

The Double Headed I – On the Sense of Paradox in Objective Painting.

*'He that concealed things will find
Must look before him and behind'*
George Wither, 'Emblems' 1635.

I have long been aware of an inherent contradiction in painting from reality. I try to do nothing more than render as accurately as possible what I see before me, but over the years I have noticed in the paintings and drawings, things that perplex me to the extent of an inward exclamation. It is a matter of seeing something that hitherto you had no inkling of, that you recognise but cannot give a name to; as if the piece of work that you have made is possessed of a life of its own, that has slipped in unannounced, clandestinely, while one's back was turned.

It would be easy to dismiss this as fanciful, but as the experience is always a surprise, not premeditated, and often unnoticed until long after the work has been completed; this very unexpectedness would argue in favour of taking it seriously. Obviously I have painted the picture, but the question remains as to who or what are involved in that 'I'.

From the evidence of personal experience, the suggestion is that painting whose aim is realism and objectivity can usher in, unbeknownst to the artist, other qualities whose origins defy explanation: while the conscious faculties are employed in translating reality onto canvas, a door is opened onto something more mysterious.

If we look to the past we see that this was in fact a fairly commonplace assumption. For centuries it was traditional to call upon the Muse for aid in all areas of the Arts, implying that the artist is just the starting point of a process that goes far beyond him or her to the mythical or supernatural realms from where 'inspiration' comes. Poets customarily 'prayed' for inspiration, avowing the need of help from some source beyond themselves, and are pictured possessed by a 'divine afflatus', or even by forces of such magnitude that they are left broken by the experience. This is the stuff of popular legend – the mad artist deranged by fits of frenzied creativity – but exaggerated as it may seem, it attests to something too often forgotten nowadays: the link between the artist and that which is unknown; and it reminds us that in the past the artist was seen as a conduit between ourselves and the divine, between us and something immeasurably greater than ourselves.

Whether or not you are religious, this essentially mystical view of the dilemma of the artist confirms my own unpremeditated experience as a painter: I see things in the work that I cannot account for. I do not know where that peculiar quality or presence has come from. The past tells me that this is quite normal, a desired outcome; and, most liberatingly, in the philosophical theories I will go on to discuss, confirms and allows breathing space for that inherent contradiction that had so bothered me before: the paradox of being compelled towards a scrupulously objective analysis of reality but at the same time feeling that there was something more to it than mere 'copying'.

Paradox is the bringing together of two opposites, so in the case of painting it is the co-existence of the everyday (the study of things in plain daylight) with something ineffable yet palpable: the peculiar quality or presence I sometimes sense in a picture. When painting objectively the conscious faculties become absorbed. We are only conscious of the task in hand, so that the self, or normal conscious habit of thought, is left behind. It could be argued therefore, that the space vacated by the conscious self, allows inspiration or a mysterious richness through. Hence, contrary to the popular belief that art is about 'expressing oneself', art is in fact about escaping the self.

Again the past provides a home for this predicament. The philosophical rule of paradox emanated from the argument that all the opposites, of which the world and experience are made: heat and cold, wet and dry, hard and soft - the whole multiplicity of Nature, were combined in the infinite oneness of God. In the philosophical debates about the inability of rational thought to apprehend the presence of God, the same paradox between what is known (rationality) and what is unknowable (God) persists. The invisibility of God contrasts with the multitudinous nature of his manifestations: “because the Ultimate One is thus invisible, His visible manifestations must be manifold” (1). This principle of the One in the Many goes back to Plato (Symposium and Parmenides), and is expressed with great force by Maximus of Tyre (2): “But we, being unable to apprehend His essence, use the help of sounds and names and pictures...of plants and rivers, mountain peaks and torrents, yearning for the knowledge of Him, and in our weakness naming all that is beautiful in this world after His nature...”.

Because of this inability to approach God through our understanding, Nicolaus Cusanus (3) in *Docta Ignorantia* argued that it is only through ignorance, or by transcending thought, that we can draw near the divine presence. “Oh Lord, how marvellous is thy face... . The face of faces is veiled in all the faces and seen in a riddle. Unveiled it is not found until one has entered, beyond all visions, into a state of secret and hidden silence, in which nothing is left of knowing or imagining a face. For so long as this obscurity is not reached, this cloud, this darkness – that is the ignorance into which he who seeks thy face enters when he transcends all knowledge and understanding – so long can thy face be encountered only veiled.”

This principle of the union of contraries, so starkly expressed in a God, “whose blinding light is impenetrable darkness” (1), was particularly important to the Humanist Neoplatonist philosophers of the Renaissance, such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola; and was elaborated in a bewildering number of pairings of differing human qualities: love and chastity, virtue and pleasure, haste and stability, that were pictured as allegorical figures, on emblems and medals. This infinitely extendable theory of twinned contraries pervaded intellectual thought throughout the Renaissance, and most of the painters of that period, Botticelli in the *Primavera* and the *Birth of Venus*, Titian in *Sacred and Profane Love*, showed a thorough acquaintance with it.

The modern world view appears, curiously, to uphold the opposite of the ideal of the Renaissance Man, who combined many qualities in one. We tend toward specialisation and polarity – we are either left-wing or right-wing in politics and never the twain shall meet, either sensitive Greens or cynical Bankers, implacable realists or dreamy visionaries as painters. Turning from a narrow, polarised either one thing or the other mentality, to the generous landscape of the Renaissance, where there is ample room for all these human attributes, each one compelling in its own way, to co-exist happily and flourish as in a rich and varied garden, is immensely refreshing.

Out of the doctrine of the Concealed God and the principle of the One in the Many, arose the notion that mutability, the changing and manifold aspects of the world of experience, “is the gate through which the universal invades the particular”. This last phrase seems to ‘place’, the whole experience of a painter of things, perplexed by the strange visionary quality which seems to visit his paintings from time to time. The experience of painting objectively today seems to find its true home, or comprehension, in the philosophical thought of the past: the absorption in the task of painting is a kind of learned ignorance through which the numinous might come; the concentration on multiplicity of form is a gate through which “the universal” might “invade the particular”.

Notes to the Text:

1 Edgar Wind, 'Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance', Pub. Norton, 1968.

2 Maximus of Tyre, 'Philosophumena', 2nd Century A.D.

3 Nicolaus Cusanus 1401-1464, 'De Visione Dei'.