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### *Manus Animam Pinxit*

In one of his last poems, *The Planet on the Table*, Wallace Stevens says:

His self and the sun were one  
 And his poems, although making of his self,  
 Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they should survive.  
 What mattered was that they should bear  
 Some lineament of character,

Some affluence, if only half perceived,  
 In the poverty of their words,  
 Of the planet of which they were part.

Years later, Elytis spoke of a solar metaphysics, in a direct reference to Empedocles and an indirect one to Camus. Stevens sees creation as a derivative of the cosmic light, which surrounds the planet. But the planet is nothing but a vast mind which man through creation can fit to his own measure and rest on the table. From Plato to Bergson and William James, mind is cosmic consciousness, another light in the natural light, "angelic and black", as Seferis says, familiar and distant, enchanting and at the same time inhospitable.

To Stevens we also owe one of the most fascinating definitions of the way in which consciousness encounters sensibility. He says in *Adagia*: "All of our ideas come from the natural world: trees = umbrellas". This could very well be seen as a reversal of Sartre's aphorism to the effect that "every technique leads to a metaphysic". Because in Stevens the mind conceives what the sensibility touches and immediately transforms it into a representation. Nevertheless, this sequence is

not always automatic. Because the personal space, where each of us feels integrated, that is, a representative individual, is not a part of the shared space but its focal projection in the light of individuality. The shells of the mind, moreover, are made up of various 'ideologies' which distort the common way of life and often twist History, with which poets, in particular, do not always have the best of relations.

The first mythological representation of the mind was the Minoan Labyrinth. For years, before I arrived at this idea, I was tormented by the incompatibility of mythological - or, rather, non-existent - time and its historical equivalent. I realised that without some affinity the poetic function is no more than a huge anachronism, a museum fossil which as the years pass will seem more and more distant and alien. And the phenomena of historical discontinuity were not for me proof that poetry continues to live and exist *in absentia* of historical barbarism. Whatever there is of the archetypal within each of us as knowledge or as awareness continues to remain a common *acquis*, since the individual life has a beginning and an end. Why, then, does man prefer, instead of remaining constantly in the kingdom of life to go on descending to and ascending from the kingdom of death? Unfortunately, silence, the deep wound of time, is the only thing which bridges this contradiction. But the price is a hard one. It entails deprivation of liberty.

Experience, therefore, is something unimaginably more complex than we believe, and so creative activity remains an unknown quantity, uncertain, and often painful. As to the sense of disaster, the monster of evil, this

cannot but lie in ambush in the mind and be nourished precisely by it. In Greek mythology, the monster is real and is called the Minotaur. He lives in the middle of the Labyrinth, a construction which is not simply a product of genius, but the negative of human intellect, a mind which has been reversed. In this sense, the Labyrinth gives expression to the architecture of darkness and of death. To put it otherwise: the crudest expression of power. The poet does battle with the ghost of the architect - of Daedalus in this instance - on a very secret - or, rather, unseen - level, as the Elizabethan poets fought their own battle with the Anglican Church or the ancient bards with the phantom of Apollo.

This battle is fought in the interior of the mind. But for someone to kill the monster is not the most difficult part. More difficult is for him to find the path which will bring him to the nest of the Minotaur, and it is even more difficult to find the way out of the Labyrinth, that is, to return to the point of entry. Help is needed, he needs to reel in the thread which will bring him back to the beginning, to the starting-point, and so to life itself. This thread is given to Theseus - whom, speaking metaphorically, we ought to regard as the first poet of freedom - by a woman: Ariadne, one of the many faces of the Muse in Greek mythology.

One could go back into the depths of time and find analogies of this archetypal myth everywhere. In one sense, the whole of art is nothing else but the constant - through the ages - winding and unwinding of the thread of Ariadne. In times of great crisis, however, we would say that all creative artists are seeking this same thread, which in our own times seems to have been lost. Because in mythical time what dominates is the eternal or the multi-levelled recall of space, while in its historical equivalent, it is the constant recall of the end, which reminds us more not that we are alive, but that we too will die. And this brought us to the age of the great refusals - which was the twentieth century - before entering today upon a period of aphasia, in

which man has ceased to look for the answers. We live in a passive age and an oblique age, in which the senses have become enfeebled and not infrequently inert. The thread is no longer hidden, but invisible. And it is not exactly a thread, but a tissue, which forms another Labyrinth. If we were to call this 'cyberspace', we would not be far wrong; I don't know whether this was what William Gibson had in mind - or, rather, I like to imagine that this is what he had - when he first used the term 'cyberspace' in his novel *Neuromancer* in the 1980s.

What kind of mind is the Internet and where is its Minotaur? It is a labyrinth whose outskirts everyone enters and leaves, but at its centre, in the house of the Minotaur, the society of repression, of world-wide surveillance and of wars, no one enters any more, apart from the monster's guards. Today's societies are not societies of confrontations. They are notional ants' nests of zero and one, where the existent is not to be identified with the pre-existent. It comes from nothing and ends in nothing. In this *horror vacui* or gap or *nada*, as Goya saw it in the deepest black in the last years of his life, freedom itself is put to the test.

All this seems somewhat abstract, the topographers of repression: directors of multinationals, ministers, generals, prime ministers, presidents, bankers - the list goes on - would counter. But for those who are not willing to cede the percentage of freedom which falls to them within the framework of shared human fate, the question remains: is there a common consciousness which can be set against this fragmentary - and for that reason more easily controlled from above - world?

The question is not a philosophical one. Expression itself, which first made its appearance as a need and then as a result, proves that cohesion, the common fate, the induction of individual experience to a shared possession and those things which at one time we used to call noble or, otherwise, inalienable feelings belong to everyone and are binding on everyone. Because although man from

Kepler's century onwards may have become the legislator of nature, may have managed the individual items - frequently foolishly ignoring the whole - and may have balanced on the contradictions, he has no right to go beyond nature itself, the absolute expression of life. The ancient world was a world of limits. Today's world is a world of restrictions - and yet of repeated and uncontrolled infringements, and thus so frequently is led into *hubris*.

No one, of course, starts out from zero. Historical civilisation may in a broader form of induction constitute a complement of nature, but it sums up the collective memory and creates the flow of time in which we all function. The conservation of memory and its handing on from one generation to the next is one of the major priorities of creative activity and this gives us the feeling of continuity: that we shall exist in the future through others; and that what we hand on can be incorporated into a later system of values. If we go a step further, the above can only mean that awareness is the only antidote to death, our only chance of creating time outside the flow of events.

Creative artists re-create and share memory - in contrast with those in power, who manage it, since the whole of the time of power is summed up in the present. Those who create extend this present and multiply it. In earlier ages, movement in time was automatic, scarcely perceptible and constant, something like breathing, the breath of the air or even inspiration (because historically, semantically or onomatopoeically - I would say - inspiration is the air which we breathe). Today, we have begun not to share the derivatives of time as common and free goods, but to have them supplied to us by those who manage them. In losing direct contact with things, we end up as victims of the intermediaries. But where mediation exceeds the limits, freedom comes to an end.

Power is the worst form of mediation between the world and us. The world which belongs to us is now supplied to us in

instalments. But we can't share something which doesn't belong to us. Perhaps it is for this reason that great ideas and proposals which extend the present into the future are lacking today, and perhaps for this reason great compositions are becoming fewer and we are falling deeper into the indecency of endless narratives, chewing the cud of the present. And just as on the Internet the line for the transference of the information must remain open so that the traffic can be more rapid, so the avenue of the narratives must be constantly emptied so that the new disposable vehicles can take to the road.

Nevertheless, the emblematic poets of the mind, like Bergson and Stevens, presuppose that cosmic awareness, that neo-Platonic utopia in which everything must be like itself or where everything must produce the exact image and likeness of itself, remains the great mirror of sensibility. When Stevens says:

His self and the sun were one  
And his poems, although making of  
his self,  
Were no less makings of the sun

means not merely that we are part of the world, the common space, but that contained in the individuality of every one of us is the whole of the world, illuminated by the phantom sun of each of us. So what do we share? We share the feeling, our personal version, the *sui generis* order, which we create within ourselves - what Isaiah Berlin once called *negative freedom*. The flights of the mind in Stevens, in which ideas have a Pythagorean structure, taking the shape of natural and notional images, are reminiscent of great eras, of the Renaissance, I would say, and of one of its most archetypal phrases: *manus animam pinxit* (the hand has painted the soul). For me, there is no better definition of the gesture. Because, of course, the hand is the absolute symbol of contact and this unites us with others, given that people understand and share only those things which they touch or which touch them, and, consequently, what

they can recognise either as direct feelings or as transferences of the psyche and the intellect. This is why Seferis says disarmingly, echoing Stevens, whom - and this, if not surprising, is at least worth noting - he had never met: "Deep down, the poet has only one subject: his living body".

We can share what we have in common, but for it to be something in common, it must be integrated. The fragmentation of reality as a condition for the management of the present is one of the sicknesses of present-day civilisation, which leads to inertia of the senses. Art, therefore, needs to discover again the natural world as a cradle of cosmic awareness (is it not this that is connoted by the tempestuous return of the Romantics?), not only in order to achieve renewal, but to halt the repressive onslaught of ruling powers of every nature, which kills memories, need, desire, joy and the grief of departure and return - everything that makes man wiser or, otherwise, more tolerant, more mature, open to the future and capable of seeing this future with open eyes - and always with the hope that it will be better. Such, for example, was and remains the message of the *Odyssey*.

Today, voices are heard from all quarters telling us that our planet is under a regime of surveillance; that we no longer have active citizens but passive creatures possessed by fear for the present, indifference as to the future, and insensitivity to the sufferings and disasters of others; that there are no longer writers of sharp-edged books, but that these have been subrogated by producers of neo-medieval narratives; that the private space of each of us is a consumer prison guarded by the fetishes of the commodity; that great events are very rapidly transformed into statistical findings; that our thoughts and feelings are standardised and in minimum time are thrown into the wastepaper basket; that we live with the fear of contact, which, of course, is fear when faced with freedom; that the world is being simplified for managerial purposes, and, consequently, we cannot think

or feel against a background of depth of time and so escape from the present.

But who can speak with sincerity about himself if he first doesn't attempt to grasp how others think? In order for this to happen, of course, an awareness of the world is necessary. And this is not gained without recourse to the important works of the recent past, which are not simply the proof, but the actual deposits of it. Otherwise we shall continue to live in anachronisms. In this instance, 'anachronism' means that we do not seek after what unites us with others but what can divide us. In the event of the latter not being available, we create it and poison the population at large with it. But when you define yourself in terms of difference and not of affinity or likeness, you live with ghosts and continue to sacrifice to the Minotaur in the belief that in this way you will placate him. But nothing is capable of sating the monster. You kill the monster, you don't drug it and you don't flatter it.

On the day that the Second World War broke out, Auden, sitting in a New York café, sensed the odour of impending death, an odour which we also sense today. The issue is not now that we should survive. The survivor, as described inimitably by Elias Canetti in his *Crowds and Power*, is not a normal individual. He is a mutated product of power, a creature who is lost in the Labyrinth without hope of finding the way out. Perhaps the issue today is not confined to where we shall find Ariadne's thread but that we should go on to how we are to throw an abundance of light on the grim fabrication of Daedalus, the dark side of awareness, the heart of power. Lost in today's metropolitan ants' nests, we seem unable to see this light. But perhaps it's not all that difficult. All we need to do is to lift up our eyes to the old Platonic republic or the New Atlantis, to which by right we should belong.

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