

What to do After a Death in Scotland and Other Stories

I

Dreams are objective facts. They do not answer our expectations and we have not invented them.

Wilfred Bion

Each day we perform a precarious saunter from sleep to waking and from waking life to sleep. At the threshold there is always resistance; too sudden a transition is a shock. These are different worlds; and yet there is continual daily traffic between the landscapes of our sleeping mind and our daily waking encounters. Images from dreams hover at the side of consciousness or ride before us as we field the visual scattershot of everyday life. Likewise the images that we have taken in by day, in the street, in pictures or films, insist and reactivate themselves beyond our waking existence. The border is porous and we cannot build a resistant wall. Instead there is constant plunder; a shape-shifting and rearranging, eluding our designs.

The artist who makes this uneasy translation his work is himself subject to the transient and variant truths of what remains unseen. He too must overcome a stubborn resistance and give himself up to work, as to sleep. A tortoise drawn into its shell on a square-patterned chaise longue, *The Problem with Painting*, reminds us of the slow game of image making, of the importance of surfaces.

The game is a strange complicity of consciousness and the unconscious, distilled through time and through the media of paint, fibre and dust, layers of varnish. The impetus is sustained by images that keep returning. Another title, *A Narrative Driven by Shape*, refers to the way that shapes lead, prior to words or even outline. The humped bedclothes of Carl Spitzweg's *Poor Poet* painting resurface as icebergs. A boulder the painter once climbed recurs repeatedly, referring to Netherlandish landscape paintings, to the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*; recalling a Beckett stage set, a huge cyst; a form that evokes boulder, cyst and anal sphincter in one, with women and parasols hovering above (in the painting *1900*). This image might also remind the Beckett-conscious viewer not only of the writer's stagings, but of his persistent problems with cysts, on his neck and memorably in his anus, for which he consulted the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, cited above. In other pictures the ovoid shape is a ship's funnel, a head of frizzy spectral hair.

In *Hero* a flaccid figure sits slumped on top of a massive swollen shape — egg, world or rock. The body is forlorn, middle-aged, tattooed across the shoulders the words REAL LIFE. The pathetic cipher that is our waking life sits just managing to keep on top of this vast excrescent boulder of paint and dirt and hairs and varnish. Varnish pools, seeps and bulges, catching dust and hair, yellowish smears; containing its detritus like a perverse amber, a pustulent cyst. This is the stuff from which paintings are made. This brute impenetrable mass is the whole mute indeterminacy of everything that remains hidden from us; the inchoate world we hardly fathom yet remain bound to. We can only hope to hold our ground; we are unable to escape it. We suspect it to be more powerful than us. Its half-deciphered contents remain suspended in the murky resistance of resin.

This stubborn materiality is evident also in the large painting *I see a Darkness*. The icebergs are themselves glass, shards in an oil black varnish sea. Icebergs like bedclothes, like death, like separation. In *After Fuseli*, the slack and warp of sacking on which a mattress is painted yields to the paint as it does to the man painted lying on his bed; the sag of canvas is the sag of the mattress itself. A monkey hovers.

The shadow of a man, the after-images of Fuseli, Vuillard's wallpaper, an early French "ambient horror" film still (Jacques Tourneur), dark lit rooms and the memory of end of century *intimisme*. After-images of things seen combined with that which surfaces. In this hybrid hinterland we are trying to look at things usually kept hidden. As for the *intimistes*, as for Beckett, the lighting is crucial to the staging. It is a night-time world, warmly lit. The images that are encouraged to surface are sometimes taboo; sex and solitude, death, nightmares — the ultimate questions, not without a sly humour.

To make and remake the thing; the materials are unpredictable but that is crucial in this game of hazard and incitement. The artist translates with wit from a world that is both intimate and estranged; he lies in wait for the stuff that might surface from the viscosity, from the almost impenetrable. He waits for something that might be recognised. Painting is perhaps the only way to ease the transition, to broach the wall.

The wall of the painting divides an imaginary space; it is also a partition between sleep and waking life, never absolute. The wall or canvas is a projection screen for our shadow lives. Cinematic shadows loom large. This canvas wall set in space is a recurrent image; the artist up against the canvas. Canvases depict walls and depicted canvases themselves constitute walls within the paintings. A partition wall or canvas is placed across a depicted space as a proposition, a potential escape. In these paintings the canvas is a wall that is never completely secure, that never really walls in. The fourth wall is always in some way ruptured; the viewer not secure in her voyeurism but implicated, at risk of disturbance. The viewer is a half-concealed watcher, or witness. As in Breughel's *Massacre in the Snow*, a favourite painting of Cranston's, the viewer is left uneasily responsible for the things that the painter has made her see.

In a studio the artist once inhabited, he became aware, late at night, of the presence of a dog on the other side of the wall, of something unseen; a live breathing presence, making him alert to that which walls cannot shut out. In *Illustration for a Kafka Story*, a couple bend their attention to the concealed beetle moving at the other side of the wall. There is a sense here of the fragility of the wall between man and his more feral incarnations, the potentially threatening animal-others or instincts that he recognises as a part of his being. These creatures that we hear scratching at the wall at night disturb us not simply as a threat but because they are already too much under our skin; a projection of larger fears of that which we suspect already inhabits us. Something is always stirring on the other side of the wall.

II

I would like there to exist spaces that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin: (...)the house where I may have been born,(...) the attic of my childhood filled with intact memories...

Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question (...). Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it.

Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces/Espèces d'espaces*

The paintings contain an inventory of beds and rooms. Specific as memories yet fallible, they belong to no verifiable corresponding reality. The rooms portrayed might be the room of a story, a story told about a past. The imagined interiors are as precise as the memory of a room where the painter has never been: the octagonal attic bedroom of the house his father slept in as child — a space known only from stories — an imagined scene of father and uncle lying in their beds at night, or of their view from the window. The painter is also there, looking through the window over their shoulders at a past fully alive but no longer retrievable or documentable except in the imagery of words or drawings in paint.

The house in Hawick where the artist's father and his siblings grew up, an unusual baronial towered building assigned to the large family by the council, exists only as a black and white corner window, half-blurred and hidden by trees in an old photograph and as a watercolour painting, done from memory by the artist's Uncle Walter after the house had been demolished. It is a specific space that no longer physically exists, yet the conviction that wills it to exist is strong, and continued through a series of paintings that are also thoughts about death and disappearance, from the room itself with his uncle's pet monkey, to the images of icebergs and black resin sea.

Cranston has pointed out that the hexagonal domed tower resembled the shape of a Victorian camera obscura, and it was indeed filled with its own conjurings and projections; shadowy images made by candlelight to people the stories told at night (there was no electricity). Stories which were handed down in turn by the artist's father — ghost stories told at bedtime; W.W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw*, tales from M.R. James or Poe, and family legends related at the slide shows he compiled for his children. Stories re-made as paintings by the son, whose varnished glazes and strange leaps of scale themselves perform a sort of magic lantern show of the past; complete with their own monkeys, arctic voyages, ghosts and phantasmagoria.

There was a concealed cavity space between the walls of the bedroom and the outer stone of the tower. Cranston's Uncle Walter used to move about between these walls and climb up the curved inner dome into the roof space, where you could look down through a peephole. His sudden eye in the top of the ceiling used to terrify Cranston's father, with the sound of his ghoulish cries. The watching eye in the ceiling has an aspect of voyeurism that is also consistent with the camera obscura, and its way of stealing images from the world and reviewing them privately; something developed by the film maker Michael Powell and also

by Donald Cammell, who was born and grew up in Edinburgh's Camera Obscura — both are acknowledged by Cranston as influences.

The glassy varnish and warm inner light of Cranston's small scale paintings make them physically a part of this history of storytelling projected through luminous images and shadow play. The scale of the work is not much bigger and similar in format to the squarish glass slides of the magic lantern, the subjects strangely consistent with their depictions of odd or comic tales, exotic lands and animals, remote journeys and phantoms. The invoked setting of such recountings, a childhood bedroom in a camera obscura-shaped building in the dark; the perfect vessel for the silent stagings of a magic lantern show. Like lantern slides, the paintings act as magic strikes of a match to conjure small glowing worlds against the long dark nights of winter in Scotland.

These magic lantern displays, slide shows or painted stories are about ways of sharing a past, of participating in a narrative that is larger than oneself but forever obscured. We hold a few glazed images in the hand; from these images, these half-imaginary glimpses, we seek to enter a world in which we might, for a moment, immerse ourselves. A temporary leap in scale where the the thing held becomes the whole surrounding space — somewhere, remotely connected to us and to our past, where we might feel completely at home.

The will to permanence in space is persistent. We walk past places where we have lived or spent time and it seems impossible to us that the life that we knew behind those walls does not go on; fervent and intent on its own unfolding, continuing in a permanently held present of the time in which you lived it, or imagined it, however long ago that seems. It is impossible to believe that this life is no longer there, rooted within the physical walls that contained it. Paintings are an attempt to address this grievance — our conviction that some things cannot simply pass; not this house, these rooms or the lives lived in them. Our conviction of permanence is borne out by the artist's ability to make such specific images from stories he has been told but never seen and by the viewer's capacity to recognise them as vividly as their own experience.

It is possible that we can recognise things that we have not actually known, places that we have never physically been. This recognition of the as yet unforeseen is one of the powers of art. Art can be a sort of return, not necessarily to our lived past but to a place that activates the knowledge that we each contain quietly; that sleeps inside us. A sense of the way things are or were that we are not aware of holding but which can be set off unexpectedly, and illuminate.

A painting might begin with a hint; a hint that persists and nags. Painting works by a strange sleight of hand; a combination of surprise and familiarity, jolts and juxtaposition. A story being told might hook us in but beyond that we participate in something more elusive; the tangible memory of certain colours, textures and sensations which are not unique to an individual life but belong to something larger.

The spaces of these paintings suggest themselves like the glimpse of a lit-up room seen from the street at night by a passer by. You look in from the street and are simultaneously within the space and without. In an instant you leap up in your mind's eye and are already sitting at the table; the light glowing, the furniture and wallpaper surrounding you. In a moment's

glance you have already taken possession of the space. The eye leaps up through a crevice and the body expands to inhabit the seen space, to feel itself oddly at home in these suddenly seen offerings.

The sight of a room from the street at night has a specificity quite apart from the inventory of what you might find were you actually permitted to enter the room; to measure and document the space of it by the light of day. The mind has its own precision with which it swoops on the half-decipherable hints offered, it completes the space as it inhabits it.

III

In Cranston's studio, the images torn from old magazines and journals, photocopies, photographs and reproductions of paintings from books scatter themselves ankle-deep across the floor. A supposed chaos; and yet as your eye is caught by one and then another they seem to have a very definite order, a rhythm and reciprocity in space as if they could not have been otherwise. Some are readily identifiable as source images for paintings but others work their own narrative across the floor. The misreading of an image can be telling; like the imagined interior looked into from outside, a half-obscurd printed image can tell you more about what you are looking for than whatever it might prove to be on more detailed inspection.

Painting is a sort of staging. In the many painted versions of the Artist's Studio space becomes immense and the inventory of scattered objects on the floor is miniaturised. The viewpoint rises and usually we are hovering, looking down on the stage of this lone painter's performance, like a dreamer, or an out-of-body experience. The paintings of gallery spaces are extensions of the studio space and viewpoint; only now there are no canvases or detritus but objects of art boxed up in small coffins. Only in the ornately corniced hall of *Success* are we entirely locked out of the space by the canvas wall, which exposes just the artist's feet.

The Artist's Studio, itself a kind of camera obscura, is the most persistent of spaces that we find ourselves inhabiting through these paintings. There is a nod to precedent in *Courbet's Studio without Courbet*, without indeed any of the frieze of figures who inhabit the earlier painting. These studio paintings enforce the theme of solitude. High spaces peopled only by the painter, a brush and a Hoover. The artist is often slumped or lying, alone and naked. His desire and ambitions at once heroic and banal and comically pathetic. The canvas that is the occasion and purpose of this self-incarceration becomes a reflection of half-mockery, half-compassion for this heroic self and its endless ambition, its boundless desire. A desire fraught with interruption, frustration and deferral; thus the tortoises — the artist's need for long life and a hard shell.

The art of allowing things in; a painting begins with a suggestion. A juxtaposition of images combined with the right accident of material can make something new, singular and surprising; an alchemical contrivance. It is about giving chances to the unforeseen, to allow for its articulation as a specific image or story. It demands strong nerves and an ear for timing. The ability to move through the sea of images over the studio floor without sinking through the gaps, trusting to an inner ordering that will make itself felt in time; to the intelligence of instinct and the capacity of mind and hands for surprising themselves.

The studio paintings insist on the context of making; on the difficult, problematic work of painting itself and on the necessary distraction and deferral. The studio space as a repository for boredom, recollection, frustrated longing, emptiness, lack of ideas — for lack or for overflow; fluids and viscosities. They depict canvases that contain the possibility of flight from their surroundings but also the man that makes these pictures with all the bodily tedium, repetition and day-to-day contortions necessary in being a man. They are sweat and dirt made flesh in oil and wax; the detritus and dust shed from the painter's body and from his materials is held forever in varnish layers. They are painting's answer to itself.

These paintings are witness to the point of painting against absurdity and against the odds (triumph of the tortoise). Works of obstinate love and perverse patience. A dogged conviction, in spite of all the evidence, that losses can be made good, doors can be opened in the most confined spaces, that painting might be an antidote to dying, and that, brush in hand, a painter can attempt to staunch the leak of life.

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