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AN ACCOUNT

Lennart Bruce

This is not an attempt at literary criticism but just an account of what happened to me as I started writing five years ago. Before that time I led an entirely different life; being thus reborn at an advanced age creates a certain urgency to write whatever you want to get out of yourself rather than bothering too much about how & why.

Having been executed, at least financially, & publicly at that, I passed into afterlife with that delightful feeling, which, I suppose, is characteristic of all ghosts, of not caring too much about reasons or manner but just plainly enjoying the "spooking" itself.

I was in West Africa at the time, living under the stress of a climate & surroundings notorious for bringing out any latent psychosis & even driving perfectly sane people crazy, when everything started to crash all around me, inexplicably as it seemed: all I had built, from zero to the most sizable food distribution company in the country apart from the first public transport, etc., including coldstorage plants, food processing supermarkets, bus line, etc. I won't enter into the question, by fault of whom, because the crash itself revealed to me in its glare that the fault was nobody's, not even my own. At the end of a long period of exhaustion I became physically ill with high fever. The mental strain was great & I started hallucinating as though my whole life had risen in phantasms around me in a huge wave that wouldn't break. At the same time as I got scared I couldn't help but become fascinated by the visions, so much so, in fact, that I had to try to describe them; & this was the starting point of my writing. Later, I of course found that my experience was in no way extraordinary. Its most spectacular parallel brings me back to 1742 when the Italian engraver, Giovanni Batista Piranesi, at that time 22 years old, is said to have fallen ill with a violent attack of malaria. The fever-visions from this period of illness are said to be the origin of his masterpiece, a series of engravings published in 1745: *Invenzioni capric' di carceri*, or as they are commonly known, *Carceri* or *The Prisons*. These extremely powerful drawings introduced a new sensibility into European art: romanticism, part of the "fantastic" in art. In his great series, *Antichita Romane de Tempi della Republica e de primi Imperatori*, Piranesi

pictures ruins of temples, pyramids, theaters, forums & arenas with the utmost clarity & an abnormally sensitive feeling for the interplay between the architectonic & the creatures sparsely placed in these desolate surroundings as though they were strangely passing & coexisting without any connection, not being made for each other, part of two different worlds. One cannot be sure the creatures are living humans even—dwarfed, antlike among these torturously colossal constructions, hinting at the presence of something unavoidable & cruelly indifferent, an atmosphere of something holy which has been deserted. The order seems irrevocable & pertaining to other natural laws than those we know of. Piranesi's Carceri has had a great influence &, as a weird curiosity, it's worth mentioning that he directly influenced the English architect, George Dance, who later built the Newgate Prison in London. One of the best analyses of Piranesi's Carceri was written by Marguerite Yourcenar, to whom, apart from the Swedish writer Lars Gustafsson, I am greatly indebted for the wakening of my interest in Carceri. Marguerite Yourcenar writes in her *Le cerveau noir de Piranese*:

The real terror of Carceri is not so much created by some seclusive scenes of torture as by the indifference of the human ants erratically moving through the enormous rooms. The different groups practically never enter into contact with each other, even do not seem to be conscious of one another's existence, & still less they seem to notice that someone condemned is being tortured in a dark corner. And the most alarming characteristic of this insignificant group of humans is perhaps their immunity to vertigo. These people rambling about with the greatest ease & in good spirit at devastating heights seem to be completely unaware of the fact that they're moving on the edge of an abyss.

The French critic Roger Caillois has also, in his *Au coeur du fantastique & Images*, images, centered on "the fantastic" in art, the truly imaginative which sharply differs from the grotesque & fabulating: ghost stories, fairy tales, etc. The difference between these two, again using Carceri as an example, lies in the fact that there has been a displacement of our surroundings & living conditions. Piranesi's imagination has stretched them without ever letting them entirely lose connection with the actual well-known conditions we are living under.

I clearly recognize this stage from my own experience; the phantasms I hallucinated during the crisis in my life were strangely real & never let go from what we call reality &, therefore, were immensely threatening. It was as though all I had perceived in my life, & forgotten by my

conscious memory, had been ruminated into large blocks of information in my memory banks without my conscious cooperation & had suddenly surged to the surface threatening the organization of my individuality, although they, by their terror, chased me out of the cave where I wanted to hide from everything that crashed around me. I deliberately trained myself to pin these phantoms down & the series of weird happenings connected with them, calling them forward again & again, describing them until this activity actually triggered me into a new life of writing & reading, which I up to then had never touched. I found this a very fertile ground for imaginative processes which proceeded without my forcing them. I managed to train myself, at least that was my purpose, to somehow get farther down, behind the visualization of the eye into the area of intricate cooperation between the brain & the eye in image-forming which has demonstrated to me clearly that the common likeness of eye to camera is wrong & proven to me the constructive role of the brain in this cooperation. This area of human imagination is also blatantly honest, disrobing the individual completely &, therefore, also obscene. In its crude undressing it doesn't stop with sex but goes all the way to the ejection of the body's excrements, the most naked of all human stages.

The realist tradition, very strong in America, consciously removes itself from the territory of imagination characterized by Carceri. But to me during my crisis there was only one reality, the one of threat, & premonition, the reality I lived with for months & that pushed everything else into secondary position. How would I describe this in so-called realist terms? I cannot use reality before it happens, & yet my premonitions were more real than anything I had experienced, so I had to try to describe them. I cannot possibly do so using conventional logic. A presentiment, for example, does not simply fall within any such category. I have had to find the means of communication & this to me presents a challenge & invites creation.

The process of thought starts with perception through the senses, whether through sight, hearing or touch, etc. The information is then worked on by the brain; it may be led back into a subconscious loop or worked on directly. The next step on the scale is creating emotion & farther up this road we enter the area of reasoning. I find the main creative challenge in using as my starting point the territory of perception/emotion rather than emotion/reasoning, since I sense great pitfalls there. And one thing I am sure of—you cannot go backward: reasoning-emotion-perception. Doing that you wind up with faked surrealism.