

Elaboration

A child sat in a garden at the end of summer in 1946 - At might easily call it a park. Fir and oak trees stood there spaced with considerable open areas between them. But their branches touched, sheltering the entire area, with the roof of their leaves and branches supported by the trunks, making the whole space into a kind of great hall. The ground cover was sparse, with any signs of its former state now faded.

There were two rather small two-storey buildings in this space, about ten meters square, 100 meters apart - rather a large distance, given their size. These were indeterminate historicizing structures with the sections and divisions typical of the turn of the century, with much of their vies hidden by the plant life around them. At some time, perhaps not even so long ago, there must have been a careful order in and around these houses, but by the time the child first saw them, there was just one dusty, lumbering servant-type working there, who either didn't think much of the place, or had no wish to remember its previous state, deliberately or not. So furniture and garden implements, sometimes in bits and pieces, were coming to litter the park.

As I say, it was 1946. It would appear that my father still had some money, having been a highly reputed architect before the war, and decided to take his two small children and their nanny to the Jarmay inn on Svabhegy hill to recover from the trials of the recent siege. A private teacher would even visit them, fittingly enough a small man with a limp, and a dreamer, with a cane always in his hand. This was Mr. Palos.

As time passed, I often thought about that place and could recount its details in my mind; those half-dreamlike images were always complete. I saw the russet squirrels jumping from tree to tree, and the birds of the morning that sat motionless on their branches like fruit, only stretching out their beaks from time to time like some kind of music-making

machine. My gaze often turned upward in the direction of that spreading layer of boughs, because I would often lie outside in the cool of the morning on a cot covered with horse-colored blankets. But my brother and I would also get around to all the nooks and crannies of the garden. Along the back end of the property ran a narrow walkway, about 1.5 meters wide, known only to the locals. That part of the park was particularly out of the way and mysterious: that's where we would pitch our little tent.

So the images that collected in the warehouse of my childhood imagination were quite varied, of many perspectives. Even so, there was one main image above all others, a view that you could get from Rege Street. It was a comprehensive view, taking in the entire spread of the property with its trees, houses, and the deep perspectives between them. This was the picture I pulled up repeatedly, to the stubborn tick of a metronome, as the decades relentlessly passed. I would look at it, observe it.

After a while I noticed that not all parts of the virtual image were entirely in focus. The bark of the trees, the branches and leaves, the delicate empty gaps full of light, the animals in constant scurry, the bushes and grassy areas were all precisely visible, as in a

professional photograph taken with a Hasselblad for scientific use, with every nook, every line, every color, contour, and texture. Every element was on display. Even in a group of leaves, hidden in a spot of shade, you could make out every single leaf, thanks to the delicate, darker pencil-line of their edges and veins. And wherever a branch was drenched in light, each element received its own distinctive illumination as a product of the myriad different angles at which they stood; the group was an agglomeration of independent parts. It resembled the brushstrokes on a painting by Tihamer Gyarmathy, or Albrecht Altdorfer's Saint George, where the tiny saint, as he kills the little dragon, is framed by the infinite leaves of the forest, each one painted.

Such was the sharpness of the natural parts of my memory's image, but whenever I turned my imagination to those two houses, no amount of squinting or blinking could keep them from being fuzzy, as in an apparition. It was as if the mocha nism of recall placed some sort of veil-like membrane or thin stage-curtain before the objects. Their details washed together, and their outlines suggested the blur of dirt. Their surfaces were worn and disfigured through use, erosion, and time's foraging hand. What is mores this physical blur then seemed to extend to the meaning of these things. Since the trees and branches had no meaning assigned to them, there was nothing for time to wash away, and they remained forever fresh and untouched, even in the semiotic sense. On the other hand, the conversation between the details of the houses and their entirety became cloudy over time, even to the point of unrecognizability. This gave rise to a suspicion that their message had been unclear from the outset, from their creation.

I would look often at the sole image of my vision, for a long time not noticing this distinction. Then came a stage where I meditated on the phenomenon of sharpness and blurriness within it, but without seeking an explanation, thinking perhaps there was none to be found. Then, not long ago, while teaching a university course, I decided to lecture on the notion of elaboration, which was once an honorable, even moral ingredient of human objects [paintings, statues, buildings, and artistic and other objects], but is ever more rarely so today - and if so, only a stunted version of its earlier presence. It was becoming clear to me that these two issues - the image in memory and the concept of elabb oration - might be related.

We may speak of divine or human elaboration, I thought, and the aforementioned relationship consists of this: in my imagination - and only there - the presumed divine shape ing creates the impression of incomprehensible precision,

while human works, unable so achieve this standard of exactitude, are all more or less flawed, and "off." After all, we must allow for tolerances of divergence from even our most exacting specifications.

From earliest times, people have been looking at the infinite workmanship and refinement inherent in divine creations. At first they probably only perceived an incomprehensible depth, the flood of characteristics that emanated from natural phenomena and living creatures, but later, when they began to explore consciously, they gained insight into the irresistibly ever-greater detail of things, as well as their dizzyingly expanding

perspectives. The unfathomable depth of this latter pair [as well as the previous experience of manifoldness indicated that the creator had fashioned natural objects with an incomprehensible detail, and continued to work on them, perfect them, change them, even to the present day, like certain self-critical masters. But the entirety of creation presented itself as one single, unavoidable model, an inviolate paradigm. Once people began to create objects and structures for themselves using ever-more varied methods, this model fanned their desire to execute their works with similar care. So they chipped, hammered, dug, aligned, smoothed, carved, engraved, mixed, heated, cut, spread, stamped, pressed, organized, drew, and measured with increasing giddiness. Their interests and ambitions were soon not only directed towards the object, but also towards taking up the special differences between human and divine creation. They made an issue of the refinement of the completed state, of theories of creation and preparation, and they noticed issues of style, and a particular mysticism arose surrounding their tools, those unusual ancillary objects.

Various modes of working human creations arose, of which I would like to discuss two strongly contrasting ones as examples. One is an agglutinative model, where the creator of a work collects a great many little pieces, elements, and parts with the industry of an ant over gears or even decades, some times with the help of many people. He piles fragments onto one another in a frenzy, observing that their number becomes more and more daunting with the passage of time and of his energy. This is a kind of delirium, a narcotic state driven by the primal gathering instinct, its stimulant being the intoxicating monotony of collecting similar objects together. This was how the Pharaoh worked, and a little lonely man Hving in Pesterzsebet who, over a period of decades, collected iron parts of all sizes in the garden of his house where a large hut or storehouse stood. He would take the pieces in there and weld them to previously collected ones, starting from the wall opposite the door and moving backwards, filling the area from floor to ceiling. When he died, and the time came to sell the property, they found the storehouse, in which [or together with which) was the work itself. You could only step about half a meter into the place. Another kind of elaboration involves not the mechanical placing elements side by side in a row, but is rather a heterogeneous organizational and functional unity that aims at the most perfect and many-layered function possible. Examples would be the telephone or the airplane, or a catted dral, where individual parts are of many kinds and serve various functions, and their different kinds of elaboration enable the unified functioning of the whole. Another example of this sort is, say, the altarpiece by Hubert and Jan van Eyck in the cathedral of St. Bavo in Ghent. One need only observe the slow, patient, humble, and time-consuming efforts with which the ambitious and fervent brothers competed with nature - or rather with creation itself. Another example: the Rijksmuseum's exhibition on the history of ships contains a small horizontal 18th-century painting that depicts an enormous battleship with five masts and two

decks of cannon. It floats in the distance, far out to sea, its large draft preventing it from approaching closer to the coast of a south-sea island that is just visible in the picture. The captain and his armed companions enter the bay in a boat, while around them stand savages, naked, gaping leaning on their clubs. The captain looks at the savages then [in the picture] at his ship, and says [according to the painting's caption] "Now I see how far

we have come." The great ship consists of hundreds of thousands of mostly different parts, standing above the horizon as a testament to the technique of elaboration, organization, and production.

Thanks to diligent craftsmen and woodworkers driving one another on, and feverish explorers, and constant workers, the elaboration of objects turned into a kind of auction - not only of things in competition with each other, but almost with the goal of surpassing nature herself, of besting nature's own elaboration.

The whole operation progresses, but still a shadow falls on every human being. It is a kind of fog, the melancholy of limitations, a pathological lack of clear meaning, a fear of the inevitability of errors, the hopelessness of vying with nature, the sadness of humanity's death penalty, the enervating state of waiting for death. This is probably the same fog that covered the houses of the inn at Jarmag as well; the original childhood image must certainly have been sharp in every detail. There must have been a sense of confidence stirred by the recognizability of everything, a confidence that has faded over the subsequent decades regarding human things, a result of accumulated experiences (like coming to know architecture). I have encountered human frailty, impermanence, the impossibility of distinguishing good from evil, the embittering relativity of beauty, and so many other ambiguous issues. In the course of these encounters, a shadow has fallen on things that come from human hands.

It has been suggested that there is no meaning in nature as there is in the world created by man. Natural creation is not out to communicate anything, has nothing to say, in contrast to our objects that practically percolate in a soup of meanings. But these signs apply only for a time, quickly losing or changing significance, thus spreading darkness. And yet there is still something like nature in the depths of the meanings borne by man-made objects, something without a message, a mute substance that once seemed lasting, unmovable, and inviolable. Now it seems as if some kind of disease has destroyed even this. That thick steam - it has either eaten away at this, or surrounded it in an impenetrable layer. Such are my speculations.

Over the years, as I recalled the vision from the Svabhegy, noting the contrast between its parts that were in focus and those that were fuzzy, and theorizing on this, the time that separated me from the actual visual experience grew ever greater. So now I will set off towards the mountain to see what is in fact there after all. This fuzziness-sharpness distinction could after all be merely a figment of my brooding imagination; in actuality all parts of the picture have the same sharpness, as originally, for light blesses everything equally with its bounty. This is what I am expecting as I stop for a moment on Rege Street, my head lowered to compose myself. But when I look up, I see that things are not like that at all! The tree trunks, the branches, every blade of grass all are drawn with a pinpoint implement, and the colors sit precisely in their places, cradled by the lines. The infinitude of divine elaboration is obvious. The houses, on the other hand, are no more than indeterminate heaps waiting for humans' trifling commands with an awkward and

simpleminded resignation.