

## Beatrixpark: An Illumination

The man was from the south, a middle-aged man. A kind, caring friend had put him up, giving him a bed in the basement of her house. The man from the south was very provincial and would marvel whenever he encountered something in that society that was unfamiliar to him. Who knows what Amsterdam stood for in his eyes. A metaphor for the north, of course. But after all was said and done, north and south of what?

The man was provincial in every sense. There was his ignorance of languages, for example. He spoke and understood only his mother tongue. His ignorance of customs. Bicycle lanes left him slightly bewildered. Naturally, he realized that the orderliness was simply to make life easier for the residents. Nevertheless, being a man from the south, he remained mistrustful when faced with a practical, functional solution to a concrete, everyday problem. Beneath the provincialism in which he was steeped, the man from the south retained a skeptical nucleus of distant origin, pre-Greek perhaps, who can say?

For him it was not a matter of defeatism, nor of pessimism. Simply skepticism. Naturally he was completely unaware of it, and so he would stroll through Amsterdam as though watching a film. Do you “believe” a film? Do you think that what you see at the movies is all true? Slip in a DVD, stretch out your legs, watch: do you believe what you see? Maybe you do, maybe you don’t. What difference does it make?

It must however be said that a provincial man, particularly if he is from the south, preserves in some part of himself a small philosopher’s stone, a gram of judgment, which constantly brings him back to the question of whether or not to believe. What he sees, what he is told, what he hears, and so on.

To make a long story short, the man from the south accepted the things around him, but with a great deal of suspicion. Certain areas of the city, forcibly developed on artificial lands reclaimed from the brackish water, left him amazed and skeptical. How enterprising, he thought. Would I live here? he wondered. And at certain moments,

his answer was not at all “no.” Though he wasn’t able to express it, the man from the south loved that space in the north. For him it was a civil way of organizing life, though perhaps not his own life.

The provincial man from the south had many masks to hide behind so that his provincialism would not appear obvious. He had studied. He had done a thing or two. The man from the south, for example, could have declared that certain things that he had seen up there were not at all to his liking. Or that he thought very highly of them. Instead, the man from the south, a man of middle age, showed no reaction, pretending that nothing was new to him, or that everything was. Gimme a break, provincial, middle-aged man from the south! Fuck off, why don’t you?

He strolled through the neighborhood where he was staying. He saw schoolchildren cross the street and head toward the park. He studied the teachers who accompanied the children. This went on even in the south. So then why did the man interpret it with some kind of hermeneutic filter that viewed northern society as an established, functional social democracy, as if where he came from, in the south, the same schoolchildren, in the same situation, would never have been able to go about so easily, in danger of being mowed down by a truck at the first step they took, in danger of being crushed by a wall toppled by a lava flow, or by a flood—why?

The man from the south (southern Europe, it should be said) strolled along and warily reflected on what lay beyond certain windows of certain houses. In school, many years earlier, he had been told that there were no shutters, roll-ups, Venetian blinds, or shades in Holland: there were windows, with curtains, and that was all. He had been told that this went back to the fact that in the northern countries the pretenses of the south did not exist: there was no morbid concept of private space, interior and exterior did not exist as a moral dichotomy. Who knows what there is to hide, men and women as we all are, from the beginning of time, amen?

What lies behind the window? The provincial man hesitated at the edge of this question, but in the end he turned away. What was the point?

The man crossed the canal, strolling over the bridge. All of a sudden—as if until that moment he had been staring down at the ground—he spotted a procession of balconies, all open, all washed by

the warmth of the day. Women sat on many of those balconies wearing very little clothing, lounging, enjoying the sunshine, the fresh air and the fine day. To the man they all seemed exceptionally beautiful and above all disturbingly sensual. In his imagination, he felt himself being lifted off the ground and cast onto each balcony, the better to get to know the female manifestation that *lucertolava*, basked there, like a lizard.

*Lucertolare* was a verb used at one time in the restricted region in which the man happened to be born. It meant: to remain motionless on a rock, absorbing the sun, sucking up each ray. Like lizards, *lucertole*, do.

These girls, these women on the balconies, *lucertolavano*, and the provincial man was totally rapt: that was the final goal, he thought. To reach the point where shapely females promised and provided every pleasure.

The man wasn't sure that this was actually so. Still, some of the women on the balconies smiled at him (he thought they had, and maybe it was true).

A creature who smiles at you. Is it scandalous perhaps? Why did the provincial man feel he was more urbane than these women who—in his view—seemed so unsophisticated almost? Smile half-naked at a man passing by? That's like fueling the flames!

This north—so dazzling with history and philosophy, so glowing with art. One day the man from the south put on his jogging shoes, left the house, crossed the street and began running aimlessly along the lanes of Beatrixpark. He passed bridges, lingered on a bench in front of the small lake with a fair pavilion nearby. Walled though partially open gardens were located on his left; he strayed into them and then returned to the path, running vigorously, pushing through seemingly impenetrable vegetation.

He returned to the house where he was staying, still running. A girl went by on a bicycle along the road that he was about to cross. As she pedaled along, the girl's leg slid out of her skirt; her thigh was so perfect and luminous that the man from the south felt his knees weaken. Despite his middle age, the nerves around his knees reacted like they did many years ago, what more can I say?

The pale whiteness of that long, tapering leg rose and fell—calm and serene—as the girl pedaled and disappeared around a slight curve

between the houses whose windows etcetera etcetera.

The man did not cross the street. He did an about-face and returned to the paths in Beatrixpark. He retraced some routes, explored others. He met groups of runners like himself; people on bicycles passed on either side of him, moving in all directions.

The man had long since given up expecting significant revelations about life and existence from the natural world. At one time, nature had seemed always on the point of revealing some kind of secret formula, some combination to an unknown safe. When he was a kid. When he—a city dweller—went wandering through the woods in summer camp. A mosquito, a salamander, a bulb, a fern: these were emissaries announcing some kind of epiphany that lay behind the curtain.

He kept running in the park. He went around a few times. The weather was pleasant, the air fresh. He found himself opposite an expanse of water. Mothers strolling with their children. Kids. Elderly people, all out for a walk. A kind of wall of low vegetation framed the scene. He ran on. On the other side of the pond two swans had climbed out to the shore and were walking in their own awkward way.

A group of people stood quietly on the meadow, chatting. A dog, short and low, shaggy like a sheep that has never been sheared and the same color, suddenly shot out of that small group of people and—belly to the ground—headed swiftly toward the swans.

It looked like a bullet fired at ground level, accelerating forcefully.

When the dog was about three or four yards away, one of the two swans turned toward it and took a couple of steps that suddenly were not at all clumsy. He faced the dog determinedly, planted firmly on his webbed feet. Then he spread his wings, in a sweeping, powerful gesture. To the dog he must have looked like a huge symmetrical sail with a hard, colored rostrum in the center. The swan then stood stock still, wings open but not all the way. Expansive, tense, rooted to the ground. A ray of sunlight, more luminous than the cyclist's leg, more direct than the diffused light on the balconies of the lovable lizards, struck the swan diagonally, illuminating him in an instantaneous, blinding flash. His wings and all his snowy splendor as a feathered creature shone ablaze in pure white radiance, glinting. In that flash of light the swan was transfigured, immovable in defense of the other swan and of itself. A very effective defense. The dog stopped short, its paws moving backward against the direction in which it was running,

like a character in an animated cartoon. When it got very close to the swan, who now towered above it, surpassing it in brilliance and spatial dimension, the dog managed to reverse course and ran whining and slavering, taking cover among its group of human masters.

For a moment the swan stood in his own illumination. The entire dynamic character of the park seemed to converge in his radiance: for a moment Beatrixpark had a fulcrum of light, a pivotal point, an umbilicus.

The resplendent swan relaxed, went back to the other swan. The sail he had unfurled as a defensive shield was now tucked back around his body. He was simply a white bird. There had been a burst of illumination. It had happened in Beatrixpark and the provincial man, in his middle age, had seen it unfold like a brief story, with an assault, a defense, and a victory over the aggressor. A sacred restriction had been imposed on the dog's mad dash. A light had dazzled him. Light is never really different—the provincial man may have thought—whether in the south, the north, or anywhere else.

*Translated by Anne Milano Appel*