

Anastassis Vistonitis

The tenant

Someone whose face is the same as yours in the photograph but who is someone else, all of whose thoughts and feelings are directed at you, falling like a gentle slab of light that will ultimately loosen and dissolve the crusted suspicion, the timely self-hatred, the efficient cold directness, the horrible good manners, the sensible resolves and the senseless nights spent waiting in utter abandon, that have grown up to be you. ...

JOHN ASHBERRY, *Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are*

As I was going through some papers the other today, I came across a photograph which I took five years ago in front of one of the many houses of my childhood. I had returned there on some visit to my native town, where I finished high school. Throughout all the years that for various reasons I went on trips up there, I took care not to visit houses and places which had a certain significance for me. And now, even recently, when I took the photograph, I didn't know what it was that prompted me to visit this old house of ours, which was in the station district, near the railway lines. Bloated with the intolerable prose of adolescence, on which I wasted, in reading it, valuable time at crucial periods, as a rule I didn't indulge in such pilgrimages. What did all that mean to me?

At that time I lived amid silences and in those silences worlds revolved which I still didn't know, miracles opened up which kept me far from indulgences of any kind, memories gave rise to tensions, in my maddest fantasies the future thrust itself forward with explosions and flashes and the fire of what was to come burnt up the past. I gathered up its pieces and its ashes in lonely and hard hours. No one was aware of my worries. It is said that a person who feels the need to engage in confessions doesn't experience things in depth. When you confess easily, it means that you want at all costs to settle your differences with the world, and I had no such intention. Every confession of mine led to a fresh breach.

I very soon realised that this world is built on arguments and that he who has most and knows how to use them best is the winner. As all my efforts were concentrated on the struggle to express myself, I became aware that there was a single price to be paid for this: exile. Striving for expression cuts you off from your environment, it hurls you into the dark, and to come out of there, you need to add again and again the same colours on the black screen. The radiance of the darkness presages coming events. No image is more powerful than blackness, the absolute colour which dyes the curtain of ideas. You need to make a hole in the darkness, to come out into the light, throwing off colours, collecting dust. When, often, you are sinking in your manuscript, it is as if you are diving down to the Underworld, and as you fall down there, you wonder: where is Persephone's dress for me to get hold of, so I can come back into the light? There is no Persephone; you are forced to do the work of a mole.

The theme of the descent of the living to Hades is one of the oldest in art and we encounter it in the great masters. It took some time for me to understand that in the relativity which determines our individual life, the need to return to the places of the past is a corrupt form of the living descent to the country of Hades.

Home/Lands.

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We don't have anything to do with Purgatory. The Catholics created this middle state in order to give unity to a world which otherwise would seem split in two. For us, the chasm appears at the moment of culmination, of conflict and of the breach, of the blow on the point of impact, where the spark is generated which lights the great fire. It is not the hearth and warmth, it is the flame which consumes lives and existences in seconds, the point of condensation, time at its maximum speed.

I look at the photograph. It is not a presumption of life, no photograph is, even the oldest. When we look at photographs, in reality we are looking at shadows. The things which we collect around us which are supposed to materialise our memories are simple pretexts for what we have lived and now they stand before us as illusions of revival, constructs of time. A photograph is a trace of interpretation and metaphor, a frayed thread of vainglory. Without the historical pretext, of course, we would not be able to make an approach to time, and the whole of our civilisation would be without meaning.

Eliot wanted to talk about time and wrote the *Four Quartets*, reverting to tradition and employing the pre-Socratics. How are you to talk, anyway, about something so general if you don't go to the sources? Today, the experiment seems to me to have failed. It starts out with definitions of the general, it made its appearance in an age of rapid fragmentation, but it is the product of impasse. There is no point of impact.

In a photograph, what has made its imprint is what existed at one moment, in the minimal time it took for the light to pass into the camera. A photographer friend of mine used to say that everything is light, without light we would live in a world without a face. The camera is a projection of the eye, but within myself I haven't been convinced by what it tells me. I see the passion of the artist, who deifies his medium in order to get the best possible result, and I recall the bitter comment of Man Ray: photography is not an art.

We poets today do not invoke the Muse, but we speak constantly about language. Reasons, causes, tools are stirred into a lukewarm jumble crowned by abstraction, which is the commonplace without its content.

I look at the photograph – a metaphor of space, of a piece of space. It has dimensions, whereas the world doesn't. We preserve within us images without outlines and it is difficult for us to perceive the real gaps in memories, and so where continuity is interrupted, first transposition and then creation intervenes, and over and above – and before – all these, imagination. You reflect and you write. Then you discover, when you are working, that this world, that you were taught in a certain way as something tangible and specific, is without form.

The concern of the craftsman starts out from his attempt to create a flow through the pattern. Is time a flow? What is time? If the artist defines it and is convinced of the definition which he has given it, he has finished, there is nothing left for him to say and his last word is addressed not to others but to himself.

We give names to time, we don't delimit it, in order to escape from time. The artist is enclosed. His work describes the history of his escape, the road towards others. The old dream in art: to deceive time, so that we are at the centre of the world. To say the words that will turn the guards to stone, so that we can reach the gate. From then on, the

distance is no greater than a step. What is the power which immobilises the mechanisms of enclosure? The conceivable is astonishing, it creates the moment of the void where we will find the opportunity, complete and aware of what we are doing, to pass, to slip between, leaving behind us words which want to become actions, those which 'stop' the key in the lock, so that the unmoving move, things become cosmos.

The photograph shows a house which isn't lived in, which is close to collapse. You can see the traces of abandonment on the stripped walls and broken windows. If I didn't remember how the house was in the old days, I would have created a different image of it, repairing it in my mind, I would have made other suppositions as to the questions about how it came to be in this condition. At such moments you realise that what is called a photographic memory does not exist and that this is a case of a misleading definition.

I have the impression now that I know this house and the most natural thing in the world is for me to say that I know it, because I once lived there. I know more than the photograph shows me; in it I see myself as if looking at someone else and I wonder what he was doing there. And then my certainty begins to seem to me exceptionally treacherous. I know what I remember, but I don't remember and I can't remember everything, however hard I try, and there is this as well: tomorrow I may not remember the things that happen today, but they will come and others will go.

So then, memories are proof that there is a loss in time and instability in knowledge. For that reason artists are the orphans of memory, and every so often they come out and protest against ranked convictions, and their infidelity is the pain which torments them to the grave. We hear all the time about how much you gain as the years mount up, but these things are no more than acknowledgement of loss. We gain the knowledge of what things we have lost, we advance accumulating, but the load is great, pieces which fall off on the way, layers of oblivion pile up in the mind where mist and frost will spread if we don't keep our inner voice alive. The poet knows this very well and tells us so quite clearly: *the older I become, the less I understand / my experience has untaught me the world.*

'Man is a useless passion', Sartre said in an access of passion. The important creative artists have managed to save themselves by turning passion into common property. It isn't enough to listen to the voices of others, it isn't this that can make you break the shell, but advancing to the point of friction and rupture, the creation of the spark.

Through the photograph I try to resurrect the house where I lived as a child. It is two-storeyed, it has a wooden outside staircase – so I'm going back behind the photograph – it's lived in. The person at the gate, myself five years ago, is going into the inside of the house, he has become 30 years younger and the house grows around him, the walls are higher, my relation with the space which the walls enclose has changed, here I shall grow taller in two or three years and here the sound and rhythm of my steps will change.

Crossing time in reverse is painful. Creation is a reverse movement, creation is painful, you hurry to beat the doors that close behind you to it. Life rolls on at incomparably greater speeds when you are writing, this seems to me to be the tension which exists when you are working, if you don't live what you are writing at the time you're writing it, you do nothing, how often do we repeat that to ourselves. Writing deprives you of the joy of life because it is life multiplied, writing is intolerable and art unbearable, it demands all the time that you should be yourself, even if within that self you dredge up

his other side, and man cannot so easily bear honesty, he seeks to escape it. Even in his happiest moments, the craftsman, who lives the intensity of feeling, cannot feel the joy of things and needs to see what he has created outside the moment of creation to feel the completeness of the fulfilled. It is a bitter and uncommunicable joy.

The photograph no longer exists. From the moment that the representation starts to move, time absorbs the outline. Why do we spend a long time looking when we want to communicate better with a painting? We have to get away from the rectangle, we have to transcend the shape. For similar reasons, great writing is not only what you read silently and on your own, but what someone else can read to you and it will have the same effect on you. And in both cases the eye is the portal of perspective.

As I open the door, I can't hear its creaking, I don't see dust settle, nothing moves in the interior, there is only the light and it passes through the windows and the cracks, drawing its own landscape. The light which enters up there through the skylight gathers strength and weakens, it is a rhythm which seems to be co-ordinated by the breath of the wind as it passes through the branches of the acacia on the pavement opposite. They say that the eye accustoms itself to the light or the dark, it accustoms itself to see, but when the image grows dim, tension is strengthened, you make up with the hearing for what has been lost from the image, you collect sounds to fill the gaps and somehow like this inner representations are created, this complementary world, the region of reflection, of insight and of solitary moments, when you hover suspended between the specific world and its perspective. It is the hour of the void, as from the sub-soil of time the dim bloom of suppositions dawns and you feel the twilight of secrets wrapping you round.

I climb the outside staircase. Everything moves more slowly inside the house, which, though on the outside it is collapsing, inside continues to live in another time. Even the light moves more slowly from corner to corner, like an eye roving carefully over a difficult and uninhabited landscape. Tirelessly the light recognises and colours, for years now, the same space. As I go up the stairs, it feels as though, as I go back, some counter current is impeding movement, as though I'm going through a denser material, through the accumulated life of the people who have passed through here, through what others have left behind them. Where is that piece of my own self, the scattered material which lives here, that experience which grows dim, time which resists me, its dust and decay? It seems as though I want to give a meaning to the house, but my deeper desire is to give a meaning to myself, the old tenant. Now as I walk in it, I grow old with it, even if it is a young child who is now climbing the wooden stairs.

When you are a child and nothing inside you has yet been arranged on a scale within you, when they haven't yet had time to teach you the world which is opening up before you, everything is transformed at the very moment that it takes shape. You want to change everything because you want to win everything, not to find your own place in your surroundings, but to take possession of the world in its entirety. You learn, much later, that what others expect from you is to be incorporated, you don't understand, to begin with, that they are trying to define a space and duties for you, you think that you are learning the world, but little by little you realise that you have become the victim of definitions and that the moment will come when you will have to choose.

The boy who is walking in this house has the eyes of a grown-up. This isn't a real boy, but the projection of old images from which the sense of the new and of discovery is

lacking, and what unfolds before him is not a landscape which has changed but a worn stage set, a yellowing imprint of time.

Yellow is the colour of decay and of repulsion. I've never in my life felt nostalgia in looking at old yellowing photographs. Instead of day-dreaming, yearning for the past and smiling – because, supposedly, I have captured time - I would see in the photograph the acid of time ruining lives, no self-deception, no intoxication with the past has ever possessed me, the leftovers of real and finished life, like food which has gone off, would change my mood – I have always reacted against these things, I have never understood what a mania for collecting means, what this garbage of time is and what it represents. Garbage, leftovers, copies, cracked pictures, old postage stamps, broken chairs which are kept in dark rooms with their woodwork worm-eaten, useless scraps ...

There are things which have been used over and over again and at different times. They have stood the test of time, it is usual to say. I am almost certain that their owners, at second hand, can't have felt any real pleasure when they used them. These things have taken the life of some other people and carried it with them, they have never really belonged to their new owners. The chair that someone else has sat on, the stamp that somebody else has sent, on dusty shelves and in drawers collectors think that they keep lives, but you don't embalm life, what you hold on to and possess is its effigy.

We embalm the past in order to slow down the flow of time. We have devised a civilisation which accelerates every day, we want to detach ourselves from the acceleration, by looking back we try to extend our own life, and as passion collapses, as time passes, the ecstasy diminishes and we try to lay hold on memories, to trick the oblivion which has us on its list, not to fall into the cleft of the inevitable.

There are three rooms on the upper floor. I open the door of the sitting-room. From the two windows on to the street, the light enters almost wastefully now and forms two large rectangles on the wall opposite. From the ceiling hangs a bare electric cable, there are things littered on the floor.

I look at the light which the bareness multiplies and lends a harshness to. I look at the light in rectangles, two imaginary windows on the frayed wall. I stand before the window and my shadow is projected on to the rectangle. A dark figure without characteristics. Light creates colours, but has no colour itself. The shadow which has no colour forms an outline which can get bigger or smaller as I change position in front of the window, back and forth, and it is as if I am moving in time, changing shape without having matter, as if I add and take away years from myself.

The light reveals to me the shadow which I contain as I have it before my eyes, but it strikes me on the back. As I look at the shadow, it is as if I project in front of my eyes my inner image and I feel that as often as I have spoken about this image, I have created it myself. It is a mere outline and its internal description is like a game. The shadow is simple, but the drama is contained in the simplicity. If I look at the source of the light, I don't see my shadow. We have eyes to see and to remember, but without eyes we shall not succeed in forgetting.

I attempt to recognise the space. We think we recognise places, things and people more easily when they have been preserved. We believe that in this way we can retain the first

feelings and we forget that memory in the growing-up period comes before feeling and changes it. Then come mind and consciousness, which do not restore, but process.

There can be no doubt that you are thinking when you are creating, but you think much faster, you cover much greater distances, the mind tries to get there before the hand, the hand strives to respond to the speed of thought, emotion multiplies thought and speeds up the processes of the mind, the work is exhausting, it requires the mobilisation of vast forces, total giving.

None of the places where we have lived and which we have left is, in reality, known to us. The game of memories involves a large measure of deception. It has no connection with the task of the archaeologist, who sets up a scene behind the recording and collation of the remains which he has discovered and classified. The archaeologist re-creates the performance through its ruins, that is why before archaeological monuments the mind and emotion complement one another. The archaeologist runs the curiosity shop of time. The hiatuses of the imagination will not carry you back, you bring the past forward because it's unknown to you, and what time has destroyed is supplied by the imagination, which incorporates knowledge into the ruins which are before you. This is how ruins become beautiful – beautiful for what they lack. But we are speaking of a life you have not lived.

A monument is a memory which is tangible and, above all, collective, it doesn't certify and doesn't simply glorify the past, it is halted decay, the glory of the *post mortem*. But to re-live the previous life in mutilated form produces in you feelings of bitterness, someone else always intervenes, the other comes, in essence, it is the other which takes shape, what you are destroys what you were, decay, they tell us, is no more than a morphological change, but how are you to accept something of the sort when decay sets its mark on you and accompanies you? Many attempt to rid themselves of their past, to escape from the shadow, to let it be absorbed by the dark, but this darkness is behind them, where they refuse to look, and, nevertheless, remains clinging to their back. Because man sees in the dark.

The things which used to be in this space, at least those which had a fixed and immobile place here, come into my mind, and then the people. The things provide the character, the people create the movement, and the life which places take on is a reduction of the great movement which exists outside us, without our personal particulars. But the mind retains the outlines and forms general pictures, the mind is descriptive, the tool which composes memories. By means of the composition we are aware of the passage of time, through the composition we realise how much life has passed over us, this is why memories are sometimes so tiring.

The space here is now filled with a material which doesn't exist, but how else are you to familiarise yourself with something that no longer belongs to you, how are you to make new correlations, where are you to see what you once were, what you are now. Persistence is one of the worst illnesses of the memory, the ceaseless and tormenting recall which constantly repeats to you that you existed and you existed again, which means that others have been here and will come, even if this house collapses under the weight of the years or is submerged in your reflections, even it continues to exist as a wreck in your more immediate or distant future – it doesn't matter which.

Certain people pass before me or beside me, but without any inner order. The place defines the passing, I recognise the people in relation to the things, the expression of the

things gives me the character of the people, the furnishings, the objects which don't exist now, not the touching and the contact with the things but a relation which is almost geometrical, a distribution of the things, which also designs the movement of the people. I return involuntarily to the framework, to the places which we shape, to the attempt we make to create rhythms, which are among the basic characteristics of individual life, and I feel that I am slipping into mere moods, because I can't feel what seems to be happening to me: that I am living again – supposedly – at second hand a part of my previous life. Whereas I understand that I cannot become the same person again, when I am unable to define what has changed in me, and, on the other hand, I don't want to fill the gaps or to begin to diagnose this or that which has come between. I leave the interims in suspense, so as not to eliminate the subtle and fragile relation with which coincidence now provides me.

As I go into the room which was once mine, just next to the sitting-room, the place seems closer, a dead familiarity scarcely perceptibly touches me, but nowhere do I see evidence that others have been here. This aged space has not retained anything of those things which those who came and settled in the house should have left. I seem incapable of smelling the alien life, and so I stand and look at the cracks in the old planks of the flooring and the dust in the corners which the light reaches, as if they were the only evidence of the age and of the life which passed through this ruin.

On the verge of collapse, the house returns to its nakedness. I have before me a spectre of decay, a proof without value.

As I emerge from the gate, it seems to me that I see myself going in again, as on that first occasion, when we moved here, and the child who loses himself in the house's interior, closing the door behind him, is as if he is lowering a curtain behind the mist of past things, hiding a landscape which is virtually forbidden.

I look again at the photograph before me, in another place now, and no thought takes hold of me. Things return to the level, to the pattern which, while it frames you, at the same time relieves you of the tormenting sense of depth. A photograph can reduce the size of life, and we, when we use it, cherish the illusion that we hold in our hands some document of our life. We rarely reflect that it constitutes proof for others and not for us, when we show it to friends and acquaintances so they can taste the life which we are unable to re-live. This impossible life, usually, we call nostalgia.

There is nothing more conventional than the way that others look at the documentation of our life. Nobody remembers other people's photographs. Photographs are not things which anybody 'sees'. We remember only those photographs through which we recognise something more than depictions: the projection of our emotions, which is not a relationship of familiarity, but an identification. We ourselves become the photographers and we meet the observer in what the object emits. We don't know whether what is emitted really exists and we have no interest in finding out.

As we sometimes unthinkingly do, I turn the photograph round, as if attempting to read a manuscript written on both sides of the paper. There is nothing on the back, I haven't even written the date on which I took it.