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"The Dead Body of a Little Girl is not a Painting": Reading Katherine Vaz After 9/11

The fact that we live in a visual world has been widely acknowledged and it may never have been as dramatically evident as on the occasion of the 9/11 events.¹ The images of the airplanes hitting the sky-rising New York towers and their subsequent implosion were followed worldwide with the most intense attention and emotion.² These images, which were to be insistently broadcasted for days on end with slight variations, have, indeed, become for many of us, the viewers (even if distant ones in terms of geographical location), the kind of visual scene capable of arousing the affective and emotional response known as a “flash-bulb memory,” since they will most surely remain in our memories forever, as if burned into our minds like light on film.³

¹ Of the large bibliography on the importance of the visual in Western culture, I shall just mention here the volume recently published by Richard Howells – *Visual Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, Blackwell Publishers, 2003) – and the volume by W.J.T. Mitchell on the historical shift he classifies as “the pictorial turn”: *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

² It should be noted that the two other aircrafts aiming at important targets in the U.S., and which have somewhat missed them, failed to get the same kind of attention from photographers, video recorders or the media, for reasons I shall not discuss here. One should also be aware of the fact that the overwhelming response, arising from a widespread sense of horror, shock, and disbelief, was not a unanimous one, glee being as well vividly demonstrated in certain parts of the world, due to socio-political specific circumstances.

³ Flash-bulb-memory is a clinical term borrowed from photography mostly used in the context of post-traumatic stress disorders, dealing with the lasting consequences of acute fear experiences – people can remember virtually forever when and where they were for special events and happenings inductive of strong emotional responses.

The ensuing stories told by the media tried in various and varying ways to deal with the utter experience of the traumatic loss suffered not exclusively by individuals, but also by the community at large. In fact, New York, the city that purportedly never sleeps but has had for a long time a reputation for never knowing or caring,⁴ felt the loss and hurt as keenly, and so did the American nation as a whole. The narrative of shared grief was, however, quickly surmounted by another one which drew its strength from the sense of national outrage and the resulting need to attribute blame to and punish those held responsible for the disaster. The American flag (the most iconic symbol of the nation), often done with improvised materials which showed the ingenuity of their creators, suddenly appeared almost everywhere. Highly expressive in symbolic terms, it brought together, whether intended or not, the narrative of the United States of America as the exceptional location of humanity's freedom and aspirations with that other narrative, reminiscent of the Pearl Harbor attack, that demanded retribution, more and more presented in unequivocal terms as a moral imperative.⁵ The intersection of both narrative lines would eventually result in wars that, to this day, have not found closure.

Recent history has, thus, once more dramatically shown how complex and plan-disrupting events can be. It has also emphasized the difficulty of adequately describing them or of creating stories that will convey the full (or even the appropriate) meaning of a given event, and not simply fall prey to, for example, a nationalist rhetoric or a sentimental victimization approach.

The fact that stories always fall short of the real is something storytellers and writers have been aware of for a long time. But they have also been aware of the possibilities inherent in the telling of particular stories. That is why we can read a story about a very specific subject and realize that it may be a narrative with a gripping "second-story" to it, one that symbolically expands our perception of the story at hand and allows it to bespeak of a much larger reference world.⁶

⁴ Cf. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), for instance.

⁵ Many were the youths who, affirming they would not have done it under normal circumstances, volunteered to join the armed forces at that moment.

⁶ I am here borrowing from Hawthorne's "The Custom House", where he writes that

Having this in mind, I wish to focus here primarily on one short story published in 2002 by Katherine Vaz, a Portuguese American from California, whose imagination and creativity has been vividly suffused with the feelings of loss and longing which have been, in many ways, internal to the architecture of Portuguese experience and expression.

The story, entitled "Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water,"⁷ is an emotionally loaded narrative about death, both sudden and slow death. More importantly, however, it is also about life, the life that must necessarily deal with the experience of death and find ways of not succumbing to it. In this short story, death comes both as the sighted death of the five-year-old child of the narrator, in an accident poignantly marked by speed, and the increasingly visible announced death of her husband's memory and history caused by Alzheimer disease, in a process that unfolds with the slowness of the quotidian. This is, thus, a short story about an intense personal moment followed by a sequence of events that take years and never go beyond the sphere of the private realm. However, and this personal dimension notwithstanding, I still feel justified in reading this short story as a quasi objective correlative for collective events of political and national import, engaging, as they seem to do, the need not of the individual only but also of an entire nation to come to grips with their own emotional and physical wounds.

In tune with our age of enhanced visuality and erosion of the traditional borders between disciplines and fields of knowledge, Vaz's short story, as most of her work, clearly invites the reader to enter into a thick cluster of intertextual dialogues, not only with the literary but with the visual arts and music too, as well as with the discourses of science, such as medicine, in this case. For Vaz, all these are part of what I would name her "enchanted forest", a place where the self is confronted with the equivalent of an undisciplined and un-chartered physical environment, anxiety and fear mixing with a sense of promise and wonderment.

he found the story of the scarlet letter in the second story of the customs building. It should also be noted that the presence of such a storylevel or storyline may have, or not, been intended by the author, a feature that should not, I think, inhibit the reader from exploring it.

⁷ Published in *The Sun*, n° 317 (May 2002): 40-46. Page references will simply appear in parentheses after quotations.

It is this kind of expectant anguish that validates the intersemiotic relation of the fiction of Katherine Vaz with the Edvard Munch's painting of a century ago titled *Enchanted Forest* (*Eventyrskogen*, ca. 1903) which depicts six children walking towards a forest – the tall trees being alight with golden hues from the sunlight – and holding hands, very probably to summon the courage to enter its shaded realms. These figures have their backs turned to the viewer, who is thus placed in a similar position vis-à-vis the forest, only one step further away, being able to watch both the alluring forest and the nervous uneasiness of those who walk ahead. The viewer of Munch's painting, as much as the reader of Vaz's work is thus forcibly invited to enter a promising world, no doubt, but one also dense with intensely disturbing somber spots.

It should be noted, though, that when establishing a parallel between the fiction of Katherine Vaz and the work of Edvard Munch I am not just following my fancy or founding the comparison on my perception of the thematic similarities between the narrative arts of two authors who share an emphasis on loneliness, anxiety, disease and death, as much as conflictual love between the sexes. I am rather acknowledging the oblique or explicit references that permeate the writing of Vaz, which include this painter as well as others. Not that the above-mentioned painting is ever, even remotely, referred to by the writer. Actually, and very much in tune with the postmodern sensibility of painters such as Warhol or Lichtenstein, Vaz rather prefers to invite for intertextual conversation pictorial works that have become part and parcel of popular iconology – such as Munch's *The Scream* (*Skrik*, 1893) or Rodin's *The Kiss* (*Le Baiser*, 1886) –, thus doubly insisting on the visuality of the world we live in, and on how we tend to organize our perception of events along visual lines.

The combination of this keen sense of the importance of the visual with the realization of how it has become enmeshed in the perception of the world, also at the much larger level of a national community's understanding of itself, is very striking in the short story under appreciation, "Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water."

The very choice of colors present in the title brings to the limelight the colors of the nation as represented in its most important icon, the flag. The presiding design of the flag does, moreover, surface further on

in the story, when the body of the little girl who was looking forward "to painting the next picture" (40), engulfed as she had been in her love of tempera paints and in her recent knowledge that "out of the primary colors, all pictures can be made" (41), is described as follows: "Thin red stripes cover Mary, as if she wants to keep this clean and neat, but then there's an explosion of blood with my hands in the middle of it." (41) Red and blue saturate the text, reappearing at every moment and in a variety of contexts and forms – as the material matter of paintings, as hues visible in nature, as achieved and adequate figuration of feelings, but also as the identifying colors of the circulatory system which includes the blood purification process performed by the physical organ named heart ("Bless its repetition; bless that old washerwoman, the heart." [46])

A similar pervasiveness of the national colors became paramount, indeed and as above mentioned, immediately after 9/11 in the massive display of flags as the visible sign of allegiance to what the United States stands for in the imagination of its people, a display understandably triggered by an intense emotional response to uncommon aggression. The accrued visibility of this most visual of icons, at such a time and in such a circumstance, immediately brings to mind former instances of such a visibility, namely in the days of the Vietnam war when the American flag was on display as an expression of allegiance but also of the growing protest against the uses it was being put to. The several *Flags* paintings of Jasper Johns offer a striking example of the critical discourse that addressed both its intensive reproduction and the questionable purposes it might serve. In Johns's *Flags 1* (1973), the duplicated representation of the flag's design indirectly comments on the duplicity of American foreign policy designs, the neatness of national purpose being replaced by the irregularity of the brush strokes and the dripping of paint, as if blood was coming out of it. So with the dead body of the little girl in Vaz's text. The postulated order of the artistic object explodes in dissonance as the viewer (the mother/narrator as much as the reader) watches the messy spilling of the vital fluid which has very probably been the first paint used by humanity.

Vaz's short story aesthetics of indirection offers thus, I believe, a concurring discourse on the need to really look at the heart of the matter,

both at the level of personal agendas and at the level of public ones. Usual and traditional forms of representation – such as the popular, and maybe kitsch, amply reproduced image of a gracious crimson flamingo looking, from the high perspective allowed by its long figure, at the blue pond where it stands – no longer apply in a world that seems to be turned upside down. This is a world colored wrongly, if one is to believe in an aesthetics of similitude in representation. But there is also the alternative that it might just be colored differently, should one be willing to acknowledge the polissemity of images and of their readings, or to embrace the distinctly imaginative color language of children.⁸

Following Poe's cue as to what a short story should be and do, Vaz creates right from the very first sentence a very specific atmosphere, involving impotence and terror, one in which the onlooker is prisoner of the inescapable condition of spectatorhood: "That bus is going to slam into my daughter". (40) This mother/narrator who looks at the bus (or was it airplane and tower?) seems, as it were, to be stuck in this moment in time, a moment before the brutal impact that one cannot but wish away: "In my stop-action memory, everything lies bare a grace note before the accident." This moment will constantly reappear as a "flash-bulb memory:" "I'm forever saying, *Remember to hold on to her.*" (40)

We, the readers, experience the first line of the text as a scream, a shout of agony heard in the mind before it is actually voiced out in narrative. The still photographic moment that is only available to the eye when the film is run "on its slowest speed" (40) is but a fleeting instant in the speeding reel of images that movement entails. The accident itself is described in a synaesthetic language that not only makes us see, but also hear and smell the event, much in the way in which Rodin, in his *Le Cri* sculpture of 1889 (by means of the position of the head as well as of the thrust of face and lips), and Munch, in *The Scream* (by means of light and color impulses that might produce an impression of sound)

⁸ Note that Munch's preference for strong and unusual colors was also deemed childish, although he used color as a symbol-laden element, in tone with his growing interest in the expression of states of mind rather than in the sort of naturalistic representation he had pursued at the beginning of his artistic career.

managed to overcome what Schopenhauer claimed were the limits of a work of art – that it could not reproduce a scream: “Memory has lifted the sound of the impact; horror first thrusts itself into my nostrils: the brew of rubber, the ether of exhaust. I smell rather than hear the wail of the woman driver.” (40-1) – Couldn’t we also hear the tearing down of the New York towers as we repeatedly saw them in the muted, or loud with irrelevant journalistic babble, television screen?

Deep, guts-rending suffering can easily turn into aggressiveness – “What’s pounding the cage of my insides is a whisper. Henry is on his third beer. I can tell the thought that comes out of me hits him a glancing blow, because his head rears back and he opens another beer: *Can’t you remember anything? I told you not to let her go.*” (41) – or into a feeling of sheer impotence – “What is that split second like, to have your body crushed, your head slammed against metal? What is the enormity of that pain? [...] I don’t know how to rescue Henry from this.” (44) – Couldn’t we feel a similar anger, horror and helplessness as we saw the bodies of those jumping from the New York towers? The narrator in Vaz’s story, named Isabel (rather than Elizabeth), will try the music store in her search for a way out, and chooses (almost too obviously) to buy a *fado* CD: “Fados are the traditional songs of fate, mournful; a singer risks disappearing into the heart of them.” (44)

But extreme pain can also induce the search for alternatives to violence or mournful sinking into the self, and those can be looked for in such unusual places as the basement room of an academic institution, where a bereavement group meets on Saturdays. In “Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water,” this venue for the meeting of many atrocious instances of “the wet mess of pain” (41) will also prove to be the occasion for the fulfilment of the wish of the living for absolute enrapture into the most intense and pleasurable near-death experience in life, afforded by the perfect, physically and spiritually lifting up, carnal union of lovers: “It is such a short distance to lean into him as he rises to meet me. We open our mouths against each other to deliver the words coming into our throats. [...] He presses me against the wall to kiss my neck, and my hands are all over him, and I say, *Wrap my legs around you*, and I am thoroughly in the air.” (42) *The Kiss*, both Rodin’s intended representation of the carnal love of Paolo and Francesca (*Le*

Baiser, 1886) and Munch's (*Kyss*, 1892), less defined in contour but not in meaning, two quintessential expressions of passion and sensuality and symbols of erotic art, come again to life in this text (recalling a previous quote in the short story by Vaz entitled "My Family Posing for Rodin," 2001).

However, if life is to win over death, even if for the brief or not so brief span of individual life, one must re-enter history by accepting the flux of time and shunning stasis, even if it appears under the guise of the perfect, self-sufficient composition in the work of art. The lovers' embrace must thus, necessarily, dissolve so that they can open themselves to all the problematic questions that life keeps asking, such as "Where am I? What's here? [...] How can you go on?" (42)

What story can one tell about the image of a child in death? How can one speak about such an image? These and similar questions have been posed over and over again – by visitors to the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, by viewers of the 2000 exhibition of lynching photographs from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield (organized by Andrew Roth, Roth Horowitz Gallery, New York, Jan. 13-Feb.12, 2000), by us all that watch the news about genocidal acts, etc. And also by the war photographers, such as Ronald Haeberle whose photograph of the My Lai massacre published in *Life* magazine came to be overprinted by the Poster Committee of the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) with a quotation from an interview by Mike Wallace with My Lai participant Paul Meadlo: *Q: And Babies? A: And Babies* (1970).⁹ After all, "the dead body of a little girl is not a painting. It is not beautiful." But neither is the "physical fact" of loss of memory pleasing to the eye that suddenly sees "death strolling in when we weren't looking, grinning, taking its time. Taking its time in telling us that it has come to stay." (46)

⁹ War photography being usually printed in black and white, this color photograph by Haeberle was all the more striking for the use of color. Turned into offset lithograph and refused distribution by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), it was distributed world-wide by informal community networks. For further references and a reproduction of the work see: Paul Wood, Francis Frascina, Jonathan Harris, Charles Harrison. *Modernism in Dispute. Art since the Forties* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 106-108).

"Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water" dwells on the impossibility of keeping life within the limits of neat compositional designs, be they literary, pictorial, personal or political. While reiterating the motif of the impermanence of things and beings, it stresses the need to hold on to them while they are with us, and we with them: "Where is my daughter? I want to talk to her – not about this, but about our need to watch out for each other, since I'm given to bolting, too." (42) The work of art is clearly not seen as irrelevant since it can very definitely give more life to the living. After all, even though the artist-child is dead, the blue flamingo painting she created keeps acting out its, never forgotten, mythical role as the initiator into the knowledge of light (cf. the Brahmin initiation in *The Upanishads*) and still preserves its Hogarthian "line of beauty", the waving S shape.¹⁰ It can thus productively speak to us "across the years; blue washing its reflection in red water," (46) functioning as the bearer of a much needed appeasement, a blue serenity that would approach the one we can see in some paintings by Matisse.

The short story that begins with a heart-rending arresting instant that leaves the onlooker gasping in impotent distance opens up the possibility of a re-encounter with the living, loving and grieving humanity – here represented by the ailing husband as much as by the "lighted cities that we will never visit, with their storehouse of invisible lives and lovemaking in unknown rooms" (46) which are both sighted with the optical eyes and intuited with the eyes of the mind and soul from a riverboat traveling on the Mississippi, amidst the varying shades of blue and red afforded by the play of light upon the water. Now, as always in American history, or so it seems, this backbone to the nation and privileged example of the American sublime simply doesn't "let up making its mysterious sounds while slowly bearing us on". (46)

The short story thus concludes with an image that fittingly both sights the enticing land of promise and cites the ending lines of the

¹⁰ Cf. William Hogarth, *Analysis of Beauty* (1753), where he distinguishes between the straight line and the circular line and "the waving line, which is a line more productive of beauty than any of the former [...] for which reason we shall call it the line of beauty [...] being composed of two curves contrasted. (Chap. VII: 37-8)

American modern fairy-tale *par excellence*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. And, in tune with the opening of the short story by Vaz, I might close this reading of "Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water" with the kind of picture that impales the gaze – such as the black and white photograph by Dinis Manuel Alves representing a poignant scarecrow, made of a blonde doll dressed in carefully stitched woolen garments and neat shoes and impaled on a rough stick.¹¹

But I wish to conclude instead with what I deem a fitter representation of that most human of conditions depicted in more than one short story by Katherine Vaz and similarly pertinent to the one under appreciation, the Pietà. And in recognition of the time and place in which I write, as a Portuguese reading a Portuguese American who has taken great interest in the history and culture of the country of origin of part of her family, Portugal, I shall here forego the encounter with the old Master, the much better known sculptural *Pietà* of 1500 by Michael Angelo. I wish thus to give precedence to a canvas recently painted by Paula Rego (*Pietà*, 2002), a Portuguese artist of international reputation whose creative imagination – incorporating violence, grotesque directness, intensity of expression, and a distinct love of stories – has (or so I would argue) much in common with that of Katherine Vaz. In this closer-to-modern-life Pietà, painted in red, blue and white, the woman is crouching on the ground, holding the grown-up son by the chest, under his arms, both bodies facing up and slightly to the front (or the viewer), the man's boyish face turned towards the earth and the woman's eyes turned upward, as if interrogating the powers above.¹²

The primary colors of suffering are here as present as in "Blue Flamingo Looks at Red Water", or in the images we have too often seen in recent times, but so is the intuition of life, holding on to decaying flesh, yes, but also able to affirm a spirit of survival and hope. So with

¹¹ Cf. the photograph exhibition *Ao Redor de Coimbra II* (Project *Dias de Coimbra*), opened in June 12, 2003. The photograph referred to bears the caption "PÉ DE CÃO / Dinis Manuel Alves." Available at <http://www.terravista.pt/mussulo/1040/redor2/d9.html>, March 2004.

¹² This painting is part of a series on the life of Mary, mother of Jesus, made by Paula Rego for the chapel of Palácio de Belém, in Lisbon. Cf. *Aprender a Olhar*, n° 7 (Jun/Jul 2003).

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the narrative by Katherine Vaz which can, after all, amaze the reader as much as the narrator is amazed by the stories told to her: "it amazes me. At any diminished point, with its impetus toward further diminishment, *life pulls up*, fresh and strong, turning away from the wall." (45)