Seeing a world through the eyes of a child on a mountaintop

There is a well-known adage about venturing off to foreign lands, that what one finds there is only what one takes along. The idea – a favourite of literature, of film and of pop psychology for a long time now – is that the trip outward is ultimately a journey inward, culminating in the discovery of hidden aspects of self. The metaphor of the 'journey home' presents a familiar spatial movement between inner and outer, known and unknown, intended to strengthen a sense of self. The metaphor is, however, so well-travelled as to have long ago disavowed its own place of origin. Indeed, its sojourns have given it a sort of psycho- and sociopathology which bears some analysis – which I offer here as my own approach to some of the themes I find in Mikala Dwyer's latest work, showing in Berlin in early 2007.

In literature, the outward form of the journey is commonly a trip into the strange and extraordinary. So the protagonist finds himself (for he is usually male) in the grip of cultural tendencies that Edward Said has defined as 'orientalism' in his monograph of the same name: the exotic fascinates, but only as the 'other' of all that 'we' properly are. The 'other' is a negative of the 'self', and shows 'us' what 'we' are by inversion. These assumptions, Said shows, are a recurring theme in Europe's depiction of its colonies. One might expect that the protagonist ought, by means of his travels, come to identify and disavow such assumptions. He ought by rights to locate in the foreign land an immense cultural wealth: intellectual, religious, aesthetic resources to sustain him during his journey and long after. Instead, by means of this metaphor of the 'journey home', he is enabled to discover the enormity of his own internal reserves. The rest is simply there for plunder, its origin 'out there' unrecorded. So Perseus finds his Medusa - in Africa, as it happens; it matters not where - but his image of her is necessarily inverted by his reflections and projections onto her. Who she is remains unknown.

From the very start, there is much to be said for redirecting the standard trajectory of this 'journey home' theme. Let me take this as the first step in entering Dwyer's work. The location of this work, and of the ideas it explores, are to my mind unmistakably European. The form of the work itself, we might take to resemble a typical alpine setting: quaint village centred around a steeple, majestic mountains overhead. This would give us a direct approach, were it not that this village clearly cannot function as such, with its houses wide open and barely structured, its gardens suspended midair and its mountains transparent. So pursuing a more tentative path, let me explore this traditional European village as symbolic of something far richer: a place in which numerous paths of interpretation may converge. Only thus can it represent a space of art in Europe at present.

Let me start, then, with the fact that the artist's personal journey is from a place that still identifies itself as a colony. (This is surely relevant, although it is not highlighted.) Perhaps it could be said the immense cultural wealth here in Europe, at this point of destination, makes it harder to support the 'journey home' model as a journey inward: so splendid is the panorama that one finds here that a reversion to self is not called for. But in that case, one might be tempted by a variation on the metaphor, which takes the form of nostalgia, suggesting that this is where 'the heart' has been all along. For those of us who have (for reason of background, education, or taste) immersed ourselves in European cultural history, this temptation can be very strong. This nostalgia is nevertheless another feature of the colonial stereotype that Europe has promoted, as described by Said. So this version of the metaphor also needs to be questioned, to consider whether it contributes to the 'othering' of the colonial perspective.

These practices of othering may be considered by way of the model of space that they employ. This sense of space is an essentially European one, underwriting its relationship to the rest of the world, to its colonies and particularly to those who have left and who return to it. For the population of Europe, the 20th century saw social and geographical dislocation on an unprecedented scale; few are untouched by it. This theme has been developed through countless narratives of upheaval: of heading out and returning, of migration and relocation, of diaspora and exile and eventual homecoming, of journeys of rediscovery and of pilgrimage. The theme is so widespread as to have a virtual monopoly on European travel narratives. In these narratives, Europe plays a functional role, alluding to values that are fundamental, perennial and shared. The role that Europe plays in these narratives can in some measure account for the sense of outrage felt by many Americans when purportedly abandoned by France over the last few years: the thought that one's distant relatives should have disavowed one's common values. The rules governing the shared sense of have been broken; the path of homecoming is blocked.

In this work, as I interpret it, Dwyer explores paths of return. She extends an invitation to enter her work as if a traveller. Truly, this is a difficult task: the space of the European village is so thoroughly familiar that it is difficult to see it with the eyes of the newcomer. In such a setting, recalled from so many old postcards, can one recall the wonder of something that is so entirely new, so foreign, that it thrills and delights? And what of features of the European village: the little clusters of dwellings, the centred turret, the tidy formal civic gardens, and most of all, the mountain towering overhead. Are these not so thoroughly steeped in a shared cultural significance that their values are learnt almost from birth? In the cultural symbolic that surrounds Europe, it is a mythical place, a symbol of an idyllic past, a bastion of homeliness and familiarity. The task is a difficult one, then, because the homeliness and familiarity of this cultural symbolic forecloses any possibility of a challenge to it.

Were the narrative of outward journey and return to be believed, the homely European vista would provide its conclusion. That, in other words, would be the end of the story: we are home. Dwyer's invitation to enter this space as a traveller, however, allows us – indeed, requires us – to ask questions that extend the narrative: where are we, exactly? Is it really home, and if so, in what sense? Who inhabits this place and what values do we share? If it is in any sense home, then it ought to provide the security and leisure in which to ask these questions with confidence. If there is life in this place, then it must be possible to see this town with eyes afresh, to bring new perspectives to bear upon it. (Imagine if you will that our traveller has just come from the streets of Berlin. In Berlin, questions about what home ought to be are not merely possible, but largely unavoidable.) The point is that, however we come to be here in this idyllic landscape, a fresh perspective derived from a knowledge of foreign places is surely to be welcomed. Even for those for whom this place is most assuredly home, a traveller's perspective can still reward.

Likewise, if the metaphor of the journey home is not simply a dead one, then it must be possible to breathe new life into it. To do so, we must first consider the model of space that supports it. The theme of journey and return that I have introduced is one of reflection and projection. There are (at least) two aspects to this theme. The first is that the perspective of the traveller is a reflection on the self, a self-reflection. The second is that this perspective is created by way of a projection onto what is foreign to the self; it is a self-conscious creation of the other as other than a self-defined self. The other is a projection created by way of a reflection on the self. The two aspects of the theme work to reinforce each other. The upshot is a model of space which is 'egological' (to use a technical term of European philosophy); that is, it revolves around the need to reinforce a sense of self-identity. The journey outward operates, not to extend or to challenge the borders of this sense of self, but to shore it up against potential challenges.

Now, if we are to envisage the traditional European town through a traveller's eyes, we need a perspective that does not merely reinforce received assumptions about what Europe is or can be. We need a vision that is not shaped merely by images imported from where we have come, nor images of what we should expect to see on arrival. We need to expand our vision beyond what we understand to be possible in view of what we see. But to develop such a vision, we need a way of conceiving our relation to this space that is not merely one of reflection and projection. We need to come to this European space with different spatial metaphors from those we have received. We need models of space which will allow us to be creative, imaginative and ingenious in our thinking about this European space. We need, we might say, to come to this European space armed with a concept of artistic space.

In the service of such a project, let me contrast the egological model I have introduced with two other models of spatial experience, which we might call the interactive and the other-directed models. (I introduce them here since, as the 'dialogical' and the 'heterological', they are described by Michel Theunissen in *The Other* as the two major challenges to the 'egological' model in modern European thought.) The first of these emphasises the interaction of the perspectives of self and other, their mutuality and relation. In this model of space, the boundaries around self and other overlap, and each contributes to the other. The autonomy of each is challenged by what each shares with the other. The sense of space might be figured as that of the traveller who, finding herself in a foreign land, seeks direction by sharing her understanding with that of the local. The easy give-and-take of the traveller's situation makes her receptive to what the two share and to what this place shares with her home.

The second model of space emphasises the fundamental distinctness of the other's perspective and the need to give this otherness primacy if one is to understand it. In this model of space, the boundaries around the self are permanently open to the influence of the other, which not only supports and sustains the self but also contests it. The autonomy of the self is thus constantly challenged by the difference of the other. The sense of space might be figured as that of the traveller who, finding herself in a foreign land, seeks direction by way of suggestions offered in a foreign tongue. This traveller's recognition of the foreignness of her situation makes her receptive; her success will depend on her desire and ability to learn from the local, to discern patterns of thought and behaviour that are new to her. It is reasonable to assume that each of these two examples present situations which call for the exercise of creativity, imagination and ingenuity.

Pursuing these two alternative models of space may provide us with new ways of thinking about developing one's perspective as a traveller, about the journey home, and about home itself. But equally, we might say that thinking about home may offer us new ways of thinking about space. For implicit in the home environment are models of space that were there all along, but are ignored or underrated simply because they are so mundane, so domestic. Since we are talking about this home environment, and the possibility of fresh perspectives on it, let us look at it by way of another metaphor: let us look at it 'through the eyes of a child'. Here if anywhere are to be discovered perspectives which delight and thrill because of their freshness; here the world is still a place of wonder. The relevance of the child's view to this discussion is suggested by D.W. Winnicott's analysis of the origins of culture in *Playing and Reality*, in which culture is conceived as an artistic space created in the process of the child's separation from its mother. It is also suggested by a series of paintings, somewhat off-centre (off 'the beaten track') in this exhibition, on which Dwyer worked with her daughter.

The prevailing imagery of childhood development throughout the last century has been supplied by Sigmund Freud's imagery of reflection: the child comes into consciousness by introverting the image of himself presented in the mirror. (Once again, the subject of this story is male.) By identifying with the reflection of self he sees there, the child comes to recognise himself as a subject, as others see him. This process of the attainment of subjectivity may be fraught and it may never be successfully completed, confronted as it is by the proscriptions of the 'Law of the Father' - and its relevance to the development of female subjectivity is still a matter of debate among feminist psychoanalysts. All other things being equal, however, the child enters culture with a sense of self strong enough to withstand those social pressures which would pave the way either to neurosis (wherein the self is insufficiently separated from the other) or to psychosis (wherein the self is overly separated from the other). This child ideally develops into the traveller who follows his own path. So, for example, in his essay 'Medusa's Head', Freud celebrates the slaying of Medusa as the act by which Perseus gains his independence, interpreted as the emancipation of his sexuality from the threat of the mother.

Winnicott develops a different model of the child's development of a sense of space. Winnicott's child is not alone with a mirror but cradled by another, its mother or mother-figure, who must also undergo the process of separation. The sense of space that the child attains is shared with the mother (the other). This shared space is the space between them, which grows as the child grows and comes to fill it with meaning. In fact the separation from the mother is only arrived at by way of the creation of this space between mother and child, which is the space of culture. At first, the space is filled with the meaning created in the child's play, but as the child develops into adolescent and adult, this space comes to be filled with 'the enjoyment of the cultural heritage' of the culture into which he or she grows. This explains the cultural heritage itself, its use of symbols that at one and the same time stand for phenomena of the external world and for the experience of the individual within it. This cultural space is a space of potential, the expression of a growing and fertile imagination, and is always transitional, the product of a developing sense of self. The child is securely located in this space, but its borders are not closed to the other; the interaction of self and other, and the role of the other in the creation of self, are fundamental to it. The separation of the self is avoided by filling this potential space of the child's developing subjectivity with 'all that eventually adds up to a cultural life'. It is in this sense a potentially infinite space and a symbol of the infinite wealth of culture. Winnicott presents something rather rare in the 20th century: a defence of a notion of the infinite.

This symbol of the infinite is at the heart of this exhibition, and I will draw on it to finish. In Friedrich Nietzsche's later works, especially *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he presents a wonderful metaphor of the breadth of perspective gained by standing high on mountain peaks.

The metaphor obviously feeds off a tradition of writing about the magic or mystical mountain. Dwyer's incorporation of this metaphor renders the mountain transparent, as if of glass or crystal, reinforcing its traditional spiritual connotations: it is a receptacle of one's highest values, a symbol of one's quest for the transcendent. The contemporary perspective tends to focus on the phallic nature of all towering constructions; I do not interpret this symbol in this way. The mountain for Nietzsche represented a playful inversion of his metaphor of the abyss. It represented a way for modern man, weighed down by nihilism and scepticism, to rise above prevailing perspectives of the contemporary world. He presented this image as an expression of a profound optimism – what he called a 'joyful affirmation' and 'divine yea-saying'. It is a metaphor for enlarged and unending perspective, which Nietzsche took to be an essentially artistic way of viewing the world. Employing this metaphor, he envisaged a Europe not deprived of meaning, but overwhelmed with an excess of meaning. From the mountaintop, one is granted a vision of new horizons and of further shores. One sees the world recreated by new perspectives.

Those familiar with Nietzsche's 'death of god' philosophy will recognise that the spatial and spiritual sense of Nietzsche's mountain metaphor is not that of the god's eye view - a perspective which is itself archetypically egological and phallic. In Europe, the price paid for pursuing such perspectives is known. On the contrary, this is a metaphor for seeing the world anew, as a place of wonder, much as the child sees it. It is a way of seeing that befits a place that is renewing itself. The task facing those of us who find ourselves here in Europe at this time is not to make something out of nothing, as might a god. It is rather to make something out of too much, out of a superfluity of meaning and value, as might a child. The artist venturing into this excessively fertile space is challenged to give sense and form to this excess, to model it so as to add further meaning. This European space is a transitional space, a space of pure potential, a space wherein new meaning and value is in the process of being created. The desire to share in this process is compelling; it is a good thing that Europe has the sense to see that by keeping its borders open to the other, its own wealth of perspective is increased.

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