

Drawn To That Moment

John Berger

When my father died recently, I did several drawings of him in his coffin. Drawings of his face and head. There is a story about Kokoschka teaching a life class. The students were uninspired. So he spoke to the model and instructed him to pretend to collapse. When he had fallen over, Kokoschka rushed over to him, listened to his heart and announced to the shocked students that he was dead. A little afterwards the model got to his feet and resumed the pose. 'Now draw him,' said Kokoschka, 'as though you were aware that he was alive and not dead.'

One can imagine that the students, after this theatrical experience, drew with more verve. Yet to draw the truly dead involves an ever-greater sense of urgency. What you are drawing will never be seen again, by you or by anybody else. In the whole course of time past and time to come, this moment is unique: the last opportunity to draw what will never again be visible, which has occurred once and will never reoccur. Because the faculty of sight is continuous, because visual categories (red, yellow, dark, thick, thin) remain constant, and because so many things appear to remain in place, one tends to forget that the visual is always a result of an unrepeatable, momentary encounter. Appearances, at any given moment, are a construction emerging from the debris of everything that has previously appeared. It is something like this that I understand in those words of Cézanne, which so often come back to me: 'One minute in the life of the world is going by. Paint it as it is.'

Beside my father's coffin I summoned such skill as I have as a draughtsman to apply it *directly* to the task in hand. I say directly because often skill in drawing expresses itself as a manner, and then its application to what is being drawn is indirect.

Mannerism – in the general rather than art-historical sense – comes from the need to invent urgency, to produce an 'urgent' drawing, instead

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of submitting to the urgency of what is. Here I was using my small skill to save a likeness, as a lifesaver uses his much greater skill as a swimmer to save a life. People talk of freshness of vision, of the intensity of seeing for the first time, but the intensity of seeing for the last time is, I believe, greater. Of all that I could see only the drawing would remain. I wept whilst I strove to draw with complete objectivity.

As I drew his mouth, his brows, his eyelids, as their specific forms emerged with lines from the whiteness of the paper, I felt the history and the experience which had made them as they were. His life was now as finite as the rectangle of paper on which I was drawing, but within it, in a way infinitely more mysterious than any drawing, his character and destiny had emerged. I was making a record and his face was already only a record of his life. Each drawing then was nothing but the site of a departure.

They remained. I looked at them and found that they resembled my father. Or, more strictly, that they resembled him as he was when dead. Nobody could ever mistake these drawings as ones of an old man sleeping. Why not? I ask myself. And the answer, I think, is in the way they are drawn. Nobody could draw a sleeping man with such objectivity. About this quality there is finality. Objectivity is what is left when something is finished.

I chose one drawing to frame and hang on the wall in front of the table at which I work. Gradually and consistently the relationship of my father to his drawing changed – or changed for me.

There are several ways of describing the change. The content of the drawing increased. The drawing, instead of marking the site of departure, began to mark the site of an arrival. The forms, drawn, filled out. The drawing became the immediate locus of my memories of my father. The drawing was, no longer deserted but inhabited. For each form, between the pencil marks and the white paper they marked, there was now a door through which moments of a life could enter: the drawing, instead of being simply an object of perception with one face, had moved forward to become double-faced, and worked like a filter, from behind, it drew out my memories of the past whilst, forwards, it projected an image which, unchanging, was becoming increasingly familiar. My father came back to give the image of his death mask a kind of life. If I look at the drawing now, I scarcely see the face of a dead man; instead I see aspects of my father's life. Yet if somebody from the village came in, he would see only a drawing of a death mask. It is still unmistakably that. The change which has taken place is subjective. Yet, in a more general sense, if such a subjective process did not exist, neither would drawings.

The advent of the cinema and television means that we now define drawings (or paintings) as static images. What we often overlook is that their virtue, their very function, depended upon this. The need to discover the camera, and the instantaneous or moving image, arose for many different reasons but it was not in order to improve on the static image, or, if it was presented in those terms, it was only because the meaning of the static image had been lost. In the nineteenth

century when social time became unilinear, vectorial and regularly exchangeable, the instant became the maximum which could be grasped or preserved. The plate camera and the pocket watch, the reflex camera and the wrist-watch, are twin inventions. A drawing or painting presupposes another view of time.

Any image – like the image read from the retina – records an appearance which will disappear. The faculty of sight developed as an active response to continually changing contingencies. The more it developed, the more complex the view of appearances it could construct from events. (An event in itself has no appearances.) Recognition is an essential part of this construction. And recognition depends upon the phenomenon of reappearance sometimes occurring in the ceaseless flux of disappearance. Thus, if appearances, at any given moment, are a construction emerging from the debris of all that has previously appeared, it is understandable that this very construction may give birth to the idea that everything will one day be recognizable, and the flux of disappearance cease. Such an idea is more than a personal dream; it has supplied the energy for a large part of human culture. For example: the story triumphs over oblivion; music offers a centre; the drawing challenges disappearance.

What is the nature of this challenge? A fossil also ‘challenges’ disappearance but the challenge is meaningless. A photograph challenges disappearance but its challenge is different from that of the fossil or the drawing.

The fossil is the result of random chance. The photographed image has been selected for preservation. The drawn image contains the experience of looking. A photographer is evidence of an encounter between event and photographer. A drawing slowly questions an event’s appearance and in so doing reminds us that appearances are always a construction with a history. (Our aspiration towards objectivity can only proceed from the admission of subjectivity.) We use photographs by taking them with us, in our lives, our arguments, our memories; it is we who move them. Whereas a drawing or painting forces us to stop and enter its time. A photograph is static because it has stopped time. A drawing or painting is static because it encompasses time.

I should perhaps explain here why I make a certain distinction between drawings and paintings. Drawings reveal the process of their own making, their own looking, more clearly. The imitative facility of a painting often acts as a disguise – i.e. what it refers to becomes more impressive than the reason for referring to it. Great paintings are not disguised in this way. But even a third-rate drawing reveals the process of its own creation.

How does a drawing or painting encompass time? What does it hold in its stillness? A drawing is more than a momento – a device for bringing back memories of the time past. The ‘space’ that my drawing offers for my father’s return into it is quite distinct from that offered by a letter from him, an object owned by him or, as I have tried to explain, a photograph of him. And here it is incidental that I am looking at a drawing which I drew myself. An equivalent drawing by anybody else would offer the same ‘space’.

To draw is to look, to examine the spectrum of appearance. A drawing of a tree

shows, not a tree, but a tree being-looked-at. Whereas the sight of a tree is registered almost instantaneously, the examination of the sight of a tree (a tree being-looked-at) not only takes minutes or hours instead of a fraction of a second, it also involves, derives from, and refers back to, much previous experience of looking. Within the instant of the sight of a tree is established a life-experience. This is how the act of drawing refuses the process of disappearances and proposes the simultaneity of a multitude of moments.

From each glance a drawing assembles a little evidence, but it consists of the evidence of many glances which can be seen together. On the one hand there is no sight in nature as unchanging as that of a drawing or a painting. On the other hand, what is unchanging in a drawing consists of so many assembled moments that they constitute a totality rather than a fragment. The static image of a drawing or painting is the result of the opposition of two dynamic processes. Disappearances opposed by assemblage. If, for diagrammatic convenience, one accepts the metaphor of time as a flow, a river, then the act of drawing, by driving upstream, achieves the stationary.

Vermeer's view of Delft across the canal explains this as no theoretical explanation can ever. The painted moment has remained (almost) unchanged for three centuries. The reflections in the water have not moved. Yet this painted moment, as we look at it, has a plenitude of actuality that we experience only rarely in life. We experience everything we see in the painting as *absolutely* momentary. At the same time the experience is repeatable the next day or in ten years. It would be naïve to suppose that this has to do with accuracy: Delft at any given moment never looked like this painting. It has to do with the density per square millimetre of Vermeer's looking, with the density per square millimetre of assembled moments.

As a drawing, the drawing above my table is unremarkable. But it works in accord with the same hopes and principles which have led men to draw for thousands of years. It works because from being a site of departure, it has become a site of arrival.

Every day more of my father's life returns to the drawing in front of me.

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