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978-0-521-24804-4 - The Slumber of Apollo: Reflections on Recent Art, Literature,
Language, and the Individual Consciousness

John Holloway

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK has been written, not in the conviction, but to review the possibility, that the present time and the recent past have seen a certain major change in what makes up our lives and our ideals about life. That possibility is of a large but almost entirely unnoticed, or untraced, shift with regard to the consciousness and mental life of the individual. In brief, it seems that the shift may have been from mental life and consciousness, to describe which would naturally bring in terms like 'large', 'comprehending', 'thoughtful', 'contemplation' and the like, towards a consciousness and mental life more limited (though in its own way, perhaps intense sometimes), or more relaxed and unambitious, or more concerned with practicalities – including, in particular, the 'handling' of others, and those ranges of experience where personal life is absorbed, to a greater or lesser degree, in collective life. The former qualities I have thought of, following Nietzsche, as for the sake of brevity falling under the term 'Apollonian'. Hence the title of this book.

Certain points require to be cleared up, in advance of undertaking this perhaps excessively wide-ranging and so exploratory discussion. Of course, the people – the children – who worked underground, two hundred years ago, in the mines of the North of England (and many other places), probably enjoyed little by way of expansiveness of mental life and consciousness. The question is not of what conditions of life obtained universally, but of what used to be seen, and what on the other hand has perhaps been coming to be seen, as a conception of how life could be lived and of how it was best, or at the least adequately lived. Of course also, many have indeed realized, largely or partly, whatever has been the ideal of life that they have subscribed to. The purpose of the discussion is not to pass judgement, in some definitive

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way, upon the goodness or badness of how our world may have changed over the past hundred or hundred and fifty years. It is simply to explore a certain wide-ranging though somewhat elusive possibility: to consider where it seems to show, and also to review the writing of certain literary authors who may have been partly conscious of it and have reflected it in their work.

Because what is at issue is the matter of some pervasive and all-embracing change, I have tried to, as it were, 'spread my net' widely and to enter fields that I have found interesting and suggestive, even when I have had to enter them as an amateur. The risks are obvious, but what are our risks, collectively speaking, if no one ever makes such an attempt, unless he is a universal polymath? Thus the first five chapters of the book pursue its underlying theme in the contexts, respectively, of serious visual art; of certain aspects of comic art; of political writing and especially oratory; of slang, colloquialisms and 'jargon' as they appear in English; and of certain developments in the study of the individual personality by psychologists. In each case, those topics are followed out over a period of the past hundred years or so.

The three closing chapters of the book are more concerned with literature. Of these, the first is about the way that the character of 'large' mind, of capacious consciousness, was an explicitly formulated ideal for a number of nineteenth-century authors, and how that ideal seems to have been modified, and to an extent, deliberately set aside, in the work of Thomas Hardy. The second reviews the poetry of Gary Snyder, the poet of our own time who has so emphatically declared that the conditions of modern life do indeed foster a restricted and coarsened consciousness, and has striven so hard to re-establish an older integration with the natural environment, and the larger, more delicate awareness that, in his view, went with it. The third of these chapters, and the last in the book, considers three major novels (and also, briefly, the work of a poet) which might be said to create 'fables for our time' of some pervasive, barely recognized but all-transforming change from the larger consciousness, to something smaller and slighter. In other words, it is as if the

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authors of those works were more or less conscious of the sort of transition that this present book envisages; though as writers of fiction they saw such matters in terms of the group of characters who interacted in their novels, and saw them dramatically rather than discursively.

I ought to say plainly, that insofar as the suggestions and speculations of this book are valid, they do not relate only to ideas and ideals (whether implicit or not) of our own time and of an earlier time. They must relate also to experience and reality, to how men and women tend to live and, more important perhaps, what potential and limit for life they are likely to have in them. Also, if there is truth in the idea that some pervasive change may have been coming over human experience – or maybe one should say European, or Western European, or Anglo-Saxon experience – we need not think that that is for the first time. We believe already that such wide-ranging changes of consciousness have not uncommonly occurred, say at the close of major periods of history. For myself, I incline to the view that they are perhaps less dramatically and spectacularly placed over time than that. Quite possibly they are going on in all periods, they overlap, they do not come one at a time. Only, their rhythms of arrival are too slow-moving for them to form part of anyone's direct experience; or rather, if they do that, one thinks of them as part of the difference between being young, and being old, oneself, rather than between living in a past time, and in the present time. Consequently they are to be detected only by reflection, exploration, and what might be termed 'chancing one's arm' a little, as to one's findings; and I have written in that spirit.

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I PERSONALITIES AND PANORAMAS

LET US GO BACK five hundred years, and consider three individual figures in paintings by Piero della Francesca. The first is that of the youthful angel playing a stringed instrument and perhaps singing *sotto voce*, in Piero's *Nativity* (National Gallery, London). The figure stands firmly upright, the right foot boldly advanced, the left planted behind it crosswise. There is the confidence and dignity of (one may infer) a performer who in a quite literal sense is inspired. The arms and shoulders speak with quiet eloquence of the bulk and weight of the instrument, of the gentle tension on the wrists and hands as they play. But these motor energies in the work seem to be merely a painter's way of stressing something else: the musician's eyes, their gaze lost in the distance; his tilted head as he listens in rapture to the heavenly harmonies made by himself and his angelic co-partners; and the expression of his whole face, deeply, blissfully absorbed. He is lost in profound emotion, lost in thought.

In the Central Italian town of Borgo San Sepolcro, Piero's *Resurrection* shows the figure of Christ in the actual moment of stepping from the tomb. The left foot, poised to take the weight of the body at the next step, the left hand holding up Christ's robe, the right arm and fingers on the staff, relaxed for a moment before they too take weight, all fill the picture once more with motor energies – but they draw the spectator into responses about masses and incipient movements, only to make still more profound the transition into the contemplation of Christ's consciousness that is demanded of us by his countenance. 'He seems to be part of the dream...of the sleeping soldiers; and has Himself the doomed and distant gaze of a somnambulist.' Those words about this picture are by Kenneth Clark.¹ It is an extraordinary

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face, one that fills us with a sense of vast receding planes of consciousness as we gaze. Compassion or hurt, comprehension or bewilderment, incomparable authority and dignity or the mere frailty and barely conscious awareness of one but newly awakened from sleep – it is a face which leaves us, as it seems itself, ‘lost in thought’. ‘We see not the ballance...we are in a Mist’, Keats wrote about the manifold depths of human consciousness.² Bernard Berenson’s essay on *Piero della Francesca, or the Ineloquent in Art* has some words which especially fit this profound and enigmatical countenance. ‘I am tempted to conclude that in the long run the most satisfying creations...remain ineloquent...[they have] no urgent communication to make...if they express anything it is character, essence, rather than momentary feelings or purpose. They manifest potentiality rather than actuality...Art...has been so over-expressive in recent decades.’³

For ourselves, it is hard to comprehend the idea of resurrection, and only too easy to comprehend that of death. But in his fresco *The Death of Adam* (Arezzo), Piero reminds the beholder of how this would not have been so for Eve. No one had ever seen a man die before; and Piero’s Eve, in posture as well as in countenance, and just like his Christ, is lost in bewilderment, lost in thought. In Berenson’s word, she is ‘ineloquent’ with depths of potentiality, of character – those that belong to great age. And when, in his cartoon *Hasta la Muerta* (‘until death...’) Goya produces a savage, ferret-like old woman resembling Piero’s Eve enough to be a dreadful caricature of her, a senile but galvanized old harpy expressive, if any figure ever was, not of depth and potentiality but of narrow, bitter actuality, Goya then starts from something of the same underlying conception about human consciousness, and about the individual, but he deliberately shows, with horror, its debasement and its bestialization.

‘Lost in thought’...if we come nearly two hundred years forward in time, and think for a moment about some of the portraits of Rembrandt, like the *Self-Portrait aged 63*, or the ravaged but determined and intensely humane *Margaretha*

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de Geer (both of these are in the National Gallery in London), we see another painter whose figures can be 'ineloquent' with profundity of personality and so of consciousness. Rembrandt's sitters make a clear contrast with, say, the portraits of a contemporary like Frans Hals. Hals's effervescent extroverts, who look as if they can just hold back their pointless chatter for long enough to let the artist rush off a quick sketch and retreat to the quiet of his studio, bring out by contrast what Rembrandt achieves. Margaretha de Geer's dazzling white cuff and ruffs, and so the whole tonality of that painting, are not the solution of formal problems alone: formal considerations focus into a silent invitation to us to contemplate what ruff and cuff throw into prominence: the face and the hands, expressive (though with restraint and dignity) of a whole human life – luminous epitomes of character and individuality.

But there is another kind of Dutch painting, in the seventeenth century, that calls for our attention. It does so because it suggests a possible answer to the question of what such absorbed, meditative, intensely engrossed countenances can be engrossed *with*. It is only a possibility: but a suggestive one. Perhaps there is a clue in Rembrandt's *David Harping before Saul* (Maritshuis, The Hague, about 1657). Saul, again, is 'lost in thought'; and so is the young David – a limited, striving version of Piero's effortless angel, a youth all absorption and dedication. But Browning, in his poem on the same subject, has David's playing link Saul's face, as he listens, to gazing at a seascape or a landscape – a 'sad level gaze o'er the ocean'; and it is not fanciful to suggest that seventeenth-century Dutch landscape offers a possible answer to our question. In saying this I am not thinking of the Dutch mountain scenes of the period; based, necessarily, on travel or on imagination. These seem heavy with wild, melodramatic feeling; they are closed in and self-sealing: Berenson's 'over-expressive' painting claustrophobically intensified. But when the Dutch depict their own vast flat landscape, all is otherwise. The swirlingly curvacious designs to which mountain scenes lend themselves are replaced by an austere and spacious discipline of gridded verticals and

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horizontals, provided by towers and spires on the one hand, and above all by water on the other. The endless expanse and endless detail of these great panoramas – I have in mind works by Koninck, Ruisdael, Hobbema and others – are based upon powerfully organized formal qualities. But among the endless offers of thought, among which they invite the spectator to lose himself, one, at least to a literary mind, is unquestionably the invitation to meditate and contemplate the question, *What is it like as Life* inside the spacious world of the painting? Both by literary means, and formally, the paintings of this school over and again invite us to meditate our way deep into the life-patterns of the picture. Even the cloudscapes powerfully contribute: cover them, and a giant landscape shrivels to a garden patch.

Some of the other paintings of this School extend a like invitation in other terms. Koninck's *Entrance to a Forest* (M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, California), Ruisdael's *Forest Entrance* (Vienna), Hobbema's *Road into a Forest* (Rotterdam), are examples of a conventionally established genre using the motif of the bosky track or pathway to draw the spectator into the picture world. But the most characteristic form is the great flat-land panorama, like Koninck's *Landscape with Huts at Amsterdam*. It anticipates, as it far outdistances, Dyer's early eighteenth-century poem, 'Grongar Hill':

No clouds, no vapours intervene,
But the gay, the open scene
Does the face of Nature show,
In all the hues of heaven's bow!
And, spreading to embrace the light,
Spreads around beneath the sight...

Koninck's *Huts at Amsterdam* is a panorama of ships, lakes, cities, fields and forests, all in glittering light or vast sombre shadow, all with endless detail of the fullness of life.

There is an application, or analogy, for all this in literature: one that was noticed by George Eliot. Suppose we were to ask where we might find profound portraiture of the deepest levels of thought and feeling in the individual, and at the

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same time a great panorama, both rural and urban, of social life. Obviously, we could scarcely expect to find these combined in any one painting. It would have to be both a portrait, and a landscape, all in one: though I must mention, in Chapter VII, certain paintings that in fact are of this kind. That is exactly what we do find, however, in one great literary achievement of modern times: the nineteenth-century novel. In *Le Père Goriot*, in *Madame Bovary*, in *Dead Souls* or *Anna Karenina*, in *Middlemarch* or *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, there before the reader lie just those two things: profound study of individual consciousness, both thought and feeling; and along with that, a sense of all-embracing, spacious, all-comprehended social and topographical order. The spatial order of the great Dutch landscapes is replaced by a temporal order and a causal order, at once synchronic and diachronic, of social interaction and of that perhaps greatest of nineteenth-century inventions, History.

Hence my title and its reference to Apollo. Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, took the god Apollo as symbol for a significant combination of qualities. He thought of Apollo as divine patron of the arts; of poetry; and of at least one kind, the exalting and ennobling kind, of music. He recalled how he was the sun-god, and as such, associated with light and therefore with prophetic insight. Through a play upon words which, perhaps illuminatingly, links brightness with the outward appearance of things, he linked him also with fictive and imaginative creation. Again, he thought of Apollo as the god of 'ordered control, freedom from unbridled excitement, and wise serenity'.⁴ Finally, because Apollo stands at the opposite pole to the god Dionysos, who represents 'the regression of individuality into...self-oblivion', Nietzsche sees Apollo as supreme representative of *what individuates*: creativity, lucidity, insight, imagination, serene wisdom, and individuality – the individually realized consciousness. Perhaps the idea, the ideal, of Apollo as a divine power under a human image, may help us to see a certain cogency in associating these ideas.

We all know that during the last hundred years or so there have been great transformations in Western art and Western

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literature; yet it is possible to find delight and exhilaration in twentieth-century avant-garde art and literature, and at the same time to wish to understand what has happened, and to ask if there was a price that had to be paid for the achievement of what happened. One aspect of those great transformations can be seen by recalling Piero's nativity angel, 'lost in thought' within his celestial music, and setting beside it two twentieth-century works on much the same theme. First, between about 1905 and 1930 the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz returned again and again to the subject of a human figure playing a stringed instrument. A piece like – to take one example – his 1918 *Seated Man with a Guitar* is, in his own words, using 'curved planes to create effects of interior or negative space'.⁵ The human figure, and its instrument, are assembled out of rectangular, triangular or trapezoid masses, along with conic sections and what approximate to segments of a hollow sphere. Piero della Francesca would have understood all this perfectly well. Like so many of his contemporaries, he was an enthusiast for pure geometry and abstract spatial perfection. Moreover, Lipchitz's intellectual interest here in spatiality is far from altogether abstract. He goes straight on, in his discussion of this characteristic piece, to lay stress on its frontality; and the frontality of a figure has much to do with the impression of individuality which it conveys, and with its relation to others. Discussing other similar works of exactly this period, Lipchitz stresses how pure geometry and 'extreme simplification' in these works were not matters simply of (in today's language) 'solving formal problems'. He writes of another of his pieces:

the *Seated Bather* [of 1916] as a figure takes on a greater human presence. While it is still in every way an organization of plastic masses and volumes... the sense of humanity gives it a *specific personality*, a brooding quality... in this work I think I clearly achieved the kind of *poetry* which I felt to be essential in the total impact.⁶

That is true. *Seated Bather* intensely communicates the power, physical integration, inner potentiality of its subject,