



G. Paolini, *Locus solus*, Genoa: Edizioni della Galleria Locus Solus, 1993.

This collection of writings is divided into three chapters, preceded by a foreword: “Un artista mancato” [An Artist Manqué], “Esposizione universale” [Universal Exposition] and “Fuori luogo” [Out of Place]. The three pieces reorder to a different extent passages from earlier texts and include previously unpublished additions. The book is completed with a story by Anna Paolini Piva.

The book came out for the opening of Paolini’s exhibition project at the Galleria Locus Solus between 1993 and 1994, documented in a second illustrated volume, identical in form and graphics, which was published at the end of the exhibition.

ARTISTE MANQUÉ

As time goes by, I have turned into an object of curiosity. I mean to say that this is far from the very first time that I have been asked to express an opinion on the world in which we operate, or on subjects like the theme of these conversations to which I have been invited to make a contribution: “Why do we continue to make and teach art?”¹. What is art? I’m sure that none of us can answer that question with any certainty. We’re unable to fix our gaze for any great length of time on this sphere or point of light that leaves us in doubt as to whether it’s a star, a planet, or a satellite, which is to say that we never cease to wonder if its light is radiant, natural, or reflected. I talk about art without really being able to do so...

And this can’t be resolved simply by resetting our sights. Allow me to appeal to an image: while manning his observation post, an astronomer comes to the realization that the distance between himself and the stars has come to be the same as the distance between himself and the earth. While intent on studying the firmament, he floats in a space that’s free from gravity and he can no longer establish contact with the world; he can send no messages back to the world.

But perhaps the telescope is pointing in the other direction... And what about *truth*? The astronomer’s only remaining truth is his instrument: the very same instrument that permits him to observe the truth.

The artist, today, knows himself to be *less* capable of self-expression than anybody else.

The artist alone has always and every day experienced the ungraspable nature or non-existence of expression. If expression finds manifestation, it does not do so *in* him; at best he performs the bitter task of lending it a voice.

And the artist understands, more than anyone else, that the image he chances to discover belongs not to him but to others, though not to all. Appearances notwithstanding, his destiny lies in an absence from the world, in an exile from time and place.

So if I am here to satisfy your curiosity, I have to admit from the very start that our appointment is an appointment *manqué*, and it could hardly be otherwise, since the voice to which you’re listening is the voice of an *artiste manqué*. The curiosity, moreover, which you excite in me doesn’t find its focus in any single individual among you, and surely not in that single individual who happens to be me.

Now I’d like to present the thoughts I have always had about the *place of representation*, understood as the space of the work (about the nature of this space, and the coordinates in which it might be inscribed).

I have used the word “thoughts”, yet I don’t intend to be unclear: I have never actually “thought” a work, even if that might seem to be the case to those who see a work and immediately glimpse – or imagine themselves to glimpse – the thoughts that gave birth to it. The artist and the work are complementary to one another, and not at all sequential to one another. Just as it is essential for the work, in order to exist, to deliver itself to the gaze that gives it substance (be it the gaze of the author or the spectator), the artist, as proof of his own salvation, has to discover

something (the work) that enables him to *look*. So I can say that I am the product of the thoughts of my works, rather than vice versa. The artist does not think; he is a castaway, a survivor who has managed to escape from the danger that lies in the destination which the work itself represents. The artist is an unstable figure... inhabited by contradictory attitudes. He seeks the new, eternally searching for originality – for roads not yet travelled – but always in accordance with a code (he is a herald of norms and rules, even if of norms and rules which as yet remain unknown to him). He has to let others participate in his vision, but no one is allowed to appropriate it (not even the artist himself is allowed to appropriate it; as the work discovers its formulation, he already turns his attention to the next). The artist is ironic, but makes no practiced habit of irony. He has nothing to prove, and simply perseveres in the pursuit of his path.

He will even teach: “The surface of a canvas or a sheet of paper is traversed by innumerable projections and experiments that belong to past experience, no less than to future eventualities. Before moving on to particulars, we should take a brief look at the functions and possibilities that we want to attribute to supporting surfaces. In other words, and paradoxically, all the possible images which a surface has represented, or might represent, can be reduced, or dilated, to a representation of itself. As though addressing a challenge to the infinite, it’s a question of seeing the sign no longer as illusory artifice, and instead as a virtual instrument. The exercises performed in the Academy can draw upon the very environment in which they are carried out, making use of all the suggestions and questions that gradually present themselves. The ‘life drawing’, for example, does not exclude the copying of a previously painted image, since such an image is no less ‘life’ than any other object might be. So nothing could be more *finished* than a work which is yet to be begun. Yet everything, in order to exist, requires that we *begin again*. The place of representation is the space required for its manifestation”².

The work does not produce space; it institutes space; it searches it out within itself in order to give itself manifestation; it evokes it in order to *represent itself*. It can therefore be nothing other than the realm of perception, of interpretation...

The artist (the castaway) is thus dispossessed of himself and truly runs the risk of no longer being recognized (noticed). Of obstinately persisting in the pursuit of something by which he indeed, quite unawares, is already possessed.

Prospector for gold, conjurer, chess player, hermit, pearl diver, artist, master of ceremonies – are these all so many synonyms? The last, for example – in accordance with established codes – is the person who commits himself to the search for truth while knowing that it cannot be obtained. “Ceremony” is no automatic repetition of a conventional procedure, and instead is an essential event in its very own right: an event that unleashes panic just as it produces ecstasy; an event that kindles or extinguishes faith. Perhaps the artist is someone or something – on the order of a stand-in – who no longer practices the ceremony of the perception of the world, and who instead has come to *live* it, conjoining revolution and discretion, demanding the absolute without knowing how to make use of it...

Like a rite into which you have to descend, or myth...

Thousands of statues constitute that body of iconography – that body of imagery – which illustrates those mysterious figures, improbable yet possible, to which we refer as the gods and their deeds...

The spaces that hold them apart from one another – the dense void which makes them visible, the distances which place them in perspective – are no less numerous.

I have insisted too often – and too often, I have to admit, repeated myself – on my perennial reticence to offer an active and conscious contribution to the search for “truth”, or at least for a possible meaning that might be discovered in the endless expanse of images.

Having laid the first stone (while still having published no blue-print) I have continued to raise the scaffolding for a building that awaits construction; a building which no one has commissioned, and which no one is destined to inhabit. Yet insisting, repeating, and continuing seem to be the only way in which to bear the total weight of an emptiness which no one imagines himself to be able to fill.

So here I am in my studio. I never begin with a blank sheet of paper (rather than points of departure, the blank sheet of paper and the untouched canvas are points of arrival). A page from a newspaper, a small rectangle drawn in pencil, with other rectangles around it, sometimes traversed by a diagonal, a fold in the paper, and here's a room... Everything is set in motion, or withheld from motion, by that certain touch of laziness demanded by impatience.

The general crisis of the bases of things today gives authorization, in opposition to any number of outworn and outdated truths, to an equal number of uncertain or gratuitous heresies. The one I think I am following leads me to believe in the truth of fiction, in representation as an absolute which affirms that "whatever becomes has already been".

My anti-futurist convictions (but the prefix "anti" is an echo of futurism) and my phobia with respect to airplanes (but immobility is the sublimation of speed) to some extent condition my consumption of space and time.

I have always admired those artists to whom I refer as "painters of the motionless". They forget reality to the point of forgetting themselves; they transform snap-shots into pictures posed in a studio.

And there we have it. I grasped the meaning of drawing from photography, of drawing defined as that which is always true, and which therefore has always remained intact. Even if there is no such thing as drawing without line, line nonetheless "moves" – as in the terminology of the game of chess – in ways that supply that verb with no direct object (in ways that imply no becoming in time). Line appears where it was expected to appear. So drawing is something similar to that prodigy of orthographic convention which places a capital letter at the start of each line of a poem (I refer to the convention of "titling" parts – as though making them self-sufficient – that belong to a greater whole); or to the motionless running of rivulets of water at the moment in which it thaws; or to petals and leaves abandoned to a sudden gust of the wind; or to the shapes of dunes in the desert; or to the typical outlines of orography, or of borders that separate nations.

These are images of things which are precious and precarious, as though brought to light by the diligent hands of an archaeologist, entrusted with the custody of the traces left by time.

What more can be said about a drawing? It's a circumstance, both rare and obvious, in which everything is miraculously found in its proper place. It's a bird's-eye view, or a vision that appears before closed eyes. The acrobat's smile at the most delicate point of his performance. The ancient profile of ruins which seem at the very same time to come into existence and as well to endure. The golden reflection on the curtain fringe, while waiting for a show to begin...

Photography and drawing seem in short to share the aptitude – or perhaps the calling – to make things transpire: they assume a transparency that has no end, that tends towards the infinite, that presents no "image" while instead provoking "imagination", and while always peering beyond contingent limits.

So I stop and gaze for a very long time, with no act of observation, at the most banal and meaningless painting in the window of an antique shop, or at the diminutive sign that announces with Bodonian elegance on the door of a nearby shop, "open all day". Suspended and inviolable images subtracted from the world and held in isolation; and placed where they are to arouse our wonder for the very fact, itself a wonder, of offering themselves to our gaze. And the sense of wonder increases if nothing, from one occasion to the next, has changed, if nothing has been added to or removed from the scene.

We are all intent on something, or entrusted to something. Like the solitary navigator who leans beyond the hull of his vessel in order for his weight to hold it in balance or alter its course, remaining quite motionless but only apparently inactive.

Permit me another image: the image of Nicéphore Niépce as he waited at the window one morning in 1822, next to his *chambre noire*... The contents concealed in that "chamber" were an impalpable illusion, but also a model. From that day on, signs and colours, volumes and distances, and everything else to which we refer as form, began to draw themselves, to deposit themselves. No longer forged by others or bent to others' ends, they effected their own transferral into simulations of the shadow of reality. That "chamber" can already be seen, essentially, as the studio of the modern artist, which is a place, from that moment on, where the visible flows into an unprotected and utterly retinal void, a photographic void.³

But it's time to get on with things, and to come out into the open. Friedrichsplatz is no theatre, as a piazza, say in Italy, often may seem to be. Yet the tables of the Café Paulus give you the impression of enjoying a special vantage point, the threshold of a door that stands ajar and offers a view of the back-stage preparations at a theatre. We're in Kassel, in the days just before the opening of *Documenta*.

The artists are moving with quickened steps (more determined than inspired it seems) to reach their appointed places. I recognize one of them (a well-affirmed artist, certainly not *manqué*) who strides beyond space and addresses the frontiers of time: he rushes to the task of openly backdating one of his works, thus declaring himself the precursor of an image which not only I believed to be my own. Trapped in his anxious need to correct history – “his” history – he's likely, at a rate like this, to end up by dating his most recent work to a moment before his own birth...

A bit farther on, another episode, other manoeuvres so clamorous as to end up in the newspapers.

Similar things take place every other year in Venice. I'm just a few dozen yards from the entrance to the pavilions of the Biennale. Here again, the exterminating angel discreetly keeps an eye on me, ready to go back into hiding no sooner than his figure appears to grow clear.

I stay where I am for quite some time, for no good reason, waiting for a signal from I really don't know whom, observing the unknown orbits traced by the steps of the many participants, all of them attempting to forget that they are there.

After a while, I too move on, wholly unaware of the direction in which I have come to move. An interminable, extenuating wait; nearly a question of taking flight, with no hasty accelerations or careful pauses.

Even today I cannot remember having been there, just as I cannot remember having not been there. Tomorrow there's a chance that I'll ask myself if that body was really my own, or perhaps the body of a hostage – myself – who was incapable of assuming a role.

Robbed, disappointed, or *manqué*, the artist neither wants nor is able to defend himself...

So we've arrived at this show and now I have to announce the titles of the works envisaged: *Parade, Il nome proprio [The Proper Name], L'ospite [The Guest], Diadema [Diadem], Castelli di carte [Houses of Cards], Passatempo [Pastime], Notti bianche [Sleepless Nights], Polvere [Dust], Automates & Marionettes, Come non detto [Forget it], Photofinish...*

“I would prefer not to”. I too would like to follow the example of Bartleby the scrivener and refrain from making any statement.

Melville's words seem to echo the extreme discretion, the touching modesty of Henry James, or the ritual abstinence of Raymond Roussel, that acrobat who could set words free from the force of gravity. Or the dizzying, poetic fervour of Giambattista Marino; or, better, the resolutory conversion which Borges ascribes to him in *A Yellow Rose*, remarking on the moment when “he saw that it lay in its own eternity, and not in his words, and knew that we can mention or allude to it, but never give it expression”.

Some time ago, a happy coincidence gave me the chance to attend a public meeting with Borges in Rome. I'd like to quote two brief replies he offered, and which I see to be of inestimable value. A member of the audience remarked, “But you are famous as a Baroque poet, as the modern world's last protagonist of a Baroque poetics”. He replied: “The Baroque, surely, is a valid form of art. Baroque poetics consists of memorable metaphors. I was or attempted to be a Baroque poet when I was young. Now I try to be simple, and I find that this is far more difficult”.

I grow ever more convinced that this “simple” opens back to “distant”, or even to “absent”.

Someone else asked him, “How do you write a poem?” He replied, “I assume a passive attitude, and I wait”.

I quote from memory, and Borges spoke, moreover, through an interpreter, so I'm unable to vouch for reporting his words with absolute accuracy, but essentially he stated, “I wait, and my only concern is to make it entirely beautiful; I want it all to be utterly beautiful”. He then concluded: “I have the feeling of receiving a gift, but I couldn't quite say if it comes from my own memory, or from something belonging to others. And I try not to interfere too much”.

Allow me once again to look for orientation in a couple of fragments that my horizon of uncertain references casts onto the shore without desiring to do so. For example, the enchantment of certain vaguely pedagogical illustrations in old treatises on perspective. Those pictures in which a group of people are intent on the study of the placement of objects in space – objects which are only volumes (cubes, prisms, cylinders) or even perhaps less than that: pure appearances that in order to discover themselves delimit a portion of the ground.

Or certain foreign language courses where the characters depicted are only extras and have nothing to say, finding their only function in the speaking of words that hold no other message than the exercise of pronouncing the terms to which they correspond.

Finally, we can listen together to a couple of phrases. “Robinson, which of the lakes do I prefer?” In this question that Beau Brummel directs to his valet, Bartleby’s preference for doing and saying nothing at all becomes a forgotten preference: forgotten, unexpressed, and above all unrecorded. The dandy is thus the artifex, but not the author, of an unbridgeable, heroic distance from the world, of a mode of writing so lofty as to have no need to settle onto a page, so lofty as to disavow the space of the page in order to hover free in the emptiness of time.

“Soyez les bienvenus à Neuchâtel”... This is the phrase that the innocent hand of *L’Ecrivain*, Jaquet-Droz’s robot in the Neuchâtel Museum, writes out for us; for each and every one of us, and each and every time. A similar robot at the Museum in Neuilly – *Le Poète* – heaves his chest, issues a sigh, and then says nothing at all.

[pp. 11-19]

¹ This first part of the text resumes and develops the theme of the lecture held at the Accademia Clementina, Biblioteca dell’Archiginnasio, Bologna, 22 April 1993.

² Note to the Painting Course at the Accademia Albertina di Belle Arti, Turin 1977-78.

³ Some passages in this chapter reprise certain notes of mine published in G. Paolini, *Ancora un libro*, Rome: Editrice Inonia, 1987.

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