

**FOUR WAYS TO APPROACH THE
NUMINOUS**

By the Mystery of Presence

Gabrielle d'Estrées and one of her sisters, both naked
Are standing in what might be a bath. Lining its sides
Are milk coffee cloths, gathered and pleated by water.
Upstage in the gloom a fully clothed woman is sewing.

On each side a red satin curtain is tied back
Allowing the viewer a clear frontal view of the two sisters,
Who seem expressionless or, to be perhaps more precise,
Are giving nothing away because the pressure of decorum

Requires them to restrain, contain but nevertheless be aware
Of a considerable cargo of physical and metaphysical truths.
Above the woman sewing is the lower half of a painting
Of male legs suggesting a depleted Mars in disarray.

But the sister's reticence and a mysterious and pervasive air,
As if they breathed pure nitrogen, makes instances of symbolism
Difficult to identify. One sister holds a pale nipple of the other
Between thumb and index finger in a circle, the hand highly

Stylised like a Balinese dancer's. The other holds a ring,
Her own hand forming a second, almost identical circle.
Their four forearms make a separate formal geometry,
As if this tableau of arms in itself represented something

Like an epigram the viewer should be able to read but cannot.
Their breasts, which lie in a single horizontal line,
Are small, conical and, as it were, undemonstrative,
Like four mounds in a raked Zen garden.

It is as if time had stopped several minutes earlier – perhaps
At the moment the one reached out her right hand
To the other's breast. It appears, although this may seem fanciful,
That she is adjusting the vertical hold in some 16th Century

Equivalent of a screen bombarded from behind by electrons
So as to achieve an unstable, shuddering stillness
In which nothing else other than this gesture is happening
And the viewer watches some unchanging studio test-pattern.

Two pearl drop-earrings are visible, one obscured on each sister
By their centralising gaze. An unsatisfactory permanence
Seems to exclude the possibility of any future action
Such as stepping from the bath or drying or smiling.

By Embracing Multiplicity

Seven roads diverge in a wood
And at their point of departure
An acolyte meets a Master and asks him, "Master!
How should I decide which path to take?
I know that at the end of one is a voluptuous tavern;
Another contains a cinema of dreams; a third
Offers cyber-space access to the past;
Another has a coin-in-the-slot peep-show
Of selected future events which, it is said,
Is fully interactive; another leads to the sea
With hire-boats and a favourable breeze waiting;
Another leads to a pavilion in which there are
Extensive and documented views of this very place of departure;
Another leads through a wilderness which is constantly changing
So that none can predict for a moment
The experience which might be gained there – "
The Master replies. "I know you too well. You ask me this
Expecting me to answer in an enigma or reversal
Of all your expectations of an answer, or propose
Staying very still here at this point of indecision
So that all seven roads flow gently back to you,
Or give you a method of visiting all at once,
Even perhaps pointing you (in the Borgesian use
Of the term) to an Aleph where All is One
And where the angels put on a large dance-fest
In a ballroom on the head of a pin – and you're invited.
Perhaps you half expect me to announce steps
Leading underground which circumvent all seven paths,
Or conversely ease you into the gondola of a balloon
In which you might rise serenely into the air
To let the winds take you everywhere and anywhere –
But you have become too dependent on such contractions.
You have relied too long on everything approaching you
In labelled clusters or packets or quanta.
You have become accustomed to assuming the atoms
Of events may be combined into the molecules
Of experience, and this is not necessarily so.
You view everything as problem and seek a solution.
You expect that from every diverging path
There will be bridges to others, and this also
Is not necessarily so. I could continue, pointing out
Other radical simplifications you have unwittingly – Ah!"
The Master observes that his words are having
The desired effect: the acolyte's head is nodding
With weariness at so many words of reply; he leans
Against the broken and loosely turning signpost.
And soon the Master notes with satisfaction
(To a degree not incompatible with his humility as Master)
That the acolyte has fallen into a peaceful sleep.

By a Devotion to Objects

Morandi crossed the borders of Italy into the wide world
Twice only, and one of these occasions was to see
Paintings on the shores of a Swiss-Italian lake.
Otherwise he was frequently in his room allowing
His thoughts to gather dust and eliminate glare.

It is pleasing to imagine oneself actually standing
In that room (a bedroom) in front of a table
On which the votive objects stand. And to see oneself
Seeing them, like tourists in Rome for the Tiber spring flood,
Or viewing the Eiffel Tower with some degree of dispassion.

The objects are a group of bottles or canisters
Or ointment jars standing on a shelf
Crowding together like cows in a field, lowing,
Lowering their gaze, looking up, chewing cud,
Staring curiously behind a simple wire fence.

The still lifes made from this array are as familiar
As a coat hanging in a hall, and one need remark merely
On the propensity for that frieze of containers
To discourage, deny, descry any implication
That they contain anything at all, or that

They were assembled to assert in any way
Anything symbolic, allusive, shamanistic, allegorical,
Even nostalgic or tinged with sadness. Rather
It would appear they have arrived, jostled slightly
Then settled to attempt to profess essence merely.

Similarly one might consider one of several
Outdoor scenes. For instance here is something close
To a square representing the side of a house
Bordered by a dissemblance of trees like hair
And what looks like a trapezoid of ploughed ground,

That wall windowless, a churned-ricotta-white
With the tree backing off lest its shadow
Assume greater moment than its canopied branch.
Some claw marks partly distinguish the wall
From a rhombus of brown-purple (a field).

So reticent are these shaded areas with shadows
Posited in the gestures of eucalypt or conifer
One might well be in the afternoon lace cloth interior
Of the room in its Bolognese cool with the footfalls
Of three sisters elsewhere in the echoing house.

One would like to press further into this sub-tropical, leafy
Interior, this haven of shadows, and ask the reader
Stationed as he is at the apex of a triangle
Whose other vertices are these meditations and Morandi's tableau,
To allow these two to overlap and coalesce further,

As the eyes focussing after a reverie recombine
Two adjacencies into a single and singular éclat,
With the clarity of the gaze from a window
At the unflinching presence of umbrella pines like clouds
On an autumn afternoon in a rising breeze.

By Approaching the River

Towards the general wellspring of recollection itself
An instinctive resistance to being drawn surfaced, as if,
Once on display there, all original impulses must fail;

Or perhaps there was a desire to prevent the fall,
Into the general wellspring of recollection itself,
Of the floating world which so innocently, so vulnerably,

Was passing, intact and entire and magisterial:
The river surface, for instance, like a titanium mirror
Undisturbed, impossibly large, where siftings of rain already fell,

And a pelican single and solitary was indecisive about
Arrival and take-off with a little track of wake
Attesting to the intermittence of its resolve — O

How the general wellspring of recollection itself
Wants to take such epiphanies from the bystander
But does so peremptorily, is careless in taking

The choicest fruit from the centre of the pyramid,
So that the edifice pauses before collapsing suddenly
And spills out over the surrounding lawns,

Out of the general wellspring of recollection itself
And into the increasing disorder of Lost Property
Where float worlds of simulacra and docketts and motes.

But to the river! whose two divulged items, bird and rain,
Were tiny portions of an indivisible and larger whole:
These now threaten to overturn their floundering vessel,

For being singled out inevitably ties weights to the rest
And throws them overboard in a tangle of floating and sinking.
The boat rocks dangerously. And yet of course

There was no boat to be seen on the original river, nothing
So graspable or large. For some minutes before the first
Drops of rain the Gesualdo madrigals veered and tangled

Of crows somewhere invisible amongst trees on the opposite bank;
The wrens' tiny flit and flight amongst aniseed trees,
A heron flying overhead just when items of similar degrees

Of granulation seemed to have been skimmed cleanly
From the surface of the eventful world; shimmers where
A fish may or may not have leapt, circles fading

Like the general wellspring of recollection itself,
And reflections — most ambiguously falling between
Incident and steady state — reflections of hinterland

Lowered in competing layers and of the blue torn openings
Between clouds, a stronger blue as reflections than above them.
And sounds! On the one hand the sound of grass

Being twisted then torn by a cow's tongue
Just behind the matted fence, and, on the other,
The sound like an improvisation for pins and pincushions

Of the rain falling lightly across the whole water sheet.
With the thought that exhaustive description may render appearances
Less susceptible to being made metaphor, the river divulges

Incident after incident: the stained grey tarpaulin looses
Tiny spiralling orbits, leaves moving in a slow convoy, aggregates
Of pollen; and the river announces a momentous event:

It is quasi-noon. The slow drift of tidal water
Hesitates, about to change direction, as if to reverse
The general wellspring of recollection itself.