

A study of precariousness in art and philosophy

Introduction

The simplest cause of vertigo is some mechanical disturbance of the body affecting the fluid in the internal ear; such as that produced by moving in a swing with eyes shut ... or a sudden fall.

(Black's Medical Dictionary, 1987, p.723)

The occasional disorientation that we experience as a vertiginous feeling is so common that it could be an intrinsic part of the human condition, it is only classed as a medical complaint when distressingly frequent or prolonged. The sensation of vertigo accompanies a vulnerable awareness of height, or a fall, and falling is a universal metaphor: falling in love, falling from grace, the fall of the Roman Empire, the biblical definition of our world as 'after the Fall'. The hidden implication is that there is something gained as well as lost by falling; a lover, a new era, even the manifest world itself – in other words, a possibility; what Sartre called the 'vertigo of possibility' (1969, pp.29-32).

The loss of balance and anxiety of possibility incurred as vertigo is inseparable from notions of height/weightlessness and depth/gravity. This dissertation will move into a far orbit from the medical definition to explore these notions as revealed in certain artworks and philosophical thought. Although the state of vertigo appears to be universal and a historical, I propose that our perception of depth/weightlessness has altered in three stages that can be observed both psychologically and socio-historically through art. It will be argued that there has been a shift from an emphasis on the 'highest', a 'tower' principle emblematic of the Renaissance, to a 'bridge' principle emerging in the Baroque, interpreted as Leibniz's catenary, to a 'ground zero' principle of the Postmodern translating as Deleuze's deterritorialization. The stages are not exclusive, as the art will reveal, but a tendency can be seen nevertheless. Through the examples of art within these classifications

my enquiry is into the value of precariousness, and the aim is to show that it can be equated with what Robert Pirsig termed 'dynamic quality' (Lila, 1991).

CHAPTER I

Leaving some dark prison, we are blinded by light; emerging abruptly onto a high tower, we are overwhelmed by a flood of emotions. We experience the dizziness, the disorientation – the whole psychology of modern uneasiness related to its abrupt confrontation with space-time. (Teilhard de Chardin, 1999, p.158)

Teilhard defines disorientation as a modern phenomenon, but the gradual emphasis on empiricism and the individual, and the accompanying demythologisation that gave precedence to the will (and resultant uncertainty from standing alone) can find its origins in the Renaissance. Minutely observed portraits, not only of people but of the natural world, as in Durer's *The Large Turf* (1503), attest to a striving for knowledge and control; a raising up of humankind. The classical sculptures and pillars of ancient Greece and Rome summed up physically the lost ideals of civilization and ascension that the Renaissance endeavoured to surpass. The 'tower' principle is perfectly expressed thus:

Yes, the life which we call blessed is to be sought for on a high eminence, and strait is the way that leads to it. Many, also, are the hills that lie between, and we must ascend, by a glorious striving, from strength to strength. At the top is at once the end of our struggles and the goal for which we are bound. (Petrarch, (1336) 1992, p.27)

Order and individualism, a possibility of the certainty of truth, a 'pre-vertigo' sensibility are qualities discernible in the work of the Cremonese painter Sofonisba Anguissola (1532 – 1625), who attained lasting success in her own lifetime as recorded in Vasari's *Vites*, as court painter to Philip II in Madrid.

Sofonisba Anguissola *The Chess Game* 1555, 28 x 38 in.

The Chess Game (1555) is an early work, uncommissioned and dilettante – for delight in its own sake. What is revealed about precariousness in this painting? As suggested, it appears to be pre-vertiginous; a ‘fall from grace’ being a state that Anguissola would have avoided at all costs. However, the situation of any woman painter, as an anachronism at this time, was inherently precarious, particularly an upwardly mobile unmarried such as Anguissola; “... the exceptional existence of a woman artist in Renaissance Italy was a social ‘marvel’ ”(Garrard, 1994, p.568).

Virtuosity and virtue were indivisible in the 16th century, and virtue for a woman was interpreted as modesty and chastity. Anguissola had to compromise on modesty to gain recognition but compensated by over-emphasizing her chaste virtue – eight of her paintings include the descriptor ‘virgo’ as part of the signature – until she married at thirty nine.

Anguissola guarded her ‘high eminence’ well and thereby avoided falling; in worldly terms her substantial oeuvre of paintings and long life are testament to this. All of her mature works were portraits, however, and portraits generally warranted the faint praise of *imitare* and *ritrare*, rather than *invenzione*, despite Vasari’s wonder that Anguissola could uniquely (for a woman!) produce portraits ... “who appear truly alive” (Jacobs, 1994, p.77).

The Chess Game, by contrast, is “an important contribution to the emerging categories of genre painting” (Garrard, 1994, p.597), and although it includes portraiture this is within an animated, related group. Chess is a game of pure rationality, or *Logos*, and ever since the Pythagoreans this quality had been attributed to men; consequently the dualism of their philosophy led to irrationality, or the senses, being attributed to women. The humanism of the Renaissance had ameliorated this division somewhat, as is shown by the numerous examples of hermaphrodites, masculinized women and feminized men from art of this time. Chess was an acceptable leisure pursuit for either sex, nevertheless by depicting her sisters playing this game Anguissola was asserting the equal capacity for rationality of women, thereby also drawing attention to that capacity in herself. This is reinforced further by Minerva, the most “rhetorically adroit and

humanistically talented fourth-born” (Ferino-Pagden, 1995, p.31), raising her hand in an odd gesture. Anguissola blended surprised concession – Lucia, opposite, has just won the game – with what might be interpreted as benediction. It could be that this is the result of surprise moderated in a sister so evidently self-possessed, but the hand does point serendipitously skywards. It is therefore likely that Anguissola was also referring to her sister’s heavenly counterpart; Minerva, or Athena, was “the most masculinized female divinity in Western civilisation” (Even, 1990, p.32). I believe, however, that Minerva’s gesture is the pictorial correlative of Petrarch’s ideal and another expression of the tower principle.

Anguissola’s awareness of her precarious position moderated her later work to a level of decorum that simultaneously ensured her popularity and limited her ambition. Whitney Chadwick states: “Anguissola could not use paint as a metaphor for possessable beauty without violating the social role that made possible her life as a painter” (1991, p.84), but with *The Chess Game* she circumvented any social violations by painting her family and that ambition could be given free rein. This painting therefore contains a vertigo of possibility which comes from height without falling, in both the worldly sense of Anguissola’s life circumstances and in the aspirational height it alludes to. In spite of this, it is a ‘not falling’ which paradoxically both prevented Anguissola’s later work from realising this possibility further, and ensured that her most daring work was created when she was safe at home.

Chess has variously been linked metaphorically to war – feudal imagery, politics – strategy, and life itself – moves altering the game. Thousands of years old, the rules had not changed significantly since A.D.500 until the Renaissance, when the name ‘tower’ was first introduced by Vida to replace the rook (1533) and the queen combined the moves of tower and bishop to become the strongest piece on the board (c.1490). Vertical chess pieces are, however, restricted to movement on a horizontal plane, and it is tenuous but tempting to read into *The Chess Game* a

presentiment of the future toppling of Renaissance ideals. Lambert used Deleuze's analogy of chess to describe the collapse of Kantian reason:

... all of the little pieces that serve as players have been endowed with singular characteristics. A knight can only move two spaces forward, then one square left or right. If it moved any differently then it would no longer be a knight...the loss of principles would signal the 'end of the game'... Here, the 'end of Metaphysics' is no longer such a lofty and impenetrable concept, but rather the simplest thing to understand; the moment when philosophy lost the rule of reason and could no longer go on playing the 'game of truth' according to the same old rules. (2002, pp.73-4).

CHAPTER II

According to Deleuze, the collapse of Reason necessitated the Baroque solution which was a saving or shoring up of the Enlightenment Ideal in the face of the 'proofs', ravages and miseries accumulating against it. Although it is naïve to over-simplify the complexity of the Baroque epoch it does seem as if a release from the restrictive Mannerism that summed up late Renaissance art under the Reformation is a major characteristic.

"The Baroque solution is the following: we shall multiply principles...we can always slip a new one out from under the cuff – and in this way we will change their use" (Deleuze, 1993, p.67).

Deleuze's 'multiplicity' of new principles could be another way of saying 'possibilities', but these possibilities have only the semblance of a release, a Janus-like aspect characterizes the diversity, ingenuity and sheer volume of Baroque art, because at the same time this diversity expresses perhaps the inventive reaction to unease. The Baroque, looking both forwards and back, was therefore at its height in a state of precarious balance between the new scientific and the old allegorical modes of thought. Deleuze's own 'non-philosophy', and the collaborative work with Guattari will be looked at in relation to postmodern art, however they are informed significantly by Leibniz. He argues that Leibniz's work constitutes the grounding of a Baroque philosophy that can also illuminate contemporary art and science. Deleuze articulates this philosophy as 'The Fold' which, briefly, is his concept for the mode of living potential that defines the force of creation. The fold and unfold refer to the extreme disorientation which occurs when thought can no longer be traced either from common sense (knowledge as 'given') or a higher principle (God, or 'good') and, according to Lambert:

"... the soul loses its ability to orient itself to either the external world of perception or the interior domain of psychological representation (memory, dream etc)" (2002, p.7).

The mental image evoked by Deleuze's fold could also be a descriptive diagram of vertigo:

What diagram would signify vertigo held in abeyance, or the precarious balance of the Baroque?

I suggest that it is possible that it would look like part of the fold, logically a fixed part of the fold.

This resembles what Leibniz called the catenary, the curve formed by gravity on a hanging rope fixed each end at differing heights. Perhaps it is not remarkable to trace the form of the catenary over many Baroque paintings when convolutions and extravagant gestures are so prevalent, but it can also be found in 'still' subjects such as Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* (1662-4) and Claude Lorrain's *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* (1648).

Jan Vermeer *Woman Holding a Balance* 1662-4 16 ¾ x 15 in.

Claude Lorrain *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* 1648

The giddiness ensuing from the collapse of reason that the catenary inscribes is revealed in a gradual turning away from grand historical themes towards genre painting:

There are numerous works of eighteenth century genre painting in which figures are found in a position of unstable equilibrium, with the effect that their future action remains in some sense indeterminate. (Jollet 1993, p.275)

The 'fetes galantes' paintings of Jean-Honore Fragonard (1732-1806) are the clearest examples of the precariousness of this time because levity is, arguably, their main characteristic.

Fragonard's work can be categorised as Rococo or late Baroque, and the privileged subjects lit in fondant colours cannot be disassociated from the decadence which fuelled the French Revolution. It is, then, a painting such as *The Swing* 1766 which contains the apotheosis of the 'Baroque solution' and its imminent fall.

Jean-Honore Fragonard *The Swing* 1766 81 x 64.2 cm.

Superficially, *The Swing* appears to be an exercise in diversionary voyeurism: the girl depicted was a mistress of Fragonard's friend, the friend is shown as the prone figure who (as a result of his fall?) can see up her skirt. It can also be a visual metaphor of Leibniz's "all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds" but, with hindsight, it is probable that Fragonard was more knowing than this. His contemporary, Voltaire, satirized Leibniz as Dr Pangloss (*Candide* 1758) and, similarly, Fragonard would not have resisted showing the 'belle monde' in a precarious state. Precariousness and falling figures are recurring motifs in his paintings; *The Swing* (1750-55), *Winter* (1750-55) and *Perrette and the Pot of Milk* (1770) are examples among others. The prevalence of these and the fact that Fragonard escaped the guillotine supports the possibility that he was more aware of the uncertainty of his milieu than his 'decadent' paintings initially indicate. I believe that Fragonard managed to capitalise on the instability of his time and found something gained in a fall, like his friend in the painting!

The catenary can be imagined, then, 'bridging' the Renaissance from its higher point, swinging across the Baroque to a metaphorical lower point marked by the Industrial revolution and the stirrings of Modernism. The lower point only marks the ending of the Baroque in historical terms, not the ending of uncertainty. When Deleuze asserts that Leibniz's Baroque philosophy also illuminates our understanding of contemporary art it is, I think, because the uncertainty that correlates to the catenary has increased as history has unfolded, much as falling increases velocity. In other words, it is not the experience of vertigo that changes, but the psychological frame of reference within which it occurs.

CHAPTER III

It can be seen, then, that the 'Baroque philosophy' would perhaps be more accurately envisaged as an unending catenary, one which stretches into our own time; 'the centre cannot hold' of Modernism would bear this out.

Jasper Johns' work itself spans the gap between Modernism and Postmodernism. Through Johns, the object reappeared but as signifier; re-presented rather than represented. Like the frivolity levelled at Fragonard, the banality sometimes ascribed to Johns (Rosenberg 1964, p.184) masks a profound aesthetic. Johns' recent *Bridge* series explores the catenary principle from an intimate perspective. The precariousness revealed here is that of individual lives. Johns had a copy of the photograph shown below on his wall, in this image the catenary is an umbilical cord between life and death.

Rwandan Refugees at Goma, 17th Nov. 1996, photograph by J. Parkin

I believe that in this image a poignant reversal can be seen of Paul Klee's diagram:

The soul's temptation (from Klee's diagram: Pedagogical Sketchbook, p.54)

Klee's diagram concerns the metaphysical, but if it is reversed, i.e:

it maps the inescapable necessity of the body. The soul's temptation for Klee is the weightlessness that is indistinguishable from vertigo:

... it is not a division of the body and soul that is the cause of suffering, but the expression of the soul's inclination to fall upwards, to lose itself infinitely – something that it must resist at all costs. In response to this temptation, the soul would desire matter. (Lambert 2002, p.67)

Deliverance metaphysically would accompany blessedness or death. But all the while the soul needs a body (the only state we know), deliverance can be as simple and as urgent as that

promised by another body. This would explain the power the photograph exercised over Johns. The first three of the four paintings with objects which comprise the Bridge series arose, consciously or unconsciously, in response to this photograph. It was some time later that Johns learnt that his curve already had a name, and this name and shape were used in the construction of suspension bridges.

Jasper Johns *Catenary (Manet-Degas)* 1999 96.5 x 145.5 cm.

This is the final work in the Bridge series, made after an invitation by the National Gallery for contemporary artists to make new works for a Millennial exhibition in response to art in the museum's collection. Johns chose Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* 1867-8 perhaps because Manet's painting was in turn a response to Goya's *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid* 1814. Johns' work would therefore be concerned with the idea of the catenary as a continuum or bridge between artists divided in time; a guard against precariousness as much as a symbol of that state. This is supported by the circumstances surrounding the condition of the Manet painting. After Manet died in 1883 the canvas was cut up and sold, Degas recovered and reassembled what he could of the fragments and those now comprise all there is of the painting. Johns' *Catenary (Manet-Degas)* 1999 re-presents the fragments in the same order but the medium used is a sombre grey encaustic. Death was the subject of Goya's and Manet's paintings; death was the event which set in motion the dispersal and retrieval of *The Execution*, and death is referred to in the title of Johns' third work in the series, *Catenary (I Call to the Grave)* 1998. Johns is using the catenary, then, also as a metaphor for indebtedness, a life-support system which operates paradoxically beyond death:

"...the references established a personal network of allegiances and debts rather than any linear progression" (Livingstone, 2000, p.183).

Livingstone remarks that Johns' 'intuitive discovery of the catenary' was an extension of his long-standing interest in 'continuous cylindrical space'. He sees the two truncated circles, one on each edge of *Catenary (Manet-Degas)* as evidence of Johns' interest in that space (2000, p.182). It is true that the problem of representing depth on a two-dimensional surface occurs repeatedly in his work. *U.S Flag* 1958 is a repetitive depiction of a flat sign or emblem but also a reminder that flags furl and unfold around poles, or wrap around dead heroes. I suggest, however, that the two truncated circles commemorate the spaces on Manet's *Execution* where the missing pieces were never found.

The vertigo of possibility for Johns does not appear to consist of something gained; more precisely it is to do with something recovered. Johns' catenary therefore holds the possibility of recovery against the backdrop of irretrievable loss.

CHAPTER IV

Anyone whose goal is something higher must expect some day to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? Then why do we feel it even when the observation tower comes equipped with a sturdy handrail? No, vertigo is something other than the fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves. (Kundera 1984, p.60)

Our frame of reference now is possibly the horizontal, the 'voice of the emptiness below' also surrounds us. Signs and copies of signs have proliferated; the collapse of reason, Capitalism, the Holocaust, technology, have all been called to account for the impossibility of poetry, the 'desert of the real', the death of painting. Like life and art, the vertigo of possibility goes on, however:

It is no longer a question of systems and functions, and of a transcendent Plane...It is a question of elements and particles, which do or do not arrive fast enough to effect a passage, a becoming or jump on the same plane of pure immanence... (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, p.255)

Deleuze and Guattari's 'plane of immanence' is before subject and object, before thought, therefore it contains all possibilities, becoming's and concepts; these are the waves or folds discussed earlier – the plane of immanence is the single wave that folds and unfolds them. A 'jump on the same plane of pure immanence' could be a description of vertigo within the ground zero principle of the postmodern.

A possibility only becomes an event because of the meaning thereafter bestowed on it, and coincidence increases the likelihood of assigning that meaning. At the same time, however, meaning must already be assigned for coincidence to be recognised. This contradiction reveals the subjective/objective impasse that all metaphysics, including Deleuze and Guattari's plane of immanence, seeks to overcome. As Deleuze states:

“Actually, there is only one term, Life, that encompasses thought, but conversely this term is encompassed only by thought”. (Deleuze, 1988, p.14)

Philosophers struggle within the constraints of thought to conceptualise beyond thought, and artists are similarly engaged, but with the emphasis on percepts rather than concepts.

Coincidence may only be chance with meaning assigned, a structuralist view, or meaning itself, a metaphysical view. An artist concerned with coincidence such as John Gillett is therefore right within the vertigo of possibility; caught in the distance between looking for clues and the suspicion that all is only a matter of perception. Coincidence became the driving force behind his recent exhibition, “Loss of Gravity” (26th Oct – 1st Dec 2002). Gillett works in digital media although he admits “I wanted to paint...(but)... Painting as an activity seemed like a closed door” (Gillett 2002, p.17). The exhibition was the culmination of a year long artist-in-residency which commenced on Sept. 11th 2001: “...it seemed certain to affect the work I would make” (2002, p.3). It is possible to equate what Breton described as the ‘simplest surreal act’ of “going into the street, revolver in hand, and shooting at random into the crowd...” (Brandon, 1999, p.265), not in the intention, but in the lives affected by Sept. 11th; although it is stretching the limits of tolerance to regard it as a matter of perception. Previously he had been developing themes of escape and flight, and had videotaped several hours of ‘planes amid blue skies, but optimism seemed misplaced after this event.

John Gillett *Ah, this Life is so everyday* after Patrick Caulfield, 2002, computer-animated video: unlimited duration

Coincidences bombard the genesis of the first work in the series, *Ah, this Life is so everyday*, after Patrick Caulfield. The title refers to a print by Caulfield of birds in flight, an image exhibited at Artsway and previously chosen as the cover of Gillett’s degree thesis on Caulfield. He had recently enlarged colour scans of black and white images of aeroplanes, revealing fiery destruction enclosed in each pixel, and matter of perception or not, felt hemmed in by

coincidence. The unlikely synchronicity one day of a flock of gulls swooping in unison and the exaggerated swearing reaction of a bystander led to the possibility for Gillett of birds making words in the sky. Birds replaced 'planes, now too redolent of tragedy, and the violence of the language, a remnant of a greater violence, became transposed in the making of this video into a serenity of sorts.

The odds are engineered only to the extent that the birds form letters, with the possibility of words left to chance, and the possibility of a word being apposite still more remote. 'Safe' appears in the image above, another reproduced in the catalogue reads 'warm', which is interesting regardless of the extent to which chance played a part. Nothing could be more precarious than the fine line between flying or falling, the sensation of vertigo tells us this, yet Gillett chooses images from the video which read 'against the text'. Why the artist has selected these as having particular significance is open to conjecture; irony would be an unlikely response when it is conspicuously absent from his other work in the exhibition. On the contrary, Gillett intended *Ah, this Life is so everyday* to be in some sense a memorial, perhaps a contemporary interpretation of the idea that seagulls carried the souls of dead sailors:

"I have considered making it recall the names of all those lost on 11th Sept., but this is a task for real birds". (2002, p.5)

It seems, then, that he is stressing that the words, like the tragedy, occurred against all odds, thus affirming that chance holds the possibility for reparation as well as destruction. This is a concern shared with Jasper Johns that goes deeper than a mutual depiction of flags.

Gillett's continuous loop of birds moving erratically out of flight formation and into an unexpected pattern is a visual equivalent of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization, in many ways an elaboration of the Fold outlined earlier. Deterritorialization is the process of becoming from the geophilosophical or rhizomatous principle, rather than the

historical or arborescent. It is the maximum intensity or nomadic direction of a linear multiplicity, as opposed to a structural unit:

... the rhizome is made only of lines; lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension... (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.21)

The line of flight is described also as a line of chance (p.24) and this corresponds exactly to the paths taken by Gillett's birds. Deleuze was interested in events and forces rather than objects, "I have, it's true, spent a lot of time writing about this notion of the event: you see, I don't believe in things" (1995, p.160). He believed that artists rendered visible the forces that are not visible, and cited Cezanne who, for example, painted the forces which cause mountains to exist. In common with other thinkers of his generation, Deleuze generally favoured artists from the canon of high modernism, but his postmodern philosophy which emphasizes the local and contingent is, I believe, particularly resonant with this work. The force which Gillett has attempted to render visible must surely be hope. The weightlessness of the gulls is a reminder of Klee's diagram, that souls incline to fall upwards – that without gravity or a physical body this is, in effect, what is most desired. Nevertheless, it is hope, rather than consolation, that is communicated by birds forming words because they hint at the crack in reality that Rainer Rilke and Leonard Cohen also poeticized: "... there is a crack in everything / that's how the light gets in..." (Cohen, 1992). Reality delivered tragedy on Sept. 11th, but art can deliver an altered reality of otherness, or at least a hope of otherness.

The anxiety of possibility that *Ah, this Life...* draws on is an uncomfortable reminder of the vertigo experienced to its utmost horror by the real lives lost that day. Nemesis was the other face of Fortune, according to mythology - Durer showed her ruling over the world in an engraving of 1502 – but even in a 'postallegorical' world, chance remains perhaps the only frame of reference for work of this kind.

Anyone whose goal is something higher must expect some day to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? Then why do we feel it even when the observation tower comes equipped with a sturdy handrail? No, vertigo is something other than the fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves. (Kundera 1984, p.60)

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... the rhizome is made only of lines; lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension... (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.21)

The line of flight is described also as a line of chance (p.24) and this corresponds exactly to the paths taken by Gillett's birds. Deleuze was interested in events and forces rather than objects, "I have, it's true, spent a lot of time writing about this notion of the event: you see, I don't believe in things" (1995, p.160). He believed that artists rendered visible the forces that are not visible, and cited Cezanne who, for example, painted the forces which cause mountains to exist. In common with other thinkers of his generation, Deleuze generally favoured artists from the canon of high modernism, but his postmodern philosophy which emphasizes the local and contingent is, I believe, particularly resonant with this work. The force which Gillett has attempted to render visible must surely be hope. The weightlessness of the gulls is a reminder of Klee's diagram, that souls incline to fall upwards – that without gravity or a physical body this is, in effect, what is most desired. Nevertheless, it is hope, rather than consolation, that is communicated by birds forming words because they hint at the crack in reality that Rainer Rilke and Leonard Cohen also poeticized: "... there is a crack in everything / that's how the light gets in..." (Cohen, 1992). Reality delivered tragedy on Sept. 11th, but art can deliver an altered reality of otherness, or at least a hope of otherness.

The anxiety of possibility that *Ah, this Life...* draws on is an uncomfortable reminder of the vertigo experienced to its utmost horror by the real lives lost that day. Nemesis was the other face of Fortune, according to mythology - Durer showed her ruling over the world in an engraving of 1502 – but even in a 'postallegorical' world, chance remains perhaps the only frame of reference for work of this kind.

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