

37^e Van der Leeuw-lezing

LATE WORK

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At fifty-two years old - the age I am now - the painter Lovis Corinth apparently solved the problem of being himself by suffering a severe stroke, one of whose consequences was the loss of motility in his right hand. To the extent that we are the servants of memory, does catastrophe have the power to free us? Corinth's late work, in which concrete reality loses its purchase on him and he ascends to a more boundless humanity, remains of interest to neurologists pleased to find illustrations of the changes in the perceptual field brought about by stroke. It is unusual for an artist's usefulness to reside in his status as an object. The illusion of art generally rests on his capacity to provide examples of truth, not become one himself. Corinth's oeuvre is dominated by his autobiographical impulse, but do his brushstrokes - in which the neurologists found firm evidence of their surmise that victims of stroke see the world on a diagonal plane - fall under the aegis of that impulse? Can his debility survive as representation, rather than as simply representative?

The ability to separate being from doing is the artist's fundamental characteristic: like the saint or the evil-doer, he preserves it in order to control the influence of his subjective self. Yet in the case of Corinth's late work, the distinction is exploded: the careful balance by which the objective world is seen to be perceived by the self is upset and discarded. The rule of time, by which he has narrated his own mortality, no longer obtains. There is no more narration, no more story: it is as if, in his brush with death, he was unexpectedly released from the whole illusion of identity, with its constraints of memory and history and pain. Instead those constraints were transmuted outwards, into a style either broken or liberated but in either case now palpably visible; on the interface of the canvas the world is no longer synthesised or reconciled by perception - on the contrary it is driven out, chased toward its own primitive, glorious meaninglessness. 'I have discovered something new,' he wrote in his penultimate year of life. 'True art means seeking to capture the unreal.'

Corinth's tilted horizons and vertiginously malleable forms, the rushing diagonal of his brushstrokes, were the embodiment of what might be called his catastrophic gain. His late works were hailed in his time as the artist's breakthrough; ten years after his death, the Nazis seized them and displayed them in the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich; in our own time they are picked over by scientists, who find them helpful in the attempt to understand the things that can go wrong with us.

In the countryside where I live, walkers usually greet one another as they pass on the footpaths. It is a popular place for walking, a coastal landscape where the paths travel through expanses of marsh and wetland and beach: there are people walking alone and in groups, couples with dogs, families. The men say hello or good morning; if it is a couple, the woman sometimes simply beams in a friendly manner as they pass. Women frequently walk the footpath in pairs: they can be heard from a distance over the flat coastal landscape, talking. Their talk is of their lives: they are immersed in it, as people watching a particularly compelling film are immersed. When they pass me there is always a moment of blinking arousal, a surfacing from the element of narrative - they scrutinise it, the reality of this footpath, with me on it. Hello, they say, when the moment has passed.

It is rarer to meet a woman walking alone in the place where I live. In the city the public spaces are full of solitary women, but here the sight is less common. The coastal delta is mysterious, silently filling and emptying with the tides, the vast sky washing it with delicate colours. There are wild storms in which whole dune systems disappear, in which features of the landscape are moved from one place to another. Not long ago, a mad wind dug up millions upon millions of razor clam shells from the sands and then organised them into a huge glittering field of mathematically aligned rows. There is the feeling both of being at the edge of the world and of that edge being malleable, the very substance of concrete reality taking on an unstructured pliancy, a receptiveness that is also a fragility. It is pure impress, a world shaped by external forces and by its own inner impulse of repetition, the tides that advance and withdraw and sometimes unexpectedly brim up and overflow, so that the footpaths lie for a while beneath the silent water. In this place it is rare to meet a woman walking alone, and when it happens the meeting will more often than not be wordless: she will pass me without speaking, this woman, as though now that it's just the two of us the pretence can be relinquished, the social niceties set aside. There is almost a brutality to it, a frank indifference I have encountered many times in the part of my life where I am a wife and mother and where women inhabit a terrain as mountainous and solid in its subjectivity as this coastal place is intangible and flat, where their interest lies solely in the investment in and the defence of the things that are theirs.

When my daughters left home to go to university, for a period I believed I had been the victim of a practical joke. The ruse, as I saw it, had been to get me to invest the substance of my life's energies into making something that I would lose on the instant of its completion. During my twenty years of motherhood I had become a practised reader of the different ways in which the maternal secret is kept, yet nonetheless I had been fooled

again. I had watched other women cross this threshold, and observed also the cultural mockery to which in that moment they were exposed: what I hadn't done was put these two things together. The woman desolate or bewildered at the departure of her children, the woman who no longer knows what to do with herself and sees no further point to her existence, is a figure of fun: under no circumstances must one betray a resemblance to that figure. I want to leave them before they leave me, an acquaintance of mine once said to me in an unguarded moment, and I was shocked by the violence of this sentiment and by its proximity to everything soft and selfless, everything that appears nurturing and secure. There are moments in femininity when the inside and outside of a woman are brought into such close opposition that the tension of maintaining their separation becomes visible. I had never learned this art of dissembling: I had arrived at each moment in my biological trajectory like a tourist getting off a bus in a strange town. And so it has continually taken me by surprise, that other women appeared to recognise this place we had come to and had prepared strategies to conceal their feelings about it. I'm just going to put my face on, my mother used to say before disappearing off upstairs to apply her make-up; and it was true that the bare-faced woman in the kitchen was an entirely different character from the groomed and smiling person who alternated with her. The former was turned inwards, upon a landscape whose primitiveness and savagery was our own shared habitat, where we had been created and in some sense still lived; the latter was turned out towards the world and what it might or might not give to her.

The woman on the coastal path doesn't have her face on: passing her, I believe I recognise some of my own blankness, my confusion at the turn things have taken. It is as though all my life some dark magician has caused mountains to spring up in my path and I have climbed them, sometimes strenuously and sometimes with ease, always glad to cross the peak and be on the downward journey, only to find that another one has appeared up ahead. Now, in this place whose flatness seems to constitute the melting down of illusion itself, I wonder about all those mountains I believed myself to be climbing, the trick that was played or that I played on myself, in order to strip my capacity for activity down to its last ounce.

'The relationship between bodily condition and aesthetic style seems at first to be a subject so irrelevant and perhaps even trivial by comparison with the momentousness of life, mortality, medical science and health as to be quickly dismissed,' Edward Said writes in his book *On Late Style*. 'Each of us can readily supply evidence of how it is that late works crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavour. Rembrandt and Matisse, Bach and Wagner. But

what of artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction?’

Said’s list includes neither women nor writers: the relationship of lateness to language is unclear. That medium, so transactional, so bound to life and change, is also the litmus of identity: language betrays nationality, social class, prejudices, assumptions, limitations, and in the end, most of all, age. A writer’s late work is very often merely the evidence of her declining powers and her loss of contact with the structure of reality. Of Beethoven’s late works Said writes that they ‘constitute an event in the history of modern culture: an artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile.’ In other words, to interpret these works as the result of Beethoven’s deafness or his sense of impending death is to rob them of their artistic status and relegate them to the level of documentary evidence. Exile is not decline: it is the self being set or setting itself apart from shared reality. But what, for a writer, could constitute a form of exile?

Corinth’s late self-portraits show a shrivelled, damaged man, almost unrelated to the corpulent, moustachioed figure of his middle period. Then, his self-portraits had a half-valiant, half-desperate honesty: they showed him in strength - large, fleshy, flamboyant - but also in a kind of psychic pain, as though he felt trapped in the untransfigurable fact of himself. His self-portraits were truly a looking in the mirror: how could he make sense of what he saw there and relate it to what he was? He looked and looked, trying to see himself: he painted himself wearing hats and suits of armour; he painted himself in an ordinary shirt and tie, fat and balding in front of the unfalsifying light of a large window. Each year, on his birthday, he painted himself. Each year he asked the question: what am I?

Any artist has first of all to establish the relationship of his talent to convention: how am I to position myself in relation to everything that has already been achieved? Do I proceed by scholarship and imitation, learning from my forebears, going all along the corridors of history before I finally find a bit of unoccupied space in which to put myself? Or do I take the leap suggested by my individuality, that simply being myself constitutes my authority and my voice? The latter scenario requires a specific discipline: to be very good at being oneself. The former, by elevating the artist’s standards, entails the risk that he will never exceed them, will never locate his true purpose. Corinth, damaged by childhood experience, unwittingly chose both. Consciously he strove to make his way by the accepted routes, yet even while he laboured under his reverence for the canon and for the

discipline and calling of art, his autobiographical impulse burst out of him at every turn. His brushstrokes were frenziedly personal; his compositional eye saw a kind of everyday sublime, where his empirical existence and the reality of the landscape were mutually transfigurative. His portraits of others were at times blurred and opaque, at others lacerating in their living reality. He was painting himself, painting what it was like to be him, painting his pain; yet it was the opposite of Said's abandoning of communication with the established social order; it was the spectacle of an artist in chains to that obligation to communicate. 'The power of subjectivity in late works of art,' writes Adorno in his *Essays on Music*, 'is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art.' Death, Adorno notes, 'is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art.' Lateness, then, becomes the act of being set free from the very forms in which one has found expression.

What is a woman's late work? Is it to be, or to do?

In the United States, the figures of Hilary Clinton and then Elizabeth Warren provided the occasion for the exercise of a curious public ambivalence. These women - competent, powerful, and the opposite of vain - aroused an unease that seemed to stem from the difficulty of placing them in femininity. They appeared somehow to have dispensed with the fact of gender itself; the unease was akin to that felt about a crime in which no one knows where the body has been buried. The signifiers of womanhood - the markers, as it were, if not of femininity then of its well-tended grave - were absent. Both women, it seemed, believed that in the matter of running for president, doing could be entirely substituted for being. Yet for certain people this was the invitation to a bestial misogyny, as though a woman's indifference to or internalising of her sexual identity - far from removing her from sexual politics - strips her of the most basic protection under civilised norms. It has often been observed that in the UK, a woman can become prime minister because she has a shape that men - or at least the kinds of men to be found in the Houses of Parliament - recognise: the shape of matron or nanny or even mother, of a chilly English kind. Her being is thus taken care of; she is free, albeit in a limited sense, to do. But for the two Americans, it seems, this shape cannot be found.

In motherhood the question of shape - of the self and its limits - is central to the test: the boundary between self and other becomes, very often, unclear; that boundary, once violated, is difficult to rebuild. Sometimes, talking to other mothers, I see us as located in the historic landscape of our own volcanic emotion, surrounded by the black hardened

shapes of past eruptions, occasions on which our insides came out and forever changed the geology of who we are. It seems, in retrospect, that an opportunity was missed, or rather a series of opportunities: moments in which we altered, when perhaps we could have contained ourselves and stayed the same. We talk about our children, weaving the narrative that will become what we think is the story of their lives: in this odd kind of aftermath the distinctions between us, once so compelling, seem to have faded. I'm as happy to listen to one story as another; telling my own, I know that what I'm saying isn't really true. The more I seem to know about these characters, my children, the less, it appears, I know about myself.

My daughter, walking on a London street, comes across a person on the pavement in distress: she has a history of stopping and trying to help on such occasions, but this time she is late for something important. As she approached she has watched others walk past this person, apparently indifferent: her bus is coming; she is torn, not knowing what to do. She looks around: it's mid-morning in a residential neighbourhood, where families live. She gets on the bus, having decided, she says afterwards, that the chances of a mum coming along to sort it out before too very long were high, and as she looks back through the window of the departing bus her surmise is proved correct. I found this story both funny and sad, pleased that she associated motherhood with competence and care but unable to stop myself seeing something poignant in this maternal figure supposedly roving the world, soothing it and setting it to rights, taking responsibility for its mess and pain. I wasn't as outraged as she was by the indifference of others: it seemed to me to be morally neutral, to be something that the mother's self-sacrificing persona had almost created, as it created, in that instant, my daughter's ability to get on the bus. Yet at the same time I was aware of it in myself, the ability unhesitatingly to stoop to a stranger on a pavement, the ability to cross the threshold between self and other that has at times held so many terrors, such possibilities of loss of being and identity, and now seemed to have assumed a kind of utility, like a handy tool that under certain circumstances could come in useful. Thinking about this story, I see that it sheds a new light on the question of being and doing, for here a woman's being and her doing aren't distinct: her being *is* her doing; in doing, she creates - or, since the essence of her doing is repetition, recreates - herself.

Art is being as doing: the leap of art is the moment in which the self is transcended and passes into the created object. In that moment, that movement, limitation becomes universality. In the created object, time stops; it is no longer subject to the laws of change; the created object becomes, in its completedness and timelessness, a source of strength, a positive value. The artist can look at the object and see a part of herself saved, as it

were, from death. But bound to that part of herself is a part of the world: her objectivity has become the object-ness of the created work. Among many other things, it is a testament to the moment in which she overcame her subjectivity. The mother's being-as-doing, by contrast, has the appearance of an absolute subjectivity: in motherhood a woman attempts to convert the pitilessness of the world into favour; she drives back its indifference with her belief in the specialness of her created object, her child. Where the artist saves, she spends, spends herself on maintaining this belief that is also the child's belief in itself. In motherhood universality becomes limitation, the limitation of the personal: is it because her world is entirely personalised that the mother stops to help the stranger in the street? Is her subjectivity, her belief, so powerful that she can simply turn it on others and transform them at will?

There is a feeling that arises at a certain point in motherhood, a feeling of overwhelming, almost burdensome competence. There is almost nothing, the mother feels, that she couldn't do: the machinations of those in power, the tides of commerce and history, the world's administration and production assume a strange proximity to her field of responsibility. If someone were to ask her to hoist the sun into the sky every morning, she wouldn't be surprised; this feeling comes to her in her kitchen, amid her actual tasks. Later in life, when those tasks have diminished or changed, that strange distortion of outline, that expansion of the self's terrain to encompass the whole world, leaves its traces here and there, like the marks left by the tide when it bursts its bounds and rises up to cover dry land.

Corinth's stroke obliterated not just his body but also his mental landscape. At fifty two, his was the creaking mechanism of an unresolved nature in late middle age. His childhood pain had transferred itself into fatherhood and family life and an appearance of bourgeois normality against which his inner culture grated and rubbed. The discomfort went unheeded, or rather, was absorbed into the artistic impulse and personalised it: Corinth's vision, which was the vision of a world seen by him, made a mirror out of everything he looked at. He wrote several volumes of autobiography, as though in the hope that by telling the story of himself he might step through the mirror and be free. In his lack of freedom he was at variance with the cultural image of the male artist: he existed in domesticity and fidelity to his family. He painted his wife, Charlotte, so many times that the paintings constitute an intimate history of their long marriage. She is almost always looking at him, sometimes with an unutterable tenderness, sometimes with weariness and resignation. In a portrait he made of the Rumpf family in 1901, the family group is shown

gathered untidily by the window. It is a moment of life, full of babies and children, rumpled clothes, a pet parrot, criss-crossing beams of attention. The light coming from behind them makes a turbulent field of contrast in which the humans have an almost geological reality: characteristically, the picture's composition is boldly subjective, in that the artist appears to be sitting on the floor as though he himself is a member of this family, its lowest and humblest member yet whose gift and burden it is to observe them with such intensity.

Corinth had been born in rural Prussia to unusual parents, a young and dynamic father and a much older mother who already had five children of her own. Her first husband had died, leaving her with a large tanning business to run and with low expectations of what she might receive at the hands of a mate. Corinth's father revitalised the business, but could not transform his emotionally brutalised wife. When their only child was two years old his stepbrothers tried to kill the boy out of fear and anger that he would diminish their share of the family wealth. The feeling of being singled out is confusing for an artist, for it has an appearance similar to that of his gift: the attack in early childhood by his stepbrothers can be traced in tandem to Corinth's motivation to produce, the two forces - the creative and the destructive - silently waging war in his inner life. Corinth remembered his mother as a pitifully opaque and frozen person, so starved of love that she couldn't now digest it. When she died he and his father moved to town, away from the stench of animal hides and the raw violence of primitive human emotion. After his father's death he survived by placing himself in the hands of his wife, who understood him; but it was illness, the brush with death, that had the capacity to free him, even as it broke his mortal form.

When he began to paint again after his stroke, it was a collapsing, intermittent world he painted, the humans blurred and more remote, the landscape more indifferent yet truer and more authentic in itself, in its own being. He was painting a reality seen by him yet without him in it. It was as though his autobiographical voice had fallen silent, and in the silence he could hear different things. 'Late style is *in* but oddly *apart* from the present,' writes Edward Said. Does this apartness arise from the realisation that the self and its story, while it seemed to be leading us toward an ending, was in fact taking us further away from one, or perhaps even taking us nowhere at all? Among Corinth's late works are numerous paintings of the lake at Walchensee in Austria, where the family had a house. Many of them show the lake and landscape by night, the moon wavering on the black waters, the hills making mysterious incoherent shapes. Charlotte Corinth writes in her memoirs of her husband sitting outside in the darkness, painting, while she anxiously watched him from within. When he finally returned inside, she writes, he would be in a

state of complete dissociation, appearing barely to recognise her. His transcending of self was also a transcending of the forms that self had taken, the people through whom he had lived and found reflection. The lake at night, when no one sees it, seemed to contain depths of that otherness from which the subjective self shies away. Those depths - their opacity and elusiveness, their refusal to be personalised - threaten the story of life. They stood for everything Corinth had resisted and braced himself against, everything that stood outside his control and that therefore seemed to have the power to undo or erase him. Another artist might have crossed that line easily, into a radical freedom: for him it took the undermining of the body itself to loosen the bonds of memory and identity and at last let him go.

How is a woman to reconcile herself to the use that has been made of her, or that she has made of herself? For in that use seems to be contained all of life's generosity, its miracles, its simple wonders: how can she set herself apart from it when she doesn't know what she would have been without it?

Many canonical female writers didn't live to do their late work: Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, the Brontes. The role that silence has played in the history of the female voice becomes, from this perspective, more charged: it has something of the force of a revelation. I'm sick of the sound of my own voice, I often used to hear mothers say when our children were small: is there a temptation to become silent, once the woman's work is done? Natalia Ginzburg, it might be said, found her vocation in recording the repetitive subjectivity of her own mother's voice - it fell somewhere between an *aide memoir* and an alarm bell, the sound of that voice against or through which the daughter found a voice of her own. In Tove Dinenson's *Copenhagen Trilogy*, the author writes of an evening spent away from her family at the invitation of her publisher, who brought her to dinner at an expensive restaurant with the English author Evelyn Waugh: he admitted cheerfully that he had come to Denmark because it was his children's school holidays and he couldn't bear to be around them; the evening ends with her controlling husband coming through the snow in rough clothing to make her come home. Dinenson was a mother and, at the time, drug-addicted and lost; Waugh was - while apparently sharing the same responsibilities - entirely free. What is one to make of such meetings, such pivotal moments in non-history?

I have heard of women in later life training for marathons, learning to sail or fly light aircraft, becoming aid or charity workers, dramatically changing course from caring about their specific lives to caring about everything that is not theirs. The mother of a friend of mine, after an adult lifetime as a scientist, took up body-building: she was as successful in

that field as in the one before. Yet she met different people, became - perhaps predictably - more sympathetic, freed from the awful constraining pressure to succeed in the terms that had been given to her. It is a kind of exile, female power, from the continuity of the feminine body: few women in the world today can look at their mothers and find any clue as to how they themselves should live. Even less is there a sense of what occurs in and after that exile, when the value and meaning of the female body itself is subject to programmatic change. Recently, at a literary festival, I heard a male author describe his feelings of relief at the decline in his libido with age: it had been like being chained to a lunatic, he said, reducing the audience to uproarious laughter. His purpose, it was clear, was to distance himself from the new scrutiny of male sexual power and its agenda of connecting men to the history and conduct of their own bodies. It was all, he implied, the fault of that lunatic, who had since quitted the scene. A woman likewise might feel she has been chained to a lunatic, but in her case she has been held to account from the start for every one of its actions.

The work of Louise Bourgeois might in some senses be described as a study of lateness. In this study, her being and her doing are to an extent separate: famous for emerging out of mother- and wife-hood into an artistic power that increased with age, Bourgeois's impulse is that of the cataloger, the gatherer and recorder of a history that lies somewhere lost between emotion and fact. How to render a woman's life, which has contained so much and yet has so little tangibility? The making tangible of the story of the female body requires, in a sense, a reversal of the usual relationship of art to time. The artist uses his existence in mortality to make something that is separate from himself. In Bourgeois that making, that lost or spent mortality, is the subject: the created work, in time and space, becomes much larger than the moment of creation. An extraordinarily long life would be needed to account for it all: fortunately, that is what Bourgeois had. Is there an extra usefulness in Bourgeois's work, in its lateness and compendiousness, its thorough, patient hauling of femininity out of invisibility and silence, its unbending resistance of the body's obliteration of its own memory? Does her cataloguing, her remembering, free us from the obligation to catalogue and make tangible our own selves?

From this perspective, femininity as equivalence and repetition, as universality, becomes, in a sense, opportunity: it can be captured; the trapping fate can be itself trapped. Through the work of the artist fate becomes history: the unknown is made known; there is no longer any need to go back. What Edward Said calls 'the deliberately unproductive productiveness' of late male style might be, in femininity, precisely this notion

of the singular usefulness of recording. A woman's late work might be to say or do something for the first and last time.

Corinth's realisation at the end of his life that true art means seeking to capture the unreal was a vision released by the death, or the death-in-life, of the body. The body had hidden it from him, this vision, stubbornly insisting on itself and the primacy of its own reality. Thus the death-in-life that female ageing is seen and felt to be might release a vision of its own. What would our unreal look like?