

PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE BETWEEN IMAGE AND WORD*

Dane Zajc

Which world is real? How often has this question been asked! And it should be asked again when we contemplate a picture. Is it the world seen with our physical eyes, the world which is the subject of our greed and commerce? Is it the world where everything has been parcelled out, every corner densely populated? This world can be dispatched in one sentence, though, in fact, one can mouth platitudes about it day and night. And this latter possibility accounts for a curious fact: this so-called real world actually escapes our eyes in a peculiar way, so that the eyes, being completely blinded by their stereotyped routine way of looking, cannot see anymore. The real world takes its course in its own logical way, which is apt to embrace and explain everything. Our way of real thinking is our defence against the world and the very thinking itself. This is the way of all flesh, full of firm polished truths, which are like rocks helping us to defend our existence. When looking out from behind these rocks, we have our visual field narrowed, beset with taboos which defy presentation, because our way of life is far too precious for us to lose it, and we dread to make a single step out of the enclosure where our tribe is gadding about dead sure that it is marching forward, always forward, toward progress.

But there is another world, which has all things different. It rejects the laws of gravitation, stability and the spectrum, as well as the logic of conventional beauty. It is suspended like a black rock above our stable world, threatening to plump down any minute. No sooner had we accepted impressionism and hung it on the walls of our sitting-rooms, no sooner come to love it and for sheer love let it fertilize our narrow-mindedness, no sooner had we learned to see nature and the world as Jakopič did, no sooner chosen to be horrified at Grohar's destiny and decided it should happen never, oh, never again, than we found ourselves face to face with a different world, ugly and detestable, utterly inartistic, a pure nothing. Or rather: something, but by no means suitable for our sitting-rooms; we would not hang it there for the whole world, the children would be scandalized!

*Translated from the Slovene by S. Klinar, and edited slightly for inclusion here.

Yet time heals all wounds, and we somehow tolerate this new trend; we have come to terms with it because there is another world rising above the horizon, stranger still and crueller, blacker and uglier, again such as we do not like. Our real world, consisting of errands, functions, jobs, wages, professionalism, frauds, profits, deficits, conventional lies, conventional religions, established atheism, this world which finds itself ideally perfect, completely rounded off, self-satisfying, this absolutely absurd world, unworthy of man, cries blue murder on seeing the tiniest flaw in the white wall of the promised better future; of the satisfaction that is to come.

The other world is made up of different observations, different eyes. It is made of looking for one's own eyes. Also of one's reeling walk and finding delight in barren lands. Of manufacturing useless articles. It is observing the world for the sake of discovering the constituent elements of one's own look. It is the incessant testing of one's own focuses of energy. It is the negation of all things conventional and confirmed, including one's own. It is far from Shakespeare's "to hold the mirror up to nature. . . ." (I doubt that this quotation has been repeated as often anywhere in the world as in my country, especially by those who defend their acquired and pre-arranged social positions), because nature based on reality has become absurd and inherently degenerate.

So again I am left to wondering what is real. Is it the world as I see it, or is it the one I imagine? And how do I see it? Has not my sight been biased with the burden of education and preference? Is what I am looking at really what I see? Is it not conditioned with my feelings and my specific experiences? With my present state of health? Would I have viewed it some time ago in the same way as I do now? Shall I see it after a while in the same way as I do now? How then can I imitate the exact reality if my state is changeable, if even my way of perceiving things changes with time, not to speak of my way of looking. And yet outside myself there is no one to help me to contact the world if I do not exist. My sight alone, then, however changeable it is, must be my guide. My sight alone can picture the world for me.

The truths that we face in life are of relative value. How can I record a truth in a poem when this same truth can be expounded far better in a scientific treatise, with numbers added? Who will believe my truth if he has not experienced it? Not yet experienced? And never will? How can I take one to a crossroads if I cannot make clear how I myself have come there? Moreover, in a particular moment, I myself may believe in an experience of mine and be fully convinced of it, but in the next moment, in a different situation, this same experience is liable to lose shape. It will belong to the past, it will

lose its youthful freshness and its distinguishing charm. And what can people do with my truths, now that there are as many truths in the world as there are people? Who has authorized me to say that my truths are weightier than those of others? That they carry weight at all? Still I think that I am a singular organism with reactions and notions which are specifically mine. This is why I try to shape the world as I see it, and I see it crooked, transposed, projected through my personality. My personality, of course, cannot claim any specific distinction, but it is inclined to presenting the world by picturing feelings, inclined to feeling the world by means of literary pictures, which take place while taking shape in a poem.

Can A Picture Be Expressed in a Poem?

It just so happened that when facing a certain picture I felt suddenly sure that I had once been in the country which the picture showed. (It was an impressionist piece of art.) I could even point out the spot which I had occupied, though the painter was not a native of my country. But I suddenly realized that that same spot had witnessed a fatal event from a very remote life of mine when I was still unaware of anything around me, an event which I am unable to describe or define, but I could see figures standing in the shadow behind thick foliage—figures which, in fact, the picture did not show—but they looked frightened because they had caught sight of—what? a corpse? a nativity? I could not know, as everything was rather blurred, somehow hidden in the dusk, like the remnants of some dreams that were ebbing away.

I took a long time standing there before that picture, and in a pretty hazy state of mind. Then I went off, had a look at other pictures, and came back again. I was trying to bring evidence against myself. But the state of mind was repeated. There was the same insoluble spell of one particular detail; the same strange impression taking shape in my mind and linking itself with the picture which had come into existence long before I was born, far away at the other end of the continent. It was no esthetic feeling, it struck no familiar cord nor did it reveal a familiar world, but came rather within the sphere of parapsychological aberrations: dreams. The memory of an event which had never been is still hot in me—it is the memory of the dreams which I had never dreamt.

The picture also gave me a feeling of sudden physical inconvenience: as if I were no longer identical with myself, or as if I inhabited the wrong body, and was thus unable to solve the riddle. I almost felt I was under some strange compulsion to leave my body

and make a tiny little step outside myself, regardless where, because then I would understand everything, know everything, remember everything. In fact I nearly remembered it even then, as it was almost within reach. I actually heard those voices and recognized them; they were the voices of my nearest relations: mum, dad, grandpa, grandma (grandma I hardly knew, but her voice was clearest of all). I sneaked away from that picture and consoled myself: This must be connected with some dreams of mine which I had forgotten, I am tired now and subject to quick changes in my state of mind.

Well, dreams then. It seems that through dreams we probably stand in much closer relation to each other than through our real contacts. I do not mean the Freudian explanation of dreams, but I believe that while dreams are going on we are ruled by a group plasm which by day we keep shut up in little boxes. Approaching a picture is, after all, often like a sudden recovery of some parts of one's own property. A property which almost exactly corresponds to the one which we might have conceived ourselves and painted ourselves. But why should it have been lost? It must have slipped our mind long ago, or we must have mislaid it. Or sometimes we feel as if someone has taken the words out of our mouth, or better still: as if the painter was the medium following our orders.

It is the first time now that I have revealed my experience with that picture. I have never written a poem about it, though nearly ten years have elapsed since then. For the poem, if ever written, would not contain the picture at all. A detail of that picture started in me a reaction that was decidedly mine. It was derived from my specific imagination, typical of my individuality, and my imagination was full of such details which only I know and remember. The painter did not think of me when working on the landscape, nor did I think of the painter when contemplating the picture, attracted by the woodside corner in it. The poem then would have risen in me without a provocation on the part of the painter, and if it had ever been written, it would only have been so because it had brought me into a near-chaotic state, and not as a response to the idea of the picture, however intimately it has influenced me. In this case the picture would not have been the subject-matter of the poem at all, as there would have been no connection between the picture and the poem.

I am no expert in paintings. I experience them as a layman; sometimes I feel that I can come near them, but sometimes their world seems to be locked up against me. I cannot describe a picture, and I can hardly present authentically my own experience with a picture. Shall I say that a picture is such and such? That it shows that and that in such and such colors? Shall I say that I have found

it harmonious? Shall I describe the world that rose in my mind under the influence of the picture? Shall I speak of the complex relations of different and very remote periods? Since I want to be a layman, I want to remain scientifically uninfected.

It was the graphics of France Mihelič that provided my first genuine encounter with the art of painting. The graphics were exhibited in 1954 or 1955. They were the first pictures made in such a way as to speak directly to me, or almost from me. Today I know why. The world presented by Mihelič is one of funerals, of incineration. The past in his pictures is grotesque and without illusions. But I know this today when that same person who was then myself belongs to the past. If I am to characterize my own self of that time, I think I should be looked upon as a youth taking tremendous efforts to express the disappointment at being left empty-handed in a place which he has entered with an armful of things. And in the background there are soldiers and blood and all that such a cataclysm leaves behind. So I felt attracted by Mihelič's graphics showing a horseman, a burning bird, *kurenti* (clowns), memoirs of infancy, silent clocks, isolated eroticism.

They spoke to me. And though at that time everyone used to talk a good deal about those graphics, I always had the impression that I knew about them rather more than others, that I was sacredly admitted to grasp their import as if I were akin to them in a particular way. It was a time when a different mode of expression was searched for in poetry. I myself was looking for one that might enable me to reveal my vision of the world, a vision which I held to be new. The style of our poetry of the mid-fifties was modelled on neo-romanticism. But the mirror of my soul, as I have told before, could reflect nothing but a world without tenderness, and almost without beauty, and demanded me to drop the former poetic ways. It was then that I found myself face to face with Mihelič's graphics, which mirrored the world in a way that could have been my own. The art of painting in the fifties was generally a good deal ahead of literature. It was more modern in contents and form than poetry. So I took a fancy to it right at first sight.

There are some such pictures which I would like to write a poem about. There also used to be a period of time when I set out to make a picture by means of a poem. But all such attempts testify to the early stages of the development of one's own style rather than to mature poetic creativity. They are more like the painting of an atmosphere or a state, or they belong to the setting of a dramatic action rather than to the painting of a picture which is immobile. When I had taken a picture as a starting point, it remained no more than a detail in the poem, which was then biased to a rather different

thing. The word is the sound which must be pronounced, the word is capricious and without the stability of the color. The line, the drawing, the composition of colors, which are the elements of a picture's effect, lose their power if expressed in words. The light in a picture streaming down from the sky, or radiating from individual characters or even from their hands and heads (as is the case in El Greco's "Funeral of Count Orgaz") is always the same light. But a poem cannot repeat the same word, or a word of the same quality, ten times. And if we introduce variants of the word, it gets compounded with dissimilar qualities of the variants, or it is even shifted to another word-class. The result is different in each process; harmony which dominates a picture because of its static character is shattered to pieces by the very movement brought about by rhythm. And if a word is to be repeated ten times, the fourth repetition will already prove ineffective because repetition dulls one's eagerness to listen. It is interesting to see how a picture is described in words. Interesting because we always use the present tense, as all pictures belong to one time only. It is in this particular time that we perceive them, and this impression is stuck in our memory. All the movement in a picture takes place right before us. The word, on the other hand, is different. It draws on tenses. Even such a short lyric as Kosovel's "Ballad," which is all written in the present tense, actually exemplifies four successive periods in which the action is completed: the fieldfare which comes flying along; the fieldfare flying through the woods; the hunter following it; a shot; the fieldfare lying dead.

Speech, then, involves tenses. One image follows another, and time is in between them. It is as I used to emphasize in my previous writing: every branch of art strives to present an action as if it were going on right before our eyes, though naturally enough, it is all past actions that constitute paintings, writings, films, or any other presentation of experiences, happenings, feelings and images. The reader, the spectator or the listener is made to believe that everything presented to him is happening right now for him to see, and it is by this deception that he is held spellbound. This same deception is the reason why actors and stage-performances are fascinating. In a picture every detail falls in the same time as the rest of the picture. But a line in a poem is no more than an element of a movement which is realized in the sequence of time. The word is typically associated with action. If one should set about writing a poem in the style of a painter, he would probably have to drop all verbs. That would almost result in haiku, a poetry which is closest to the art of painting. But, of course, closest to that of Japanese painting, or impressionism. That poetry involves silence rather than speech, in much the same way as pictures do not use words.

We use words during all our life. I deliberately say words, and not language, because words are more suitable to convey the notion of the crude material, the bubbling magma which we take into our mouths and spit out into the void. Most often we do so only to say nothing, only to hide ourselves. We lend words to each other, lick them thin, bite them to pieces, befoul them and throw them into the gutter. We look for new ones, such as will bear no witness to ourselves, such as will hide and shelter us, so that we shall feel safe behind them; such as will enable us to cheat those who mean to cheat us in that great swindle which is called human relations. If it was honest people who taught us to pronounce the first sentences, if they were motivated by love and joy in creating names for all things in the world, the melody of their voice will remain alive in us and will whisper, in between our confused babbling, *the* word into our ears and thereby save us, for it will bring truth into our situation. But what words will our descendants learn from us, now that we misuse them for setting traps for each other, and for creating a permanent lie?

The language of poetry is information about the way poetry encounters the world. It is labelling the world with specific words chosen by a strict self-censorship and by a censorship imposed by the notions of, and speculations on, the world. No one can force this language to stand close to contemporary vocabulary, the one used in real life. This language is giving a name to a world which is a personal vision. It is the habitation of a poet's spirit: in Prešeren's, Jenko's, Murn's, Kosovel's vocabularies we come across the spirits of their personalities, modelled by the force of their words and their visions of the world. Speaking of the spirits of the deceased poets, I mean to say that they stand out in their poetry in such a perfect way as is rarely found in living persons even in close contact.

Exactly as I am no expert in painting, I am none in poetry either. I can only speak of how I experience my own poetry; of how obedient my language is to me when I trust it, how words stand to my order, how they come to me of their own sweet will and whisper themselves into my ears. Sometimes. But then each such wave leaves behind a desert full of perished words, cadavers, scorched insect corpses.

Then I naturally invent a new process. I try a different approach by means of another word, another image, but the wall of words will still rise. Then I try out new positions in another present time where any trace of the past has been lost, wiped out deliberately, so that I could climb up to a different look-out and reach a secret path that would take me to what needs to be renamed under a different aspect, bathed in different color. And I often imagine a

perfect man who does not use many words, who actually keeps silent and speaks by silence. More and more do I aspire to creating a kind of blurred poetry, which does not make use of words any more, still counting as poetry.

A Poem Without Words

My wish to write a poem without words which would still count as a poem is a wish to attain perfect hermeticism. It originates in my conviction that a poem is a useless thing which has nothing to tell anyone, as it is actually dumb; that it is a product of the same kind as so many other human products, simply a product which adds nothing to a harmonious life. I mean the life of those that do not write poems. Those, on the other hand, that do write them are obsessed with them, they are victims of their own creativity.

This experience is probably shared by a painter who is more and more fascinated with the color white, as it symbolizes perfection to him, and he sets out to make a perfect picture in this same white color. I think that Gabrijel Stupica is such a painter. I think that he was becoming obsessed with white when he produced "The Girl with Toys" in two variants; at least it was two variants that he had exhibited. There might be stages of development between them, which are unknown to me. But it does not matter; even if he did not make intermediate variants, he certainly had them in mind. In much the same way as I sometimes have a poem in mind, but never write it. Sometimes out of sheer hatred for writing poetry, sometimes out of mockery towards an activity which is made up of recording one's own words. I have the impression that white when it has started to attract a painter opens for him infinite possibilities, such as an escape from form and characters and from any chance to draw and paint them, thus destroying them in himself. To my mind, every painter is likely to be ridden by fear of being left utterly blank and empty after a work has been accomplished. But the white color offers an infinite number of variants, which, after all, do not need to be materialized at all, they need no exact delineation. It is the painter's hope, his salvation, so to say. The Australian aborigines, and they alone, believe that the painter who has made a picture is lost in it, and that he has set out to make it only to escape into it. They do not believe that those that had left their drawings and engravings on the rocks were their fellow-tribesmen; they will rather say that they were strangers, members of the tribe of painters. There is probably a flickering hope in every painter that some day he will be lost in his picture. And the color white seems to be

especially suitable for making this possible. For the one that means to escape and has actually been observing his own escaping, will inevitably discover the white into which he can escape, leaving the door behind him clean and intact. Gabrijel Stupica's pictures which I know bring evidence of the painter's fight with the color white; here and there he has whipped a sharp cut across to indicate a drawing. In a particular period of his creativity, white became his chosen color. There is a metaphor that is appropriate in this connection: for the painter the color white is exactly what the black void in the universe is for the stars. It is very close to a poet contemplating a poem without words. Stupica can serve as a model, as I think that there is no other painter in Slovenia equal to him in dealing with the problems of painting, and in trying at the same time to present these complex problems in his pictures.

The Painters Who Escaped into Their Pictures

The Australian aborigines, as I mentioned above, believe that painters escape into their pictures, that they hide themselves in them and live in them. The pictures then live the life of the painters. Perhaps, when we roam about galleries, it is not only that we watch the pictures but that we also are watched from inside the pictures by those who have made them. We are watched even by the pictures themselves. Sometimes we are caught unawares in the right moment, and we are fascinated. We seem to be turned into a kind of receiver for the picture's rays, or waves, by means of which it projects itself into us.

One afternoon, in London's National Gallery, I chanced upon the Rembrandt hall. During a previous visit I had overlooked it. It contains a few famous paintings, which I had known before, but only from reproductions. I had never been very interested in Rembrandt, but had rather dedicated my attention to others. I mention this only to point out that in a different moment or period these pictures would not have made on me an above-average impression. This time it seemed to me that I had met a friend, that I had entered a world which was other than what I had known before, that I had been invited into that world for friendship but in a dignified manner, that the works collected in that hall were speaking to me about unusual perspectives on human existence. That from those golden-brown hues, the kind things get at twilight, the energy of a proud, courageous but pitiful man was pouring into me.

From then on I have thought that in certain pictures an energy is concealed which at a particular moment takes possession of the

viewer of that picture. It moves into him as the energy of a person moves into us who is related to us, and we are happy that we have recognized him. With pictures it is not perhaps a matter of being related, but rather that we are in some one of our senses seized. I am speaking of the energy that accumulates in a picture. Of things that are displayed in a singular fashion, depicted in a singular way, about figures, their movements, about the rhythm which is established through the relationship of all the elements that comprise the picture.

This transfer of energy I experienced standing before Rembrandt, not so much as an inspiration for my own creativity but rather as the peaceful but powerful tale of a man long since deceased, who speaks to me in such a way as to inhabit my thoughts, to whisper to me from inside my own head, however in a different way than I am accustomed to whispering to myself, in that he does not speak to me with my voice, but in a voice that comes from his pictures; he did not form words but simply settled into my body and directed my eyes to see what he wanted them to. This is what I call energy hidden away in a picture. Thus a picture helps us to identify ourselves with it, to guess the ways of destiny where our own way, such as it is, does not seem to be more eminent than it really is.

A World without Beauty

Marij Pregelj has left us a world without beauty, creations immersed in gray, made up of broken planes. His gray is like the depressing smog from Dachau, flooding the world and drowning the past and the present. In this fog are placed his terrible people who are losing their anthropomorphic delineations and human privileges. They are ready to commit any action, an act of love as well as a crime, for they have just lost their masks and will assume a different form any minute. Since they come out of the gray, they can at any time disappear back into it, only to turn up again, different. They know no fear, as they are fears themselves. As in the Ugets legend, they appear in a boat, which in this case is a picture, gaze at us with the bulging white of their eyes, and at once disappear behind a new wave of fog. Their heads are half-moons, quarters of gourds, or faces painted on gray balloons. These canvases had been bathed in vapors from a kettle where the collective dinner for his generation was prepared, for the most hard-hit and decimated generation witnessing the fall of European civilization.

He made a portrait of his father sitting in a chair, which is somehow pushed into the picture. The father has a pile of books in

front, which will topple over any minute. He is looking at us from behind his glasses, but we cannot see his eyes at all. That's why we have an impression that he may have no eyes, after all, and that, though he appears alive in the picture, he may long have been dead. The great writer in his son's picture is alone; not lonely, but alone. It is his destiny to be alone; before his death and after. It is his destiny to remain an outsider, brushed aside, because he does not belong to our time; because there is no time to which he could belong.

So he is gazing at us eyeless, and yet with a look that knows everything about himself and us. And what he knows about us is anything but optimistic. Leaning against the high back of his chair, he looks the dethroned ruler, however little he may still feel like ruling. For the yellowish color is in many places blotted out by the gray one, which seems to be oozing from a flaw, which is the flaw of our century, a flaw in our consciousness, in our belief in the future and in our belief in human actions.

The Rhythm of the Picture and of the Poem

In these speculations of mine I have quite frequently used the word rhythm. It was in Byzantine frescoes that I first caught sight of it: the rhythm of angels in St. Sophia's Church at Ohrid, and the terrible rhythm in the fresco of the Descent from the Cross at Nerezi. A different, that is broken, rhythm is to be found in the fresco at St. Primus' Church above Kamnik, where the Virgin Mary is giving suck to those that take refuge with her. I claim that whatever one does by way of creating his own expression, he does it consciously in order to create his own rhythm. Let me quote a passage from my own writing, that is from the essay "The Play of Words and Silences":

Rhythm, when adequate, seems to be irrevocable, because it is inspired by the organism. It seems to be fathered by the blood, by what is called temperament and is buried deep under the vocabulary. It rules over this vocabulary and chooses words out of it. When the thought and the rhythm clash against each other, we have chosen the wrong word. In this cross the writing is blocked, the rhythm plays hide-and-seek in the maze of the limestone underground world where no one can find it. It seems to govern the composition in a picture, for every picture is pregnant with rhythm which captivates the spectator. This one then fancies to have discovered what he had long known. He

probably remembers the dreams which he cannot fix nor classify. Indeed, rhythm seems to be veiled with dreams, buried under their varied nonsensical rubbish, hidden to the eyes, which are all too eager to discover it. But in its inimitable style every single experience of ours is recorded, each of them in different letters, so that an attempt at discovering one's own rhythm is identical with listening to one's own voice. Rhythm, so it seems, must contain a code which explains how individual people experience things, a message in cipher which we have inherited and keep enshrined in our bodies in order to hand it down to our posterity. Rhythm is also that abstract quality which makes us accept a poem even before it affects our mind. When a poet does not listen to his rhythm any more, his poems will fall dumb. Even when the discovered rhythm becomes habitual (every experience is recorded in a different code), his art will lose the indispensable. In a poet whose creativity has ebbed down one should probably first try and find out what has gone wrong with his rhythm, and where he has parted from it, because in this way he has parted from one of the uppermost powers of his biological and ethical systems.

Goya's Dog

Goya has a picture of a dog half buried in sand which children have thrown on it. The dog's entire body, covered with sand, lies already within the boundaries of death. Only its head still peers out. The head leans to one side a little, which can be understood as a gesture of defence against the sand falling on it or as an innocent waiting for an amnesty which one of the many surrounding voices might declare. But the idea of this voice is purely ours, for the dog which is being buried belongs to nobody. He is just a vagabond dog, he has been strolling about everywhere, but has now come to his terminus in a situation which is beyond him, in a position of expecting the impossible; his rescue is impossible and his death is impossible as it is beyond his experience. The children playing this cruel game do not appear in the picture. There is only the yellow of the sand, which is the only color there. In the victim's eyes this sand constitutes the universe, it is the last and the only form of the world that he can see, if he can see at all, for the fine yellow grains seem to have blinded him completely. Whatever he may see, he sees it yellow, in much the same way as the sunlight pierces through clouds of dust. The dog's head is stupid, innocent, and, since listening to something, also obedient. The head, sentenced to death, peers from

the picture, peers from the painter's window into his universe, from a bare piece of ground on our planet, waiting for the inevitable end to come, for children are known to be thorough in their games.

The children do not appear in the picture. They had dispersed long ago, they had grown up and died, in many situations and circumstances they were like the dog who had ended up by guessing that only an external power, a power outside his own powers, can save him.

The painter does not appear in the picture either. He has been changed into the gliding of the sand. The dog's head, however, peers out of the planet listening to man and waiting to be called. It will never be, of course. We do know, however, what happens to wandering dogs, who are used first as a toy, then as the victim in a game; one can easily guess that this is how things go on with people though one is reluctant to admit. Goya admitted it, for he was an atheist of the kind that had lost his God and never bothered to find him again. So he made a picture of someone who is being buried alive without knowing what is happening to him. How often are we all being buried and how often do we realize that we are actually ensnared and left at the mercy of imps to play cats and mice with us? Such questions will enter the head of an ignorant spectator. Goya's dog is a shock. And as for shocks, we still do not know if they have a healing or a harmful effect.