

RAPHAEL SANZIO<sup>13</sup>

*All beauty sleeps: and lo! where lies  
With casement open to the skies  
Irene, with her destinies!*  
Edgar Allen Poe

Today, four centuries after his passing, if we isolate ourselves hermetically in the metaphysical concept of the eternal solidity and immutable appearance of plastic form, and look at the art which surrounds us that has arisen in the four centuries following his death, we find nothing that surpasses his art.

The first impression that one gets upon looking at a painting by Raphael is an impression of solidity. This impression gives us a profound spiritual well-being that springs from a consoling rhythm, as if we were in an architecturally perfect room, with large rectangular windows high up on the walls through which we perceive neither human constructions nor nature, but only a broad sky and where the noise of life can only reach us distantly and confusedly. His portraiture transports us to such a world. From the dome of the skull, through the folds of dress and drapery, down to the hands and the base on which the figure is placed, as a statue on a pedestal, there is a stability and an immobility which brings to mind the eternity of matter. The figure seems to have existed before the painter had created it. Perhaps it is because of this that whilst looking at a work of genius we are seeing for the first time, we ask ourselves in amazement: “Where have I seen this scene before. Where have I seen this face?” And we feel troubled as when in real life we see a person or witness something happening that has appeared to us in dream.

Only great painting can awaken such mysterious sentiment in human nature. Man, as painted by Raphael, seems to have cast off the frenzy of life and has no more the constant appearance of preoccupation that haunts him in the world.

It would seem that life had retreated from him, that no noise signalling existence is heard by him. The spectral aspect of a person appears like some phosphorescent matter that needs darkness to become evident. Man, thus represented, acquires that intense attention which characterises the statues of great Greek art.

It is this phantasmal and statuary aspect that distinguishes Raphael’s portraits from those of any other painter. This aspect is particularly evident in two works: the portraits of Leo X and of Angolo Doni, both in the Pitti Gallery.

In the portrait of the Pope, the flesh of the round and powerful head, resembling that of a Roman proconsul, is of a granite-like solidity, whilst the two lateral figures seen in the background look like apparitions hewn out of stone. I do not know why, but once, standing in front of this portrait I thought of Brutus and his ghost.

The power to extinguish all spark of life, of that current and explainable life, in painted figures, and of endowing them with solemnity and immobility, of a serene and disturbing aspect, like images containing the secrets of sleep and death, is the privilege of great art. When art is deprived of this gift, even if it reveals a

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profound knowledge of craft and magnificence of imagination, it will forever be an inferior art.

Raphael achieved this destiny to the full. Not by miracle, for the phenomenon of his genius is logical as to its apparent form, though inexplicable in its depth (but what phenomenon of life does not carry in its depth a mark of interrogation?). Logical, I say, inasmuch as it constitutes a thundering conclusion with regard to the slow and painful evolution of art on its fateful ascending line from the primitives up to Raphael. This phenomenon reminds one of certain mysterious geological upheavals, when the earth burnt by boiling sulphurous waters, streaked with streams of lava and shaken by earthquakes, rises in twisting mounds like a tortured divinity in the midst of a nightmare. Through the torment of immeasurable spaces of time, under the benign dome of serene skies and purified of all bitterness and of all that burns and corrodes, the earth then covers itself with plants and wide branching trees under which philosophers and poets will one day come to meditate.

In Perugino we find elements of constructive serenity that characterises the art of Urbino as a whole. *Saint Sebastian* and the *Espousal of the Virgin* are two paintings of the old Umbrian master that are on the level of his disciple.

We must even admit that in Perugino's *Espousal of the Virgin* there are elements that are metaphysically superior to those contained in Raphael's painting in Milan. Perugino's painting, inferior in its overall aspect, contains a more Greek metaphysical serenity. The communion between sky and earth seems more direct and closer; the architecture of the Temple is simpler, the steps shallower; the presentiment which breathes through the arcades and the open doors of the Temple has something in it more moving than in Raphael's painting.

Nevertheless Raphael's *Espousal of the Virgin* is the most profound and complete painting of all time. It is perhaps the most "Greek" painting there is. I use the word "Greek" in its hermetic sense. It is above all a "mysterious" painting; mysterious in its execution in which no trace of procedure is evident, mysterious in composition and construction where all the most inexplicable and occult myths of antiquity seem to be concentrated; the mystery of Hellenic divinity present everywhere; the tragic oppression of biblical apparitions right down to the metallic echoes of the bells of Catholic Rome ringing out in the serenity of the morning.

Other works of Raphael's reveal a strange and profound knowledge of the Old Testament. Interpreted by painters of genius, the Bible appears in all its multiform aspects like certain monstrous divinities of vanished peoples and seems to have more than one face and a variety of expressions.

But there is a face of the Bible that few have been able to find. This face is revealed solely in a number of paintings by Raphael.

Poussin represented the idyllic aspect of the Bible in the mild golden gentleness of some of his episodes as in *Autumn* or in the *Bunch of Grapes from the Promised Land* and especially in that marvellous and restful painting *Summer* or in *Ruth and Boaz*; Rembrandt felt its skeletal, dry, nude and meagre aspect, burnt and consumed, in a word, the Semitic aspect.

Raphael in his frescoes of the loggias and especially in that apocalyptic study made for the ceiling of the Heliodorus room in the Vatican, reveals the face of the Bible to which I have alluded. It is a face that not all can see for it is strange, gloomy and monstrous and is, according to me, the most profound aspect of the entire Old Testament. The oppressing fatality of Jehovah is manifest in all its mystery in *God appearing to Noah*. The ancient Creator is carried on the shoulders of gigantic cherubim, flying over the earth. The mystery of this figure slightly elevated above the earth, be it a flying divinity or a marble statue on a low pedestal, has always profoundly impressed and troubled me. The reason for this I could not explain. There is a mystery in

it that I have never been able to grasp. Perhaps some day the explanation will come to me gently and freely like forgotten names or melodies suddenly remembered in the morning, in the last moments of sleep before awakening. Then perhaps I will be able to give an explanation of it as the one Thomas de Quincey gave of the impression made upon him by the knocking on the gate in Macbeth, for the present I must content myself with taking note of it and add that I consider my case more complicated than de Quincey's. Moreover, I have made a tentative solution as will be seen later in this essay of mine.

I must say that very few works of art give me this impression and with regard to some of them I even doubt whether the will of the artist who created them actually intervened. In two of Raphael's works this impression is a certainty; they are *God appearing to Noah* and *The Golden Calf*.

In *God appearing to Noah* the metaphysical impression is entirely caused by the figure of God carried on the shoulders of gigantic cherubim. Although the group flies close to the ground there is a terrifying profundity behind it; this impression is especially caused by the movements of the Cherubim supporting the ancient God from the rear and who is leaning his head to look downwards. The representation of the three immense athletic cherubim is strange and marvellous in the same way, as it is in complete accord with the monstrous aspect of some events in the Bible where the cherubim appear in the first and second vision of Ezekiel:

*And he spake unto man clothed with linen and said, 'Go in between the wheels, even under the cherub and fill thine hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim and scatter them over the city. And He went in my sight.*

*Now the cherubim stood on the right side of the house when the man went in and the cloud-filled the inner court.*

*Then the Glory of the Lord went up from the Cherub and stood over the threshold of the house and the house was filled with the cloud and the court was full of the brightness of the Lord's glory.*

This heavy and gloomy aspect, this nightmarish and apocalyptic atmosphere can be found in the Raphael's composition in the figure of Noah prostrate in prayer, clutching his son to his bosom as if he would crush him, in the figure of a pregnant woman descending the two steps of the doorway with her children in her arms.

The mystery of divinity, the sadness of the biblical family, the drama and fatality of the species are all united in this painting, which presents in its lines the hermetic representation of the triangle. In *The Golden Calf* the metaphysical aspect is especially due to the small effigy of the ruminant placed on a low pedestal. Here again is a phenomenon to which I have already alluded, that is of the divinity only slightly raised above the earth. In this fresco there is another element enhancing its metaphysical aspect, the small size of the calf that makes it seem like a toy. This metaphysical aspect would not exist were the calf larger, as those who read the Bible would most likely imagine it to be. For curiosity's sake one can compare Tintoretto's *Adoration of the Golden Calf* in the church of Santa Maria dell'Orto in Venice with Raphael's fresco. In the Venetian painting, the calf, of natural size, is carried on the shoulders of four robust men. The sky, the earth and all that surrounds them seems to be taken up in phantasmagoric movement. Clouds cover the upper part of the sky; Venetian ladies in languid attitudes are seated in the shade. No detail of this painting comes close to biblical mystery. In the Urbinate's painting, on the contrary, all is immobile and tranquil, the figures might be statues; from every side an air of mystery is concentrated around the calf, around the small and terrible metal calf on its low pedestal.

It seems to me that Raphael's painting of *Ezekiel's vision* is less biblically profound. But one must remark

that the painter's sacrifice of the metaphysical aspect was necessary. A painting which aims at supreme beauty cannot lose itself in a mass of strange and monstrous apparitions alien to all plastic conception as can be seen in the following passage from the Bible:

*Also out of the mist thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance, they had the likeness of a man. And everyone had four faces and everyone had four wings. And their feet were straight feet and the soles of their feet was a sole of a calf's foot and they sparkled like the colour of burnished brass. And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they had their faces and their wings. Their wings were joined one to another; they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward. As to the likeness of their faces, they four had a face of a man, and a face of a lion, on the right side; and they four had a face of an ox on the left side; and they four also had a face of an eagle. Thus were their faces and their wings were stretched upward; two wings of every one were joined one to another and two covered their bodies. And they went every one straight forward whither the spirit was to go they went; and they turned not when they went.*

From these words Raphael has drawn the Phidias-like group now in the Pitti Gallery. The terrifying monsters of the biblical nightmare have become perfect animals; winged lions and calves, hermetically slim as flying unicorns, while Jehovah himself in this painting looks Olympic among luminous clouds over a classical landscape. This work of Raphael we can also call "Greek", though its Greek sense is entirely different from that of the *Espousal of the Virgin*. In other painting Raphael attains to the metaphysical through the intimacy of the scene, where the figures give us a sense of surprise, almost of disquiet which we get on entering a room we thought empty and find people there.

This is a sense of discovery that could be defined apocalyptic.

I have often meditated on the causes determining this aspect. It seems to me that the surprise, the troubled astonishment that certain works of genius give us is due to a momentary cessation in us of life or, better, of the logical rhythm of the Universe.

Returning to the example of a supposedly empty room in which we find people, the strange metaphysical appearance which people take on when we notice them is due, I think, to the fact that our senses, our cerebral faculties, under the shock of surprise, loose the thread of human logic, of that logic to which we are used to since childhood; or rather we "forget", we loose our memory, life comes to a halt and in this cessation of the vital rhythm of the Universe the figures we see, even if not changing form materially, present themselves to us in a spectral aspect. This emotion I felt for the first time when I saw *Saint Luke painting the Virgin* in the Academy of Saint Luke in Rome.

Some critics do not attribute this painting to Raphael but I, for my part, am inclined to think that it is a work of the Urbinate and am entirely of the opinion of the German Karl Kirchbach, the profoundest connoisseur of Raphael's work I know. What makes me believe that it is really a painting by Raphael is also the fact that I find in it the same metaphysical spectrality of figures grouped in closed spaces that I discern in other works of his, especially in the group of *Giustinian e Trebonius* (a fresco) and in *Santa Cecilia* in Bologna's picture gallery. In reality, in this last painting the figures are in the open but the sky gives the impression of a low ceiling and it would seem that the figures standing beneath could almost touch the angels sitting and

singing in the breaks of the clouds.

This element of a low sky and ceiling is exceedingly metaphysical. Some traces of it can be found in Leopardi, particularly in his *Canticle of the Cock in the Wood* where a cock with his claws on the ground touches the sky with his crest.

These phenomena I have spoken of must be added to that of the statue placed on the low pedestal and the divinity flying a mere span above the earth. I think they must be attributed to a sort of hermetic communion between the human and the divine, between logic and reality, and inexplicable metaphysical appearance.

These are the general aspects of the spiritual values (the only ones that really count in the work of an artist) that I see in Raphael's painting. I leave the rest to art writers, to museum directors, to those who compile monographs and to international aesthetes. There are innumerable volumes in all languages on the artist and his life. Age-old banality of human tradition presents him to us in the semblance of a young man with an effeminate face, surrounded by a crowd of disciples, ladies and elegant men, painting with light-hearted ease in circumstances of pomp and opulence, consumed at last by love.

It is not in this way that I see in him.

If he was carried away by a few days of fever at age of thirty-seven, it is because his body was exhausted, it was not love that had weakened his body but the magnitude of his effort, the immense fatigue of art. And I see him towards the end of his heroic existence as he appears in the pathetic and strange engraving by Marcantonio Raimondi: conquered, shivering under the folds of the mantle in which he is wrapped, with a bitter smile, a hallucinated look, prostrate in a corner of his deserted studio between a small scraped palette and an empty canvas.