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EVIL EYE

When we look at the world we try not to believe it to be evil; we regard its deceptions as shadows of intelligibility, or more aggressively we want to exorcise the darkness of its obscure possession. A presupposition of the inherent goodness of seeing the world is due as much to an ideology of Enlightenment as it is the index of a mythology of Illumination. Both rational Enlightenment and mystical illumination can utilize the values of clarity, of transparency, of prudence or ecstasy in their own diverse rhetorical programmes; either way they imagine any wrongness of the world to be dispelled by a vision which is proper to their principled manner of looking. Rhetorically, darkness and light are expressions of principled oppositions.

In images, oppositions are essentially unprincipled, they do not contradict each other, or rather their contradiction is not dialectical. Only by insisting on a rhetoric of the image, on an assuasive principle to vision (which institutes ideological interpretation), does an image resemble the form of analytic ineligibility presupposed by a good vision of the world. Then the image's obscurities will appear likewise as intelligible deceptions: contradictions, symptomatic absences, obfuscations, signifying repressions and so on. Only by an idealization of the imagination can those deceptions be in turn exposed to a light which synthesizes (although which is not itself synthetic but natural, original). To an ideal imagination the world will reveal its sacred geometry, and whether it is one of cosmic correspondences or social or ecological systems doesn't matter. This theoretical view has little to do with any equation between vision and truth, rather it is the business side of an incorporation of vision into providence (not the truth of God and the deception of infidelity, but the goodness of the world and a perverse renunciation of it). Whether classical or modern, this sacred vision is Apollonian in its imaginative inspiration: it defers to a god who can synthesise distance with perception, a god who arises from the orgy or the battle to stretch out his arm and compose the scene, to give proportion to events.

If Tim Maguire's images appear to reveal a mystic vision of the world, then this is not at the expense of any scepticism on his part toward the numerous historical appropriations which constitute on one hand his attention to Australian, American and European landscape traditions (Fred Williams, Russell Drysdale, Thomas Cole, Caspar David Friedrich), and on the other his resort to the signature devices of modern metaphysical painting (Barnett Newman's famous vertical 'zip' as a mark of spiritual presence, Rothko's hovering 'cloud' of colour, Albers' obdurate square, Klee's capricious line). These contradictory elements of Maguire's style, his scepticism and his mysticism, are only the synthetic ingredients of a rhetorical insistence upon his images to declare the providential values of lightness and darkness. The visionary aspect of his art seems so much to do with the psychic

drama of light dividing darkness, with the symbolic power of primordial but remote, isolated structures of human presence (the water tank, pole or bridge in a desolate flood plain, for instance), in other words with the singularity of an Apollonian gesture. It may sound perverse then to suggest this of an artist whose work is evidently 'Olympian', but the quality of Maguire's work which is so spellbinding is the dissimulating overstatement of monumentality, of any primordial cosmic geometry, which – not unlike Piranesi's hyperbolic prisons and antique ruins – undoes the symbolic principle of the image and revivifies a certain kind of hallucinatory and evil power of the eye.

Is it this particular hallucination which endows Maguire's paintings with an uncanny light of their own, a light which is equally dark – yet not in an idealizing paradox which invokes an unbounded supernature that has originated the divisions of light and dark, but as a sensuous atmosphere which congeals in a treacherous image of that duality. To put it another way, the light in his paintings and pastels is not an illuminating light marking out primordial dimensions of nature, but a sterile substance left behind from creation and which forges dimensionless figures. An hallucinating vision of the world appears as a stare to those who look upon it: sterile and vacant. Hallucination and prophecy are often associated in both abstract art and religious lore through a blindness which can signify the transcendent apprehension of truth (the seduction of sensual, worldly perception is either overwhelmed or renounced). More important is the mythical inversion of exterior light for an interior one, or wisdom (a passionate participation in the good), marked by a blindness to the seductions of the phenomenal world. But a sterile blindness, the kind Maguire has found in a fascination with the story of the explorer Sturt's blindness (resulting from his futile expedition in search of Australia's mythic inland sea), is a blindness associated with deceptive prophecy, with the sinister power of the phantasm, participation in the treachery of the mirage.

Of course, most of Maguire's monumental forms explicitly refer to mirage effects: where the still heat transfigures a flat desert into an endless sheet of water, or where a corrugated iron tank or fluted column dissolves into its still reflection as it stands or lies ironically in an infinite flooded plain – the hallucinatory inland sea itself. But this imagery was an expression of an idea of unbounded phenomenal mystery and solitary retreat, hinting at an emblematic though hermetic resolution of oppositions. Maguire's latest work, much of which has been completed in Tasmania, is itself suspended within the sensual force of hallucination. It finds no emblematic form. The expression is almost of Olympian mystery gone into delirium. In this new work there is no possibility of conceptual ambiguity or irony, and yet if the world is still an unstable visual field, then its forms no longer fluctuate between opposed values (of say, the substantial and the ethereal, or the true and the false perception) but instead mutate or metamorphose within boundaries of sensual obsession. One is tempted to say that over the last year, even as one senses the poignant complementarities in his colour becoming poetically associated with a Venetian haze or mist, Maguire's uncanny light is also becoming 'infernal': at least, if this word can suggest a light like a diabolical fluid incandescing within the eyes, damning them to an infatuation with unreal sensual intensity. In this state horizon lines or thin vertical openings will glow as eerie – ominous – affective and rapturous irruptions without transcendent moral or

spiritual value, without any rhetorical direction. Here the painter relinquishes identification with his romantic or modernist sources (notably Friedrich, Turner, Newman or Rothko), and also with any formalism or idealism.

The thin quivering slit of light, whether horizontal or vertical, does not heroically divide the darkness or tragically offer a realm beyond it: the darkness of the huge water tanks for instance is like a translucent gel, the result of patient but laborious glazing, which coagulates as a relatively opaque luminous bar to define a contour line. The ribs of the tanks seem to channel this dark, unnameable fluid into viscous ripples of an excitation, as if the light was the pale but thickening reflection of a fragile obstacle – like the cold flare of an attenuated spine in an X-ray photograph. In each of the large paintings of three tanks side by side, the central tank spreads laterally out by a kind of anamorphosis: there seems to be a drift in the geometric field around the two flanking bars of light, rather than the volumes of the tanks. More important, the major symmetry is on an indefinite blur of darkness, where the central tank is most forward to the eye, where it loses its curvature and is distended and rarefied. What determines this world is darkness, a deceitful darkness yet no tone which merely veils objects (interposing itself between them and the light; this is only a darkness divided from itself by light at the Creation), but a darkness which undoes the dominion of objects, which seduces their forms.

The image of division of darkness by light is a romantic artist's abstract formula for a rudimentary version of the Faustian presumption, to relive the Creation and so design an emblem of the idealized artistic imagination. The symbolism accrued by this mythic motivation of art identifies that originating light with goodness, passion, beauty, with semen, strength and spiritual power. However, Maguire's sterile and 'unilluminating' light is a cursed residue of the Creation. It is an indistinct light, a resin in the hallucinating eye. One could describe it, like the Gnostic image of 'created light', as an evil emanation of the deceitful and vain God of Creation. (For the Gnostics, the symbolism of light would be a seduction carried out by a treacherous Divinity desiring to remain the immortal agency of His world.) The light in Maguire's painting is alluring, as a seductive God's evil light, though it does not form the world according to His providence. To call it also an infernal light is not to suggest a specific power of darkness hidden within it, but is to be immersed in its phantasmic mutability; it is an ungodly light – not in providential opposition with darkness, not as the immaculate medium forming concentric unity of the mirroring eye (Jakob Bohm's 'philosophique globe'); instead, a voluptuous fluid that twitches, congeals, clots and liquefies again within the obscenely disproportionate, organic eye which stares, consumes, vomits (its pulsations forged Shelley's vision of his wife Mary's breasts as staring eyes). Despite the feeling of remoteness, of romantic solitude, of Olympian perception, Tim Maguire's paintings turn a marvelous evil eye toward us, staining us with a light that does not designate Apollonian proportion and distance, but one which appears and disappears in irredeemable anamorphosis and unprincipled, promiscuous indistinction.

Edward Colless

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