Introduction

In the case of Simon Dinnerstein, I came to the work by way of the man.

I first met him in the summer of 2005. At the time, my wife Alyssa was principal of the Tribeca Learning Center, a public school in lower Manhattan. Simon's wife Renée, a gifted and highly committed educator, was working there as a part-time literacy consultant. And so one Sunday evening, Simon and I were seated beside one another at the Harmony Palace in Chinatown, having accompanied our wives to a banquet celebrating the marriage of one of their colleagues' daughters.

Not knowing his work, I was struck immediately by Simon himself. Observant in an unusually respectful way, deeply curious yet quick with laughter, he made a strong first impression. Over countless courses and sparked by a series of animated entertainments at the Harmony Palace, we began a conversation that has developed in truly wondrous ways.

I was making a living as an editor and translator in those days. A prolific reader, Simon shared many of my interests in literature. And as we talked excitedly about Musil and Wittgenstein, Kafka and Szymborska, it soon became apparent that we were also both particularly interested in the ways—visual and textual, remembered and imagined—we all make sense of experience; more precisely, of the ways we construct meaning of time and experience.

As the four of us shared a cab back to Brooklyn that evening, Simon and Renée invited Alyssa and me to dinner. Not long after, I visited the brownstone row house that functions for the Dinnersteins as home and studio, and saw some of Simon's paintings and drawings.

Over the course of several visits to the house, I was increasingly fascinated with the mysterious sensuality in Simon's work. I was also quite taken by the mystical, otherworldly, yet entirely figurative quality of his compositions, and with the recurring representation of Brooklyn. I am not as knowledgeable about its context and language as I would be were it a novel, but I still found Simon's work refreshingly unfashionable. In fact, if compelled to identify a tradition to associate with it, I would have offered Flemish, Dutch, and German names, most of them from centuries long gone. How

could it be that this work came from a New Yorker whose life had traversed the second half of the twentieth century? It was from the outset, then, that I sensed Simon's disregard for fashions and trends, his exceptionally strong artistic vision.

When I first saw a reproduction of *The Fulbright Triptych* in one of two previously published monographs, I was struck initially by the three human figures. Obviously autobiographical (Simon himself is arguably still recognizable as the artist in the right panel), they were all fully present—or as Simon would say, *completely there*. But there was also some tension, which I associated vaguely with the competing pulls between the togetherness and unity of family (the notion of a secular trinity came to me only later) on one hand, and on the other the solitary pursuit—the brashly ambitious, fiercely single-minded pursuit—of artistic expression. There was also a strikingly sacral quality to the whole composition, and while I did not—I still do not—understand this entirely, I remember thinking initially that the triptych was somehow Jewish in a profoundly illuminating way; that it was, as Guy Davenport puts it in a letter to Simon included in this volume, "a perfect register [...] of the Jewish soul." And yet there was a provincial German landscape out the window (if rendered, I thought, with a degree of ambivalence), in this painting begun not three decades after the worst ravages of the Shoah.

As I studied the details—it is difficult to imagine the scale of the painting's three panels, to be sure, and yet somehow seeing it even in detail is surprisingly rewarding—I wondered at the richly dialogical nature of the work, its own reproduction of paintings by artists such as Holbein, Vermeer, and Degas alongside the drawings of children, its fragments of history and memory, its evidence of exile and migration, and its citations of Melville and Wittgenstein. Here, I thought, was a painting that worked almost more like a symphony or a large-scale literary work, combining an extraordinarily wide range of discursive levels with a disarmingly straightforward figurative representation.

A few months after Simon and I met, I was named editor in chief at Milkweed Editions, an independent literary press. By the end of the year, Alyssa and I had moved our own young family from Brooklyn to Minneapolis, and I feared that the friendship developing between Simon and myself would be curtailed.

It was then that Simon approached me with an idea. Over the years, he said, a number of writers and artists in various disciplines had responded in highly interesting ways to his art, and especially to *The Fulbright Triptych*. And as he had read somewhere that Milkweed published work exploring dialogue between the visual and literary arts (the source proved to be an outdated advertisement for a contest, one of many fortuitous if inexplicable developments along the way), he wondered if I would consider publishing a collection of writings reflecting on his triptych, ideally by an unusually diverse set of contributors that would include poets and scholars, essayists and curators, musicians and composers, actors and filmmakers.

Our hope was that the resulting book would reflect the richly allusive and allegorical qualities of the triptych itself. And as happens with Simon, this original vision was richly rewarded. Over the course of the following two years, an astonishing range of contributors emerged, often—and I can't help but think that this diversity of perspectives reflects *The Fulbright Triptych* itself—in wonderfully mysterious and enigmatic ways. When I approached potential contributors, the response was often unlike anything I had experienced before. I remember sitting in my office with Dan Beachy-Quick, and showing him a reproduction of the triptych for the first time. I said only that we were thinking of assembling a highly unusual book, a book consisting of reflections by widely various writers on a painting of great complexity and accomplishment. He studied the triptych intensely for several minutes, remarking on its extraordinary range of reference, before smiling broadly and answering affirmatively.

And respond he did—respond all the contributors did—in wonderfully creative, intelligent ways. Indeed, while each of the forty or so pieces of writing in this collection offers a rich and highly expressive perspective on *The Fulbright Triptych* and Simon Dinnerstein, taken together they develop what I now see as a collaborative dialogue that directly reflects the painting's inherent message of symphonic connectivity. Such that, as I had hoped from the outset, a contemporary American masterpiece is illuminated anew, in a way that could only be accomplished in this medium.

Looking back from my own perspective, it is hard to believe that this journey began with Simon and my initial exchange in Chinatown. But then perhaps the story of this

book's creation is itself suggestive of another inherent message in *The Fulbright Triptych*. For if, to evoke the lines from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* that are cited in the painting, "every particular form of life could be other than it is," the possibilities—in art as in life—are truly endless.

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