

A SEA-CHANGE IN AESTHETICS

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Whenever I hear the word "aesthetics", I tend to think first of two books: Hegel's *Aesthetics* and Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Humanity*. This is not because these two books are my only references, exclusive of all others, nor is it because I accept all their premises, all their conclusions, all their methodology. But it's because the one attempted, with the resources at his disposal, to open up a general field (looking north, south, east and west all over the world), while the other was out to see aesthetics as an integral part of a living culture, not as a term to designate the vague study of something that went on at the fringes, or in the basement, a fundamental culture-less society.

Most of what is called art-criticism has nothing of this scope or of these perspectives. Which is why, in a lingo more often than not (there are, fortunately, exceptions) effete and semi-intellectual, not to say pseudo-intellectual (most art criticism sounds even more ridiculous than literary criticism, which is saying something), it is already week by week, month by month (the criticism not tied to some kind of journalism not tied into some kind of journalism is rare), to talk about practically anything, making everything sound pretty much the same. Which is why also the art-world, while being cluttered with all that goes on, tends to be dominated, each one at least for a while, by various types of self promoting infantile egomaniacs who do this or that "new thing": this one, who wrapped up his mother's shoes as a child, spends years hustling Paris so as to be allowed to wrap up the Pont-Neuf (the "art critics" write the whole affair up with ecstasy); this other one, who in childhood had to mark everything in sight, years later paints rocks in the Tibesti desert bright blue (again, those in "cultural authority" find the undertaking "adventurous", "interesting", while the art critics drool at the mouth).

Contrast this with a "primitive" context, that of the Australian aborigines say, where, seeing his son trail a stick along the earth, making marks, the father will tell him off, saying that marks should be made only for survival, or for sacred purposes.

I'm giving that example only for contrast, as representing a deeper sense of existence, of world and of culture. I am not making a plea for a return to sacred art, or for the reintroduction of mythology or magic - all those traditional hoards and practics, to which some art critics, conscious of the general fairground-booth effect of a modern art context, have had recourse, advocating a return to God, or the gods or, more often, the goddesses.

No, I'm clearing the ground, in order to try and get round to talk about something else, beginning from the ground up.

Already at the end of the 19th century, some of the more lucid and far-seeing minds had begun to realise that, unless a change of direction was taken, and a larger field explored, a context nonentity and futility was liable to be the only context most minds would know: it's Rimbaud, finally crying out "art is baloney - if I have a taste for anything at all, its for earth and stones", before making off for the desert; its Nietzsche having Zarathustra call out, in desperation, to his fellow inhabitants of the planet: "I beg you, brothers, remain true to the earth".

All the really significant work of the 20th century took these analyses and appeals seriously, and tried to follow out lines appropriate to them - while trash piled up and chit-chat got printed by the mile. Even in its more concerned areas, society tended to restrict itself to strictly social preoccupations. These social preoccupations are legitimate, but unless the wider field is kept open, they will tend to restrict culture. Witness the social revolution in Russia, resulting in the dreariest brand of social realism (still imitated here and there by nostalgics of the Industrial Revolution). Witness feminism, again a legitimate movement, but tending to restrict art to the family album, or to the cumbersome goddess mythology.

One of Hegel's points was that art and culture could no longer be concerned with model, but with concept. What we have witnessed since, exceptions apart, is proliferation of texts without context - no context other than that of immediate social environment. Or again a striving after concept - hence all those conceptually trivial fabrications that clutter the art scene, hence the excessive conceptual discourse accumulated around objects that hardly correspond to it. The only relief from obsessive social environment was and is baroque fantasia, which is only the other side of the coin. The examples are legion, and I don't think I need labour the point. What is obvious is the need for a new conceptual field, in which the "models", the "motifs" will be (I state my premise) natural forms and energies, not at the level of scenic representation, but at that of fundamental geo-logos. What we expect from the highest art is not the reflection of humanity, but an extension of humanity. What is behind the highest art is poetics, not pathetics.

I think a whole subterranean line of 20th century thought and art has been leading up to a regrinding of poetics.

With Nietzsche, who invents the figure of the artist-philosopher, something new tries to start up in the field of thought. Nietzsche tries to move up back of religion and metaphysics in order to enter into physical landscape dominated by no transcendence, but animated by a "new sense of the earth", outwith all the human-all-too-human contexts. This general philosophy is accompanied by an aesthetic: "a sense of the permanent and reduction of means". In this search for "more original districts" and "a

clearing of which philosophy knows nothing", Heidegger goes farther along this line: the development of a poetic thought based on no transcendental, metaphysical presuppositions. Again moving on Nietzsche, Deleuze speaks of "something that can't be coded", but which is "inscribed on the body of the Earth". This movement, which has nothing to do with the imaginary movement of representation, implies "an immediate relationship to the outside". I'd say that 20th century thought has been trying to move, via all kinds of analyses and experimentations (what is called "deconstruction" being the most obvious and the least interesting among them), from the history of metaphysics to the geography of a new poetic thought.

In poetry and art, a similar development has been going on - beginning with Romanticism. Novalis (*The Disciples of Sais*) speaks of an earth-writing: "That writing one finds everywhere - on the wings of birds, on egg shells, in the clouds, in snow, in crystallisations and petrifications, in plants, in the light of the sky". It's there is Walt Whitman, ready to jettison practically everything most people understand by poetry (affectivity, personal sentiment, elegant prosody, a metaphor or two, a little ambiguity, etc), if only he could suggest "the undulations of a wave, the breathing of the ocean", or the sensation he felt when confronting a chaos of boulders in Platte Canyon, Colorado. It's Rike, trying to expand his life into "farther and farther circles", saying that "there is a totality in which we sometimes share". It's Klee declaring: "I begin with chaos and move from there to cosmic thought". It's Roger Caillois trying to "read" stones and extending this reading to organic growth, the configuration of geochemical forces and the lines engendered by all kinds of visible and invisible waves.

And we can look also to science. In his correspondence with Max Born, you have Einstein talking about the need for "savage speculation" in science, and for "immense intellectual leap", saying that, as an individual, he feels "so much contact with everything that it's a matter of indifference (to him) to know where the individual begins and where he ends" (we're close to Rike); we witness there a conception of things that is anything but narrowly scientist. In his theory, Einstein is still classical; he's an eccentric classical. But in thermodynamics and quantum theory, this was to change. For Einstein, chance and disorder are temporary, provisional configurations, hiding underlying order. But now with thermodynamics and quantum physics, chance, disorder, the indeterminate are no longer illusions due to ignorance, but are part integral of the universe-multiverse. The accent begins to be laid on flux, irregularity, complexity. In *The New Alliance* (1976), Prigogine and Stengers speak of the necessity of a "poetic listening into nature". The biologists Varela and Maturana, studying complex self-organising systems, speak of "auto poetics". Bateson (anthropologist, psychologist, cybernetician) aims, in *Mind and Nature*, at a notion, a notation of aesthetics: an aesthetic cartography. And then there is D'Arcy-Thomson's morphology (a development of Goethe's, and like Goethe's, close to aesthetics): "The waves of the sea, the little ripples on the shore, the sweeping curve of the sandy bay between the headlands, the outline of the hills, the shape of the clouds, all these are so many riddles of form, so many problems of morphology."

It's all this, developed to its limits, and gathered into coherence, that I have called geopoetics. And it's in this opening context that I see the work of Liz Ogilvie.

Ogilvie's "archaic landscape", her "primary space", as geopoetical art theory puts it, is the Island (or the archipelago) of St Kilda. There are ancestral reasons for that (her mother's father was from St Kilda). But it is not genealogical and family aspects that underlie Ogilvie's art, her reading of the island(s) goes way beyond that socio-personal level.

Lets look at the landscape in question, the focus of concentration, the field of interest.

Up to 1930, when it was evacuated, the bird-devoted archipelago of St Kilda, lying 110 miles west of the Scottish mainland, was the remotest inhabited part of the British Isles (Rockall, 190 miles west of St Kilda, was and is uninhabited), and one of the most isolated spots in the United Kingdom. Geologically, it is part of that North-Atlantic field marked by all kinds of perturbation and metamorphosis that have given rise to a complex coastal morphology comprising a variety of structural combinations. In others words, it belongs to a plutonic context that begins (shall we say - we won't quite go back to the year one) with the archaean gneiss of the Outer Hebrides that are part of an archaic continent comprising what we now call Europe. Along with the British Isles, Iceland and Greenland (the time is about three thousand million years ago). Thereafter, you have to imagine Scotland and the Hebrides lying under the Cambrian Sea for about 150 million years, out of it rising the Caledonian range like some Himalaya of the North West - eroded and worked over millennia by those morphological agents: wind, water and ice. It's within this context, in tertiary times (say 50 million years ago) that an igneous activity of great complexity takes place, with outpourings of lava erupting, from centres on Skye, Rum, Mull, Arran and St Kilda. The flow of lava has resulted in those great cliff-scarps along the West coast, with Conachair giving Hirta (the main island of St Kilda archipelago) one of the highest seacliffs in Britain. On those cliffs and rocks, eroded, dissected, sun-cracked, rain pitted, ripple marked birds have settled for millenia: fulmers, gannets, puffins filling the empty space with their cries in that fresh, clear atmosphere, that extraordinary luminosity the Atlantic can sometimes offer. Man settled in his turn on those rocks about a thousand years ago. It was a small, well knit, outlandish community, living in stark conditions and, like all human communities, it had its qualities and its defects that changed, though not so much or so rapidly elsewhere, with the centuries. By the time written records begin, its economy was based on a little cattle and sheep raising, a little agricultural (barely, oats), a little fishing, weaving, and the slaughtering every year, for meat, oil and feathers, of thousands of those fulmers, gannets and puffins that dwell on the cliffs: the men in particular were such inveterate cliff-climbers the practice had an effect on the morphology of their feet. When Martin Martin visited the archipelago at the end of the 17 th century, he had this to say about the St Kildians: "When they sail, they use not Compass, but take their measures from the Sun, Moon or Stars: and they rely much on the course of the various Flocks of Sea

Fowl" , and he spoke of them measuring time only by "the sun moving from one hill to another" and "by the ebb and flow of the time". Kenneth Macauley, writing in 1765, has this: "the islanders in general possess the art of predicting the changes of the weather perhaps in much greater perfection than many of those who are beyond doubt superior to them in some other branches of knowledge (...) the St Kildians owe much of their knowledge to the observations they and their predecessors have made on the screaming, flight and other motions of birds, and more especially on their migrations from one place to another". If there were elements to be deplored, then, in the St Kildian situation, there was also much to be admired: one picturesque element (but there was necessity behind that action and there was an abstract reading beyond it) that tended to strike the imagination was the sending out from the island of messages contained in little wooden boats. The situation might have continued, but by the early 20th century, conditions had become so hard , and the island population so reduced, that the remaining body, 36 inhabitants, asked the British government, not without contradiction in their minds, to evacuate them, which was done: I have an image in my mind of dogs being thrown into the sea with a stone around their necks, and houses being abandoned with a Bible open on their tables. As to the island, its feudal owner, Macleod of Macleod, sold it to the Earl of Drumfries (later Marquis of Bute) who left it in his will to the National Trust for Scotland, who in turn leased it out to the Nature Conservancy Council, with certain areas being leased out to a radar tracking installation under the authority of the Ministry of Defence; there, you have to imagine RAF experts in guided weapons playing crickets... As to the islanders, their last gesture as a group was at the Jubilee exhibition in Glasgow, in 1936, when they had a small stand at the Kelvin Hall decorated with photographs, spinning wheels and stuffed sea-birds.

The question (the art question) remains: how, beyond the ethos and the pathos of a community, to express the whole territory, get on to its wavelength, present in patterns, find a language adequate to it? In my initial reading of the territory, I purposely piled up information, and I could pile up more, because any wild territory is practically inexhaustible (which is one of the reasons why they should not be tampered with, but left in their inexhaustibility, the attempt to get more and more in touch with them being the basis of culture). But nobody apprehends all the information at once, and art depends largely on selection. The Arabs say that Allah took away from the desert everything superfluous, leaving only the essential for the mind to meditate upon. I don't want to bring Allah into the picture (any more than God or Buddha), but I retain that the idea of decentralisation and meditation, and the notion that reduction of detail intensifies perception. And yet there is a sense of totality. So the mind will be using known, interweaving and writing-up fragments of information, seeing them not as motifs of representation, but as agents of reflection, elements of composition, in a kind of algebra, defined by Grey Walter (The Living Brain) as "the Arab invention of patterns in which visible and invisible pieces could be logically manipulated, assembled, equated, evaluated."

So, via investigation and memory, Liz Ogilvie has tried to let the sea speak to her, and the islands speak to her. Using various surfaces (hand-made paper, aluminium, perspex, zinc, that loosely woven cloth called scrim), using various materials (acrylic, oil, crayon), using seaweed shapes and words, she has opened a window on to the ocean, written a diary (a book, a scroll) of nights and days, sculpted space and suggested movement in a large and voluminous way, turned landscape into mindscape, and then converted inscape into outscape.

I've tried to indicate the context in which I see Liz Ogilvie's work, now I'm speaking about its method. It's an Atlantic algebra, a language evolving via a grammar of elements, saying, after "equals St Kilda", in the larger context of this exhibition, "equals a world".

The first and last word in culture is "world poetics".

Island Within

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