

“The Wonder Of Daylight”: In Search Of A Delicate Balance

JOHN BURNSIDE

In 1966, Edward Albee’s *A Delicate Balance* received its first performance at the Martin Beck Theatre, in New York City. Like its more famous predecessor, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, (which appeared in 1962), the play revolves around two married couples: in this case, Tobias and Agnes, whose worldly success is not quite sufficient to suppress an underlying sense of unease, and their equally affluent friends from the country club, Edna and Harry, for whom that uneasiness has erupted into outright panic:

HARRY: So we were sitting, and Edna was doing that – that panel she works on...

EDNA [*wistful, some loss*]: ...my needlepoint...

HARRY: ...and I was reading my French; I’ve got it pretty good now – not the accent, but the... the words.

[*A brief silence.*]

[...]

HARRY [looks at EDNA]: I... I don’t know quite what happened then; we ...we were... it was all very quiet, and we were all alone...

[*EDNA begins to weep, quietly; AGNES notices, the others do not; Agnes does nothing.*]

...and then... nothing happened, but...

[*EDNA is crying more openly now.*]

...nothing at all happened, but...

EDNA [*open weeping; loud*]: We got... frightened.

[*Open sobbing; no one moves.*]

HARRY [*quiet wonder, confusion*]: We got scared.

This intimation of panic, or what might have been called, in the mid-’60s at least, existential terror, comes at the end of Act I, but it does not arrive out of the blue: in fact, it has been foreshadowed from the first, in the play’s opening words:

AGNES: What I find most astonishing – aside from that belief of mine, which never ceases to surprise me, by the very fact of its surprising lack of unpleasantness, the belief that I might very easily – as they say – lose my mind one day, not that I suspect I am about to, or am even... nearby...

TOBIAS: There is no saner woman on earth, Agnes.

AGNES: ...for I'm not that sort; merely that it is not beyond... happening: some gentle loosening of the moorings sending the balloon adrift – and I think that is the only outweighing thing: adrift; the... becoming a stranger in... the world, quite... uninvolved, for I never see it as violent, only a drifting...

This theme is taken up a few pages later by Claire, Agnes' alcoholic sister:

CLAIRE: No one to listen to Bruckner with you; no one to tell you're sick of golf; no one to admit to that – now and then – you're suddenly frightened and you don't know why?

Tobias [*mild surprise*]: Frightened? No.

Tobias is surprised by this suggestion of existential fear, not only because he has done everything possible to exclude it from his life but also because it is his appointed role to impose order upon existence. He is the supposed rock to whom Harry and Edna turn when panic strikes and, according to the conventions of his time, he is the Provider, the breadwinner, the paterfamilias, a quiet and mostly uncomplaining refuge, not only for Agnes and Claire, but also for his serial-divorcée daughter, Julia, who runs home to him every time she abandons the latest predictably unsuitable husband. He is self-control, he is practicality – yet at the climax of the action, towards the end of the third act, he is the one who breaks loose, in “an aria” that expresses “all the horror and exuberance of a man who has kept his emotions under control too long”, and it his silence, at the very close of the play – a silence that is both formal and newly informed – that allows Agnes to finish the thought with which the drama opened:

AGNES [*to fill a silence*]: What I find most astonishing – aside from my belief that I will, one day... lose my mind – but when? Never, I begin to think, as the years go by, or that I'll not know if it happens, or maybe even has – what I find most astonishing, I think, is the wonder of daylight, of the sun. All the centuries, millenniums – all the history – I wonder if that's why we still sleep

at night, because the darkness still... frightens us? They say we sleep to let the demons out – to let the mind go raving mad, our dreams and nightmares all our logic gone awry, the dark side of our reason. And when the daylight comes again... comes order with it. [*Sad chuckle.*] Poor Edna and Harry. [*Sigh.*] Well, they're safely gone... and we'll all forget... quite soon. [*Pause.*] Come now; we can begin the day.



There are numerous possible readings of *A Delicate Balance*: as an exploration of a society whose self-satisfaction and supposedly guaranteed order were about to collapse under the pressure of 'the '60s', as a philosophical exploration of ideas of order or a psychological examination of self-deception in friendship and marriage; but for me the key to the play is in the juxtaposition of Harry's "quiet wonder" and "confusion" when he looks back at the moment of panic that drove him from his house, and Agnes's closing invocation of "the wonder of daylight". A comparable mix of wonder and confusion can be found in a short poem by Eugenio Montale, in the title sequence of his 1927 collection, *Ossi di Seppia*:

Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro,
arida, rivolgendomi, vedrò compirsi il miracolo:
il nulla alle mie spalle, il vuoto dietro
di me, con un terrore di ubriaco.

Poi come s'uno schermo, s'accamperanno di gitto
alberi case colli per l'inganno consueto.
Ma sarà troppo tardi; ed io me n'andro zitto
tra gli uomini che non si voltano, col mio segreto.

[Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glassy air,
I'll turn, and see the miracle occur:
nothing at my back, the void
behind me, with a drunkard's terror.

Then, as if on a screen, trees houses hills
will suddenly collect for the usual illusion.
But it will be too late: and I'll walk on silent
among the men who don't look back, with my secret.]¹

1. Translation by Jonathan Galassi in *Eugenio Montale: Collected Poems 1920-1954* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998).

To begin with, this poem – with its opening *forse* – seems to echo Agnes’s opening speech, where she imagines that she “*might very easily*” lose her mind, and be set “adrift [...] becoming a stranger in ... the world”. As Rebecca West suggests, in *Eugenio Montale: Poet on the Edge*, (Harvard University Press, 1981), “Because of the first word of the poem – perhaps – the scene is presented as conditional, and the entire experience is kept at bay. Although it might be argued that the miracle would be a sort of positive breakthrough to the essentially provisory nature of the seen world, the words ‘nothingness’, ‘void’, and ‘terror’ all point to the basically negative essence of such a transport. The initial ‘perhaps’, therefore, allows the poet to entertain what would otherwise be an intolerable possibility if stated unconditionally.” Maybe so – but, as Italo Calvino points out, in his famous note on ‘*Forse un mattino*’, the “fundamental point” of the poem is that the nothing, the void, is “*alle mie spalle*”, “*dietro di me*”, which suggest that the sensation experienced by the speaker of the poem is not an intimation of dissolution, or mental decay, but of catching a glimpse of a new model of reality. The poem’s hypothesis, he says, can be stated in very simple and rigorous terms: given the separation of space into the visible field that presents itself to our eyes and the invisible region that hovers at our backs, the former has the feel of an illusion, like an image projected on to a cinema screen, while the latter is recognised as a void – a nothingness – that is, nevertheless, the actual, or essential reality of the world, (or, in Sartre’s words, “*Le néant hante l’être*”; nothingness haunts being).

Calvino goes on to compare the poem to a story Borges tells about the *hide-behind*, a mythical creature said to inhabit the forests of Wisconsin and Minnesota, a presence that is always there, at one’s back, but, no matter how often or how quickly one turns around, can never be seen. It is always there, but it is always out of sight, which means that it is always capable of inspiring panic. The man in Montale’s poem, however, has actually turned around and managed to see this “hide-behind”, and what he sees is not an animal, but something both more frightening, and more wondrous: it is “*il nulla*”. This is the stage beyond panic, the stage beyond the distraction of turning and not seeing – and at this point positive and negative become immaterial: what the man experiences is “*il miracolo*” and, after the shock, after the “drunkard’s terror”, that miracle carries him to the threshold of a formal and informed isolation, where his only option is to walk on, “silent / among the men who don’t look back”, with his secret. Like Tobias, it may be the point at which the scales fall from his eyes and he sees that he is alone with an ‘inner life’ that cannot be communicated, even to those he would like to imagine he loves. Yet it is also, potentially at least, the threshold of a new way of being, a way

neither positive nor negative, but suddenly detached from such concerns, a provisional dialectic that, informed by the nothingness by which it is haunted, is played out, thesis by thesis, in the miraculous, yet entirely provisional “wonder of daylight”.



Ultimately, the original of the hide-behind is Pan. He is the god who dwells at our backs, unseen; he is the invisible presence we sense when we are alone in the forest of beguilement. When Harry and Edna flee their comfortable home in the suburbs, they are not running from anything specific; as Harry is at pains to point out, as he declares several times, in fact, “nothing happened [...] nothing at all happened”. What has frightened these two placid suburbanites is the hide-behind; what they have found in their house, where they least expected it, is panic. Yet they return home at the end of the play, not because they have found the reassurance or the escape that they were seeking when they turned up on Tobias’s doorstep, but because they have managed to turn and see, not the animal they feared, but the nothing that had crept up on them unawares:

HARRY: Edna and I... there’s... so much... over the dam, so many... disappointments, evasions, I guess, lies maybe... so much we remembered we wanted, once... so little that we’ve... settled for...

It’s not much, but it’s a glimpse of the truth, and it allows Harry and Edna to depart in something close to an informed silence: quiet, dignified, not at all shamefaced, they say their goodbyes and offer their thanks, then go back to their empty house. For them, one suspects, the hide-behind will no longer be a factor. Instead, there will be the cool, clear light of day, and everything *that* entails.

Yet what is missing, or at least goes unstated here – in the closing scenes of the play, and in the final line of ‘*Forse un mattino*’ – is what the Greeks understood when they recounted the story of the music contest between Pan and Apollo, (the best-known version of this myth is recounted in Book XI of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*). According to this myth, Pan, the piper, challenged Apollo, the lyrist, to a musical duel and, when the mountain deity Tmolus had listened to them both, he pronounced Apollo the better musician. As Robert Graves has pointed out, “Apollo’s victories over Marsyas and Pan commemorate the Hellenic conquests of Phrygia and Arcadia”, so a great

deal is made of the barbaric, vulgar quality of Pan's music, compared to Apollo's refined and measured song, yet it does not seem too great a leap to view this story in quite another light, in which *existential terror*, or panic, is transmuted into something other. What that 'other' might be is still open to question, of course. It would be foolish simply to speak in terms of 'reason' or even 'moderation'. Apollo may be the god of mathematics, science, philosophy and astronomy, as well as music and poetry, but his victory over Pan is not so much a conquest as a transformation. The story that this myth tells may be a parable of victory for the superior Greeks over the vulgar barbarian, (so many such tales are, on the surface at least), but it also indicates the transmutation of one form of psychic and physical energy into another.

Most importantly, it tells us something of where and how order is conceived. While it is true that Apollo shapes our art and our conceptions of beauty, that same art originates in the woods, with wild Pan. When we speak of 'order out of chaos', (or 'something from nothing') we do not mean the imposition of a crudely rational schema upon an amorphous mass, but the transmutation of an order that we cannot comprehend into something we can. Reason governs this process, but it is an *emergent* phenomenon, and it is necessary to remember this when we think of an artistic tradition. When we go to the temple, we go to Apollo, in the wonder of daylight, but Pan is still there, in the woods, in the shadows, and he is the "green force" that renews and perpetuates our traditions. In his essay, '*Stile e tradizione*,'² Montale dismisses those who "ingenuously repeat the formulae of the past which they have taken for extrinsic realities valid in themselves", and continues: "More than these, who make use only of the externals of traditional style – and nothing else is possible in this respect unless new historical conditions give rise to new beliefs – more than these, we say, those who seem to us to be within the tradition are those who, reflecting in their work the characteristics of our complex and difficult age, tend to a superior dilettantism, rich in human and artistic experience". As several critics have noted, Montale's point here is that the tradition is not continued or advanced by those who *would* do so, but by those who can and those who *can* are those who have gone to the woods and stayed long enough to catch sight of the hide-behind, that old god who stands behind us always, in the green of nothingness, gifting us with music and the *terrore d'ubriaco*.



2. Collected in *The Second Life of Art*, Eugenio Montale, tr Jonathan Galassi, (Ecco Press, 1982).

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
(‘Burnt Norton’I)

As pungent as they are, there was never anything ‘new’ in Eliot’s words, yet there is, even now, something extraordinary about the mode of saying. Cool, laconic, almost an aside – who or what is this bird that calls, “in response to / The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery”? – the remark revolves around the word “cannot”, which indicates both a near-scientific observation of how the mind works (we know, after all, that our minds are unable to process more than a mere fraction of the data that surrounds us, and that what we see as “reality” is the result of a constant and necessary filtering process), and a lament for our imaginative and spiritual limitations, (too much of that filter has been constructed for societal reasons, too much is designed to constrain our secret selves). The music in the shrubbery is unheard, it is hidden – and yet we sense it, and we move to it, with the others who are here, visible and invisible:

So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the empty alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the drained pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
(*op.cit.*)

For me, this has always been an exemplary passage, a perfect instance of the poet’s essential gift, which is to judge *exactly* how much to leave unsaid. So much so that it seems horribly redundant to point out that both Pan and Apollo are present here – suggested, qualified, shown then immediately withdrawn, just as they should be. Between the two, but resident in neither, is the realm of the imagination, where order is made, where reality is pictured. If we could turn and look directly and exclusively into the face of Pan, we would see nothing but the void; yet if we forget what Seferis calls “that cry / brought forth from the wood’s ancient nerves”,³ we can only become the creatures of an empty formality, ingenuously repeating the formulae of the past, all the while pretending that what we have is a vital and organic order. So it is that, when we speak about Pan and Apollo, we are

3. The translation is by Keeley and Sherrard, from *Collected Poems*, George Seferis (Cape, 1969).

speaking not of a dualism, but of a complementarity: the yin and the yang, the dialectic of this essential process: the making of order. Poetry – any art – is, and has always been, a quest for that order in its subtlest and richest form, yet such an order cannot be found anywhere but in the space between one god and another, between the woods and the temple, between the solitary hut in the mountains and the *agora*. In this space, imagination creates, from an unbearable complexity and richness of data, a fiction by which to live: as Wallace Stevens says, in these lines from ‘Asides on the Oboe’:

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

For those of us fortunate enough not to be almost overwhelmed by contingency, that chosen fiction is the order by which we live our lives and, within parameters that constantly shift and sway, we *choose* it – and to have that choice is both an astonishing privilege and an immense responsibility. For the process to begin, however, we must go into the woods, into Pan’s territory for, as Montale notes:

Social life is an addition or aggregation, not a unity of individuals. The man who communicates is the transcendental self who is hidden in us and recognises himself in others [...]. The attempt to fix the ephemeral, to render the phenomenon non-phenomenal, to make the individual self communicate, though it does not do so by definition, in short, the revolt against the human condition (*a revolt dictated by a passionate love of life*) lies at the heart of the artistic and philosophical quest of our time.

(From ‘The Artist’s Solitude’, in *The Second Life of Art*, [my italics])

But we need Apollo to give this individual, wild life a meaningful form and so make it communicable to others – as art, as representation – thus contributing to an overarching, communal fiction: a fiction which is not mere “social life”, but a common recognition, and respect for the essential *hidden* quality, of the transcendental self in all of us. Only there, between Apollo and Pan, will we discover an imaginative space that is rich and complex and informed by “the cry brought forth from the wood’s ancient nerves”, where art is neither private consolation nor media spectacle, but the arena where – haunted by nothingness and blessed with reason – we

distinguish the wonder of daylight from “the glare of the public, which darkens everything”. And when we consider the predicament faced by Tobias in *A Delicate Balance*, we remember that this process – this art work – is vital, not only to the salvation of the individual who turns to see the hide-behind staring him in the face, but also to the very existence of a rich community, in which a live tradition is upheld, not by the schemata of conventions and vested interests, but a narrative interplay in which the transcendental self finds its own haunted and makeshift likeness in the fictional life of another.

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