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Voices of Absorption: Reading Karl Kirchwey's *A Wandering Island*

Literary criticism may anchor its methods in extraterritorial strategies. My aim here is to approach Kirchwey's poetry book *A Wandering Island* through the lens provided by the art critic Michael Fried in his works on Eakins (*Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*), Diderot (*Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*), and Courbet (*Courbet's Realism*).

In *A Wandering Island* Kirchwey uses the dramatic monologue (a survivor of the Roman sack of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., "Gangaridae"), the epistle ("A Carnival Letter"), the *ekphrasis* ("For Aëlló"), the epigram ("The Balsam cut with Steal"), or the ballad ("The Color Known As Provincetown"), in order to manipulate different perceptions of time. This also means that he unfolds his stories supported by two main strategies: the presence of (theatrical) *personae*'s voices and insights, and the dialogue between poetry and the arts.

Since I've mentioned the art critic Michael Fried one may think that my focus means a transplant of art criticism into literary criticism, but, in this paper, Fried will function mainly as a background, a system of reading, through which each text will emerge in its own absorption, and in a dialogue within its own signs, and cosmos. I'll start with one example from Fried's criticism, and then I'll consider one example from Kirchwey's poems. First, though briefly, we must ponder on Fried's analysis of Diderot's criticism on the pictorial representation of Belisarius' legend. Some words about Belisarius and the legend that has surrounded him through the centuries:

Belisarius was an outstanding general of the later Roman Empire, a man who in the course of a mostly illustrious career won important victories over the Vandals, Goths, Bulgarians, and other formidable enemies. As far as is known, he never wavered in his loyalty to Justinian. Nevertheless, he more than once incurred the emperor's suspicions and late in life was stripped of his household guard, deprived of his fortune, and imprisoned for a time in his own palace. Partly restored to favor in A. D. 563, he died from natural causes two years later. (Fried, 1988:146)

Though Procopius of Caesaria's *Wars*, the main source of information for Belisarius' life, doesn't mention his blindness, this legend was built since the fifteenth century. His blindness and a specific *anagnorisis* in the presence of a soldier will be central in Belisarius pictorial representation. According to Diderot the figure of the soldier that we can see in Luciano Borzone's *Belisarius Receiving Alms* (1620) was nuclear for a specific strategy of dialogue:

Il est certain que c'est la figure de ce soldat qui attache, et qu'elle semble faire oublier toutes les autres. ... c'étoit là précisément ce qui rendoit la peinture morale, et que ce soldat faisoit mon rôle. ... Si quand on fait un tableau, on suppose des spectateurs, tout est perdu. Le peintre sort de sa toile, comme l'acteur qui parle au parterre sort de la scène. En supposant qu'il n'y a personne au monde que les personnages du tableau, ... Or c'est une supposition qu'il faut toujours faire. Si l'on étoit à côté du soldat, on auroit sa physionomie, et on ne la remarqueroit pas en lui. Le Bélisaire ne fait-il pas l'effet qu'il doit faire? Qu'importe que l'on perde de vue? (*idem*, 147)



Luciano Borzone, *Belisarius Receiving Alms*, 1620s, engraved by Bosse

In this passage Fried emphasises two main items: one sign and one dialogue. The sign is the soldier, his presence, his dominance, and his “entire absorption in the act of beholding Belisarius and meditating on his condition” (*idem*, 148). As Diderot stated in the letter quoted above, it was the soldier “qui rendoit la peinture morale”. And it was also the soldier “[qui] faisoit mon rôle”. This leads us to the second item, the dialogue. Let us observe how Fried unfolds this “rôle”:

... he seems to have meant that the figure of the soldier functioned in the composition as a kind of surrogate beholder who in effect mediated between the actual beholder and the figure of Belisarius – and, by a natural synecdoche, between the actual beholder and the painting as a whole. ... In fact by virtue of the same synecdoche, one might say that removing or displacing the beholder in front of the principal figure went a long way toward neutralizing

the fact of his presence before the painting as a whole. ... Diderot held that it was the figure of the soldier that made the painting moral, acclaim that I have read as implying that the moral meaning of the work was on the persuasive representation of absorption. (*idem*, 147)

In these lines the pictorial composition and the painting-beholder relationship are read as delineating a strategy of enunciation anchored on silence and absorption. Silence and absorption seem to represent a private cosmos, a world of its own, where we, the beholders, are forgotten. Life seems to go on over there without even noticing our presence; that we, as “voyeurs”, remain there waiting to be noticed, waiting to reclaim our status, our power. I wrote “seem” since we, as Diderot insinuated, and Fried explained, are in a certain sense transplanted into the figure of the soldier; our eyes are part, participate of this *persona* insight.

On the other hand we must not forget that the hero remains there. Forgotten in his status, in his moral power, because of the soldier's presence, he still remains there. Besides, this hero is blind. He ignores the other's eyes, the eyes of the beholder. We, as beholders, our eyes, had already been forgotten.

This composition defines a certain sense of absorption, a certain sense of absence, that we may recognise in some moments of Kirchwey's poems. I started by saying that in *A Wandering Island* Kirchwey uses the dramatic monologue, the *ekphrasis*, and specific genres, as the epigram or the ballad, in order to manipulate different perceptions of time. He plays with *personae* and with the interaction between poetry and the visual arts.

This means that he may be filiated in a specific tradition; a tradition of “strong” names in Anglo-Saxon poetry; a tradition going back to the “cameleon poet” (Keats' negative capability in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”), to Shelley's ruins (“Ozymandias”), to Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, to Melville's *personae* and *ekphrasis* in *Timoleon*, to Eliot's *personae*, among others. Through this tradition he may also be understood.

Although this is not the right moment for a close analysis of this tradition, I think that I wouldn't be wrong by saying that those poets found in objects, in paintings, in statues, in ruins, in fragments, in other identities, the possible voices for their poems, the voices that would verbalize meanings that they couldn't or that their time wouldn't allow them to verbalize. We all remember Melville's political and cultural nostalgia (repression?) in the last lines of “The Age of the Antonines”: “Ah, might we find in America signs/ Of the age restored of the Antonines”. Or Eliot's *persona*'s lack of memory (sexual repression?), of words, in the hyacinth girl's episode:

'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
 'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
 – Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
 Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence. (Eliot, 1980: 52)

After this tradition (rather) brief outlining, it's the moment to focus on “An Irish Girl on the Lake of Geneva”, Kirchwey poem that I've chosen to bring here supported by Fried's words and by the tradition mentioned above.

This poem begins with a fragment of *The Diary of a Young Lady of Fashion in the Year 1764-65*; a *persona* of a specific (high) social status, placed in a time far away from us, in the remote years of 1764-65; besides, there's something personal, I should rather say intimate, here: these are words taken from a *Diary*. As proper "voyeurs" let us scan those words: "My oar slipped in my unskilled hand, throwing me violently against Mr. D., who took the occasion to kiss me. ... Papa perceived something in the clear water, for he turned abruptly, but it was all finished then" (Kirchwey, 1990: 15).

Two characters, the narrator – the young lady –, and, moral contention *oblige*, the mysterious Mr. D.. Should we presume that *Mr* means he is older than she? Two characters and one distant and absent-minded (sleepy?) beholder, her father. In her narrative strategy there's something nuclear: an ellipsis, the omission points after the crucial moment – "took the occasion to kiss me". What happened between the kiss and "Papa perceived something in the clear water"?

Concealed moments, absorption, silences, these are the key elements of an atmosphere through which the poem unfolds. Let us see how:

Embarked near Clarens in the Pays de Vaud
a mild day, the lake so still it would appear to yield
their images to the trout moving far below.
A relief to be on open water, having left behind

Lausanne for a while with its bridges and ravines.
A rustle of silk heaped up at the thwarts like foam
when the *sébard* blows, a girl of seventeen
peering at her reflection. And her brother, for whom
none of this is new, seated opposite and leering.
(*ibidem*)

In these initial lines, the girl emerges in a state of absorption "peering at her reflection" in the still and clear waters of the lake. Narcissism of a teenager? Actually her eyes turn away from the boat, from the characters close to her. At the same time another beholder, forgotten in her *Diary*, joins the stage: "her brother, for whom/ none of this is new". So, instead of a moral beholder, someone who would assure the others, and the social norms, that decency would prevail, an accomplice emerges. And what about Mr. D.? Let us follow:

The father, half asleep from a late lunch
and the warm sun, would see only a moment's limning
of faces whose expression is shadow, as in some average

bucolic embrace in sentimental embroidery,
stirring uneasily, daydreaming of a moment
like this in his own past – and wake to comedy
oh what it has become, the daughter nearly ruined

(so he thinks), the mother dead.
(*ibidem*)

The parental image, the symbol of social and moral authority, and also the one and only beholder in the young lady's *Diary*, turns out to be a "sleepy", absent beholder.

This beholder “would see only a moment’s limning/ of faces whose expression is shadow”. Memory, bucolic images of a “sentimental embroidery”, and reality all merge as in a state of hallucination. The absence of her mother reinforces his moral status, and, consequently, his guilty feeling. Reality, life, becomes, for him, a comedy. But is it really a comedy? Let us see how the young girl feels this moment:

Their progress over the lake
that afternoon, one suspects, does not impress
her as much as the flowers from the chestnut wood
in her prayer book,
or the lines from *La Nouvelle Héloïse*

she will carry in her memory nearly through life,
or the theaters, pavilions, and palaces
to which she returns just as the guttering of
sunset around the shoulders of the Church of St. François.
(*ibidem*)

In the second line, between commas, the lyrical voice reveals the limits in which the scene is approached, the limits of knowledge: “one suspects”. This instant in time seems to remain hidden, forgotten, among the essential memories of her life. However, “next day” an ordinary thing will awaken a different perception of what she felt:

Next day the whispering of her muslin flounces
on the stone and counterclockwise dungeon spiral
at Chillon will unwind time like a freshwater nautilus,
and the black updrafts of air will make her feel

suddenly dizzy.
(*ibidem*)

The future stands against the present, against the moment that the lyrical voice doesn’t mention, against the moment when the two bodies met, and something new was revealed:

But in this moment she stands,
a clumsy girl stirring a dripping blade
on a summer lake two hundred years ago, far inland,
and stares hard where a moment past those shadows were united.
(*ibidem*)

In Fried’s analysis we’ve found a moral emphasis in the eyes of the soldier; the soldier, as beholder was inviting us, the other beholders (the readers), to share his point of view. What was supposed to be the centre, the blind man, couldn’t actually see. But the drama was fully focused on stage. In this poem one finds a similar strategy of interaction between the eyes of its characters.

The whole drama is focused on a very limited space, the boat. But the characters’ eyes diverge from this stage. They never meet. The beholder, the father, was supposed to represent the moral dimension, but he is far away, absent, and looks too late; after all he had already transplanted his moral status to his son “for whom / / none of this is new”. The brother looks somewhere; as I said, he is an accomplice. Absorption is

the main feature of the young lady who looks at the shadow, the memory of her kiss. All the eyes diverge.

And what about the eyes of the other beholder, the reader? We must remember that the gentleman is not mentioned, because of the “decorum”. The reader can only imagine the moment his eyes met her eyes when they kissed. Or, were their eyes closed? The reader is, in the end, a beholder whose power is denied by the lyrical voice.

From this denial we infer that the representation of the absence, the “decorum”, is the main moral frame of a picture where everybody seems absorbed in his and her own thoughts.

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