

Letter to Ed Darn

Nov. 24, 1971

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Dear Ed,

It seems strange to write to you when I will probably see you before this letter reaches your house; but no!, I might not visit you and Jenny this time coming to Chicago because I'll be bringing Neowyn and Bearthm and will want to spend their 'big city'-time in The Loop, give 'em as much of concrete and neon Xmas windows drama crowds and grand hotel as I can cram into 48 hours. Maybe you and Jenny can make it to the Keaton lecture ("The General" this up and coming time); and thus we'll see you there. But anyway I'd write as I said I would that last wonderful visit with you, because there are things which simply cannot be mouthed outright; lips just don't spit mindfully. As Gertrude Stein puts it:

"What does the human mind write.

"The human mind writes what it is.

"Human nature cannot write what it is because human nature can not write.

"The human mind can write what it is because what it is is all that it is and as it is all that it is all that it is all it can do is write."

(from "Relation of Human Nature to The Human Mind
or The Geographical History of America")

Wow! what a great book! It's out of print, of course; but I've a Xerox of it Sitney made for me at Yale years ago; (and I can almost forgive him everything these days because of that essential gift). Have you ever had a chance to read it? It is, you know, the book Charles refers-to in that late N. Y. lecture; and if I'd heard that tape earlier I could have sent him Xerox of this copy I have. I wonder if he ever managed to read it.

Okay, well, to get down to some of these brass tacks I'm carrying around in my teeth: Spooks! -- that's what I'm fussed about ...how They do haunt most Art (almost all contemporary senses of what any possible Art might be) -- or you might call it: The Long Hangover. I'd thought any Public what's-the-matter (with my work, life, etc.) was settled once it had become clear to me why Parker Tyler (and his critical relatives) rejected "Anticipation of the Night" and most of my films from there on. I was (as Parker saw it) betraying the 'religion' Surrealism had become. "Anticipation...", dreamy as it was, was perhaps the most unbearable film to the Surreal imagination because it (they must have felt) blasphemed right in the mid-section of The Church (which Dreams had become). But I underestimated 'the problem'. That 'religion' (with exactitudes of ritual) goes back several generations before Maldoror -- thru Symbolists and Pre-Raphaelites ... thus thru the source of hippy's 'echo': the early 19th cent. German Youthmove: -- rooters of that 'religion' thereby planted firmly pre-Renaissance (backed up against Gothic walls).

I'd taken a turn in 1957 which not only emptied the Brakhage band-wagon then but set it on a course which would inevitably bounce all those who later climbed on for Romantic's sake, those who must have mistook "Dog Star Man" as Roland's last stand.

Those are cowboy boots "Dog Star Man" is wearing; and he doesn't die with 'em but rather becomes a STAR (in McClure's sense of the word), a cluster of stars or, if you want to get that specific, sits down at last in Casiopeia's Chair (she the wife of Cepheus and mother of Andromeda, her chair circum-polar, northern) and then finishes as a street-light!

Okay, it now finally becomes CLEAR to me that the ONLY way I could have done your movie script "Abilene! Abilene!" would have been something like "Dog Star Man Meets Gunslinger". That also explains why for so many years (about two years) I couldn't get into your poem "Eunslinger" at all. A half-dozen or more people told me I'd never be able to read it until I took "hard drugs"; and those are the boys on your band-wagon whom you've just bounc'd, I'll bet, now that you're down to "Cycle". My real trouble with "Gunslinger" was, of course, that He is THAT close to "Dog Star Man" that it took me awhile to get perspective, like they say. I was squinting at Him thru one eye, down my own gun-sight. I'm now knowing I may be among the very few people who can REALLY read Him -- what a pleasure! ... smugness intended -- inasmuch as I've been back and forth across that desert to get to "Abilene" dozens times now, with all the 'fans' telling me I won't make it less I "get a horse" (they meaning Pegasus -- wrongly I think ... I mean, I'm asking you -- they really mostly meaning that Peg-o'-their-sense-of-Art sprung from the blood of a 19th cent. Medusa as Gustave Moreau might have drawn it straight off the old Gothic tap).

Well, we've both suffered alot over the inability to make that 'western', right?; but we may get to it YET because our paths converge -- painfully often ... I mean, Ed, you're one of the few men who cause me to tremble back into my shell puff-up (I actually find myself looking fat in your bathroom mirror) and become unbarably shy. Jenny's mother took the edge off that this last visit, gave us both another locus. Doesn't matter tho'; I keep coming back for more, will so long as you see me through. It's painful for you and Jenny too, I think; I mean I think I always make you nervous; and it would be good to have you say so if so. . . .

From the beginning of your 'preliminary note' to "Abilene! Abilene!" it's clear you do mean a 'dog'ged' man -- "raw schizophrenia" as you put it ... YET CLEARLY that as a 'natural condition' (and here's where 'the hip' tend to mis-read "Gunslinger", I think); you write the technical note (apropo indoor scenes Black & White, outdoor Color): "This should be done as if it were 'natural' even though it is easy to see it is unnatural in the ordinary sense": and I could use that as if it were a rule-of-thumb (dirty thumb, green thumb, etc.) in the making of all recent films -- and then the condition of the man, speaking for himself in the film-script, is absolutely clear: "How many times? I live a single life, and try to fill it up as the allotted years will take the strain of this passage, and even tho I am assured I shall pass full blown into eternity as a pure demonstration of human event for men to remember, they'll get it wrong -- they'll read it as a victory over death in~~t~~ their name."; and THUS you distinguish The Artist, of the script, from ANYthing that might have come from fin de siecle -- I mean his parents might have (tho' he be bastard-enough to have fled, if ever known, 'em) ... his mother maybe Belle Epoque herself but -- He clearly off on his own American 'toot' toting nothing really but "The Gun" (as you'd originally titled the film-script). He makes speeches, right?; they all do, all those 'white folks', while "the indians" are "non-speaking -- but not neccessarily silent", as you instruct.

But there are no speeches in "Gunslinger", am I right?; I'm sure I am! I mean, as I read it, you've re-created both the Art of Rhetoric AND conversational art therein to get it 'straight':

"Oh Narrowness of protestation!

And oh in the cool lateral morning even
in the cool wide burn of
our oenanthic unrest and willfullness
we move west and no more
Shall Dawn Bless our Altar Cloth"

AND: " Got it! the Slinger asked
Yea, I heard it I said
Not the same thing he said
Tell me more I said
Cool it he said."

Well, it's a bit much for me to be quoting your poem back at you; but I just had to get it (a couple clear examples) on the page in juxtaposition to Speech from "Amilene!". The best example of your break with 19th or any other century's Roman-trance, and all the Greeks therein it, IS the talking horse of "Gunslinger" -- he/she's a beaut!; I mean you're the only man I know who's created a talking Horse that can be spoken "obliquely to" (my underline) ... "Peg." doesn't stand a chance up against your horse (who# yes! can also 'fly' but with always one foot on the ground, as is 'natural' to horses -- as is the birth of movies, did you know that? ... that Stanford had made a bet that all four horse hooves never entirely left the ground in gallop -- they hiring a battery of cameras with strings stretched across the track to prove it one way or t'other; but, apropos 'fly', I AM tired of those readers of yours who've insisted to me that your Horse is simply and only Heroine; and I remember one of 'em prompted me to fight back with: "Yes, yes! (which means, like all doubles, "no") but that Horse is also, for instance, 'gravel in the throat', and I mean I TOO know that Hoss!, that 'ocean' "mare" is, etc.")

The passage of "Gunslinger" I'm MOST currently in-mind-of (now that you, last visit, clarified how MUCH Levi-Strauss has moved into my life via those 'film structuralists' who would, in provincial N. Y. critical study, de-limit with their 'ists' what film structure can BE, clipping their 'lists' of some of the best new films that DO spring from L.S., "Long Shot" we call it in film) IS fixed beautifully for me:

"So your name is not
Heidegger after all, then
what is it? I asked.
Levi-Strauss.
Levi-Strauss?
Do I look like his spouse
No. . . I mean I've never
seen his wife."

: BEAUTIFULLY put!; but then
the whole poem reads to me like that now -- a report . . . what GUNS do --
something I've lived thru to hear the report of!

"The Cycle" helped me alot. I mean it's NOT a bicycle built for two; and I don't think your Romantic followers are going to be able to ride in on it unless they're courageous enough to sit on the handle bars (that scariest of all experiences as made beautifully manifest by Keaton in "Sherlock Jr.", which I hope you and Jenny managed to see last Monday.) Let me try some juxtapositions, in relation to "The Cycle" (all other quotes taken from a book of great use to me now: "Dreamers of Decadence" by Phillippe Jullian):

"Dark Angel, with thine aching lust
To rid the world of penitence:
Malicious Angel, who still dost
My soul such subtle violence!

"Because of thee, no thought, no thing,
Abides for me undesecrate:
Dark Angel, ever on the wing,
Who never reaches me too late!"

(Lionel Johnson)

- (1) "The furnishings are all strictly flat
That is if you see a chair to sit in
You sit in the image of that chair
You fry an egg in the image of the skillet
- (2) "Which Looks at you like you're killin it
Anything which dares purport To Be
I myself saw a typewriter filled with concrete
Is raised aloft in instant mockery

(and thus Id opts phenomenologically
opposite Lionel's ego-centrism which
just naturally spirals in the "gyres
and gimbles in the wabe".)

"A symphony of blues and brown --
We were together in the town;
A grimy tavern with blurred walls,
Where dingy lamplight floats and falls
On working men and women, clad
In sober watchet, umber sad.
Two viols and one 'cello scream
Waltz music through the smoke and steam:
You rise, you clasp a comrade, who
Is clothed in triple blues like you:.... "

(first half of "In The Key of Blue"
by John Addington Symonds)

- (3) "By living Atlantes, a race of half-column of half-man
Who turn each such thing smirking
dizzying with threats of abandonment
To gravity
A heady trick in this uncentered locus

- (4) "Atlantes also hold the drawn shades down
And they open and close the rear door
When Fear and Surrender come and go
On their unscheduled excursions
- (5) "And these Atlantes pick the pockets
Of the passing guard producing almanacs
Or tintypes of Brigham Young in drag
But they cannot count
- (6) "Neither do pictures constitute an image
In their plaster heads, In any case
They mostly make a gesture of disgust and wink
Which is always a chain reaction among them"

(that last stanza of yours most clearly
indicating what I'm most up against --
simple Symond's hangover wherein the
"walls" must be "blurred" or else
leading up to the hier-attic Levi-
Strauss waltz in order to "constitute
an image" in current aesthetician heads.)

"Sunk in some dream voluptuously
Circle those azures richly blent,
Swim through the dusk, the melody;
Languidly breathing, you and he,
Uplifting the environment;
Ivory face and swart face laid
Cheek unto cheek, like man, like maid.

(2nd half of "In The Key of Blue")

- (7) "When they speak they say simply Shit!
Or thanks! though sometimes they say
Could I have the pickle when youre done with it?
- (8) "Their conversational English is limited
Yet they mimick its rehearsal very cleverly
They fear one thing and one thing only
And that is the avaricious Vice-Versas
- (9) "An obscene and gluttonous order of rat
The Supreme Janitor unleashes on the floor
After Lunch where they destroy themselves
With madness"

("Vice-Versas" I take to be 'structural-
ists' last stance -- I mean the only
possible 'conne&'-'struct of "The
Actual Furnishings".)

"Yea, but I dreamed: and lo! my feet were led
Down the slow spirals of those deadly stairs:"

(beginning lines of Symonds' "The
Valley of Vain Desires")

And I could go on# and on-ing with this 'mix' -- Remy de Gourmont and Theophile Gautier inter-twining warp-wise with your "I.D."s straight woof, . . . Flaubert's Byzantium playing excellent second-(echoe)-fiddle to your Atlantes -- begging pardon for distorting your characters thus, Ed; but the above is, I think, sufficient to show how we ALL got somewhat where'll we're going via Ezra Pound's 1910 London dilemma (up# against Dreams per SAY, shunning BOTH Freud and Zola, etc.) and Gertrude Stein's turn-o-the-century job as a court reporter. Damn, damn, damn rings through all Pound thereon, him firing his reports, solid documents more straight than facts; but "Damn it all, Robert Browning", "Damn your sensibilities", etc. all the same. Charles finally laid it 'on the line' of talk, his created self talking; but it is Gertrude's "listening and talking at the same time" (as she defines "genius") which informs. Charles' drive is to get it OUT, 'on the table'. Gertrude makes 'the table' possible -- like, she (I think) helps you get through the beginning of "From the Fall of Anytime", helps you get "The furnishings" "flat", helps Creeley come to "Pieces".

My problem at the moment is simply horrible -- to gather those images of the dead I photographed in The Pittsburgh Morgue . . . as simply as "bringing in the sheaves" -- to shape an art without any conventional haunt! The instant a single traditional western ghost lights up those corpses all that imagery will become unbarable. I mean I won't be able to look at it myself! Therefore I now study the reproductions (in "Dreamers of Decadence") of the paintings # most body-littered: Moreau "Les Pretendants" (rummage out the Delacroix's it springs from, in another book), Jan Toorop's "The Sphinx", Sartorio's "Diana of Ephesus", Klinger's "Death of the Lovers" and "Dead Mother", Kupka's "The Conqueror Worm", and especially Jean Delville, "Tresor de Satan" and all his reproduced images throughout the book, Rochegrosse's "Les derniers Jours de Babylone" (and all the other academic echoes out of Delacroix), Leon Frederic's "Le Torren" (which gave me a direct Klinger nightmare early this morning -- perhaps because his etching . . . straight out of Goya . . . is across the page from "Le Torrent" -- evocative of all Goy-esqueries, Xtian guilt angst et al), and of course Redon's things-to-come and might-have-beens; and I've been constantly rummaging the half-dozen reproductions of that far wall of The Sistine Chapel. This tradition has given us Haunt and Art as almost interchangeable words. I wrote most clearly about the personal source of it in my essay on Melies. All else tends to get put-down as "genre". Very well, let's then back to the first painter thus credited: Giorgione, Giorgio or Zorzi, as his friends knew him. Best quote I get on his work is out of Walter Pater -- now hear this:

" . . . He is the inventor of genre, of those easily movable pictures which serve neither for uses of devotion, nor for allegorical or historic teaching -- little groups of real men and women, amid congruous furniture or landscape -- moresels of actual life, conversation or music or play, but refined upon or idealised, till they come to seem like glimpses of life from afar . . . he is typical of that aspiration of all the arts towards music, which I have endeavoured to explain, -- towards the perfect identification of matter and form."

(from "The School of Giorgione" 1877
quoted in Abrams' Giorgione book)

If I'd have had that road-map (and could've understood it) ten years ago, I'd have known exactly where I was going directly these last six years; and

"eyes" would have been no surprise to me at all, nor why I whittled my 'editing' responsibilities down to Tone and Rythmn, as most clearly seen in "Deus Ex". But the present case (The Morgue footage) pushes me to a further extreme, as if a man that had at last learned to liven a Grégorian Chant by shifting timbres and thence passing various passages around to different single instruments and stretching and compressing various passage lengths (as a man, many men, once did) were suddenly confronted by symphonic multiplicity and many rythms going at once; for single shots (of The Morgue footage) carry shifts in spec^{ts} of tone and rythmn which "Deus Ex" took dozens of shots to more obviously (obvious as cut) accomplish^{ed}; whereas "eyes" ran more along its several lines of various stories, with its 'rymes' of colors often forced, as in verse, its rythms #sprung# by the 'action' it was following -- "get the action", like they say . . . "shoot first and ask questions later", as you put it; but that's just IT, that I have NO questions apropos The Morgue footage -- no 'story' hier or linear presents itself, as the title I've given the work-in-progress makes clear: "The Act of Seeing with one's own eyes."

It, this "Act" pushes further than any Pater 'fix' on Giogione or anything I can see in repros. of his painting -- no 'lightnin' spooking my landscape, the sleeping ladies all quite dead and not at all goddess-like, all color harmonies as spread as if Saurat had ~~put~~ designed them and Time (plus varnish) had shellac^{ed} 'em solid, or almost so . . . all subtleties sinking back into facsimili, reaching for fact, picture as fact (as distinct from image) -- I've gone THAT far (without thinking, like they say) to avoid the slightest ghost of a haunt. Well, I put the case too strongly. I've not succeeded THAT greatly yet; but the drift is clear, if I can but convince myself to gather these pictures along the grain of 'em and not paddle desperately upstream. Every instant at my work-table there is the temptation to make a clever cut -- cut away from all this corpse . . . cut-up, cut-up, cutty-up-up-up (in Will Tell. fashion) -- and to inter-cut for tone's effect . . . get my "e" going strongest in the scale of things, MY "see"ing majoring everything -- rythmn those blues! BUT I now know why Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson" is the turning point of his career, leads straight as straight can be to his Self-Portraits (wherein he could again afford a baroque brushwork because he'd got it sunk in under his straight flush, as naturally as the weave of the canvas itself). And I now know why I've made those Pittsburgh films. It wasn't, as I'd thought, to get an uncovrage of The City or some-such ("strata by strata", as you put it) but rather to force myself up against enough city-terror to banish all 'spooks', symbolical or otherwise. Police, Hospital, and then The Morgue finally pushed me to that extreme; and this may be the last Pittsburgh film, for my eyes are leaping about my environs here again and as never before.

The case, apropos Art/Haunt is clearest when we think of Music; as tones reach thru texture to approximates of daily sound (wind, birds, Debussy's "La Mer", etc.) they haunt (and begin to terrify with Musique Concrete). Similarly, as Pictures reach toward Music (Giorgione, for a start) the 'ward' becomes haunted. An image is always an after-image, image after something, imposed on 'picked' (or what might be called the 'plucked' string in music, most free of other-worldly associations, and/or the pure sine tone of Electronic Music). Tchelichev worked his way through the gamut, his "Hell" baroque as, his "Cache-Cache" perhaps the last open wail of 19th century Romanticism, him on the way to classical 'heaven' and thereby down to the finest lines imaginable (as Parker Tyler demonstrates beautifully in his "Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelichev"); but that was just the airiest way out of the eyri. I'm bouncing light directly off the earth instead; and that (despite the fact that most critics have used painting to satisfy their

fetishist longings, getting their rocks off ghosts, thus defining Art as Haunt) most of MOST paintings (including overall spooky ones) have fashioned themselves in plein-sight. It is the arrangement that matters -- the arrangement . . . not "de" but THE -- "towards the perfect identification of matter and form."

I did not mean for this letter to get this long. Just pick up your riff wherever you like.

I haven't been as excited in years as I am this wondrous morning I've survived that Klinger dream, known thereby exactly what was bothering me to all those dreams directly prompted by photographing in The Morgue. (You must realize now why Robert Kelly's "Dream Work" is specifically important to me -- his tack the only sensible one I've run across which might get dreams free of any specious telling and/or all their spooks and the tombstones Symbolism might be taken to be . . . especially since Sir Real and The Traditional Night settled over the western world -- Kelly trying to disrupt all that easy familiarity which association engenders. I think he makes a mistake to opt for "cluster" tho' (even if he doesn't mean "free assn."). A straight (rather than story) line'll do; I mean, just TRY to tell a dream straight; but then you DO; and you're one of the very few who thus report, fire your gun straight up making World of otherwise narrowed dream-church. Charles has been clearest about U.S.'n SPACE; but Gertrude tabled it best when (in "Four In America") she specified why our boundaries don't follow geographical lines.

All this rattling of verbal sabres! Well, that's my way of shucking Tradit! -la-la before going to WORK. I mean, all I've got to do now is follow the pictures I've already took and cut out the mis-takes -- ah, but there's the rub: I gotta know these 'picts' like the back of my hand and STOP all inclination to palm-reading . . . should be the easiest film in the world to 'cut' BUT#--I'm scared to . . . Death, is it? -- the Art so subtly concealed I've spent two months trying to pick-up on its gossamer trails, at times fearing terribly I was reading "Emperor's New Clothes" INTO it. Who'll EVER be able to see it on the screen? Well, I will; and for the rest, that's their problem -- tho' it's liable to become mine, economically speaking (as audiences and old friends are already booing/hissing and rejecting "eyes" and "Deus Ex") . . . and I'm just hoping I don't find myself in the absurd position of lecturing on the Art of these recent films in specific detail when it's managed to conceal itself as beautifully as it has; and THERE you have the rub up against the grain of viewers -- I mean, that it's so easy to solve their problems when you can talk about an Art that rides obviously off in all Symbolical directions that that's all really that's ever BEEN talked about. And that's a side-effect, I'd say. It is a 'leak' in what I'd like to call that Document/Art we've all (especially Americans last century) been after.

Okay, forgive the length of this letter. I'll appreciate any feedback you can give me to liven my too-much ownness#, even a screeching HOWL if you like. I'm especially fearful I've been too presumptuous apropos Poetry, especially yours. Thus, heart in teeth, I've writ# where I was too shy to talk; and I've taken encouragement from your statement that "the phone has stopped good letter writing dead" to start this which I hope will manage to be a correspondence between us.

Blessings, Stan

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