

**Chance – necessity and desire,
Eric De Smet or “an incessant victory over the stupidity of strokes”**

*Unas frases escritas por el tiempo
Con su extraña caligrafía,
Tan rápida y confusa, aunque a la vez
Exacta y maquinal como el morir*

(A few sentences written over time
With its strange calligraphy,
So swift and confused, yet
Precise and mechanical. Like dying).

Felipe Benítez Reyes

It was June: a fine summer with the promise of even better to come. An old winegrower from the Baden district (near Vienna) predicted that 1914 would be an excellent year for wine: “People will remember this summer for many years to come!” According to Stefan Zweig, while the attack on Franz Ferdinand on June 28th had stirred up the feelings of the Viennese, the news had not kept the many Austrians and Germans from preparing for what promised to be a warm and unusually sunny summer holiday. So Stefan Zweig was one of those who had no qualms about travelling to De Haan (near Ostend) where he was to meet not only Emile Verhaeren and Fernand Crommelynck, but also Ensor. A remarkable painter, according to Zweig, “who was much prouder of the poor and pretty waltzes and polkas that he composed for the military band than he was of his fantastic paintings in glowing colours”.

Even on the Belgian coast, the sun continued to shine. Yes, there were rumours of war, but that the Germans would invade Belgium? Out of the question! “Nonsense”, said Zweig to his Belgian friends. “You can hang me to this lamp post if the Germans march into Belgium!”

But the July 23rd ultimatum changed all that. The insouciance of the holidaymakers began to make way for panic. Five days later tragedy struck. Zweig just managed to board the last train to Herbesthal and cross the Belgian border. No longer any doubt, “the German invasion of Belgium contrary to every provision of international law, was in progress.”

Stefan Zweig’s description still fascinates us today: there is a poignancy about the contrast between the insouciance of the seaside visitors in Ostend and what with hindsight we regard as the inevitability of events. As you read those passages about the carefree and unsuspecting life of the holidaymakers in Ostend you secretly hope that things will turn out differently. I know someone who spent years reading every available work about the Spanish Civil War in the abiding hope that in the new version history would have a different outcome, that this time Madrid would hold out longer against Franco’s advancing armies, long enough for foreign allies to come to the aid of the Republicans... In anticipation of the inevitable you look for vestiges of indetermination, indicators, telltale signs of an occurrence that would have avoided the unavoidable. In a word, chance.

In a recent work by film director and writer Alexander Kluge and painter Gerhard Richter published in 2010 (*December*), we learn how after Goebbels' marriage on December 3rd 1931, Hitler nearly met his end in an accident. On the return journey his chauffeur skidded on the icy road and missed by 40 centimetres the car carrying the mother-of-the-bride of the Minister of Propaganda. Alexander Kluge was born 73 days later, on February 14th 1932: on the day of the wedding he still had 40 centimetres to grow. And he wrote: "lying in the well-tempered belly, where I was almost born, without Hitler having had a part in the future."

In the light of a future that is already over ('future perfect') such moments are charged with the purely imaginary power that single-handedly they could have derailed the whole of history. It is as if we invest all our hopes and desires for a better and different future in chance and pure coincidences. But, conversely, what actually happened and what triggered all those various coincidences, takes on the character of *deeper necessity*. Those 40 centimetres which saved the life of the Führer-to-be do seem to be a sign of a cynical providence...

- *Only providence can explain why the cars did not collide.*
- *What do you mean by providence?*

In *War and Peace* Tolstoy described with great verve how nothing went according to plan either at the Battle of Austerlitz or the Battle of Borodino. The French and the Russian generals had drawn up and discussed detailed strategic plans: at that precise moment that specific battalion would be in that particular place. General X's battalion would have to go the other way and advance towards the hill, etc. But when the time came, one battalion arrived late, one was hindered in its manoeuvres by the enemy and another lost its way... But after the fatal outcome, each movement seems to be the expression of a deep and brilliant insight into the laws of military strategies. No longer by a God, but by a deified individual (Napoleon). *As if nothing had been left to chance.*

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With hindsight it does seem as if the indefiniteness of the future has shifted to the past: seen from the completed and seemingly inevitable future, the past appears as a virtual field of unutilized exits and opportunities, of chance meetings and coincidences which came to nothing, but which could have taken history or a life in a totally different direction. Rather like a pile of old love letters never sent because of external circumstances.

In a recent essay about the work of Dostoyevsky, the writer Jean-Philippe Toussaint claims that it was the use of this retroactive stance in *Crime and Punishment* which fascinated him so much and may even have prompted him to start writing. This is the use of the 'prolepsis', or what is termed the 'flash forward' in the film world (the opposite of the flashback). Because of this brief intrusion of the future in the present, every event is now charged with a sense of fatality, everything that happens is pregnant with what is to come. "Henceforth, on remembering that moment and everything that happened that day...": in the light of this anticipated retrospection which all at once is dropped into the present, the character's fatal actions suddenly seem driven by an inner determination. Why, despite being exhausted, he didn't take

the shorter route home that day but went via the Hay-market ... And at the same time everything he didn't do appears to be charged with possibilities which might have taken his life in a totally different direction. It is no accident that that attitude of the prolepsis is one of remorse and contrition. The future appears to be concluded. What follows is brooding and ruminating on what has happened.

But what Toussaint suggests is this: the prolepsis is more than a rhetorical process and more than an existential attitude; as a figure of speech it embodies the perspective from which the writer conceives his novel. It is no accident that his book *La vérité sur Marie* opens with this extraordinary sentence (both stylistically and in terms of content): "Later on, thinking back on the last few hours of that sweltering night, I realized we had made love at the same time, Marie and I, but not with each other."

What he wants to show here is that in writing the art consists of more than just ramping up tension (as in detective novels). What gives the book intensity and depth is the extent to which it manages to create tension between the variable and the fatal, chance and the anticipation of the fatal outcome. The work still grips us even when we know the denouement, or perhaps *because* we know the denouement. Such works you read over and over again, looking for what had remained variable in that world, for what might have escaped fate. This is the real tension we find in authors like Proust, Dostoyevsky and Jean-Philippe Toussaint, who evoke chance and possibilities in a hermetically sealed world. Those exits and escape routes are frozen in a flight that is rooted to the spot for all eternity. In that tension a world is evoked that is created and preserved by the imagination. Desire prevails in that specific tension. So a good novel acts as a closed and isolated world, an absolute reality which is introverted and exists in its own right but lives inwardly through the dreams and desires aroused in those margins of unused chances. Imagine that Prince Andrei hadn't been wounded at Borodino. Or that Albertine had lived... In a novel desire manifests itself in its essence or in condensed form: desire is the hope of being able to escape the unavoidable. And invariably the unavoidable comes along, shattering that hope and that desire.

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The idea outlined above can also be illustrated as follows: the night of April 14th 1865 the young Lewis Powell attempted to assassinate the American Secretary of State W.H. Seward. That same night John Wilkes Booth murdered Abraham Lincoln and George Atzerodt is assumed to have planned to kill the Vice-President Andrew Johnson. Alexander Gardner photographed Powell in his cell on the ironclad vessel the USS *Saugus*. He would be hung on July 7th, along with the other conspirators. In his now canonical commentary towards the end of *La chambre Claire* (Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography), Roland Barthes refers to the tension that is the essence of this photograph: I see two things at the same time, that man is going to die – that man is dead. Like others I am struck by a 'future perfect' where what is at stake is death. I shudder on seeing a catastrophe that has already taken place. "Every photograph", says Barthes, "is this catastrophe". A historical photograph captures a moment – that moment was still full of future. But with all its future it has already gone for ever: crushed by time. "Il y a toujours en elle [la photographie] un écrasement du temps" – there is always a defeat of time [in the photographs].

The 'catastrophe' of every photograph is caused by the mechanical process required to capture a moment in time. But the time structure of the 'future perfect' is that of the prolepsis. It is this structure and this figure of speech which, as an attitude to life and time, help us understand the work of Eric de Smet. His works derive their intensity from that perspective and in a way the disquiet they contain embodies the internal tension we have just evoked. There is something catastrophic about his works in the sense that Barthes conveys when he speaks about the photograph of Lewis Powell, or about Raskolnikov's romanticized remorse.

In the traditional metaphysics of the Augustinians, desire was interpreted as the contrast between the eternal and time, between the city of God and the earthly. Only in eternity will our desire find peace: the fact that the earthly provides us with no let-up and that we always long for more is itself the sign of an original intimate bond with the Almighty. We are driven in what we want and desire by the absolute, because our will is itself the impression which the infinite and absolute being leaves in us (Malebranche). Will is by nature infinite and absolute, but we train it on objects that are relative and finite. Hence the disquiet: those objects soon lose their meaning and their value in the light of a desire that is geared only to what is eternal and absolute. We are no longer satisfied with what we have acquired and eventually possess. Desire had overestimated its worth, which affirms the fact that our relationship to the divine was perverted: instead of just longing for the absolute, we have made absolute what we longed for. The eternity of the desire made the unenduring object absolute.

The traditional model interprets the motive of desire from the tension which arises between the eternal character of what drives us and the finiteness of what we desire. The driving force is the disproportion between desire which always strives for the almighty and the low in which it is rooted in its human form. Desire only becomes pure by dying in the world. But as Marcel Proust repeatedly emphasizes in his novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*: "[It is not because other people are dead that our affection for them grows faint, it is because we ourselves are dying.](#)" Desire is destined to evaporate. Worst of all is having to ascertain that your craving or lust for everything you considered to be almighty slowly ceases to exist. Desire itself fades. When our affection for something or someone wanes, it is as if something in us has died.

Desire does not itself possess internal necessity or an autonomous dynamic of its own, but it is stimulated by external chance factors. It is not a natural force which constantly tries to cling to something so as not to be driven forward. It depends on a concurrence of circumstances, lucky coincidences, that a something or someone not only attracts my craving, but causes it to rise up from nowhere. Therefore what strikes us so much about the waning of desire is the realization that in itself it doesn't have the strength to rise again from its ashes. Fear is not so much the prospect of disappearing oneself, but of being left behind in a landscape abandoned by craving. A new spring, but not for me.

"Desire subsides
and cries itself into a red morning sky"

So desire is not some sort of absolute power that would load the finite object with the eternity of its own movement. It is not the absolutization or idealization of the

object or the being that arouses craving – idealization on the other hand creates distance and makes it greater –, but awareness of defencelessness. It is as if we can only really commit ourselves to that being in and through the realization of his or her fragility. Not that everything that is defenceless is valuable. Rather, as Lucebert said: “everything of value is defenceless”.

Desire resides in the temporary structure of the ‘future perfect’ or unfolds in the figure of speech of the prolepsis. Not only because an intimate bond is forged with the being in anticipation of and out of sensitivity for his or her absence and loss, but also because what in the end is the work of pure chance and of a happy chance meeting is experienced in desire as being the expression of a dark providence and of a mysterious necessity.... “That she happened to be standing there on that very spot that day”, “that I didn’t take the shorter route home that day, despite being exhausted”,.... all that does seem to be the work of a supernatural force, a gift from heaven. Good fortune that suddenly and unexpectedly befell us. Because chance as well as good fortune, ‘Zufall’ as well as ‘chance’ refer to what befalls (‘to fall’ or ‘cadere’) and could not be foreseen. An event that interrupts the routine and allows something unexpected and un hoped-for to come about, out of the blue, giving life such intensity that we look upon it as fate, as a thunderbolt. Life is super-charged like a dream.

But after a while desire extinguishes itself, it goes and lies down, leaving me behind in a musty world that is drab and grey. I find myself in a form of life that simply will not die. Desire does not take me with it as it dies, but drops me in a void that is suffocating and without hope. This tension between desire and what it leaves behind, between craving and drab survival seems to me to be at the heart of Eric De Smet’s work. On the one hand, the loss of self that characterizes the glow of happiness or pleasure – and on the other hand, being left abandoned and alone in a void which has all the suffocating pressure of the outside world on sleepless nights. This tension is absolutely central in one of his most recent sculptures. Underneath the figure looks as if it is about to throw itself onto the earth and literally let itself drop. It is the movement of an angel being hurled into sleep, wanting to literally *fall* asleep or sink into total oblivion. But just as it is on the brink of falling, the sculpture picks itself up and advances, as if seized by panic, resurging, possibly for the last time.

Desire is an endless death struggle that recalls the agony Proust describes in *Le Côté de Guermantes* (The Guermantes Way). His grandmother is dying and the narrator pays her a last fond farewell. Gradually she seems to sink into sleep, at peace at last. But then, Proust tells us: “Suddenly my grandmother half rose, made a violent effort, as though struggling to resist an attempt on her life... At that moment my grandmother opened her eyes. I thrust myself hurriedly in front of Françoise to hide her tears, while my parents were speaking to the sufferer. The sound of the oxygen had ceased; the doctor moved away from the bedside. My grandmother was dead.”

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What is left once desire has subsided is an empty and vague awareness that is no longer attached to anything and is seduced and gripped by nothing, a resurgence of life which awakens with a start and in disarray from the glow, and panic-stricken falls

into a world that is as raw and empty as death, a spasm of a life that cannot die but is left behind in desolation when everything in front of it has wasted away. It is a savage, almost bestial reaction, like that of a drowning man who suddenly resists the urge to allow himself to be sucked into the deep, or perhaps the rude resurgence of the mind which shirks sleep and torments me with sleeplessness. You succumb to a desire, rather like falling into a deep sleep. Desire and world grow together to form an entity, as in a dream. But then against your will, as punishment, you are driven out of that sleep and like Ahasveros condemned to wander the earth, between sleep and wakefulness, desire and death.

According to the oldest sources (Bologna c13) the legend of the Wandering Jew derives from a story pilgrims told on their return journey from the Holy Land in 1223. They described how they had seen a Jew in Armenia who had goaded Jesus to walk faster on the way to his crucifixion. To which the cross-bearer is said to have answered: "... there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom". (Matthew 16:28). The Jew was then cursed to walk the earth dishevelled, dazed and disconsolate, unable to die and made young again every hundred years. We know what fate befell this Wandering Jew from the protagonists of the Heimat ideology. In a mixture of legend and eugenic pseudosciences (and social Darwinism) his wandering was compared to that of vermin and rats. But in a twist of history and of fate this became the sort of life lived by people in the German cities.

W.G. Sebald expressed this aptly in *Luftkrieg & Literatur* (Air War and Literature), the essay in which he investigated why the subject of the bombardment of German cities in the Second World War ('area bombing') had been taboo in Germany throughout postwar literature. He gives various reasons for this, but one of them has to do with the impossibility of facing up to the conditions in which the survivors lived.

In that book, which he wrote in 2001, Sebald makes several references to the first-hand account written by Friedrich Reck on August 20th 1943. The latter describes the exodus of the survivors after the destruction of Hamburg and, among other things, how in the midst of those dazed and dishevelled people a mother's suitcase burst open on the platform and the entire contents fell out. Toys, burnt lingerie, toiletries and finally the charred and mummified body of a child. What makes this testimony so implausible is that the incident goes beyond anything we can imagine. But the same thing occurred in other cities too: many mothers carried their charred child with them in their luggage. Nobody knows what became of them. It is also difficult, says Sebald, to comprehend the trauma in the minds of the survivors. But what strikes us most about these dazed and dishevelled survivors is that they survived at all. Sebald implies that there is a correlation between this endless wandering and that of colonies of insects. Colonies which "noiselessly and incessantly overran everything". In exactly the same way the ruins were overrun with weeds, flies and maggots which devoured the bodies, and the cities of those who had wanted to cleanse and sanitize Europe were suddenly besieged by vermin, so that the survivors had to face up to the unbearable truth: "*They* were the rat people". This is perhaps one of the reasons why this tragic history was hushed up in postwar literature. But there is more: Sebald wants to evoke a "natural history of the destruction". Insects such as ants, termites and bees have always fired the imagination of philosophers (Mandeville) and writers (Tolstoy, Maeterlinck), who saw in these colonies the

natural models of human societies and states. Nature as the draft of history or culture. But with Sebald nature now stands for a form of survival that remains once history has exhausted itself and there is no longer anything historical about it. The vermin gorge themselves on the rotting remains of human civilization. And the sort of human life that emerges from those remains is parasitic and doomed to roam hysterically from one place to another looking for leftovers to live on. So Sebald wonders if the aerial bombardment of civilians could not be seen as a sort of portend and mock-up of our contemporary societies. As if in our contemporary frenetic mobility and eagerness for movement we did nothing but continue that then natural flight from catastrophe. This theme of wandering, roaming around, hysterical flight in space and language and pointless motion (*...Always cobbling!! that is now my lot*) seems to me central to the work of Eric De Smet. There are the 'trajectories', but also more recently there is his interest in the myth of the Wandering Jew, Ahasveros. In one of the works with that title you see an unwieldy, helpless and rather foolish bulk bent forward as it stumbles along on two brittle or charred legs. It is off-balance and looks as if it might come a cropper at any moment. But that very lack of equilibrium is the movement. The figure has momentum and in her flight she lifts what could be a head with a mouth which seems to cry out with prehistoric grief. Movement and grief. How far we are from the idyllic Wanderlust, or from the "*stabat mater*".

This work – like most of Eric de Smet's work for that matter - is extremely powerful: Eric de Smet is not primarily concerned with 'forms'. What makes the figures consistent and convincing cannot be put down to form. These figures are pregnant with a vision that could be fully developed through concepts and words. Not that the figures are looking to illustrate such philosophical insights. But they do visually what the philosopher or the poet tries to do with language and concepts. In a sense Eric De Smet 'thinks' in images. Eric De Smet *thinks* about desire and survival: about the inability to disappear into the glow, or the inability to disappear is what is left afterwards: frenetic wandering.

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Abstract art has familiarized us with the idea that an artwork does not directly 'represent' anything; that the point of the work is no longer the category of representation, but the category of expression. With a representation an artist is looking to reproduce an aspect of reality in a context which sets it apart from that reality. In that way representation creates distance vis-à-vis what it presents. In expression the work does not fall outside what it wants to depict, but is as it were the expression of it. Representation and expression differ from each other as the Cartesian idea differs from the Spinozian concept. The former is directed at reality from the distance of thinking and by means of a presentation; with Spinoza, on the other hand, both thinking and presentation are modifications of reality itself. What does it mean to say that an artwork expresses something 'real', that it seems to contain a truth? The true or successful does not of course consist in the way reality is correctly reproduced. Art, said Paul Klee, "does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible." What does "make visible" mean?

Gilles Deleuze was right when he wrote that the lifetime work of Francis Bacon was to try and paint 'a scream'. But painting a scream does not mean reproducing the

horror that makes the viewer cry out, but generating the forces, the violence of the *convulsions* in the body which cause someone to scream. Bacon paints the scream at birth... Just as De Smet paints, for example, desire at birth. What De Smet paints, draws or sculpts are not recognizable figures who would be driven by desire. His 'figurations' are not depictions of something out of the world, but they themselves require form and presence. They want to make desire visible: they express it. In the way they come into being, they seem to be the expression of chance and desire. Many of his works from the 1990s are called *trajectories*. Traject (from 'traiacere') refers to what is left when someone has found his destination and to the road he has travelled. But 'iacere' also means 'to throw' and refers to chance. The traject itself determines if that throw 'will become something', and if it does, it is not because it becomes part of a larger whole. Eric De Smet often begins his trajectories by drawing them. And this drawn trajectory does not grow into an organic 'path', but becomes an essential part of its own growth. The sculptures capture that same 'throw' in the wood or in the bronze. What grows is the trajectory as an autonomous swelling. It goes its own way. In that sense they are not looking to present or represent anything, they never organize themselves into anything other than themselves (a gestalt, a recognizable form, etc.) but push forward with a revealing closeness: autonomous, broken loose from a world. Indeed, Eric De Smet wants to capture desire as it seems to be embodied in what he creates. Or rather, he wants the *traject* he is creating to embrace him. Drawing is a sort of magical incantation ritual. It doesn't start from a representation or an intention, but can be likened to a throw or toss up whose fate will determine whether it proved to be the expression and incarnation of *something*.

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The powerfulness of many *trajectories* is founded on a sort of ambiguity: not figurative enough to merge into a 'Gestalt' and too obtrusive to fade into the background. I would like to describe them as the "scratches of the soul". Eric De Smet once quoted Cioran, who was talking about "screaming" as "the last stage of lyricism". It seems to me an apt description of his own work: a *traject* as the hastening, agonizing last phase of a poetic silence, as the macabre awakening from a lyrical bewitchment. No song any more, but even less than silence. What remains of a voice when the lyricism has burnt out. Screaming and shrieking: they disarm the imagination with their disastrous, raw simplicity.

A recent *traject* shows a figure displaying a painful, even clownish arrogance. Like a blind absolute ruler that figure inflicts itself on us with an irritating presence, while the background melts and flows away.

The figure embodies the embarrassing display of power of someone who is blind to his own downfall. It exudes power, but not life, and irritates precisely because it is without force. "Pouvoir sans puissance", Deleuze would have said. It does seem to be the incarnation of our time and of the clownish overconfidence and arrogance of an authority concerned with just one thing: warding off and postponing his own downfall. This, too, is a figure of that same desire and of that internal division which characterizes it. The clownishness lies in the attempt to ward off and remove that tension. Moreover, it is striking how in recent works Eric De Smet often puts the emphasis on that aspect: the misplaced, grotesque or exalted, the daft or deranged

('Ahasveros'). Some trajectories gesticulate with a blind, single-minded exaltation, sometimes bordering on the ridiculous and the annoyance of empty affectation. They put one in mind of the macabre coquettishness of Goya's *Caprichos*. In 'Hasta la Muerte' (Until Death) he depicts a very old lady with that macabre coquettishness, beautifying herself in a mirror. I believe I can even hear that crazed lady's shrill cry in some of the *trajectories*.

There is something poetic about the trajectories, but that poeticism is always broken off internally. The movement of the *traject* is rarely very fluid. In one of his most powerful drawings Eric De Smet shows how a figure on spidery legs rises up with force. But the figure breaks right in the middle, and the rising force throws itself forward. It is *that internal split* and the tension that keep the image balanced. A rising force is broken off in the middle. And that internal crack gives the image movement; it trembles and shudders. In the *traject* I have already referred to, a figure seems to stoop with excessive force and vitality and we don't know for certain if it is the expression of euphoria or fear. It caves in and seems to stumble headlong. But that life force, that elan is only the effect of the split which breaks the figure in the middle like a twig. It is that split, that disproportion and that lack of balance which evoke the power of the movement and of that elan. It is that split which is fixed. The *traject* exists only as the incarnation of a tension between the elan of the figure and the split which generates the movement. The expression itself seems to be split between absorption in that elan and the state of collapse caused by the split. He tries to keep the two together: the parts of the *traject* do not become part of the whole, but neither are they indifferent to it: what holds them together is the awareness of the internal split.

That crack, that inner split sometimes makes the difference so that the image asserts itself. Each new *traject* is in a sense possessed by that 'difference': in such a way even that often different trajectories form a sort of entity, a series of fragments which all circulate around the same split. They are not all about the same thing, but in everything they express, a same something always obtrudes. Consequently, there is an air of tragedy about each trajectory: not only because it is possessed by a tension or split, but also because it only seems to be the repetition of that same internal division.

How many trajectories has Eric De Smet drawn, sculpted or painted! Each time he starts from nothing and yet he invariably seems to come back to the same. That pressure and repetition give his work a sense of fatality, but also a whimsical and comical quality. In 'Titaantjes' (Little Titans) Nescio tells us how the painter Bavink is obsessed by the setting sun and repeatedly tries to capture it on canvas. But each time the sun reappears, it is indifferent, as if that little painter didn't exist. "Do you understand what that sun wants from me?" he complains. "Thirty-four setting suns I have standing against the wall, reversed. And nevertheless I stand there again every evening". Somewhere Deleuze wrote: "There is something tragic about what is repeated, but something comical about repetition."

De Smet's trajectories are not real lines or contours, they don't define figures, but resemble 'scratches'. A line should be drawn with a light hand, the hand of a Japanese calligrapher on a smooth ground that offers no resistance. A scratch should be incised and consists of overcoming the resistance of the material. The line subjugates or lifts the material, while the scratch tries to bite into that material. The line presupposes the relaxation of inner tension. The scratch exploits that tension,

evaporates power, forcing and pushing it into a spasm. That's why there is something broken and jagged about the trajectories. They stem from an operation which itself is the expression of tension, as if they had been carved with a knife in hard wood. At the same time the intensity of the *traject* evokes the power with which it was incised.

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In an essay about the absolute, J-P. Sartre claims that Giacometti was the first to sculpt man as you see him, i.e. "*à distance*" – at a distance. He claims that his sculptures attain an absolute distance: he creates a figure "at ten paces, twenty paces and whatever you do it stays there." In short, the relationship between the sculpture and yourself no longer depends on your own position vis-à-vis that sculpture. Whether you are close to it, or a way off, it embodies an image "*à dix pas*". The block of material is nearby, the image remains a way off. The distance has itself become a feature of the image. "He puts the distance within hand's reach." But you do have to find the right position, view it from a respectable distance. If you get too close, you lose the distance. If you stand too far away, you don't see a sculpture. Something similar happens in De Smet's images and figures. It is a question of adopting the right position which releases us from the relativity of what we see; from what we see as a function of our abilities (to recognize, to distinguish, etc.).

So seeing the visible as it manifests itself in the works of Eric de Smet requires asceticism: learning to resist the urge – like children with clouds – to capture recognizable forms. There is something reassuring about reducing an obtruding *traject* to a form, for example to that of a snake, a face or arm. But the intensity is then lost. By contrast, the *traject* requires a sort of self-denial, the suspension of recognition. It requires practice, effort: you have to learn to look without seeing. You don't always succeed: the figure resists, doesn't allow itself to be penetrated, is not 'accessible', but it works in me, imposes itself with stubborn opacity, turned in on itself. And then suddenly it breaks open. And the time you have spent on it undergoes an internal modification: you are sucked in with the figure and it is as if time has stood still so as to be able to go on ticking in the figure itself. Time even becomes a dynamic feature of the figure and seems to be completely absorbed by it (a juncture, a particular point in time). Each figure has its own rhythm: sometimes fast, sometimes slow, but its movement is always rooted to the spot. What you suddenly see is the magic of how that figure, as if for the first time, puts itself together, composes itself, positions itself, challenges.

In his statues Rodin wanted to show the movement of his sculptures by presenting certain limbs disproportionately by exaggerating them, so you saw for example how those sculptures walk steadily or hurriedly.

But in Eric de Smet's sculptures you see how a figure starts to move of its own accord, becomes movement, how a game of chance solidifies into necessity, how pure coincidence develops into something inevitable: *there it is*. How in other words a figure is born over and over again immutably and for all eternity. Seeing is initiation and helping movement occur, tension that holds itself together despite breaks in the movement, or perhaps *because of* the breaks. Time itself becomes an expression of the inner pressure of work, a process of expression and development of what is given as internal condensation. Everything that develops is contained in it,

implicit. The development adds nothing in that sense, but expresses what is given. The figure trembles.

The background is very important in that movement. In one of the Ahasveros sculptures it looks as if in its foolish movement the figure, like a grubby rag, makes dirty smudges. In other sculptures the background is more 'auditive' than visual in the sense that it denotes a kind of droning. Rather than giving the figure space or depth or shadow to be swallowed up in, the background arouses disquiet. It is as if the figure is hanging above that disquiet, only just balanced, or as if the background has flowed away or sunk from under him. The background doesn't support the foreground, it isn't the world that gave birth to the figure, but drones under the figure, just as a pain in the eyes can sometimes shimmer as you look. The background can be heard; Johan Eyckelboom would say:

"it sounds like silver paper
trying to emerge
from its crumpled state"

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Every work is movement and captured in movement. One figure is repeated (Ahasveros with water shoes) and is part of a trajectory. Its form is a matter of chance but once the form is there, it continues on its way with the implacable necessity of a Spinozian world.

They plot trajectories, not in time and space, but by being time and space. Every figure is like a solidified throw! It is its own beginning and destination, and exists (succeeds) when it contains and embodies the inner tension of chance and fate. Each figure gives the impression of pure coincidence: it could have been different. But as soon as it is there, there is an inevitability about it: it could not have been different from what it now is! A little longer, and the tension would have disappeared... the image would have failed and would have had nothing to say. The power of a great artist, says Roland Barthes, lies in a sort of asceticism and precision of his brushstrokes, or of the movements of his hand: "L'artiste se retient d'en vouloir trop" - The artist prevents himself wanting too much. Therein also lies his strength: he controls every movement. And that control is "une incessante victoire sur la bêtise des traits" – an incessant victory over the stupidity of strokes.