

PAUL GEORGES

Private Allegories, Restless Lives

Painting, like poetry, has been defined as that which resists all definition and, by such testing, resists the conventional sense of integrity. Painting submits notions of integrity and unity to a test, and this test, pragmatic and kinetic, yields us the sense of freshness in adventurous art. Paul Georges is submitting painting to such a test. The critics of his turbulence and his restlessness, the dislocated configurations that he has derived from observation and from the resources of mythology, overlook the possibility that his destabilizing art is actually a generosity. The munificence with which Georges endows his works is one of painterly ambivalence. He has refused the temptations of dogmatic systems and has entered a terrain where neither mimesis nor the nonmimetic will save one, simply.

One of the fundamental problems of our epoch is summoned by Harold Bloom's sense of *belatedness* or an ambivalent and anxious wrestling with our self-consciousness of traditions. Georges avoids false naiveté, and he also avoids a species of etiolated neoclassicism that is becoming a popular decorative refuge in our time. Unlike many artists who are willing to quote complaisantly and who think history is a series of palatable styles to raid, launder, rinse, and wear, Georges is involved in a sense that we must struggle with the myths we use. The myths are powerful, because they release the most private sense of ourselves. No Medusa in Georges operates without becoming at once a private/public language. His most relaxed observations of wife and daughter, moreover, resonate with mythological tones of the Fates. A table becomes a centaur to such a painter, because he accepts a world of triple puns, as in Joyce, where a common day is divided, split, and tested by its analogies with the heroic world of Greece, the rhetorical figures in encyclopedic array, and a set of disturbing allegorical tropes. "Post-modernism," mostly a cruel snark that leads a prescriptivist life of its own, has become to many a comforting dismissal of the Joycean struggle with mythology and realism, and it is comforting to find a thinker such as Baudrillard commenting recently that not much has been improved upon since the modernist heroics of the

1920s. The work of Georges is an attempt, I might say, to go back to the fiercer energies of Joyce, Picasso, and Eliot and to create a painting and series of paintings that will bear the integrity of the individual within a ferocious *agon* with the tradition. There is no *fin de siècle* relaxation into mere appropriation: there is a mature complexity rejecting the lesser dogmas.

Rimbaud spoke magisterially in his notorious *Lettre du Voyant* of the need for a dislocation that would produce cold and consequentially visionary objects. Georges comes to a Rimbaud decision in his oneiric works that comically celebrate the move from America to Europe that he has enacted domestically. In the study and final painting of "The Disturbed Move," the artist takes what could be a whimsical irony of modern real estate and extrapolates a vast flag of distress. In gigantic scale, his modern antiheroes are lofted into a red and spotted sky and tumble among distended seashells, bananas, chairs, and cars. As in his other works, there is an exasperated and expansive reference to Tiepolo in this baroque ceiling-painting, as it were, but the feeling-tone is Chaplinesque and devilish at the same time. Like objects in Johns, these are parts that can hardly be taken for the whole anymore: they are parts for the part. The illusions are prosey and matter-of-fact as Kafka, but the metamorphosis is still a melodrama. The tragi-comedy of our helplessness is rarely as vivid.

In one painting from his new domicile in France, a woman does laundry, while an immense and Polyphemus-like tree above her renders the whole scene as melancholy and turbulent as a Ryder. This kind of spectral poignancy is perhaps not as often emphasized in the literature on Georges as is necessary. Take the portrait of *Lisette and Yvette* from 1985, and one has a model of such a private space of uncertainty. While I have suggested the echo of Greek statuary here, I would not want to overlook the mastery of a Courbet-like solidity withal, so that in a *coup de theatre*, these two solid figures, snuggled so closely together, look out at us with dignity and detachment that belies all of their anxious rapport. They sit on a couch only

sketchily rendered and expressly so, so that their postures are that much more a complex ratio of gravity and grace. If one wants to place Georges, like Wolf Kahn and Fairfield Porter, as neglected masters, it is significant to remember their place within the figurative tradition of Abstract Expressionism. It is this tradition that the Museum of Modern Art, for one, and most other institutions have dogmatically condemned to lead a marginal existence, even though Meyer Schapiro, in an early study of Jackson Pollock, paid attention to this element as an important antithetical stylistic resource. The painterly cadenzas in carmine in the background of "Yvette and Lisette" show Georges's mastery of the lessons of de Kooning and Hoffmann. The whole tableau, casual as a study, remains as invincibly self-reflexive as any "pure painting" of the 1950s. I would also remark, as Lucio Pozzi has said elsewhere, that psychological portraiture has been one of figuration, so it is particularly refreshing to see the possibilities of psychological depth within the comedy of the surface. Psychological insistence and painterly hedonism make these cinematic, seemingly *collaborative* works.

The still lifes of Georges are paradoxically restless things. When he choreographs his table, he produces, not the rigid melancholies of Morandi's grammatical family-groups of bottles, but a kind of stormy chamber music. One might say that, like the composer Elliot Carter, he is involved with the "theme of abruptness." The storm cloud stops, and a sudden bright band of elegant lit sky begins. A severe self-portraiture prevails in one bust glowering in comic defiance. Nearby, in a kind of perspectival slouch, a group of bottles screens off a distant field. Color and compositions both are abrupt. What is this table doing, suddenly in the foreground, screening a pastoral of moderate bitersweetness? The mesmerized surrealism of it all may almost pass over us, except for a wild impasto here and there which seems to reinforce the sense that agitation itself is the topic. There cows are not the brindled joys of Hopkins or the contemplative *vaches Cambridgiennes* of E.M. Forster's idealistic undergraduates. The whole is a

disquisition on the uncanniness of home. Freud has spoken of the primary meanings of antithetical words, and the still life is presenting us with fruit that is at once fulfillment and frustration. The objects remind us, too, of the magical decontextualizations of the neo-primitive. These objects, this fruit, this bottle, are presented upon a table as in a lacerating non-space. What makes Georges so unsettling a master is the combination of suave sky and landscape painting, all seemingly normal and derived from the vagaries of Corot, with a whole swath of painting that emerges from the random or wild pleasures of an expressionism that is untamed. But this is all to be expected from an analytic allegorist. Again, still life is only interesting if it permits us, like powerful myths, to restore ourselves to ourselves. The objects that surround Molly Boom on her bed are as significant as Penelope's loom if and as and when the author can unweave them so that they stand, in such a bright and complex impasto, that we see them as if for the first time. Georges has this Adamic trait.

The sensuous and the serious must not be disentangled, and that was the serious lesson of such critics of poetry as Leavis and Trilling, but who in painting has contributed such a sensualism as Georges? His nudes and his family groupings speak of an aware sensuality. Where Porter avoided the nude and many young painters flirt with an ideology of puritanism or the arrogantly transgressible, Georges tends to see the eruptive in pleasure everywhere. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has spoken of the terror of Beauty for late capitalism always: the element that escapes control. Georges is a painter who delights in the Dynamo of the Virgin, to play with Henry Adams' terms. That is why he can play with Manet so skillfully and also lacerate us with his ironic titling, "Over the Bar."

Two enormous pictures, "To France" and "Perseus Slaying the Medusa," haunt us with the baroque power of their deep space. Recently Frank Stella has been creating an anti-modern narrative in which he plays Caravaggio and gives abstract art the volume it demands to stay alive. I would say that Georges is one of the masters who is

currently challenging in figuration the rivalrous Stella. His paintings are as bold as Stella: the highest compliment. Yet he achieves this by a revitalization of figures out of Tiepolo. The Perseus has an innocent gigantism that rivals that of late Guston, and as a matter of fact, perhaps only Guston saw as clearly as Georges the possibility of a kind of Dionysiac use of caricature within figurative expressionism. The Perseus painting is at once a complex wall of red and a narrative of Homeric simplicity: hair, sword, blood, and baggage. In "To France," seagulls dip and pivot where a dream-table flies with goddess and self-portraiture in stone. In both pictures, figuration is not being used complaisantly but as a perturbation. One might almost say that these works go back to the figure, like Stella in the museums, to ask again of abstraction how to revitalize painting in our day. And the multivalent answer produces a painting of multiplicity itself.

Kenneth Koch once remarked of the American adaptation of French surrealism that the Americans took what was perhaps an ecstatic and idealistic movement and translated it into a meditation on the everyday. Of course, Bréton's original intentions make clear that surrealism was to be an affair in which day and night life were not to be divided. Georges is a painter for which these categories may seem strange, but I think it is one reason why he has not been so easily digested. Too often he seems like a naturalist inappropriately agitated or an expressionist bizarrely reduced to the figure or a figurative artist going astray amid allegories. If one notes that his neoclassicism is really a nightmare transformation within surrealist terms, that his Gods and satellites are a Rimbaldien code of sensuous *dérèglement*, then, I think, one can detach him from the usual line of American landscapists and place him in the dream-tradition of Ryder, deChirico, even Cornell, and Johns. Because he lacks the intimism of the last two, this analogy may seem strange, but actually Georges is very much a master of the dislocation dream. Yes, we assent to what Dennis Adrian has spoken of as his observed blue and his painterly light, but we also sense that the floating tables

and tumbling couples are part of a labyrinth of oneiric meanings that cannot be rehearsed by vigilance or explicated by tone. It is not that Georges is ever literary in the pejorative sense that ruins so much minor Surrealist painting, it is that he has come to an unbearable point, where, as Kafka says, there is no turning back from allegory, from meaning, from a sensuous and in a sense, anti-mimetic iconography. They look like figures, but they are dreams. They look like dreams, but they are systems, integrities, worlds.

In the literature on Georges, perhaps the most poignantly mistaken criticism was the philistine attack by Canaday, who claimed that political allegory could not be handled so personally. This critique is truly fabulously off the mark, and, inverted, it bears witness to the power of Georges and his painterly choices. Truly, allegory in its most political sense has always been personal, as in Dante's invention of the ego that is plunged into the unreal. The allegorical, as Walter Benjamin extolled it, in an essay in the exploration of estrangement between signifier and signified, between the realms of self and the social. In his political and mythological explorations, Georges is able to use the anxious personalism of Abstract Expressionism without the figurative tradition that he likewise digests. Fairfield Porter extolled Georges as a master revivifying the tradition due to the assimilations of the abstract school. The fundamental audacity of Georges is his reinsertion of the public allegory as a device to unmask late capital in its umpteenth slump. Thus, he is able to save the space of Kent State, the Medusa, and the Kennedy assassinations. He tells us "the tale of the tribe."

David Shapiro

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