

STAIRS

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All photographs involve a moment of capture, and the capture of a moment. Sometimes only the weight of the papers arrests the sensation of a slight filmic haze over the eye, a skein of markings, which seem as weightless as a dream. The material image still resonates in the non physical, as if form is always immediate to itself and is as multiple as everything which exists.

It is often difficult to understand how the duration that is caught can reach and communicate beyond itself. Looking back at an image or picture reminds us that we are also confronted by time, perhaps realising that time has us in its hold. However it is right perhaps to think, that moments often arrive when the photograph belongs as much to fortune as to faithfulness. The world is an appearance however fleeting in which the temperament of the artist enmeshes itself and finds a unity to its own disclosure, it is not so much the world seen through a temperament, but rather the world given as crystallised emotion, the gathering of the world as temperament in a moment of radiance, of appearance.

Something shines in the finding, like the certainty of falling in love.

The lucidity of feeling, which in passion can become dramatically clear, is gathered by technique and seeing into the event. There is no *ben trovato* for someone who is not seeking. One can really find that for which one has always been looking. Such searching is not strictly speaking a re-search, it is more the faithful listening to what is often inarticulate, something remote, and far-sounding, like the calls of hunting horns in a forest. Always, even impossibly close, a constantly evocative of distance.

When Gasquet spoke of Cézanne, he told of the mesh of appearance and unity the artist sought and explained the recurrence of motif in the work. This is not the serial repetition, which colonises the image as it inhabits itself, as in Warhol.

In Cézanne the motif is not a self-signing through the object, rather it is the re-enactment of the search. Cézanne will also invent a method to become adequate to the passion of his seeing, so that the very tension within colour and stroke becomes dynamic and generative of space, there,

on the very surface, a real skin of tension and activity.

To express his seeking, Gasquet tells of the mesh and consilience of Cézanne's physics; "Here is my motif. (He puts his hands together ... draws them apart, the ten fingers open, slowly, very slowly he brought them together again, clasped them, squeezed them tighter and tighter, as though meshing them into one) That's what you have to try to do... Everything has to mesh with everything else that there is no way for the feeling, for the light, for the truth to escape."

From the reported description the metaphor of the hand gets extended, after all what the artist Cézanne suggests is no more than a receptacle for sensations, a brain, a recording apparatus- and things recorded are vanishing at the same time, so it is necessary to bring things together, and a good work is like bringing hands together, it is neither too high nor too low, it does not waver, it is true, compact and full. The artist becomes then in their viewing a parallel to the event, his, her, only aspiration, silence, 'he must make silence all around him, he must be a perfect echo'. What is seen and felt interpenetrate each other, and even the technical instruments, brushes and paints and canvas, in Cézanne's case, need to translate, what is seen and what is felt, what is out there and what the brain delights in, for Cézanne that would also be the contemplation of the most humble realities; and he was capable of imprisoning his own lyricism in the most direct copy of the reading of the model and its realisation. They sometimes came to him, and the search for harmony was uttermost, 'to capture the moment as it passes'.

What is to be understood is that the process of seeing, the process of conceiving, and the process of composing are not successive, there is no art by sequence and numbers, it is through the emergence itself that the form and process become clear, and what emerges is the tangle and creel of sensation and world, a shuttling backwards and forwards, a gestation and birthing where the decision, sometimes made up of endless hesitations, doubts, perplexities, congeal as action, where work releases the truth of experience and the experiences of truth.

It is even complex to follow the way in which the creative process, where not successive, is so intermingled and even fuelled by the chaos of momentary appearance. The artist is both hunter and prey.

Again in the charting of this dynamic situation one has to follow the emotional contours and often anxieties of realisation that remain for every artist a form of fundamental internalised fear of self-realisation, to be a becoming, finally as momentary and deprived of possibility as the tangible world in its flashing freshness, or what is hidden.

As Max Raphael once remarked, "In the artist's feeling, all of man and the cosmos is alive and thus enters into the concrete work, making it a vehicle or symbol of the whole, at once subjective and objective. The artist, in fine, is capable of preserving this new feeling in its striving towards totality instead of permitting it to congeal and freeze until such time as he has found an adequate inner and outer form for it."

Everything remains suspended in this encounter for the decision, where the feeling in its originality and comprehensiveness, and the adequacy and realisation of the form that realised the feeling take place. It may very well be that the more intense the activity the less conscious it is, nevertheless the becoming conscious returns the action to memory. It is this play, which fractures the initial unity of experience and surrenders it to the image. The shock of space always inscribes itself to the time of capture, where the image vibrates and communicates the dual experience of the subjective and objective moment.

This oscillation is itself a fundamental aspect of human movement. The split that is often described as spiritual/material. This oscillation, and constant backward and forward movement for the immersion in unity and the return to wakefulness as a creative action, always offers a powerful image, and one that we can see as having some fundamental importance within the trace of movement that every experience of the stairs offers.

The powerful metaphor which is elicited, the vehicle or symbol, as Raphael calls it, is not necessarily chosen from within the conceiving, rather the seeing and the composition recover

are the *ben trovato* of an often aimless crossing and turnings of paths followed, and the unknown journey of living in its vivid ineluctability and stringent contingency.

The powerful metaphor had itself once a blessed home in Alexandria, one finds it in Jacob's dream, and in the *Enneads* of Plotinus, and one could trace the Egyptian source back to the early stepped pyramids at Saqqara.

In Jacob's dream, the text directly inspired and coloured by the Greek writing of Berossus, effectively concocted in Alexandria, as Russell Gmirkin has cogently argued not earlier, than 279 b.c.e. and 500 years later in the greatest Platonist, Plotinus, we have the tangible *scala spiritualis*, it is the ladder of the soul, it is the stairs of perfection, it is where spirit and matter traffic between realms and join them, simultaneously.

In the dream of Jacob we see announced the beauty and sacredness of a place, *makom*, in Plotinus it is the movement itself of the ascending and descending soul, from the rapture of unity to the material and concrete, the humble omnipresence of the everyday which is most salient. The source lies in Plato's *Symposium*, 211c, perhaps the earliest text read by students in the Academy, speaking of the only way the candidate must approach the sanctuary of love, "starting from individual beauties, the search for the universal beauty must find him ever mounting the heavenly ladder stepping from rung to rung."

Nowhere has the relation of the artist and the contemplation of forms been more fully described than by Plotinus, and in terms of exquisite simplicity. What the artist knows is that the spiritual world is found within, and in the contemplation of forms, a universe of pure forms, "all things are transparent, and there is nothing dark or resistant. Each form is clear for all others right down to its innermost parts, for light is clear for light. (*Enneads*, V 8,4-4-5) In Plotinus the material world is the visibility of such contemplated forms. The forms are as they are because they had to be that way. The world of forms is not about rational calculation and planning, it is, a melody that sings itself.

Or, as Hadot remarks, forms are hieroglyphs that draw themselves. The world of nature

silently issues forms, because they are born out of contemplation. Once again the Plotinian paradox reverts to the brute fact of the mystery of life, that it is a mystery. Through contemplation a unity that is simple and immediate is achieved.

When the critic turns to the world of the artist to follow his tracing of autobiographical symbols, there is a danger of too personal an associative interpretation. After all the symbol, unlike the sign, is necessarily ambiguous, it points into its own ambivalence, and like the poetic word is as much resonance, reverberation as direction, as much suggestion as reference.

Thinking of the work of Schwartz requires what Bachelard called a topo-analysis, to perhaps describe from the distance the places remembered and loved, the primal and simple material images that speak of seclusion and comfort, well-being and home. In Bachelard his phenomenology of the material image rests on an ontology which is understood as well-being, antecedent to all other mental operations and later experiences. These images are simple and fundamental, the corner of a house, a nest in a field, the light in a distant hut on a snowy night, viewed by a traveller from afar. There is no doubt that he is fascinated by varying kinds of spatial intimacy, much in the way of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, where the literary themes congregate and are richly described, for the sense of corners, the structure of the house, stairs, cellars, garrets, shells, nests, all of which are archetypal but of the day time and not of the night dream. They belong to reverie, a reverie which occurs often during moments of deepest contemplation, where literally the mind is away, it wanders, it dreams openly.

They provide security and comfort, they belong if not to a pool of archetypes then certainly to a shared humanity which is accessible in imagination and through sympathy for all who experience it. Bachelard's topo-analysis is an account of dreamed spaces and spaces that have been loved.

However for the artist there is equally something isolated and willed in his dealing with the world of things and objects in a highly specialised, technologised world, and also dealing with them where the sensuality of seeing is strictly disciplined to the instruments and technics available.

It is not possible to read memory as something so benevolent and dreamy. In much of the work of Schwartz there is no attempt to view the world as a still life, nor to make the exaggerated claim that the banal and off-beat has special revealing powers.

Something within the balance of his concerns seems to leave the populated world away, and instead one has enigmatic and powerful suggestion via clues and traces of habitation. One can think of the series of works dealing with huts and an almost primitive architectural fantasy, which seem more involved with the relation of use to these often curiously organic structures, which in some cases seem as if they grew from the place organically rather than been the result of a secondary cause, the builder or architect's plan. This concern becomes more riotous in the diminutive garden sheds, or, the works on material piled in heaps, decomposing stuff shown in highly composed arrangements. This can also have the desolation of once highly decorated Christmas trees denuded and thrown out on the streets Amsterdam after the feast day of the Epiphany, 6th of January.

Sometimes it is as if he abandons the contemplation of solitary and fugitive places, settling to show the negative space and the broader virtual realm they occupy, here there is something tottering, suspended between depth and height, a series, such as at Hanover, where there is no cosy iconography, rather a phantom and eerie atmosphere which is given the formal rigour of something mathematical.

This fusion of motif and private pulsation feels musical. However, the rigour leads to a kind of soft hallucination at the edges of the object, and also, as in the many cases, places have been turned inside out by being so viewed, and the relations of comfort that Bachelard speaks of are replaced by dense suggestions of odd scale, strange ritual spaces, poignant isolation, as in the fixity of the interiors of the homes for the blind, which is perhaps the artist's most moving series.

If anything Schwartz practises silence very delicately, letting things speak. The photographer may very often want his or her work to 'really' be the thing, not the thing as it is in its self-standing, but as so viewed, that the act

of vision alone gives the object a fullness and completeness, even one might say a vitality that removes it from its actual anonymity. Schwartz avoids either turning his world into a nature morte, or dominating the signature of things into a stylistic gesture. His look accepts the detached objectivity that the camera can bring, his own control is to exercise that into a spiritual refinement of production, in which another contemplated shining takes place, and becomes the beauty and reality of the work.

In the work of the stairs, there is again a curious temporal reversal, almost the opposite of what was shown for the Hanover Expo, series of works. Here the ruin is the very beginning of construction, as if going to a building site one sees already before the building is erected, the possible marks of time and the profundity of simply mechanical forces and gravity in the life of any structure, as mortal then as any living being. In Hanover the mark of time was its fugitive destiny in cultural consumption itself which in its transience shared the destiny of the ruin and the mortality of earth simultaneously.

With the stairs series there are just those moments of shock and jolting, that the artist must experience to leave the unity of experience, and create another work; something not yet seen. For the photographer it is the light that enacts this visibility, and the light figures directly in how the placid organisation can add to the sense of shock in works which like the stairs of Piranesi, so admired by the film maker Eisenstein, the montage moves to a kind of explosion, and in these whitened images it is of light and the visible itself.

Acknowledgements

I have drawn on Max Raphael, *The Work of Art and the Model in Nature* in *The Demands of Art*, London, 1968.

Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision*, University of Chicago Press, 1993.

