Photo - graphing

John T. Giordano

photo by Eduardo Masferré
[Knowledge - understanding] ... is an island and enclosed by nature itself within limits that can never be changed. It is the country of truth (a very attractive name), but surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the true home of illusion...

Immanuel Kant
‘Critique of Pure Reason’

Knowledge is a shoreless ocean in which the knower’s soul is a signpost.

Khwaga Abdullah Ansari (1006-1089)
‘Intimate Conversations with God’
Metro Manila: Evil Spirits

"Hello John?"

"Yes?"

"I'm a student at the University,
You don't know me do you?"

"I think I've seen you around."

"Quick, walk with me and act like we are a couple."

"OK" I said. I thought she was being stalked by someone.

"Tell me that you love me."

?..........."OK,...........I love you."

She then flagged down a cab. "Quick, get in with me."

We got in the cab and she asked the driver to rush to the international airport. She insisted that she had to leave the country as quickly as possible.

"Do you believe in evil Spirits?" She asked,

"No", I replied quite smoothly.

"What would you think about someone who keeps a statue of the Virgin Mary with her head burned off?"

With tears in her eyes, she explained that she needed to leave, but she had no money for the plane fare. She was being followed by evil Spirits.

"Manila is too Spiritual a place" she said.

She asked me to recite The Lord's Prayer with her, with one hand she clutched the cab driver's rosary and with the other she held on to mine.

"and deliver us from evil,.......................Amen."
During the course of the evening I managed to convince her not to go to the airport, to stop to have a cup of coffee and talk. Philosophically, I normally attempt to steer clear questions which are Spiritual or paranormal. I always considered that there was no need to have an opinion about things upon which I did not have any basis to speculate.

But now, suddenly, this was my concern. I felt a responsibility to say something. I rather awkwardly try to give a convincing argument against the existence of evil Spirits and I try to convince her to return with me to the college campus. But I fail. I eventually return alone unable to save her soul.

But it gets me thinking...

Kant made such matters his concern. He writes in a letter to Mendelssohn about his purpose in writing his early essay The Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, ridiculing the mystic Swedenborg.

As a matter of fact it would be difficult for me to conceive of a method of so clothing my thoughts that I shall not subject myself to ridicule. It seemed to me the wisest course to take advantage of others and first do the ridiculing myself; and in this I have been perfectly frank since the attitude of my own mind is inconsistent and, so far as these stories are concerned, I cannot help having a slight inclination for things of this kind, and indeed, as regards their reasonableness, I cannot help cherishing an opinion that there is some validity in these experiences in spite of all the absurdities involved in the stories about them, and the crazy and unintelligible ideas which deprive them of their real value. (Dreams, p. 162)

The best defense is a good offence. The paranormal and the irrational emerge as a kind of threat. It is that about which one cannot speak of as a philosopher, and yet confronts the philosophical thinker from time to time. And so it seems that to be a good philosopher involves not only caution but tact.

Years later in the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant uses the imagery of an island to depict the domain of the understanding.

This domain ... is an island and enclosed by nature itself within limits that can never be changed. It is the country of truth (a very attractive name), but surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the true home of illusion, where many a fog bank and ice that soon melts away tempt us to
believe in new lands, while constantly deceiving the adventurous mariner with vain hopes, and involving him in adventures which he can never leave, and yet can never bring to an end. Before we venture ourselves on this sea, in order to explore it on every side, and to find out whether anything is to be hoped for there, it will be useful to glance once more at the map of that country which we are about to leave, and to ask ourselves, first, whether we might not be content with what it contains, nay, whether we must not be content with it, supposing that there is no solid ground anywhere else on which we could settle; secondly, by what title we possess even that domain, and may consider ourselves safe against all hostile claims. (Critique of Pure Reason, p. 158-159)

In the Critique of the Power of Judgement we find Kant again facing the stormy ocean. He finds his imagination inadequate to take it all in, and so judges the sea sublime. The failure of the mental powers, in the face of the sublime, also leads it to an appreciation of what power it has. The sea turns Kant back in upon himself.

So we find Kant from time to time, scanning the horizon, aware of at least the possibility of some beyond, but always while standing on his own safe ground — what he can take in.

And what about me?

Virgo
You are tactful and courteous,
and adapt well to those with whom you are concerned...

This is what the coffee mug in the store said about my astrological sign. I find myself quite attentive to such things. And I am always on the lookout for omens. There has always seemed to be a superstitious side of me which I try to keep distant from my philosophical speculating (and it is interesting to note that super-stition would mean a standing-above in contrast to an under-standing).

There was a drug-related experiment I tried when I was younger. What if all the meanings projected upon the world were stripped from the surfaces of things? This was an artistic project: to see things in the most intense way possible, unfiltered by meaning. And as you can imagine, the experiment went horribly wrong. One is left in a fascinating
but frightening landscape, lost in a kind of darkness desperately trying to recall the reflexes through which the configurations of communication and meaning take place.

But of course, I’m more mature now. And so here and now I am compelled to ask: does the fact that I philosophically try to stand clear of these abysses, mean that I stand on solid ground?

_The Bus-ride: The Photographer_

I take a trip to the mountains of Luzon. On the Bus-ride I meet a Danish photographer who has worked in Somalia, Afganistant, and now the Philippines. He is doing a documentary about farmers in various corners of the world. We begin discussing art and philosophy and he begins explaining his technique of taking pictures. He tells me that he intuitively snaps the pictures even if he not yet completely acclimated to the scene. He brings them home, develops them, and then does not look at them for at least a month. When he finally does go over them certain things jump out at him. As he looks at the pictures it is as if he is looking into himself, his reactions to this foreign environment, his attempts to come to grips with this confrontation. The _looking-out_ is in fact a _looking-inward_.

What is outside of us, is also within us. Kant’s former student and rival Herder develops this insight.

_Whoever tells me what the powers of the soul are and how they operate within them, to them I will explain in return, how they are also outside [their soul], how they operate on other souls and other bodies, and that perhaps they are divided not through such partitions of the soul as they are divided in the chambers of our metaphysics.... The inner man with all his dark powers, stimuli, and drives, is only one. (SW, s. 177-178)_

Notice he calls them “dark powers”. This is not out of an allegiance to the occult, but the recognition that this plurality of powers which animate the understanding, are also outside of the understanding. The light of the familiar is embraced by a certain darkness.

The German Romantic philosopher Novalis also believed that the
subject is animated by nonsubjective forces and emerges as a unity only through the conflict of these forces. He writes in his ‘Miscellaneous Observations’.

*The seat of the soul is the point where the inner and the outer worlds touch. Wherever they penetrate each other — it is there at every point of penetration. (Philosophical Writings, p. 26)*

Merleau-Ponty uses these same insights in order to challenge Descartes’ theory of perception which is based upon a sharp division between mind and body, between the interior and exterior. In his late essay, “Eye and Mind” [L’oeil et l’esprit] he writes:

>Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrusted in its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body. These reversals, these antinomies, are different ways of saying that vision is caught or comes to be in things - in that place where something visible undertakes to see, becomes visible to itself and in the sight of all things, in that place where there persists, like the original solution still present within crystal, the undividedness of the sensing and the sensed... “Nature is on the inside,” says Cézanne. Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them. (“Eye and Mind”, p. 125)

The subject inhabits nature and nature inhabits the subject, and both are connected through a conflict. But this conflict gives birth to Spirit, gives birth to the visible from the invisible. Merleau Ponty then compares painting and photography with regard to this dynamic. He favors painting because the painter in a much more direct manner is connected to the play which gives birth to the visible out of the invisible.

>Rodin said profoundly, “It is the artist that is truthful, while the photograph lies; for in reality, time never stops”. The photograph keeps open the instants which the onrush of time closes forthwith; it destroys the overtaking, overlapping, the “metamorphosis” of time. This is what painting, in contrast, makes visible ... (“Eye and Mind”, p. 145)

That is, painting more accurately renders the succession of moments
in time. Each part of the painting seems to blossom with a new moment of being. But we need not follow Merleau-Ponty all the way and diminish photographic representation. The photograph is a "lie" only in contrast to the movement of time. This desire to freeze one moment in time has a validity in its own right. It represents an attempt to capture that subtle threshold where the invisible emerges into the visible, where Spirit emerges from darkness into its particular configurations. Merleau-Ponty, contrary to his intentions, remains very Hegelian—wanting to capture the movement of time in time and setting this forth as truth. It is still mimetic, representational. But the photo-graph truly hovers between what is visible and invisible without trying to represent the process itself. The photo-graph is the emergence of Nature through the Subject. The mythic unity of the photograph is also the mythic subjective unity, which tries to capture the locus of emergence which is neither inside nor outside. The photo is the conflict between the familiar and the mysterious.

Nietzsche can help us along here. He writes in Daybreak...

Forgetting. — It has not yet been proved that there is any such thing as forgetting; all we know is that the act of recollection does not lie within our power. We have provisionally set into this gap in our power that word forgetting, as if it were one more addition to our faculties. But what, after all, does lie within our power? — if that word stands in a gap in our power, ought the other words not to stand in a gap in our knowledge of our power? (Daybreak, #126)

The word, the concept, the idea, which often seem so clear and distinct to us, gain their clarity only by virtue of being a blind spot. And it is this web of concepts which we spin over the world to understand it. And the subject itself would be a web of ideas, images and reflexes woven over an abyss.

Lately it has been quite unfashionable to speak of the subject. Allegedly because the mythic unity it represents is threatened by the fragmentation of experience predominant in contemporary culture. But we must see that the subject has always been the locus of fragmentation and conflict. And it is this very heterogeneity which creates the unity of the subject. The subject is that place where disconnected things come
together, and come together in a very fragile manner. This locus is not an inside not outside, but both. It is not a the Same, not the Other, but both. The subject is not a monad but a switchboard. And in the interstices of this network is a darkness.

And now we begin to see how significant this photo-graphic confrontation is. It involves the area of conflict between subject and subject, culture and culture, subject and nature, outside and inside, and above all the conflict of the subject with itself. And all of these conflicts flash a certain unity, which is the art of the photograph or the art of the subject.

It also represents the very possibility of the art of philosophy.

The Danish photographer and I sit and gaze out our windows at the landscape passing by.

**Banaue: Nature and Culture**

The rice terraces of the Ifugao Province ascend the mountain-sides for thousands of feet and are the product of thousands of years of human activity. The entire mountain sides are land-saped and become the environment upon which generations of people live out their lives. The water has become accustomed to following the intricate age-old series of channels which meander along the stone walls. People meander along the paths — along the rock walls, up and down the steps etched into the earth, from one terrace to the next, to and from their houses perched on the mountain-sides, while the river roars below. Within this sculpted landscape, of rice ponds and channeled water, people follow their everyday routines, follow their age-old customs.

What is natural? What is artificial?

And where is Spirit? In the Rock walls, in the way life has modified (and has been modified by) the landscape? Can we even know a mountain in its natural form, until we have draped our own form over its surface? And yet, doesn’t our own form emerge from the natural form?