

A Conversion

Derek Walcott

I

When I was invited to write about Clemente, my instant reaction was refusal, because his work irritated rather than excited me. But the idea was challenging and my judgment needed reassessment. I had been sent reproductions measuring about an inch high of his series. “A History of the Heart in Three Rainbows” (the title creating a slight, disdainful shudder), and their scale seemed incredible—six feet by twelve feet—in watercolour! Was there paper that size, and did he pour on the washes of colour without their buckling when they dried? How did he tilt the surface to get an even flow of colour without their puddling? The photocopy dimensions were absurd, but their original scale—not in inches, but in feet—was staggering; each painting aimed at inducing a wow!

“The measurement: is this inches or feet?” I asked.

“Feet.”

I was astounded.

“Does he pour it? ”

“Yes, he poured it.”

No brush was that wide, and no matter how broad the brush, it would leave seams at the edge of the stroke if the painter wanted a unified surface, a single wash.

In a watercolour you have to watch out for doing too many washes, the paint puddling; only masters like Sargent or Hopper avoid this. Well, we’ll see, I thought. The title of that effete effort at metaphor put me off. Nothing is more nauseous than American surrealism, I thought. It’s like a truck-driving uncle trying on a tutu for ballet class. Anyway, I like my surrealism nasty, like e. e. cummings, who can turn into wet Kleenex when he is sentimental, and Clemente is unabashedly sentimental. His delicacy, his sensitivity, can be irritating, but I began to see that he wants it to be that way; he wants to record both the damp, sentimental thing and to provoke my recoil from it. Watercolour on that scale must have taken on the belligerence—or, say, the vehemence—of large oils. So something approaching a conversion began. Their design, I could see, was not the usual Rorschach dribbles, the mind-numbing surrender to uni-dimensional mystery. I read that Clemente lived, lives in India, but those mandalas were without affectation or enigma or psychological riddle.

No naïf artist could have done them; they were a manifestation of magic, of the painter’s prestidigitation. What I will probably admire, I thought, is the technical miracle of a mass of water suspended: a transformation of the material into what is astonishing and contradictory.

II

Clemente’s drawing is deliberately infantile—that is, innocent—in the way that Blake describes innocence: a new illumination that follows on experience. But it is also primitive, or rather primal, and Egyptian like David Hockney’s serial bas-reliefs. He

antedates classical, Greco-Roman drawing and sculpture, and at first it seems faux-naïf, a pretext, but it is, simply, without any theory, a way of seeing the world afresh, of Blake's looking not "with" but "through" the eye, and I resist it. But, again, I was probably meant to dislike it, to look at it correctingly, patronizingly, the way a missionary may look at the tablets and amulets of a naked tribe, a parent at a backward child, or a doctor at the work of an unstable patient. The drawings often look wounded, as if they are the emblems of a psychic instability, the deformities of a harmless imagination, but they are more than that—they are contradictions of history, of a given aesthetic, not defiant of but unaware of perspective and its third dimension. They float above rules and principles like Chagall's compositions. There is no pivot and there is no frame. My anger at Clemente's drawing began with all these things, but was chiefly a recoil from their surrealism—a floating penis here, a disembodied eye there, rubber limbs, bodies without skeletons, a too conspicuous imagination. Now, being formally asked, I looked at them more respectfully than at the doodling of an aging *enfant terrible*.

It was their surrealism that irritated me. I dislike it in poetry and I dislike it in painting—for example, Redon and that drifting cyclopean head of his. American poets and painters brandished surrealism as if they had discovered it having a beer at the Cedar Tavern. Frank O'Hara admitted the adaptation, and then it became its opposite; it made not having rules the rule, it made freedom compulsion and made a new perspective of the meandering line. It made the powerful cute. If you place Clemente next to Blake, the changing of power or of prayer into pathos is evident. But I am following a deceptive lead and I need to go back to where it begins: vision, the way an artist sees. We cannot alter what we see, and yet no two artists see the same object or person, still-life or landscape, the same way. Otherwise there would only be one drawing, one portrait, one view identically repeated in every culture because the laws of reproduction are unalterable. Clemente is Italian and therefore a descendant of and an heir to Michelangelo; can we place these flaccid, boneless doodles against the marmoreal solidity of, say, the Cumaen Sybil or the muscle flexing of a six-pack athlete. I forget the artist who dismissed Michelangelo as beefsteak; but the school of Michelangelo can balloon and inflate itself so rhetorically that we can long for the epigrammatic reductions of a Clemente. It is only recently that great painters have been allowed to be bad draughtsmen. Neither Cezanne nor Van Gogh really drew that astonishingly; their badness was an anguish that they had to dominate by giving their distortions harmony.

William Blake knew that it takes experience to render or create innocence in poetry, that the betrayal of truth lies in the faux-naïf; and Francesco Clemente, the painter, either knows this or pretends that he doesn't. At any rate, his work invites one to look regressively; it contains experience, but presents its conceptual drawing as innocence, as even ignorance. The draughtsman presents his as if there is so much experience to be recorded that it needs reduction, simplification, near formula.

Drawing is as personal as handwriting, and when we read Clemente's drawings we see both clarity and contradiction. They look like wriggling reflections on the placid surface of the paper. They emphasize timidity, fragility, fear. Their limpid mortality is disturbing. These massive watercolours, despite their scale, or because of it, contain both experience and innocence. In the spacious gallery where their mantras are

mounted, they are like the walls of the temple where Clemente, the artist, is preserver and priest.

This sense of service to the imagination and to the tribe has a more than secular example, and it almost effected my conversion. I value the joy in their patience, in their emphasis on the painter's—every painter's—evaluation in symbol and mystery, in their open piety. There are few artists around who so unabashedly cherish their vocation; to sanctify delight is to be what Wordsworth called Nature's Priest—not of landscapes, but of our mental travel.

Technically, these spiritual landscapes have kept the texture of their origin: water. Their compositions always skirt peril and absorption. You feel that the brief bliss which blossoms when the loaded brush touches the damp surface and the painting begins that touch which instantly enables and humbles the painter, has been repeated, prolonged into an ecstasy of loving everything, especially sex, the mystery of flesh in the terms of Blake's mantra:

For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life
Therefore the soul of sweet content can never be defiled.

It is the surrealist effort to reproduce metaphor that does not quite work for me. Painting can reproduce simile—*this* evokes *that*—the balance of two objects that are made synonymous, that can only go so far, though where it gets can be very enjoyable, as with Chagall, the painter whom Clemente most evokes; but surrealism's effort to create a pictorial poetry has its limits for me. I keep a distance because surrealist painting is an attempt to make a second language in which logic does not apply. All the objects in Chagall still have names, as they do in Clemente, but comparing these paintings to poems is itself a frontier. I pause at the border unwilling to cross over, but my hesitancy and refusal is my fault. Clemente makes me admit my inadequacy. I resist surrender, his banal, intolerant opposite. Here the theme is the human heart, weighted full and palpitating. In Chagall, cows and fiddlers, exploding bouquets, they are symbols of orthodoxy. Clemente is secular, but not a heretic. Art is his orthodoxy.

An object, a face, a loaf, a landscape exists in air, unframed space. A sheet of paper, a camera, a blank wall with edges is meant to contain the lineaments of the subject. Does proportion, measurement begin instantly? Is it synonymous with vision? Are there already on the canvas or sheet of drawing paper lines that are projected by the mass or bulk of the object? Are these lines inflexible? Clemente is sitting next to Michelangelo; both are drawing. Since there is only one object being drawn, reproduction should be identical in either's representation, but they are not. To permit both versions to be valid is to say that there is no such thing as the presentation of reality, that the way anything is defined in line is acceptable, anarchic. Clemente steps back in time before the rules of representation are formalized and proceeds, instinctually, to draw. How? Who dictates the direction of his line and what is its intention? The vase, the apple, the face, or his vision of them? What is this suspension of belief that hangs transformed from a flat plane surface? The reality of that plane surface without any forced or artificial depth, treated for what it is, was thunderously adumbrated by Cezanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings in which he simultaneously

worked in two truths: the flat plane of the canvas and the continuation of that one dimension by the succession of brick-like strokes that build solidity and also depth.

In impressionist painting, the death of black for outline, except for a defiant Manet, also altered perspective. Everything is close, even distance. The paint, or rather the action of painting, is shared by the viewer and difference is only a matter of tint and hue. This is not so in the academy where the artist thinks of distance as he draws it. Clemente's planes begin with gaiety; every drawing of the painted object is a manifestation of the delight in painting it, which is the infantile delight of the child until the instruction of reality becomes too difficult and drawing is abandoned. We have reduced art to obedience. This is not Blake's route and it is not Clemente's, but the question is always: Who is to say? Who is to say what is good or bad drawing? Van Gogh and Cezanne can both be gloriously awkward draughtsmen, but that defence is too easy. Good drawing vibrates beyond its outlines.

As we work, the work casts a shadow, or if it is language, an echo of every word is its parallel. Clemente wants to paint the shadow and the echo of the original; that is his true territory as well as the object that his drawings delineate: not only the object, but the shadow of the object; not only the word, but the echo of the word. And sometimes in Clemente, the shadow precedes the subject and the echo precedes the word.

The exhibition of fifteen immense watercolours with the overall title "A History of the Heart in Three Rainbows" is staggering in scale but is conceptually humble rather than pompous. Its humour is delicate, its tenderness unabashed. To manage intimacy on such a scale, to whisper in the viewer's ear rather than roar, is worthy of a conversion. His Franciscan affection for all things makes Clemente's series sacred.

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