
**A
BALTHUS
NOTEBOOK**

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IF THERE are eternal values in art, it seems they are preserved only by those who strive to realize them in a new content (Schapiro, 168).

BALTHUS'S ADOLESCENTS have a history. The Enlightenment, removing encrustations of convention from human nature, discovered the *durée* of childhood as the most passionate and beautiful part of a lifetime. (In Plutarch's *Lives*, no childhoods are recorded.) Rousseau, Blake, Joshua Reynolds, Gainsborough, Wordsworth.

By the Belle Époque, children (in a pervasive, invisible revolution) had come into a world of their own for the first time in Western civilization since late antiquity, and we begin to have (in Proust, in Joyce) dramatic accounts of their world as never before. Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" (which now that we have Balthus seems Balthusian) is a skirmish on the border between the inner worlds of child and adult. James follows with symbols the serious misunderstanding between the interiority of the two realms.

It is significant that anthropologists around this time, inspecting other cultures, thought of themselves as studying "the childhood of mankind." Balthus is a contemporary of Gide and Henry de Montherlant, who, like Fourier and Wordsworth, were trying to *place* the child's random vitality. Balthus's adolescents, in an endless afternoon of reading, playing cards, and daydreaming, seem to have come, we are told, as a subject for inexhaustible meditation from *Wuthering*

Heights, a dismal and hysterical novel that he reads in his own way.

What caught Balthus's imagination in it was the manner in which children create a subsidiary world, an emotional island which they have the talent to *robinsoner*, to fill all the contours of. This subworld has its own time, its own weather, its own customs and morals. The only clock I can find in Balthus is on the mantel of *The Golden Days* in the Hirshhorn, and its dial is out of the picture.

Balthus's children have no past (childhood resorbs a memory that cannot yet be consulted) and no future (as a concern). They are outside time.

THE TERM "modern artist" has never had a strictly temporal sense; from the beginning it has designated a totemistic clan to which one belongs according to a structure of rules with tribal overtones as yet to be described. Balthus is as yet a provisionally kin country cousin. Sir Herbert Read, for instance, decreed that Stanley Spencer was not a modern artist. We remember that Brancusi, to please a committee, had to redraw a portrait of Joyce because it wasn't modern enough for their taste.

Balthus, I suspect, has been excluded from the clan for reasons of awesome primitiveness, and has thus remained in the distinguished category of the unclassifiable, like Wyndham Lewis and Stanley Spencer. If modernity ended by trivializing its revolution (conspicuous novelty displacing creativity), it also has a new life awaiting it in a retrospective survey of what it failed to include in its sense of itself.

BALTHUS AND Spencer illuminate each other. Spencer's intrepid religious grounding (eccentric, Blakean, British, Bunyanesque; the naive inextricably in harmony with the sophisticated elements) is like Balthus's privileged, undisclosed, but articulate psychology. Both painters express a sensual delight in the material world that is openly hedonistic, an accomplishment of their imaginations beyond the sensitivity of criticism: the way light rakes a brick wall in Spencer, the respect for carpentry and architecture in Balthus.

Both Balthus and Spencer give us the surface of the canvas as a mimesis of natural textures, not paint. In Picasso, van Gogh, on out to the *reductio ad absurdum* of Pollock, it is paint. The difference is a philosophical one, perhaps even a religious one.

Spencer's iconography of saws, ironwork, human flesh reseen without the authority of neoclassical conventions, kettles, drying laundry, the location of shadows in naked light parallels Balthus's return to a realism of an accomplished eye that demands accuracy of detail and that generalizes nothing.

EAKINS AND BALTHUS. Their differences are many: Eakins has none of Balthus's irony, wit, or comedy. Their sensuality, surprisingly, brings them together, for both insist that the body has a mind, and that its intellectual, speculative, thinking life is integral to the sensuous life of the body. They share a candor expressed in exactitude and honesty. Eakins shared Whitman's vision of the erotic, and painted wrestlers as intimately entwined as lovers, and male swimmers as comrades as in an Athenian gymnasium frequented by Alcibiades. All of Eakins's work is of thinking, skilled, accomplished people: mathematicians, athletes, poets. Eakins painted the arrived; Balthus, becoming. Both explored private, privileged space, with nudity as the occasion for their tact.