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patches of color. They are as abstract as music is to anyone who has not learned to listen.

* * *

Five Angels are finished. There is no sign that the process is nearing an end. I have only to pick up my brush and it resumes.

I think: I am making a puzzle, painting each separate piece and setting it aside. When I finish, if I finish, it will be there to be pieced together. But no mortal hand will be able to do it.

Afternoon. A feeling of endlessness. I paint, watching the motion of my hand. I am startled. Somehow, without knowing it, I have gone past myself. Whatever happens, this motion is a part of nature—will go on forever.

SVEN BIRKERTS

SOME PARALLELS IN WORDS AND PICTURES

I.

There is nothing like a good quote to launch remarks on a subject as freighted as "visual arts and literature," so here goes. This one is from André Breton:

"The whole point for surrealism was to convince ourselves that we had grasped the 'prime matter' (in the alchemical sense) of language."

I've been collecting these gems for years. They are scattered through recent cultural history like seeds. There isn't a participant—I shall call us all participants as distinguished from those who are not intimately involved in the creative process—who hasn't made a stab at the definitive statement about art's relation to literature. The subject has been chewed like a bone, albeit not contentiously, by poets, prose-writers, philosophers, painters and their partisans, all of whom are ineluctably related, like cousins whose resemblance lies in a passion for the communication of truths.

The general conclusions are (1) that visual art is necessary (2) that it is the true reflection of the human soul (3) that it goes hand in hand with the written word. The same three truisms hold by transposing "visual art" and "the written word."

When I was a young painter back in the late thirties and forties, literary was a tag of opprobrium when applied to someone's painting. There was, literally, nothing worse. If a critic used this word on you it was fatal, you were thus relegated to the purgatory of self-styled artists devoid of gut feeling. Literary! In fact I do not remember a word carrying a larger stigma. Stemming as it did from an establishment in love with the abstract—for, it seems, you can love only one ism at a time—there was no defying it. Successful artists began to title their works with numbers; no literary references for them! As what is now called an "emerging artist," my emergence was, therefore, a very private matter.

Because, what purpose would it serve to say that at sixteen I read Arthur Machen? While only half understanding what I read I was drawn to his fantasy just as, later, the morbid webs of Poe along with those of the painters who called themselves Pre-Raphaelites drew themselves about me so tightly that at home it

was not easy to get from me the simplest responses to the most ordinary questions.

The fact that at this time I was employed by the municipal library of my town conferred, along with extravagant reading opportunities, a sort of privilege, so that my really indefensible mutisme was largely indulged, for was I not thus earning my way through college?

This school was Knox College, where literature was a COURSE, like history, or integral calculus. Could I, a dreamer, argue that history and literature are bedfellows? Or that math has a poetry built right into its abstruse conclusions? Or that art is the glue that holds them all together? Could I, a naive, if ever there was one, propose a semiological approach to art as for language? Such was my confusion that I fled—straight into the gothic arms of Anne Radcliffe, Beckford, Walpole, 'Monk' Lewis, Mathurin, fevered seducers all. There, like the Lady of Shalott, I began to weave painted webs of my own. Those gothic novels, along with Poe's tales, Oscar Wilde (O Aubrey Beardsley!) and the legends: Tristan, Cuculain, Roland, and more and more, caused me to reproduce, as my first secret pictures [I did not have art training. College was "liberal arts," no applied studies, except dissecting little animals in science lab. Art was the *history* of art where, during my time there, an entire semester was devoted to the comparative merits of Reynolds and Gainsborough. (Gainsborough won.)] the most medieval of monsters always in mortal combat with pale humans, robed or unrobed.

But this was in 1930 and there was a buzzing in my ears. Then, in the big city it was stronger and clearer. A kind of seismic vibration? I didn't know then what had happened, was still happening, gradually, after the Great War; a rumbling, a tremor shaking the placid foundations of both art and writing. What was it? One heard about things, The Armory Show, the Paris ferment . . . I happened on documents, catalogues, strange new books, reproductions, tracts, even enigmatic postcards. It was felt in cities, rattled windows, nettled the status quo and liberated writer, artist, musician. Some "young turks" in Zurich had called it Dada, a gratuitous tag that stuck, *faute de mieux*, until it turned into surrealism, Paris-based and scintillating.

It was only natural that my gothic dreams had long since faded. Living in Chicago, I had looked again at the Rosettis in the museum and the lilies visibly wilted. By the time I had come to New York they were gently buried, along with their bloodless

maidens and pouting Perseuses, just as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Vathek* now slept on the top shelf where they belonged. Taking their place, and over the years, millions of words crowded in, all kinds of words, the great ones, the trashy ones, the banned ones . . . What would Molly Bloom think of Emma Bovary? (My cloth sculpture of 1970, "Emma.")

Soon, New York was officially in the swim with, in 1936, the MOMA show of Dada and Surrealism, an event that brought, along with its explosive foreignness, attention and credibility to hometown innovators, Cornell, Man Ray, Cage, Blume, Hare, Gorki and, hovering over everyone like a guardian angel, Marcel Duchamp, present yet elusive Marcel, with his easy genius and offhand grace.

How can I convey the sense of recognition I felt in seeing a new kind of visual art—pictures, objects, even sculptures—all sparkling with reference to their textual counterparts, all talking with new words. For the first time it was borne in upon me that art and literature were inextricably fused. Since forever. Poet and artist bursting the seams of their categories. Art as metaphor for language.

It was all heady stuff for me. So full and so fast that when I met the surrealists later on home ground I was already deeply committed to a way of seeing that truly matched their own. And when life for me became a tandem adventure with Max Ernst on two continents, it affected me with nothing so much as a constantly escalating energy and will to get on with what I was doing. It all worked smoothly for both of us. I never felt the need to *cultivate* my unconscious. Then or now. It is there. Alchemically fused with my conscious self, assuring my individuation. They mesh and work together to make of me whatever it is that I am.

II.

That what takes place in an artist's studio is all craft may be what many people think who haven't been there. Surely there are few, if any, artists no matter how conceptual whose mental baggage is without referral. Referral to something read, thus something envisioned from that reading, a shape, a color, a sign, provoked by the words. For me surrealism was condonement for what I had been painting and a spur to do it better, to go farther. I am, moreover, perfectly sure that its impact on American artists and writers was general, in varying degrees, not just on those painters who rushed to conclusions about the surreal by painting



Dorothée Fournier

cloth sculpture

EMMA

landscapes bristling with incongruous objects; or on young poets wading in swamps of chaotic words.

Am I a surrealist? Am I a sophist, a Buddhist, a Zoroastrian? Am I an extremist, an alchemist, a contortionist, a mythologist, a fantasist, a humorist? Must we artists bow our heads and accept a label, without which we do not exist? The underlying ideas of surrealism are still very much with me. They are in the backs of a lot of other minds too, even in those so young as to have known only the records, the hearsay, the debris. But I have no label except artist.

In his *Histoire du Surrealism* Maurice Nadeau said, "From the moment Breton adopted the category of artists" (i.e. visual artists) "dates the abortion of the surrealist movement." It was in a sense true, the movement having been philosophical. Founded in 1924, Breton's definition: "Surrealism, n.m. Pure phisic automatism by which we propose to reveal by speech, by writing, by any and *all other means* the real workings of thought . . ." Vast program! A dozen or so angry young men, desperate, disillusioned and with nothing to lose would revise attitudes, revitalize language, would revamp life itself.

But it did not quite happen that way. Its vibrations stirred instead the minds of artists, the "all other means," who somehow squeezed in; artists near and far came on until, like an ethnic infiltration, they had explosively taken over, so that surrealism, at least in the public mind, was the new visual sensation. Who today is familiar with the superb language innovations of Tzara, Aragon, Leiris, Eluard, Desnos? But mention surrealism anywhere and you have named not an ideology but an art movement, one that followed impressionism, futurism, expressionism. Anywhere and everywhere it is understood as visual, and associated with a certain kind of painting. I will even say that had Johns and Rauschenberg lived in Paris in 1927 they would surely have been surrealists, though like some of the best painters there, they would not for long have taken orders from André Breton.

As for Dada, it is all over New York, healthier than ever though travelling under assumed names. The fact is, we are not Parisians here. Far from. Now as then, the tenor of life in Paris (or Berlin or Zurich or London), or should I say the simple geometry of its perceptual conventions rests on such different signs from ours that it seems most often a matter of history, like a family tree, out of which we Americans have grown: we are now the central sturdy trunk, sky-bound, though unfortunately nourished on money. (Enough ink has been spilled on the subject of our present

money madness that I can pass it over with the sole remark that truly uncorrupt beings, whether artists, poets or simply witnesses, stand appalled. No one knows what will happen. Will the artist paint a picture even if it is not bought and paid for in advance? W. S. Merwin speaks of "the ones who believe that nothing is real until it can be sold.")

III.

In France I laboriously learned the language. I had to. I wanted to. How else to be completely there? Sharing life with Max Ernst was an unequivocally French experience and I was as involved with the language and its signs as I was with the work on the easel. The language. If at first it was elusive, over my head, it only meant I had to try harder. And, gradually, to my English pantheon of extravagances I was able to add some French soul-mates: Lautreamont, Villiers, Roussel, Bataille . . . It is not easy to name names. There are so many who may have more truly determined my visions. Of course I was painting, and reassured in the belief that there are realities that have nothing to do with logic; and that diving into the subconscious—I call it *surconscious*—is the way to find them.

There was another group of artists in the Paris sixties who called themselves "*les lettristes*". Their belief in the power of the letters of the alphabet provided all the basis they needed for their works: pictures and objects made up of letters.

A peculiarly Parisian product was *le beau livre* "the beautiful book", where language and image fused to make splendid marriages. It would be hard to find an example of truer collaboration between artist and writer than what happened in the genesis of these books. The oneness of the two was often so seamless, so perfectly achieved that the question arose, "Which one, which one . . ." In working on some of these, the bonds I felt with their authors fairly sang. There were always book projects, along with whatever else was going on in the studio. And it was not unusual for an artist to write as well.

So it is inconceivable for me that in the context of our time art could be separated from words. Can there be artists inventing images without having in some way passed through the sickle smiles and round frowns of language? So that it had to happen: now there are artists who show us written art: found signs, exhortations, solicitations which they rearrange, powerfully, sternly, apocalyptically. It is Dada.

Less blatant, less readable, but just as prevalent is the evocation of subjects from literature. Why not? It has sparked the imagined painting for centuries, and proven my point: that all the ways of reading such as taking in signs while on the run (fast) or some circumstance of forced leisure providing time for a surprise discovery—a delay at the airport, a wait at the doctor's, a week-end with relatives, a day in bed with the flu, browsing among cast-off books, read and unread; above all, simple curiosity leading to uncounted hours of enchantment—something that I think is still possible—lead to the next work from the artist's hand.

Old obsessions die hard. I have just named a collage "*L'education sentimentale*." I have my reasons. Other works have been referent: Coleridge's Lucy Gray, very early on, in numerous avatars, incognito; Racine's Ariane turned into a cloth sculpture, "*de quel amour*." (1970) And "*A Mrs. Radcliffe called today*," painted in 1945, has turned up again, "*Mrs. Radcliffe called again*," and now again in a new collage called, "*Still calling still hoping*."

Such are some reflexions and strategies of just one artist. One set of contours, one experience of the process, among thousands. So that I can start all over again.

DOROTHEA TANNING