

BORN AGAIN AND BORN AGAINST

A Lament for Eugene de Leastar

Somewhere in this welcome selection of Eugene de Leastar's work, there's a painting called "Before the Scourging" which was done, in every sense, both temporal and thematic, at the start of the terrible third millennium. For those diminishing numbers within cultural earshot of the participle of the verb in question, the title cues a Christian acoustic, a dolorous repercussion of veteran scriptural grief from the Passion Narrative; but the poor unfortunate individual awaiting flagellation in a grey carceral space which seems to exhale the scent of old sweat and fresh excrement could also function fittingly as a disappeared prisoner in Pinochet's Chile, some tortured insurrectionist from separatist Chechnya, or (in a scenario the artist anticipated by a preview of several years) an abused inmate from the Abu Ghraib chamber of horrors, with its Kodachrome catalogue of brutalised human ensembles.

The Stations of the Cross and the story of the sacrificial victim are, after all, the ultimate political graffiti in the church-state realm of Pilate and Caiaphas. They talk to the terrible walls of a scapegoating society in the spray-can signatures of prohibited compassion for the simple reason that each and every New Jerusalem, from Plato's Republic to the totalised wasteland of Pol Pot's Cambodia, sooner or later incorporates the bloody signage of the original holy city. There will always be a Praetorium somewhere in its shrieking vicinity; there will always be a Place of the Skull on its stinking outskirts; and there will always be a processional route linking the two precincts, for the edification of the studious and subdued citizenry in-between.

De Leaster's study of the scourging asserts all this in an instant of paint and Christian clarity. It appears at first glance to embrace vulnerability in the somewhat sanctified, social-democratic manoeuvre which supposedly marks the responsible and rebellious artist - alert always and everywhere to the reactionary terrors of mass culture and committed to the strict, salvific critique of most politics as pure victimisation. Their name in latter days has been Legion pretty much across the forms, written or wrought, and, while their worthiest work has always evangelised the emotions, the worst of their witness is sadistic chic, the froth of a self-advertising instinct for the pitiable that's partly complicit with the cruelty it entertains (there is, I think, an echo of this Aztec aspect in Francis Bacon's fascination for schlock-horror). But this image of the kneeling detainee is not flogging ideological wares of a centre-left variety.

Indeed, it's not flogging anything at all. What it represents is only, as it were, the prevision of a violation, and one in which the viewer will be invited, much against the grist of instinct, to identify himself as a compromised voyeur, the critic to double as a criminal presence, the onlooker to rehearse instead the role of a Peeping Tom (and a cat of nine tails at that). Just as Susanna's nakedness in the Hebrew fable makes leering elders of us all (De Leaster's "Nymph and Satyrs" also nicknames the story overtly, this time with a Greek kink in the bleak black comedy), so the lack of lacerations on the surface of the stripped flesh - no welts; no weals; no gothic lesions from a Mel Gibson movie to heighten our humanitarian outrage - alter our status strangely from that of a hushed honour-guard in a quiet gallery, all programme notes and piped music, to that of a taunting gauntlet in the loud street outside.

In other words, we are now accessories and not innocents, sinners and not spectators merely. What we say and what we think about this picture either as a devotional relic (an act of faith) or as a rhetorical exercise (an activity of form) in our sceptical, eclectic, post-Enlightenment categories will be the drubbing it endures and the mutilation it embodies. It is chained to our civil ironies and to the metropolitan mockery of the relativist as much as to any actual manacle in the cell-wall, because the voice in our head is no longer the old tumult of guilt and grief that sculpts our humanity but the explanatory soprano commentary of a rented tour-guide in our headphones, glossing the canonical panels for those who have forgotten how to bless themselves in the Museo de Bellas Artes in Seville, say, which was once an ascetical Cistercian convent and is now a warehouse of pricey fetishes where we prostrate ourselves. "Before the Scourging", then, consists of one atrocious hostage from the whole vandalised/abandoned corpus of Christian signs in a post-religious reality which largely despises recycled Western iconography from the diminished myth of Jesus as a sort of sectarian sclerosis, either technical mimicry or sick kitsch.

So the figure in the frame goes well beyond the vainness and the vanity of a moralistic, late-modern stance by craftsmen who continue to characterise themselves, first and foremost, both as empathetic creators and as an ethical élite in a dispirited universe, while hotly refuting any mention of a greater - or a grander - God to qualify their heady anthropology. By contrast, our Irish practitioner, monastically reclusive in his Munster hermitage, has no interest whatsoever in the prestige of his witnessing creativity or in the power of a personal vision. That sort of nineteenth-century talk is for charlatans and the academic commentariat. It is masturbatory stuff, deluded and juvenile, the tantrum of a self-admiring modernity in which the art-work as icon (always to a means to an end: spiritual change in the seer) transmogrifies monstrously into an idol (always an end in itself: psychological exchange with a sightseer), and we creep around the Tate like a cathedral, cowed by its high, hallucinatory bullion .

Know thyself, said the wise Greeks; be thyself, say their witless Hellenistic inheritors; and to be oneself, in spite of stemming from the prior partnership of two other persons in an act of conjugation, is never to be confused or conflated with being anybody else. To be outstanding, you must first stand out. Painters may reference the back-catalogue, of course, but, if the citation isn't parodistic, then it's plagiaristic; if it's not supercilious, it's servile. Either you're on terms of equality with the Old Masters or you echo their terminology with a quote-as-joke jollity. You get even, as it were. The main thing is to stay that way: to remain personal and not plural, a terminus, a tour de force, the subject of the sentence in a first-person narrative, an I for an I.

De Leastar is outside this loop and therefore he's also outside the hermeneutic circle of contemporary aesthetics. Eschewing altogether the cult of novelty and the thirst for stylistic distinctiveness as the chrysalis of real talent, De Leastar's originality consists at the end of the day (night would be too heightened a term for this permanent apprentice) in his utter indifference to difference itself. In short, he wants only to be the same as others before him in a disciplined retinue of deferential pupils over long historical periods, an imitator and not a master in a mentored sodality of Dead White Males, a copyist of other cartographers and not a footloose pathfinder, in the radical understanding that he will thereby, in the fullness of time, become truly himself for once - and perhaps even for ever.

This project is more brave than slavish, it seems to me. There's even a confidence bordering on conceit or, at least, a coquettish mystification of his calling in a canvas where he presents himself as an admittedly left-handed Renaissance maestro, ablaze in swathes of Byzantine gold and the vocational velvet biretta, just as there's a sturdily sober sense of his own practitioner's worth (and his dense expenditure of effort) in the study of the besmocked artist standing, perhaps a little defensively, between a terracotta caryatid and its recumbent model who is orbiting her pelvis towards us, the seething, civilised voyeurs on the verge of the image. On the other hand, "Vanitas" mocks the prurient and self-proclaiming blandness of the professional painter with a deferential nod to Velasquez; the artist's ascension into heaven, with its ship of fools and its Carnival cast of antic animals in the lower left-hand corner, is closer to farce than satire; and "Artist and Christ", whose template from the tradition is a stunning Zurburan, severely effaces the kneeling draughtsman in robes that are rather Dominican. Could this be De Leastar's Iberian hint that he's a dogsbody, a Domini canis, to the mortified Lord whose tortured cadaver still scandalises elegant Orientals interested in Christianity?

Jerusalem, be it said, is only the half of it. Athens is in there too, naturally. De Leastar breathes with both lungs whole-heartedly. The legend of Pygmalion occurs (indeed it "transpires" quite literally in the Latin source) alongside Paschal images of the parallel mounts, Calvary and the wine-press of the olive-grove, just as the bare-breasted Muse of the Athenian tradition in the painting entitled "Poet and Muse" alternates with the Mater Dolorosa of the Deposition - albeit the former portrait features the grim mnemonic of the Christian skull on a decidedly classical plinth and the latter depends, at least in the story of the Annunciation, upon Luke the evangelist's familiarity with the pagan Mediterranean literature of erotic encounters (usually barbarous and abominable) between Gods and mortal women, which the only Gentile gospeller transforms from horrible Ovidian metamorphoses into a chronicle of contemplative courtship in a distant imitation of the ancient reticence of the God of Genesis. Elohim, after all, breathed in Adam's nostrils in creative amity and not in his open mouth as an opportunistic Casanova.

In short, it's right and reasonable that, in the same author's sequel to the third gospel, which is the Acts of the Apostles, the sainted Paul should stand historical trial as a matter of evidentiary fact before the brother of the celebrated Roman tragedian Seneca. Simplistic binary habits from our schooldays - black, white; Jew, Gentile; Semitic prophet, Socratic philosopher - shouldn't blind us to the common mould of the melting pot of the inter-Testamental age in late antiquity. Attic or Semitic, Latin or Levantine, it is all one intricate Eastern Mediterranean mixture. Like his fathers before him, De Leastar is therefore that hyphenated singularity, the average Greco-Roman Judeo-Christian, with all the mongrel energy of its genetic momentum over two millennia.

This may sound sweetly south-facing, but it's a hard station too, not a station of the cross, to be sure, but a station of the crossroads between cultures. Admittedly, the Acropolis in Athens and the Davidic citadel of Zion are both of them eminences, cities set on hills, but their vertical likeness belies their drastically different horizons, their rival internal hinterlands. Greece looks out on a much more arable landscape, more farmed and fertile than the desert stretches of Palestine where emptiness is a mystical treasure and the wind writes its autograph in the visible sand. Delphi is something else and something other. Its

sense of the body is all gladness and groundswell, nudity without nakedness. Here adult anatomy is the normative form of the beautiful, an orchard in harvest. Flesh fills and fulfils the purposes of providence. We are, in a word, material witnesses in a world which is truly phenomenal, a world where we can believe our eyes absolutely, and the truth, if it be tested, is tactile, glistening and statistical.

But the heroic torso of the Greek imagination is only a decapitated trunk in the Judean tundra where moonshine physics yields to sunstroke metaphysics. The body is already problematical in Judaism, a poor relation of the thirst for transcendence, a divided and avoided identity which is sourced morosely in a self-defeating eros that must be transgressive in order to be thrilling. In its later bastardised form as Western Christianity, that rabbinic scruple in the Hebrew Scriptures will metastasize into a crucial and an excruciating and a crucified form. So "The Last Greek", De Leastar's quipping tribute to the bifocal human being of the two traditions, Jewish and gentile, presents the female of the species in a simple sepia study of the comfortable and unencumbered body (the Hellenic ideal, Helen herself perhaps; our earthly appearance as an exquisite apparition) while the higgledy-piggledy progeny of original sin - distended, stunted, Bosch-like, Netherlander mutants from colder latitudes than the Latin - cavort in a hobgoblin striptease on the other side of the canvas. That's to say, this artist understands the primacy of the human body in the European enterprise; but he understands as well that Christendom, for all its dear cherishing of flesh in the wistful doctrine of the Incarnation, has never actually made its peace with physicality, let alone with sexuality.

We have, however, made our peace with the image of our likeness. Its presence may be recondite, but its representation is our proper business. If the first council of Nicaea ended by acknowledging core Christology and the correct procession of persons in the Blessed Trinity, the second council in the very same city four centuries later culminated in a decision about iconography that was arguably more fundamental still to the fortunes of the church that became a civilisation – in other words it closed by disclosing the majority dogmatic recognition of the theological delegates, opposed in principle both by the parent religion of the Jews and by the nascent Islamic step-child of the Gnostic Christians, that we may picture things for ourselves, that we may feast our eyes to feed the famished spirit, and that seeing is, indeed, believing.

So the Celtic hermit clinging to the sea-cliff of some vertical island in the North Atlantic a thousand years ago mixes white of puffin's egg with his own ear-wax in some serviceable clam-shell as the sticky goo in which his dirty pigments - juices squeezed from berries and beetroot, the soot of a gannet's carbonised bones, lampblack from linseed oil - slowly condense and become for us the sediments of another Resurrection, or a birth at Bethlehem, or the kind alfresco feeding of the multitudes from breadcrumbs and fish-bones.

So too the monk's posterity in the city-states of Italy will distil saffron from the stamens of crocuses, blue from the pummelled pistil of the cornflower, indigo from the woad of mustard, and a dark grey tint of mortality from the incinerated gallstones of water-buffalo; and, as they do so, they will dream, deep in their world of madder and malachite and the brushes made from the facial hair of specific Slavic families in the male line, of the ultimate colour, the costliest hue: ultramarine from the seams of lapis lazuli in an Afghan quarry in

the midst of alien Asia to decorate and adorn, again and again, the exquisite chemise Our Lady likes to wear.

These are the grounds of our Eugenio.

***Aidan Mathews,
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