

Disseminating Bene in the Anglosphere

A Translation Project

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*There's a starman waiting in the sky
He'd like to come and meet us
But he thinks he'd blow our minds.
(David Bowie)*

Occhio zombie, ché stasera vi spacco il cervello!
(«Watch out, zombies, 'cause tonight I'll blow your minds!»)
(Carmelo Bene)

Loving the Alien: Carmelo Bene and the Beyond of Disciplinary Boundaries

A vibrant iconoclast of the Italian avant-garde in the postwar era, actor, director, dramaturg, and writer Carmelo Bene (1937-2002) played a major role in the transformation of contemporary Western aesthetics of theatre by reshaping the concept and practice of performance.

Bene's thought-provoking experimental works garnered critical *acclaim* and popular success in Italy and France. For this reason, it is not surprising that Bene's multifaceted oeuvre has attracted scholarly attention not only in his native country, but also in France. Bene has also raised academic interest in other European and non-European countries, including the Anglosphere: some reviews of his works have appeared, for example, in American and British scholarly journals and books. Nevertheless, he remains widely unknown and scarcely studied in the English speaking academia, mainly due to the lack of English translations of his *opus*. We therefore argue for the urgency of promoting Bene by providing the first translation of his works into English. While our translation undertaking (which is currently under development) sits within a larger project of divulgation of his oeuvre, in this article we introduce our first translation plan, with the intention of making Bene's most iconic theatrical works available to a larger international audience.

To this end, we intend to follow the example of scholar Jean-Paul Manganaro, whose rigorous textual analysis and meticulous translation made Bene's collected works accessible to French audiences. Similarly, our complete project consists of

a critical edition which includes the translation of his writings and the subtitling of his recorded performances, supported with academic essays and annotations.¹ We embarked upon such an endeavor because we are confident in the relevance of Bene's accomplishments to contemporary debates in aesthetics and the philosophy of art. We lament that such an important facet in the study of the performing arts has been overlooked for too long, and believe that it is time for this gap to be filled. Furthermore, we believe that our project perfectly aligns with the increased importance of fostering interdisciplinary research in the Humanities. Indeed, Bene's *opus* is interdisciplinary in nature, spanning from theatre to the fine arts, from philosophy to literature, from film to music—always revising and altering their respective forms and canons. Moreover, his work expanded across not only media but also genres, cultures, and ages. Such a rich body of work has the potential to nurture innovative conversations among scholars, artists, and experts from a variety of fields, including performance and theatre studies, film semiotics, visual culture, literary theory, and continental philosophy.

Aesthetic and Praxis

Bene is a unique figure in the history of experimental theatre. He explores and questions the ultimate boundaries of Western dramatic and literary tradition. Moreover, his aesthetic widely addresses Western thought by dealing with notable theoreticians, theologians, and philosophers: from Master Eckhart to Saint John of the Cross, Schopenhauer to Stirner, Nietzsche to Freud, Lacan to Foucault, and from Heidegger to Derrida.

Hosted to show his work in England, Belgium, Germany, the former Yugoslavia, the U.S., and Russia, Bene found in France a favorite interlocutor. Here, he established deep conversations with post-structuralist philosopher Deleuze and writer Klossowski. He was also praised by internationally-celebrated artists such as Dalí and De Chirico, popular film director Fellini, and influential Italian writer, poet, and film director Pasolini, to name but a few. Within the Italian cultural context, Bene both gained appreciation and provoked scorn among intellectuals and critics. With provocative tones and attitudes, Bene would encourage his spectators to reject the conformist trend of political correctness as well as the assumptions of Western aesthetic canon. To acquire a better understanding of Bene's ironic yet speculative attitude, it is useful to quote a few of his caustic remarks.

These claims reveal a profound knowledge of Western-European culture, the metaphysical principles of its philosophy, its capitalistic tendencies, democratic values, and weaknesses. In his autobiography, *Vita di Carmelo Bene*, 1998, he

¹ Bene's major films –*Salomè*, *Un Amleto di meno (One Hamlet Less)*, *Don Giovanni*, *Nostra Signora dei Turchi (Our Lady of the Turks)*, *Capricci (Caprices)*, *Hermitage*– are already subtitled in English.

recounts to Giancarlo Dotto, his interviewer: «Rather than being born, I was aborted to life» (7).² Bene's conception of existence conveys the ideas of the *misfatto* (the «misdeed,» a wrongdoing), the instinctual will for survival beyond this “unwanted” coming-to-life, and the consequential humanistic consolation to such a misdeed. Bene was invited as the sole guest of a very popular Italian late-night talk show, «The Maurizio Costanzo Show», in October 23, 1995. As the host tried to begin the conversation by allowing his guest the «freedom to speak» about the new publication of his complete works, Bene replied with the following digression:³

Uhm, la libertà no, la detesto. [...] Finiamola con la libertà... con la libertà di stampa... Quando la stampa si deciderà a privarsi della libertà di stampa, sarà fatta; l'informazione cioè, basta con l'informazione. Non facciamo stasera dell'informazione: disinformiamo... se ci riuscite, a casa... non solo qui. Basta anche con la cultura, intesa come colonizzazione. («Uno contro tutti»)
(«Um, freedom no, I detest it. [...] Let's get rid of freedom... [and] the freedom of press. If the press decided to renounce the freedom of press, it would be done. That is to say: enough with information. Let's not inform tonight: let's misinform instead! Not only here... but at home too, if you can do so. Enough with culture too, understood as colonization».)

Bene here argues against the democratic conception of civilization, which would silently perpetrate the violent act of (super)imposing a culture. On the contrary, he advances that each individual should gain her own vision of culture, his own path of study and experience.

During the same year, invited as a guest to another talk show, «Il Laureato» («The Graduate»), Bene addresses the spectators, mostly composed of university students. By referring to the etymons of *studere* (desire) and *schola* (rest, ease), he defends the value of studying against its institutionalization:

Lo studente [...] si configura come colui che desidera. Niente di meno: desiderare! E allora: vedete che scuola e studiare (e lo studio) sono due... è un'antitesi! Cioè non possono convivere. [...] Non si può andare laddove si insegna, per apprendere. Per apprendere, bisogna disapprendere quanto s'apprende e poi si fa doppia fatica, quindi sono ore buttate via; quindi non bisogna invocare lo stato: lo stato deve smettere di governare! Lo stato detta sempre dei codici... Se no si finisce nella rappresentazione. E ogni rappresentazione è sempre e comunque, ahinoi, rappresentazione di stato. Non so se sia chiara l'antitesi tra studio e scuola. Si studia desiderando, questo è lo studio. La scuola invece è la palestra dell'ozio; per gli scioperati, per chi ha tempo da perdere. Salvatevi finché siete in tempo! («Il Laureato»)

² Translation is our own, unless otherwise indicated.

³ A collection of Bene's writings appeared in Carmelo Bene, *Opere. Con l'autografia d'un ritratto* (*Works: With a Portrait Autography*) in 1995.

(«A student is the one who desires. Nothing less: to desire! So, you see that school and studying are two... it's an antithesis! That is, they cannot coexist. [...] In order to learn, one should not attend an institution, where pupils are taught. This way, one should unlearn what she learnt, struggling twice and wasting her time; indeed, we should not get the state involved in this matter: the state should desist from governing! The state always imposes its codes... Otherwise we end up with representation. And any representation is inevitably a representation of the state, alas. Did I make clear the antithesis between studying and school [as institutionalized education; *authors' note*]? Studying implies desiring. On the contrary, school is a training ground for idleness; it targets sloths and slackers. Save yourselves while there is still time!»).

These statements express Bene's dismissal of the system of power on which Western civilization is grounded; at the same time, these assertions call for an alternative to it.⁴ Driven by such an anti-humanistic slant, his artistic research aims to “de-think” Western thought and neutralize the forms of power it generates.

In point of fact, this anti-humanistic perspective characterizes Bene's works, which typically attack the canonical conception of artwork as a form of representation. Following Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault's analyses of representation as the most effective tool to exercise social control, Bene is well aware of how his own anti-representational operation on performance serves as a critique of power. For example, his theatre acts towards the dismantlement of the traditional elements which define performance as a representation of power (from the character's identity to casting rules; from the playwright's authority to the spectators' subjection to image lyricism).

It is important to clarify that Bene's intent of surpassing tradition does not mean rejecting it in an avant-garde fashion; rather, according to him, tradition is to be mined from within. Nor does his theatre question canons by embodying an intellectual criticism of them (as in Brecht's theatre), for such a solution would still be grounded in the metaphysical discourse that Benean works are aimed to abolish. His theatre stages radically modified versions of drama and literature classics (such as Shakespeare and Marlowe, Collodi and Huysmans, Masoch and Sade), whose original meaning is unfailingly contradicted and eventually eradicated through omissions, amendments, and insertions of other works. His unrepresentable theatre *performatively* subverts the *mise en scène*.

As a result, his performances display the double articulation of language as a logically determined content (the *said*) and an unconceivable dimension (the *saying*, the inexpressible event of language). In this regard, drawing on Lacan, Bene claims that his theatre demystifies the misunderstanding originated by the metaphysical discourse. The speaker is not the subject *of* the discourse; rather, she is subject

⁴ See respectively «Maurizio Costanzo Show» and «Il Laureato.»

to the signifying system: the signified is determined by the play of difference the signifiers generate, and not by the subject – which is spoken by language. Thus, Bene concludes, meaning is an illusion, an obstacle to overcome: «il significato è un sasso in bocca al significante» («the signified is a stone in the signifier's mouth.») *Quattro momenti su tutto il nulla – I: Il linguaggio*, 2001).

Accordingly, through the systematic violation of common stylistic features of meaningful communication, Bene's works end up disproving the coherence of the semiotic system and causing the narrative structure to collapse. As a result, the audience can only go with the flow of signifiers, lapsing into a primeval ecstatic experience.

Career

The Benean aesthetic of the unrepresentable goes beyond theatre, finding applications to literature, film, and music as well. As a matter of fact, eclecticism marks Bene's production from the very beginning, spanning from the dramatic repertoire to Happenings, and from poetry to novels.⁵ In the '60s, Bene gained the admiration and friendship of great Italian intellectuals and militant critics such as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Elsa Morante, Alberto Moravia, Andrea Penna, Ennio Flaiano, Angelo Maria Ripellino, and Alberto Arbasino, who often praised his works in their critical reviews. An extremely prolific polymath, Bene began his career in Rome, playing the titular role in Camus' *Caligula* in 1959, and then restaging it as the director (and main performer) in Genoa, in 1961. Revered as an *enfant prodige*, he subsequently opened a theatre space, called *Teatro Laboratorio* (the first of a series) in Trastevere, Rome. He pursued a reinvention of theatre language – some years ahead of the widening of experimentation that the advent of the *Cantine Romane* and the *Scuola Romana* later promoted, and just before the Living Theatre's pioneering Happenings took place in Rome. Interestingly enough, Bene befriended the exponents of the Living Theatre, when the company used to work and reside in Rome. He observed that, albeit with very different aesthetic and means, the Living

⁵ His first theatre productions (1961-1967) comprise works as diverse as *Pinocchio*, two versions of *Amleto (Hamlet)*, one from Shakespeare and one from Laforgue, *Dr. Jekyll*, and a series of Happenings (i.e., *Cristo '63*), *Edoardo II (Edward II)*, *Majakovskij*, *Ubu Roi*, *Il Rosa e il Nero (The Rose and the Black)*, from Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk*, which one night was seen by Theodor Adorno as the only spectator), and *Faust*. He produced performances and readings based on texts by a number of poets. Besides Majakovski (revisited in *Spettacolo-Concerto Majakovskij*, where the futurist Russian poet was read alongside Esenin, Blok, and Pasternak) and Dante, Bene performs poems by Campana (*Canti orfici*) and Manzoni (*Adelchi*). With *Penthesilea la macchina attoriale – Attorialità della macchina (Penthesilea the Actorial Machine – Actoriality of the Machine)*, he draws a performance from works by Homer, Statius, and Kleist. Later, between the late '80s and the late '90s, he would come back to Dante, Campana, and Manzoni, and work on D'Annunzio's drama and Leopardi's poems.

and his theatre had the same goal: namely, the eradication of representation through performative events. «They would come in mass to my performances and I would go to see theirs. Although we were to the antipodes, we shared a common taking the scene apart» (*Vita di Carmelo Bene* 182).

After two years spent writing novels (1966-1968), such as *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* (*Our Lady of the Turks*) and *Credito Italiano* (*Italian Credit*), Bene abandoned theatre to dedicate the next four years to experimental cinema, which earned him critical acclaim (1968-1972). *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* (1968) was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Venice International Film Festival and was also appreciated abroad by the American Avant-Garde Film and the French Nouvelle Vague.⁶ An iconoclastic film set in Apulia, Southern Italy, *Nostra Signora dei Turchi* is a parodist representation of cinema, which attacks cinematic techniques as well as the cult of images. Such an aesthetic also marks two subsequent films, *Don Giovanni* (1970) and *Salomè* (1972), which Deleuze will later regard as exemplar cases of *crystal-image*.⁷

In the mid '70s, Bene went back to theatre. He began to experiment with new phonic devices in live performance (e.g., the use of playback). Such works as *Romeo e Giulietta* (*Romeo and Juliet*) and *S.A.D.E. Spettacolo in due aberrazioni* (*S.A.D.E. Show in Two Aberrations*)⁸ were enthusiastically welcomed by the French audience. These works along with *Riccardo III* (*Richard III*) got the favor of the French intelligentsia as well. For instance, Bene had the chance to meet Foucault and Lacan, who, after seeing Bene's *Romeo and Juliet*, allegedly exclaimed: «Je veux relire tout Shakespeare!» («I want to read Shakespeare's oeuvre again!») *Vita di Carmelo Bene* 325). During that time, Bene also built long-lasting friendships and collaborations with Manganaro, Deleuze, and Klossowski.⁹

In the second part of his career, Bene devoted himself to combining the disciplines of theatre and music by deepening his study of the musical phrasing and the actor's use of the voice. In 1979, invited by conductor Francesco Siciliani to stage Schumann's *Manfred*, he conceived the symphonic poem as an *oratorio*. He staged a minimalistic version (without set design and costumes), which was intended to emphasize Byron's verses and Schumann's music. Bene only set the orchestra

⁶ Barney Rosset bought Bene's films *Capricci* and *Nostra Signora dei Turchi*. Donyale Luna, who valued his films, offered to work for his *Salomè*. Calling Bene on the phone, he recalls her saying: «I am Donyale Luna. I am not asking you to play Salomè. I am Salomè» (308). She died shortly after the shooting sessions.

⁷ See Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (190-191).

⁸ In the '70s, Bene also produces a third version of *Hamlet*, a first *Othello*, and a first *Macbeth* (1983).

⁹ See Deleuze's essay «One Manifesto Less,» and Bene's reply to it: «Ebbene sì, Gilles Deleuze!» (Well, Yes, Gilles Deleuze!) in *Sovrapposizioni* (*Superpositions*). See also *Il teatro senza spettacolo* (*Theatre without Spectacle*).

and two actors (Bene himself and actress Lydia Mancinelli) reciting the libretto; they used a style which Bene called *voce orchestra*, «orchestra voice,» which was dramatically implemented through phonic technology. After this experience, Bene intensified his collaboration with contemporary musicians, such as Bruno Maderna (with *Hyperion*) and Salvatore Sciarrino (who composed the music for the *Lectura Dantis*).¹⁰ In the '80s, Bene's theatre experimentation increasingly involved voice, sound, and powerful phonic technologies.¹¹

Such a study on the actor's voice and its implementation through technology helped Bene to conceive of poetry as a tool to explore the *poetry of voice* (rather than the voice of poetry). While with a sophisticated vocal technique Bene was able to emphasize the rhythm and sound of the verses above their semantic meaning, he also added technological effects (not only playback, but also repetition and reverberation) to complicate the Saussurian relation between signifier and signified in a Lacanian perspective. Indeed, strengthening the first over the second characterizes his vision of language throughout his entire career. Such experimentation slowly took Bene towards what he called the *phonè*, an aesthetic horizon according to which the performance focuses on the use of voice and sound, drastically reducing the relevance of other theatrical elements (e.g., set and costumes). His research on the *phonè* reached its *acme* in works such as *Hamlet Suite* (1994) –which transforms *Hamlet* into a concert for «orchestra voice» and orchestra– and *Macbeth-Horror Suite*, which combines Shakespeare and Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth* (1996).¹²

Before this late phase, it is worth mentioning that Bene was appointed artistic director of the Venice Biennale's International Theatre Festival (1989-1992). However, he resigned in 1990, lamenting that the administration granted only a minor part of the funds initially announced. He left behind the ambitious plan of a Biennale as an international laboratory for artists and scholars. Ann-Laure Poulain, with her group *Beaux Quartiers*, had begun to write the soundtrack of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, at the Italian pavilion; a group of scholars including Pierre Klossowski, Camille Dumoulié, Jean-Paul Manganaro, Umberto Artioli, and Edoardo Fadini, had started working at the Belgium pavilion for a few months on the theme: «La ricerca impossibile. Il teatro senza spettacolo» («The Impossible Research: Theatre Without Spectacle»)¹³.

¹⁰ He also realized Beethoven's *Egmont* and collaborated with Riccardo Muti.

¹¹ Of these years, most memorable are his above-mentioned *Lectura Dantis* (1981), in memory of the terrorist attacks perpetrated in Bologna, at the train station; his *Hommelette for Hamlet* (1988), where he treats *Hamlet* as an operetta; another version of *Othello* (1986); *Cena delle beffe* (*Dinner of Pranks*); and *Lorenzaccio* (1986), both a performance and a philosophical pamphlet where he brings to an apex his aspiration to create philosophical theatre.

¹² In the '90s, he also proposes a third version of *Pinocchio*, ovvero *lo spettacolo della provvidenza* (*Pinocchio, or the Spectacle of the Providence*).

¹³ The first biennium was conceived around the figure of *Tamburlaine the Great* as a symbol of the

From 1990 to 1994, Bene retired from public events due to serious health issues (with two exceptions: he performed *Adelchi* and *Majakovskij* in Moscow in 1990 at the invitation of the minister of culture Valerj Shadrin). Subsequently, Bene performed quite rarely. Instead, he appeared in a few press conferences and talk shows. Nonetheless, he was able to record new readings of poems. In addition, he attempted to set up an association (*L'Immemoriale di Carmelo Bene*) aimed at promoting scholarly study of his work and furthering research in theatre studies and experimental forms of performance practice.¹⁴

His Theatre and Our Translation: A First Step

Well-read in Western literature, drama, and philosophy, Bene's goal was to de-center the Hegelian subject and dissolve the psychological chronology upon which modern narration relies. This is why his works display a distinctive use of the grotesque, which mixes opposite sentiments, reverses roles, and attenuates tragic afflatus. Bene's aesthetic opposes a practice of de-thinking and de-historicization to the system of representation at the very foundation of Western civilization. Theatre—the space of representation par excellence, in traditional terms—constitutes the core of his radically unconventional endeavor.

Indeed, Bene pursued a sort of *post-philosophical theatre*, which, in its anti-modern, anti-humanistic, and anti-representational fundamentals, makes of performance a non-place for the unspeakable, and transmutes the actor into a «*macchina attoriale*» («actorial machine,» an aimless performer lost in a Schopenhauerian *will-less* state of mind). An excellent example is the philosophical pamphlet *Lorenzaccio*, which Bene wrote in 1986 and transformed in a theatrical performance. With regard to this work, Bene asserted: «I stood out as the only wrecker of modern theatre.... From now on, European theatre can restart from zero» («Sono un genio, è proprio così»). *Lorenzaccio* epitomizes Bene's phenomenology of the actor and its emphasis on the *act* as a performative event irreconcilable with the concept of *action* and its chronological ordering of facts, central to modern theatre. Precisely by enacting such idiosyncrasy, *Lorenzaccio* challenges the idea of theatre as a mere form of representation.

In order to deconstruct, pervert, and dismantle representational practices of modernity, Bene's works deploy and tackle Western theoretical assumptions by

barbaric. This initial phase of Bene's Biennale was published in two books: *La ricerca impossibile*, and *Il teatro senza spettacolo*. The second biennium was supposed to offer a philosophical theatre about the crushing of the subject, built as a glass museum around Klossowski's *Bafometto* (writing, paintings, and drawings).

¹⁴ Unfortunately Bene's will had no real consequences because of administrative impeachments that prevented it from becoming effective.

both devising original performances (such as *Lorenzaccio*) and staging reworked pieces of the dramatic or literary repertoire (from Shakespeare to Sade). Such a double path marks Bene's innovative operation on the dramatic text, the stage, and theatre itself. By focusing on how he re-envisioned repertoire plays, it is possible to identify frequent references to canons and dramatic rules, whether they are cited, contrasted, criticized, or deliberately contradicted in the performances. Following a trajectory opposite to the postmodern one –still depending on the totem of *the modern*– Bene invented a form of performance that attempts not to push modern theatre to its utmost sophisticated versions and self-contradictions, but to demolish and bypass modern discourse.

Following Artaud and his rejection of the dramatic text as the essential element of performance, Bene employs what he called a *scrittura di scena*. The expression plays with the multiple meanings of the Italian word *scena* in theatre vocabulary. Indeed, *scena* means both the physical place where the performance occurs (stage) and the abstract milieu defining not only the fictional dimension that the performance simulates but also the mental space where linguistic mediation can be suspended by the very happening of the performative event. This is why we propose to translate *scrittura di scena* with the paraphrase «on-stage writing about the scene.» The phrasing refers to a dramaturgy made during rehearsals through a large use of non-verbal theatrical elements (such as costumes, sounds, gestures, and props) that strongly reduces the prominence of the written text and emphasizes their effect on the performer's ongoing acts (therefore: *on-stage writing*). Furthermore, these elements are used as signs that explicitly play in contradiction with the history and function of performance as understood in the Western representational model based on the dramatic text, thus offering an opportunity to criticize it (therefore: *writing about the scene*).

Thus, Bene's *scrittura di scena* actuates his parallel concept of *togliere di scena* «removing from the scene»: his dramaturgy progressively annihilates the structures of theatrical storytelling by removing its foundations (e.g., the individual dimension of characters, the *crescendo* of narrative tension, the significance of the dialogues, and the plot development).¹⁵ As a result, Benean performances eventually build what Deleuze defined as a minoritarian theatre («One Manifesto Less», §2 «Theatre and its Minorities») and realize a transformative encounter between actors and spectators.

Based on these remarks regarding the relevance of Bene's endeavors, we believe

¹⁵ Going beyond Artaud, Bene intended not to deal with the theatre's double (which he ultimately considers to be entangled into a metaphysical net), but with the «doubles» (*Vita di Carmelo Bene* 330) which, according to Klossowski, lie behind performance. See Klossowski «Cosa mi suggerisce il gioco ludico di Carmelo Bene» («What Carmelo Bene's Ludic Game Suggests to Me»), in *Otello, o la deficienza della donna (Othello, or the Deficiency of Women)*, in Bene, *Opere*, pp. 1467-73.

that beginning our translation project with his theatrical works is a motivated and reasonable decision. Theatre constitutes the ideal subject for the exploration of such concepts as actor and act, as well as the performative (embracing them both), which Bene's aesthetic so originally reshapes.

Indeed, the performative is a distinctive trait of his entire oeuvre. Performative are not only his performances and reflections about theatre, but also his films, where the spectator is frequently prevented from attributing a coherent meaning to the plot: her gaze is often blinded by the moving images, the sound, and the disembodied actors' voices; performative is the filmed image that, being burned and damaged, out of focus, becomes alive and acts on and against itself, making a parody of its potential narrative. Performative are also his novels, where the figures resist the logic of events and the linearity of actions, and are lost in an experimental, neo-baroque stream-of-consciousness-affected dialogues and narration; such figures are indeed reflective of the complex forms of their de-thinking minds. Finally, performative is his writing –across genres: novel, essay, playwriting, screenplay– which, by mingling experimentation and neologisms with phrases and lexicon derived from ancient Italian, reveals a high mastering of language. The result consists of a very original creative style, flexible according to the theme and genre of each work. Therefore, the value of our translation project goes beyond the aim of popularizing Bene's works, and requires close attention not to make textual elegance, wit, and irony vanish in pursuing a translation as respectful as possible of the original texts. There is need to raise active interest in Bene and encourage more scholars to investigate his *opus*, to contribute to the existing scholarship and promote original interpretations of and innovative approaches to his remarkable works. The delay in making accessible to English readers the study of such a major figure of contemporary Western art and of his determinant oeuvre should not be further maintained.

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