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- A Visionary Infection -

The Anatomy of Movement in Georg Trakl's Poetry

I

My aim here is to attempt to illuminate a little of what for want of a better phrase one might call 'the anatomy of movement' in Trakl's vision, to try to identify perhaps the most crucial strand leading to the infection of images that lends his work an unrivalled visionary intensity and singularity in modern European poetry. If we wish to take a conventional approach we might say something like 'There is in the work of Trakl a muscular, highly elastic imagery, encompassing complex fusions of dream-like visions and the memory of real events and experiences propelled by an ever deepening morbid anxiety. This language of the imagination is the consummation of a visionary impulse born of chronic despair and longed for transcendence from an almost impossibly deranged and precarious existence.' But what does such a pronouncement really tell us? One could say the same of a good number of *poète maudit* cases, or those possessing a visionary faculty.

Let us first identify what exactly constitutes the visionary image. I shall take an excerpt from Coleridge's famous poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by way of example. By examining a section of the Coleridge poem it gives an idea of what one in fact means by the visionary image and how through the combination of a series of movements both real and dream-like it acts powerfully on the reader's own imagination to produce the feeling of having shared in the poet's image design and furthermore maintains the image for the reader as something fluid and without boundaries, a living vision which can be extended by the individual imagination, a baton passed on.

Coleridge's memorable image of the sun above the surface of the sea being transformed into a 'broad and burning face' peering as if through a 'dungeon's grate' when the 'naked ribs' of the ghost ship pass between it and the viewer has all the hallmarks of the visionary about it. There is not only the poet's transfiguration of the sun into a being with a face, but the fact that this being is incarcerated, trapped behind the bars of a prison cell and is peering through towards the onlooker, perhaps in the hope of escape or sympathy, in rage either impotent or menacing, or none of these. Although the idea of the sun having a face and being an entity like the moon is hardly original, even by Coleridge's time, it doesn't seem to matter here. The face image retains impact because of the artful melding of ship and

sun, a poetic double act, the way these two entities interact through movement. The ability of the poet to endow objects with a supernatural meaning, indeed with any meaning at all is what elevates the scene to visionary status. Coleridge confirms towards the end of the sequence that indeed this is the timber carcass of the ghost ship, 'the naked ribs', passing spectre-like before a sun just resting over the ocean's surface. This motion of ship against sun enables a temporary juxtaposition of objects to form which gives rise to the original image. The poet ensures the reader knows how that image came into being but waits for six or seven lines before an explanation. This gives the image space to ripen in the individual imagination, to plant a root but not be entirely without mystery or enquiry. However, by the time the reader reaches the explanatory line about the 'naked ribs' the image has already anchored in the reader's imagination and the mind raced through the options of how to perceive it. Once it has the comfort of the ribs so to speak, the reader's imagination is secure and is ready to embellish the image, reinforce it, frame it.

Coleridge's genius like Trakl, lies in the creation of images which are the product of a mind unable or unwilling to accept reality and therefore in order to exist must find alternative realities which for them are more valid. Such a path leads to a kind of momentary truth nourished by its brief exposure and ephemeral nature, captured subconsciously at the heart of the image making process. The poet is saying 'I had the means to feel this. I sensed the sun become an incarcerated being at that moment the ship passed before it. I give you a truth which came from feeling whether it be coaxed out by opium, dream or madness. I invite you to join me and perhaps even go further than I, to extend the image.'

In the case of this example by Coleridge and in Trakl as we shall soon see, movement is the key, both of the ship itself and the surface of the sun. The gradual grafting of the ghost ship's timber skeleton onto the contrasting so very much alive inferno behind it causes a kind of quivering derangement, the strange notion of that broad flaming face of the sun peering through the bars. This is what attracts the sympathetic reader and infects them. They see the masts and ribs of the ship with the sun reaching round them. They sense the gliding movement of the ship, the silhouette of the timbers passing over the sun like a feeble eclipse, the metamorphosis of a burning sun's face suddenly confronted by 'bars'. This is an unforeseen apparition, temporary, product of a procession of movements, seized before fading completely and transmogrified into the permanence of poetry.

II

Like Coleridge, Trakl employs the visionary image as the principle means to express himself, but unlike Coleridge and other romantics with a visionary capacity who interspersed their visions with a framing language to support their occasional images, a narrative, political anxieties, awed wonder/fear at natural surroundings or despair of mankind's folly etc, there is no space in Trakl's work for such conscious construction in the traditional way a poem evolves. For Trakl the imagery has become the entire poem, or the world of Trakl is one long uninterrupted visionary image, cut and pasted into individual poems. All Trakl's existential concerns become an essential part of this new language and cannot be separated from it. Nowhere does Trakl break out from the image world and show himself, nowhere does he weaken the bond which he has with this powerful unconscious. This is but one important factor which contributes to the feeling of total sacrifice, almost a martyrdom to the visionary element and a sense of greatness resulting from the uncompromising nature of Trakl's vision. Although we hear Trakl loud and clear in his torment and despair at the fallen state of mankind, the message is filtered through the imagery he has initiated to deal with its pressure on his psyche and so comes at us in pictorially created fashion, that is to say those concerns are sieved through a series of images onto our minds via the dream-like, hallucinatory scenes and settings of his poems rather than through mere telling. Although all great visionary poetry has something of this faculty, in Trakl's case the process is I believe strengthened by the continual provision of a dream-like setting, the uncanny, eerily beautiful and often obscure story which unfolds in the Trakl poem and seduces or unsettles the reader very quickly and often from the first line. 'Shepherds buried the sun in the bare forest' 'Oh, the dark angel which stepped from the tree...' 'With dead hero forms, moon you are filling' 'I sing you wild fissure in the night storm'. These do not appear to be the standard fare of opening lines. There is no lead in, no preparation. One is immediately plunged into the image landscape like a parachutist falling from the sky into the unknown. The rate of images like that of Coleridge's ghost ship, is in the work of Trakl increased ten fold.

Certain images often appear to have no connection to those that follow or precede them, so to some people reading Trakl for the first time it may appear to be a random display, seemingly incoherent, colours thrown in at will, delirious gestures and schizoid ravings with no real meaning beyond their shock impact. But on closer reading one soon realises that there is a distinct pattern. This is usually primed in the setting of the poem which although in a dream state, will have recognisable features as

well. For example the chant like opening lines of *De Profundis*. 'There is a stubble field where a black rain falls, there is a tree which brown stands lonely here.' immediately evokes a scene which anyone can tell is going to be a melancholy one. We recognise the dreary field and the empty huts wreathed by a hissing wind. Trakl has the reader primed. He has introduced a landscape which mirrors his own despair. After the landscape is set the poem plunges suddenly into the scene that culminates with shepherds finding the orphan child's 'sweet remains rotting in the thorn bush'. No sooner have we absorbed this powerful image than we are faced with an abrupt change of pace and a solemn pronouncement on alienation with 'a shadow I am far from darkened villages' followed by the morbid terror of 'onto my brow cold metal steps, spiders seek my heart' and ending with the arresting yet perplexing 'In the hazel copse crystal angels have chimed again'. Although these different parts of the poem seem adrift from each other they produce a seductive almost mantra-like effect as they drop down into each other, bearing little relation and yet somehow sitting comfortably alongside each other. This peculiar but effective combining of hermetic image clusters to produce a poem's definitive picture is repeated throughout Trakl's work.

The repetition of colour and its ambiguities has been much discussed elsewhere resulting in something of a quagmire, but little thought appears to have been given to the question of movement in all its variations. In Trakl's poetry there is a glut of walking, falling, stepping and sinking. Climbing, bending, leaping, stirring, gliding, floating and leaning follow close behind. This tapestry of movement is carefully positioned in the poems to create an effect which emphasises the dominant theme wishing to be expressed, habitually that of melancholy or decline, but it is done in such a way that the tonal qualities of the poem are profoundly enhanced. As indicated before, the visionary power of the image is increased by the state of flux suggested by actions such as walking, sinking or stepping as well as the drawn out nature of such an act as sinking for example. The image is stretched by the movement, lengthened, giving the individual's imagination almost a slow dance of gestures and actions within an enclosure of silence as in a dream. This idea of a detached landscape of imagery existing within a reality which is unable to grasp it is embodied in a statement by the poet Rilke, a contemporary of Trakl who was also a sensitive admirer of his poetry. 'I imagine that even one who stands close by must experience such spectacles and perceptions as though pressed, an exile, against a pane of glass: for Trakl's life passes as if through the images of a mirror and fills its entire space, which cannot be entered, like the space of the mirror itself.'

The variations in movement suggest a change of pace. The image of sinking, falling and inclining slows events down, suggesting reflection, melancholy, extinction, whilst conversely the image of leaping, striding or dancing creates an atmosphere of freedom, spontaneity, or madness. In the poem 'To The boy Elis' there are several incidences of this movement mosaic. 'Your body is a hyacinth into

which a monk dips his waxen fingers', 'you walk with soft steps into the night which is heavy with purple grapes and move your arms more beautifully in the blue'. Then later, 'our silence is a black cavern from which at times a gentle animal steps and slowly lowers heavy lids'. One notes that a substantial part of this poem is based on dream movements. In another instance Trakl uses a real movement in a poem such as the line 'heavenly it is to lurch drunkenly through the dusking wood' from 'My Heart towards Evening' but on the whole the images have the elusive ethereal dream quality I have described. As if that were not enough the poem has myriad subsidiary actions going on as well. 'the blackbird calls', 'your lips drink', 'your brow bleeds', 'a thorn bush sounds', 'black dew drips'. The poem is seething with action and motion, with beginning and completion, with unresolved gesture. The narrator talking to Elis, describes his visionary universe. Everything flows on a current of individual movement and yet as in *De Profundis*, the subject of each stanza has little relation to the one before or after it, like those in 'Birth' which contains the unfathomable lines 'A pale thing wakes in a musty room. Two moons. The eyes of the old stone woman are shining'. In Trakl's poetry one action seems to lead languidly into another as if there could be no other way. In 'To the Boy Elis' for example, the monk has only just dipped his waxen fingers when the gentle animal steps from a black cavern. Separate and unaware of each other's existence, they yet combine to create a story which only has meaning within the poem's solitary and detached landscape. These otherworldly beings and beasts carrying the colour assigned to them who step gently from one place to another have holiness and purity about them, a sure purpose and inner certainty alien to mankind. Theirs is a world which as Rilke says we cannot enter but only gaze at as if trapped behind glass. It is pure, unsullied and easily extinguished.

Trakl is leading us somewhere he does not know himself. The image is a lure only, asking to be followed, nothing is definitive. The Trakl line gives us so much to interpret and absorb because in its visionary state it throws up a bewildering range of ambiguities and possibilities. We see the image not as a dead thing, a finite picture but perhaps more as a cinematic image lacking a definable boundary, forever replayed in our minds. The desperate search for a bearable reality through poetic remoulding of existence creates, in Trakl's eyes, a need for purification of some kind from what he sees as the pestilence of mankind. The awareness that this transcendence may only be achieved through the extinguishing of the body becomes more insistent as time passes, resulting in the forceful visions of annihilation characteristic of the later poems.

'Beautiful is man and emerging in darkness, when marvelling he moves his limbs and silently his eyes roll in crimson hollows' By way of conclusion this excerpt from the poem *Helian* shows the highly effective mix of movement in the Trakl poem and the possibilities of interpretation for the reader. The image successfully marries normal anatomical movement with delirious fantasy, a scene given

credence through movement, the core of the image sequence, which binds the elements together and justifies its survival. Just a handful of such images would have meant that Trakl did not suffer his arduous existence in vain but to have such a prodigious supply of them is nothing short of a miracle. Trakl is the supreme modern exponent of the visionary impulse. Through him we have arrived at a place in poetry where it seems impossible to go any further, at least in the one direction he steered in. He got further down that road than anyone else, before or since, but when he finally broke down no one could reach him.

Appendix:

Coleridge

From the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Part III

The western wave was all a flame,
The day was well nigh done!
Almost upon the western wave
Rested the broad bright Sun;
When that strange shape drove suddenly
Betwixt us and the Sun.

And straight the Sun was fleck'd with bars
(heaven's mother send us grace)
As if thro' a dungeon grate he peer'd
With broad and burning face.

Alas (thought I, and my heart beat loud)
How fast she nere's and nere'!
Are those *her* Sails that glance in the Sun
Like restless goassameres?

Are those *her* naked ribs, which fleck'd
The Sun that did behind them peer?
And are these two all, all the crew,
That woman and her fleshless Pheere?

Trakl – Visionary Movement

Oh the black angel who stepped softly from the
heart of the tree

Through their long hair rolls
A fiery wheel, the round day
Earth agony without end.

Moon, as though a dead one
Stepped from a blue cavern

The sun has sunk in black linen; forever
This bygone evening returns

And angels step softly from the blue
Eyes of lovers who more calmly bear their torment

When in sleep he descended the darkening spiral stair

When stonily he launched himself before black horses galloping

Softly sinks on stark walls the olive trees blue stillness

From which at times a gentle animal steps and slowly lowers heavy lids

Heavenly to lurch drunkenly through the dusking wood

Figures stride wax-stiffened through embers and smoke

A red wolf which an angel is strangling

A heart stiffens in snowy silence

Oh my brother, our blind hour hands climb towards midnight

