scribing syllables of one vowel only, vowels colored here by values (i, a, o) as boldly diverse as can be.

And so the point of departure of the text was, from the point of view of the writing as such, decided. The most important thing was done. There was nothing more than to wait for the starter's resonant signal, for the writing to be under way. But there was no waiting. Meaning was instantaneous in the cerebellum of the three colored syllables: immediately the go-ahead was given, the series of signals begun.

What could be more piercing, more percussive, than the rapid-fire sounding of these three syllables? They ring out, well heard and understood, like the sharp call of that trumpet, the Catalanian *tenora*, which gives the Sardana its flavor.

But let's return here, in time as in space. Let's evoke instead another phenomenon of sound, perceived very often at Mougins as well as where I live, by reason of the proximity of the Italian border. Our three colored syllables are blared out by its means even better than by the *tenora*, and much more categorically. I speak of those three horn blasts let out by impatient young motorists of which it's said, in one of those catalogues which we all receive quite regularly: "Of a tonality deep yet shrill, powerful, they signal far ahead your arrival at the intersection; strident, so as to dominate your surroundings and be heard even by the big trucks. Their instantaneous resonant intensity startles and asserts your presence on the road. They are as loud as the law permits." Let us say, of the proboscidian sirens of Picasso, most often under a harlequin's tricorne, that they constantly infringe the regulations, exceed the limit every time.

Very far from having said all about the *one first word* imposed on me by a force (or person) stronger than myself, I will nonetheless stop here. I take it that I have sufficiently alerted the very great majority of my readers whose eyes opened on the world later than mine. A world very much altered, besides, by the chain reaction set off by Picasso, the unprecedented echo for those who were contemporaries of the event, the effect of a radical, stupefying, dynamic, atomizing and galvanizing break with the past of the meteor, the phenomenon in question.

If, to resume from the beginning our gallop, we should ask what that mysterious authority is that rules us *both*, here is what I would say to Picasso:

To have been able, after so much and so many, to write of you, if it was more than I could not do in only one way: by the act of your name immediately driven, planted in the mind of the reader by the telecommand of my right hand—it was that thus, one more time (and doubtless you better than anyone understand it, since thus—have you not told us?—Painting signed itself), that power much

stronger than myself was manifested of Writing, the immortal Deity that makes me do its will, that does with me as it will.

We are each of us at the power of an Immortal who, having conceived us (in the mortal breast of our mother) in the act of love with that other mortal, our father (we know it well, do we not, that man and the immortal have loved each other. To Don José Ruiz, as to my father, we have known well, even before receiving it as they gave it to us, the *alternative*), will one day take us from our mother's lap—at whichever period of our childhood suits it—to make us come into the world. Yes, but what world if not that which is meet for its children—that mythic world interposed between gods and men where, doomed like these last to die, we find ourselves endowed with a Divine Power which we are enjoined to employ constantly in a series of prodigious labors, in the service of the fabulous memory where we will live since we are destined there, yet which, throughout our mortal lives, is as strong as it is disquieting, disquieting as it is puissant. Of this inquietude, we know from Paulhan himself how Braque answered him one day when goaded on the subject of Picasso. "He refuses himself nothing. He paints in every style. What talent, what boldness!" And Braque: "What saves him is that he's troubled. The only vicious horses are those who don't sweat, as any jockey knows." Apropos of this inquietude, look at the expression of the eyes in nearly all the photographs taken of Picasso as he stands by a recent masterpiece.

When I speak of prodigious labors, of course, the present one to which *hic et nunc*, I address myself, is one of them—and will, by that fact, appear *ugly* to you. But apropos of the *ugly* (and of Picasso), here are two quotations. Here's the first (from an extremely amusing and remarkable lampoon by Dali, in that it bears witness to the relative proximity in loftiness of view of the two geniuses, but at the same time to a certain slight inferiority of one—by "slight" you will doubtless have understood which—to the other): "What an anarchist Picasso is. Having half poniaired Bouguereau, he gave him the *puntilla* and at a single blow achieved modern art, making it uglier by himself in one day than all others combined in several years. . . . Thank you, Pablo! . . . In a matter of weeks you have attained the limits and the ultimate consequences of the abominable. And this, as Nietzsche would have wished, by leaving your blood on everything. There remains nothing for us but to turn our eyes once more to Raphael" [*sic*].

But here, just as candid but infinitely more touching and serious, is the second quotation, a statement by Picasso himself as reported by Gertrude Stein:

"He who creates a thing is forced to make it ugly. In the effort of creation one fights, and the result invariably is a certain ugliness. Those who follow, with time

and distance for judgement, will do better" (a marvellous modesty here, or a significant mistake in Gertrude Stein's transcription) "and will please more, because they do not have to fight, they know what they are doing, where they are going, the thing having already been created . . . ."

To these two quotations, let us add this statement of Braque's about his first "glued papers" (collages):

"How could I make a mistake? I didn't know what I wanted." And again: "I have always been compelled by something stronger than myself. I have taken what came to hand."

As a second and last example of the imbrication of our work, each treading in the other's footsteps, here is what I wrote one day, also about another painter friend (Fautrier):

"We know nothing or very little of the processes of Nature, directing the artistic operation. We nonetheless observe. . . ."

Cf. Picasso, quoted by Brassai: "Doubtless there will one day exist a science . . . which will seek to penetrate further into man through the creative man. I often think of that science, and am resolved to leave posterity with as complete a documentation as possible. . . . That is why I date all that I do."

To speak thus is to show as much modesty as courage, as much lucidity as ambition. It is in fact to show oneself rather a "materialist," to conceive of oneself simply as an organism like another, a "phenomenon" of Nature, like another, to proclaim, accept and wish oneself as such.

And, no doubt, this admission, this clear view of our dependence is our one chance of surpassing this condition, of bypassing it. I am thus able to imagine Picasso as a sort of Sisyphus, but one capable of pushing his rock so that it doesn't fall back, of pushing it to the top where the other horizon is revealed and the rock rolls down the other side, the Hero rid of it rejoicing, upright on the highest peak of the world, in his victory. Doubtless this is what Picasso understood when, towards the summer of 1906, already exercised by and so to speak "big" with the *Demaiselles d'Avignon*, he exclaimed, in an equally dramatic renewal of the legendary "Eureka!":

"A tenor that reached a higher pitch than that inscribed on the wall: 'Me!'"

The wall already written is, evidently, all of nature such as ancient culture allowed us to see it. It is all the museums of all human cultures—not only the universal art museum and library but all the museums of man, all the archaeological collections, all the museums of natural history, all the zoos, all that which Picasso, who has read and seen it all, has shown himself *solely* able to digest, to reproduce and re-create to his own taste, with no trace of the university or erudition, for his

"Bon Plaisir," in the "Gai Savoir" of Nietzsche or, finally, in what I call the "Ob-joy": i. e., the orgasm achieved by any system of signs which has, by a mad redoubling of the textual grasp, reached its Seventh Heaven, the *certain point* at which it signifies purely itself. That is the summit, attained each time he has passionately desired it, by Picasso.

Here, somewhat in the manner of a collage, also to break the *temporal* monotony of a text written, in some sense, from one end to the other, on the same day and then (despite certain essays in detail, in the sentence, in retro-narration) on the whole quasi-melodic, arabesque, as if the pen had left neither my hand nor the notebook, it seems to me good—despite all the risks that this entails for my present "honor"—to cut out, from a rough draft written in 1945–47 at one sitting, uninterrupted, with enthusiasm, without the slightest remorse, with brusque jumps of tension, with airholes, imbecilities, grossnesses, improprieties, "whatever you want, it's there," to cut-out, then, entire passages and to rearrange them, *changing nothing*, interspersing them with paragraphs written by my hand and in my ink today.

Only, if there is such a one, the particularly alert reader will detect, all too easily, the texts of one and the other period. But I hope that the uninitiated majority will find here only some of my own pleasure, despite a certain shame at times and a desire perhaps for self-punishment? I hope simply that neither one nor the other reader will find himself, at any time, ready to give up this text with a curse.

Here (it starts from here).

The air is pure, the road wide, the sun floods the sky. In a brand-new town, the multicolored laundry rumples and snaps in the rising wind. Each object revives and proclaims its positive virtue.

Automobiles, small fry aviation, bodies of wood or iron take the road, take the air.

Steel and copper, horns and sirens resonate. It is morning in the twentieth century.

At this moment, a great flag is unfurled on which, in pure and dazzling colors, a simple emblem that is question and answer has taken shape.

And everything begins to move forward.

Man has appeared.

It is a painting by Picasso.

Everything is there: the prehistoric, the ancient, the old, the baroque, the classical, the romantic. All the reasons for man are present.

The world is complete. All is new, rejuvenated.

It is civilization.

It is youth.

Picasso, Stravinsky, James Joyce: they are of the twentieth century. By them the twentieth century appeared, owing everything to previous centuries, owing nothing to anyone.

In the twentieth century, the mirrors burst in pieces.

Blinding lights in the streets. Ragtime and cocktails.

There was no shade except that brought by negroes. A beautiful shadow, that of the melancholy depths of the negro race (negro art, negro spirituals). Very quickly, in fact, this what I shall call a beautiful destruction in broad daylight turned baroque. Melody, the melodic line, the melodic worm reappeared. Sorrow reinstated the scene: subjectivity.

But Picasso, who takes all into account, is thus one of the most brilliant proofs of man's power.

So much money that it was funny. Insolent good fortune. Picasso thumbed his nose at the Fine Arts, Fortune and Fame. Triumph of our coterie.

The hatefulness, then, of seeing merchants in power went for nothing.

But since he is the perfect type of the gangster, he lives like an Andalusian peasant. His family, his Spanish clientele. Vulgar pigeons, chiens de luxe flying and running about his apartment.

Each painting by Picasso is a new flag for the intellectual offensive. We'd decided not to let ourselves be romanced any longer by the sempiternal song which our eyes and established tradition sang to us: teach us about nature. To mix things up. As in a kaleidoscope or cocktail shaker. To do by fits and starts, by fooling around, what we could to change things.

Analogy of the paintings of Picasso and the trituration of language (of languages) and logical time by Joyce.

Suppose for an instant that Picasso stopped producing, I noted a few weeks ago. Where would we be?

It would be like a window closed forever. Like an ended session of diversities. Like a circus leaving town. Like a kaleidoscope abandoned in a corner, which no longer works.

Everything would be still once more. Without interest or surprise. Colors would slowly fade, forms erode, collapse, wear away.

We would await the new magician who would put everything in motion again. But we would await in vain.

It is our good luck to live in a time in which one man, the greatest scene-shifter imaginable, modifies appearance at each moment. With a flick of his thumb he makes the universe vary.

At intervals, we open our eyes. All is changed. Not destroyed: arranged otherwise. And each time we enter this new world with a new enthusiasm. A new morning. As fresh, juvenile, indubitable as yesterday's. As deserving of our joy and our energy, of our joy in living, of our breath.

It must also be said: he is the best man (and the worst demon) there is: his particular, differential quality is to bring together in himself *all* the possible and conceivable qualities and of course (if one wishes) *all* the defects, transformed in him, so perfect are they, into qualities (negative). *All the qualities* and then one: that of possessing them all. For a phenomenon like Picasso, quantity and quality are no longer incompatible. I have never, myself, had anything from him other than his friendship: a kind of tender, fierce familiarity—and have had from him only proofs of his generosity, his affectionate spontaneity. When he failed me (as the phrase is) five or six times, how could I hold it against him, since it was out of kindness for others? For instance, for Eluard, who blanched ("He turned green," our colorist informed me over the phone) when he learned that Picasso had sent Resnais' assistant to me because he wished for *me* to write the narration of his film on *Guernica*. Picasso had phoned me about it two or three days earlier, the assistant had come and we had begun work. Then this second call: "You understand, I could not do it to him. I'd forgotten his poem! We will do something else together." Another time it was Sabartes who must have turned color when, in connection with a volume of reproductions about whose preface Reverdy had made difficulties which the publisher found ridiculous, Picasso immediately designated me. Mourlot and I came to an agreement, but Sabartes. . . but of course, Sabartes, his factotum since they were young, who saw him every day: how could he not understand?

I might mention several other incidents of this genre, one quite recent. But I have known many such lucid and generous impulses in him.

It is known that he excelled in such gestures. As Racan wrote of Malherbe, what he said carried, all his acts were decisive and even, in a way, magical. I will record only two here: a word, a gesture the first time he met me and then kept me with him several hours. I had heard that he'd read my little book *The Parti Pris of Things*, published in Paris in 1942, with sufficient interest to desire to know me. But I did not return to Paris until after the Liberation (just after the end of 1944). I asked Paul (Eluard) at the time to introduce us. It was at the Grenier des Grands Augustins. As soon as he looked at me (inadequate: from the first split-second-glance) he exclaimed in the liveliest, warmest way: "But we belong to the same family! I have cousins who resemble you trait for trait." Nothing better calculated to break the ice, as one says: but among cousins (Mediterranean) there was no ice to break: melted at the first glance of recognition. It was like a father recognizing his twenty-year-old son among a thousand others (I was then forty-five) after twenty years of separation. From that time I had only those marks of affection, spontaneous and sometimes biased, that I have spoken of.

Picasso kept us there, and we all went downstairs to eat at the old "Catalan." The three of us sat at a table near the door, facing the zinc bar. Others were there: Dora Maar, Nusch, Fenosa, Cocteau and someone else: G. Hugnet (perhaps). Cocteau: not at all brilliant then but humble, contrite, effaced, withered, sinister-looking. He had a good deal to be forgiven for, his "resistance" against the "Occupation" not having been, it was said, particularly intransigent. Before long I had a very bad headache. When I said so, Picasso immediately left the people sitting on either side of him (Nusch and Dora Maar), made me take an aspirin at the bar and walked me outside, saying that some fresh air would do me good. But the air was more cold than fresh. He immediately changed his mind, went back inside the little restaurant, got his own hat from the coatstand, came out and put it on me like a crown.

Believe this if you like—the aspirin had certainly not had time to act (with me it takes nearly fifteen minutes)—but wearing the old hat of the old artisan, in two minutes I was cured, my migraine instantly dissipated. Picasso himself laughed. We rejoined our abandoned table companions, who hadn't stopped talking. No more anecdotes.

All those, innumerable, who speak, write, sing or paint without creating and into whose tunid (?—but I know what I mean) jabbering it requires much good will—and spare time—to enter; all the explicators, the propositioners, the critics, the analyzers, the men of hypotheses, the story tellers (except for a few), the reviewers, novelists, journalists—and I almost forgot the poets—all those who propose to themselves and us their thought, i.e., nothing, a progress of larvae in the ooze, an

inconsistent marsh, lyric poets or other fantasists, surrealists, intimists or others, all those who praise silence in many words, who take an airing towards the exit from the world, crayon in hand, they will all come one day, of course, to reproach the creator for creating. They will reproach him for his assurance, his pride, his insolence, his incontinence, his flippancy, his virtuosity, his tours de force of cards or strings, his equilibrium on the tightrope, his authority: they will reproach him for his defiance of pontiffs and the Creator—with a capital C—himself, for his masterful boxing of the Creation's ears (who turned all colors and saw stars)—and if they are obliged in fact to consider him finally as God himself, they will reproach him then for not being only God, for having needed to create things, for not having known to content himself with primeval nothingness. It is as Groethuysen made Master Eckhart say:

So great was its love (of the soul for God, placing no difference between) that it suffered to see him God and wished to see him super-God. Jealous of things, it wanted God for itself, the God of the soul and not that which had placed the world between them. My distress is great, said the soul. Nothing was created . . . and you uttered the world. . . . I was the creature then, you the creator. And you loved me. But sometimes I said: if he loves me why has he created me and given me a name as if I were this soul and not another? Why is he the God of a world in which I must coexist with all things, and why am I in this world, I who was a soul before any world? And the soul answered: You are God, you are spirit, you are that of which it is said: it is, and I suffered to see you God, I wanted to see you nothing. The stone is stone, the bird is bird: what are you other than the bird and the stone, being a thing? . . . Then you created the world, but it was useless creating worlds and worlds. Will you ever be other than yourself, the God of creatures, of your creatures which make you God and from whom you implore love, revealing yourself to them so that they will say: I love you. . . . The soul wished to be no more. It sought its death and the annihilation of all things.

The soul perceived that through love of God it could love God no longer, that God had been its great temptation. But deep within itself it preserved its nothingness, which no creature nor even God had penetrated. There, *it was alone* (my emphasis) and *everything become image was swallowed up in it*. There it was poor, and deprived of everything; and all was simple and one.

This is without doubt a fine page, a trifle long perhaps. So many words in praise of silence! Truly, a perfection (in its genre). I would like to have quoted all of it.

We, however, have no desire for things to become images. We aren't jealous of them. We have freed ourselves from any inferiority complex vis-à-vis the things of the world, since we may create other things. On the contrary, we love them, they ravish us, we thank them for bringing us out of our nothingness. We see ourselves as one of them. But on the other hand, as equals of the so-called God who created them all. God is a materialist because he wished to create things (and not images)—and we are materialists too. We know the joy of diversity, if we refuse the mystic joy of unity born of fear, of trembling before death.

If we do know disquiet, it is the disquiet of creation, of work, of the creative power. It is that of unwillingness to let escape the possibility of creating again and again a new thing. It is that of a plethora of choices.

From it we adhere to our successive desires, born of very strong emotions, no doubt, born themselves most often of an encounter. But the desire for expression according to our vision of the object (being or thing) is immediately thwarted by the commandments or caprices of our method itself: drawing, painting, writing: all grows complicated, and we are led to some unexpected result (obtained sometimes in the accomplishment of another project undertaken at the same time) in which we nonetheless recognize with certainty the jubilation of our language itself.

Thanks to his exceptional gift of revealing at the first glance what is the simplest, noblest and most moving of the human eternal, in each human figure, face and attitude, of the animal eternal in each animal, of the eternal jug-ness in such and such a jug, Picasso achieves a sort of *abstraction embedded in our nervous system* which in him only is pathetic and appealing, in Braque only serene, and which is absent everywhere except in these two titans. There is, in every painting of Picasso, something like a grand fable, a depth of landscape, be this only the air and light (or shadow), that is worthy of a universal mythology.

This is so even in his cubist period. There is always a sort of narrative or genre scene or noble likeness which touches us in our moral being. In Braque there is, between the ordinary and the fatal, the same praiseworthy equilibrium as in Chardin.

In every painting by Picasso there is a ballet, a pantomime, an Elizabethan theatrical scene.

But it is of immobility, of the mute, or rather, like writing itself, of mobility prepared for, i.e., to begin without guidance, whenever you please, at the chosen instant, according to the rhythm which suits us.

These are what we call *tableaux vivants*. But significant of feelings of an intensity, a mechanical precision and unprecedented aggressiveness, where everything starts up as when you aim for the bull's eye in a shooting gallery: there is a capital punishment, a drama automatic and deadly.

Merely rough sketches, perhaps, or simple schemata at times, but so successful that they are much closer to perfection than any perfection of labor and patience. No drudgery. Happy creation. Happy creations. Not to be, but to bes.

The plural infinitive.

"To err is human." And not only human, but divine. Witness these fumbblings of Creation, these monsters, these innumerable sacrificed possibilities. . . . To live, to be, to create is to err.

Aside from immobility, nothingness (which we challenge, defy and detest) there is nothing but errors. Long live errors, then. The most serious, the most divine men are those who carry their errors to the extreme. Those whose pendulum has the deepest and widest swing. What is intelligence, imagination, the ability to hypothesize, genius (scientific and artistic), if not this?

It is simply a question of not giving as *truth* (of not making oneself so ridiculous) that which is nicely and usefully error. Definitively valuable as such. And should one be aware of its value that, certainly, is not ridiculous. It is rightful pride.

Nevertheless, there are valuable, positive errors, and others which are hardly so (or not at all).

What is necessary for them to be so? Firstly, that they go far, are well constituted, and that they carry all the weight of previous outmoded errors (or truths): that the pendulum be heavy with all this.

That is what Apollinaire meant when he said that Picasso is the heir, the inheritor of all the great artists. Yes: nothing of what the past has given us is absent in Picasso. He takes it all with him, in his movement (the "Life" of which Apollinaire speaks), and in an unexpected direction. He enlarges the sphere of knowledge. He has greatly extended the domain of art. . . .

*Errare humanum est.* . . . Amplitude and intensity. Picasso directs his swing at the four cardinal points.

And it's known that the pendulum, beyond a certain ("reasonable") amplitude in its movement, wobbles, strikes and startles the onlooker in very unexpected places, goes through magnificent arcs, torsions and deformations.

What is also necessary is that there be installed on the swing *someone or some-*



*thing*. Everyone knows that to send off an empty swing lacks interest. It is the reality of the exterior world that we send off on our swing. We photograph the object in its utmost amplitudes.

*Errare humanum est . . . Divinum atque . . .* and perhaps we should define the world as the errors of God. *Positive errors* and not (merely) defects. Variety.

Don Juanism, or feminine dissatisfaction (of the frigid woman)? Not at all. The ostentation of defects, thus transformed into qualities. End of the collage.

Since it was Picasso's wish to send up his last firework, the last *bouquet* of his work at Avignon in 1973, close to the station where in 1914 he left for the front with Braque (and Derain), it is with the period properly called heroic which ended then, of his work in conjunction with Braque, that I wish to conclude. Labors of Hercules. Cf. the heroism of Cézanne, cf. Mallarmé. "We were very close and concentrated then," Braque has said. Braque: rejected by the Salon d'Automne in 1908. As late as 1913, Picasso caused people to cancel their subscriptions to Apollinaire's *Soirées de Paris*, where some of his cubist drawings had been reproduced. "Cézanne was for us then like a mother who protects her children." (Picasso).

No trickery, no conclusion.

Reader, you have just heard, as you will have been able to, this *Toccata, variations and fugue without end to the Glory and on the Name of Picasso*, which I have had to cut short on August 7, 1973, at three p.m., for the needs of publication.

1976

*Translated from the French by Lane Dunlop*

