

From: *Karel Appel. Dipinti, sculture e collages*, curated by R. H. Fuchs, J. Gachnang, A. Santerini, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 9 October - 29 November 1987), Castello di Rivoli, Rivoli-Torino 1987, pp. 82-85.

Travelling with Appel

Hugo Claus

«But this light doesn't exist in nature».

Braque: «Am I not, then, an element of nature?»

We arrived at the village by the sea very late. Before looking for a dwelling for the night (we had already perhaps given up the idea), we moved, surrounded by fog made even thicker by the sea wind but which still allowed the slashed cliffs on the horizon to be seen, in the direction of the inn, the only illuminated house of the village. The room which we saw through the opening of the door was a dusty golden yellow. A small wrinkled man was standing on the doorstep. We said that we were strangers and that we were lost. It wasn't true, but we thought this detail would have certainly excited his pity. The small man assented as if it was natural that, in this area, a traveller should lose his way and, with slow steps, we arrived at the long, narrow counter among the murmurings of the fishermen who had taken possession of the three tables and chairs, all the same, placed about with great regularity. We didn't understand their language, it was a gurgling of which we only caught the solemn and amazed exclamations. A hurricane lamp hung in the middle of the room, a wan, weak sun which stank hardly illuminating the bundled up figures in their seaman's coats. After our entrance, the discussions of the fishermen (or perhaps their tales) did not cease, but they were allayed. They had lost their confidence and, while they spoke, they cast us glances both inquisitorial and reassuring, as if our position as strangers among them rendered us inoffensive and put us in their hands and at their mercy.

In an instant they emptied great glasses of cider which they didn't need to order, being that the young red-haired innkeeper busied himself with refilling them - and this past-time seemed to keep them occupied for various hours. Whenever one of them got up to move towards a door placed at the end of the room, his step was controlled but laborious, and the youngest of them clung every now and then to the side of a table or the back of a chair. My friend and I did not exchange a single word (there was nothing to say) and emptied our calvados with the same regularity with which the numblers emptied their glasses of cider. For a long time the filthy glass of the pale wooden window no longer allowed the minimum ray of external light to pass through when, from the by now dark fog which we guessed was outside, voices reached us which expressed themselves in the same indistinct dialect as the gossiping fishermen of our room. However when these latter perceived them in their turn - the neighing of a horse united itself at moments to the noise of the voices - their posture, their mimicry and their gestures changed. We saw them swing about on their chairs, the innkeeper polished his glass with a new vigour and some of the young fishermen, those who up till now had made themselves heard less, got up and, nearly feverish with excitement, went towards the door and threw it wide open. Outside, the night waited, the empty space was black as ink, soon they filled it with their light, nervous bodies, dressed in American jeans and jackets. Neighs and voices got closer.

The innkeeper stooped over us and, with a rather timid smile, told us in a scholastic French that they had gone to get Pierre, the great Pierre. «Ah! Yes», we said, with a tone of obviousness: it's true, indeed, certain. We didn't ask for any explanation. His face, marked, slashed with a hatchet, was radiant.

Waving his checked duster, he indicated the door with a wide gesture and, without moving his eyes from us, went on repeating that the great Pierre would arrive any moment; following his red chapped hand with our eyes, we saw that outside the night was animated. The constant murmuring and chattering of the fishermen grew, the young got out of the way of the door, far away a dog howled and in the yellow light, three men entered dragging a fourth, so tall and big that he made their silhouettes seem minute and fragile. We ourselves and the fishermen who seemed to have risen as a mark of respect, as if before a representative of authority or a priest, all felt in this room small and weak in front of this young giant. It seemed as though he had difficulty seeing us, by the way in which his head dominated the tallest of us; his seaman's eyes with red eyelids, shunning the cone of light from the hurricane lamp, came to rest on the bottles lined up on the shelves, behind the counter. His name was Pierre, the innkeeper had told us, and we knew why: he was a gigantic stone endowed with movement. Pierre dashed against one of the tables with his knee, the fishermen strangled a laugh. Pierre sat on a table that had just been quickly cleared. He was young, his skin without a line but of an enflamed red, and he had no forehead. His fine white hair, women's hair white as paper, left uncovered a finger of pink swollen flesh above eyebrows strangely thick and rigid; the short nose with slightly upturned nostrils overhung the humid opening of a mouth in which irregular yellow teeth were attached to swollen gums. Nearly as wide as he was tall, the enormous body showed a swollen trunk and stomach, as voluminous as a sack of corn, which raised and lowered itself as if animated by its own life, vegetative and innocent.

«Pierre, - exclaimed the fishermen, - ah! Pierre».

He smiled turning on all sides to show that he had come with the best intentions in the world and that he considered everyone to be pleasant people, even the oldest crouching in the corner against the stove - and unexpectedly he made that piercing neigh which, before, we had exchanged for that of a horse.

Then he gazed directly in front of himself and moved his great fleshy hands on his knee. The fishermen stared at him with a strained air, so excited by his nearness as to forget to speak. They also exchanged shoves with their elbows when the red-head (who had disappeared for an instant without us noticing) reentered through the door which gave onto the counter, holding a white porcelain soup tureen decorated with a garland of blue flowers. Pierre gave out a grunt of joy and, with an obscene greediness which made him squeeze his eyes together, held his hands out towards the soup tureen, took it to his lips and began to drink. It was a light rice broth which, from the confined corners of his lips, trickled in thin rivulets down the opening of his blue woollen cloth shirt, as he gulped it down at an astonishing speed. When he had emptied the tureen, he continued to chew his gums for a while and the fishermen expressed their admiration in old-womanish shrieks.

With calmness and precision - to make one think that the scene repeated itself often, that it was perhaps a weekly attraction in this isolated hamlet - the innkeeper this time filled the tureen with red wine (he poured out two bottles) and held it out to Pierre who immediately began to swallow. Then the vessel was crammed with a grey, coarsely ground mixture, in which we could recognize flour, potato skins and beans. Pierre sank his fingers in and ate. The fishermen raised their glasses in his direction and gave him a toast, but he didn't raise his eyes, he didn't hear either their whistling or their cooing quicker and quicker, noisier and noisier. Raising himself from this unrestrainable blow-out, he turned once again towards the four corners of the room, and gave everyone a weak smile from his panting mouth, still stuffed with food. The tureen was then filled with cider - a gift

from the fishermen to judge by their excited gesticulating. During a space of time which seemed to last four or five hours, the enormous cup was filled three times with cider and twice with wine. And in the middle of a suffocating silence - the sneering had abated - Pierre got drunk without moving himself from the table, without saying a word. But he was drunk, definitely, because one could note a transition, a change in the massive, ineradicable, unpenetrable vitality which must live in this dilated covering. The bovine shoulders curved, the light pupils clouded over in their red shells betrayed a threatening uncertainty. Pierre trembled.

The fishermen recognized these symptoms, they were waiting for them, it was the first stop on a path traced out in advance for this evening. But where did they go to get this giant to gladden their small weekly meetings? To the mountains, to the islands? A volcanic island, perhaps, very close to the cliffs, where people are born blind, with one leg, with two heads, where deserters have found a refuge among the low boughs of the apple trees, where children rule, where...

One of the fishermen (the mayor, the sexton?), a dried up sixty year old, went up close to Pierre; he gave him blows on the knee. Smiling, Pierre hiccuped, the mouth open on saffron-coloured tusks, and everything in him, in the moment in which the sexton touched him lightly, betrayed innocence and a good-natured confusion.

The sexton asked him if he was happy. Pierre didn't understand. The fishermen laughed behind their hands. After this the sexton asked a series of questions all of which were aimed towards a single thought, a contorted hidden thought. How were his eighteen brothers? And the cyclops, his father? The sexton's voice trembled, became weak and licentious, a goat's voice. And how (triumph! the fishermen held their breaths and observed their leader with pride, with anguish) was his mother?

With difficulty, Pierre let himself slip off the edge of the table, his bare feet slid like a regret towards an abyss, under the effort his mouth opened revealing a tongue and the roots of yellow teeth. We thought he was going to speak because his lips trembled, tried to draw the crusty cracked borders together, but he stood up, he held himself upright without help and he stretched, annulling the memory of his arrival in the door embrasure, several hours earlier, as if we saw him upright for the first time, placenta abandoned by a giantess and endowed with life of its own in the fertile garden of men.

«Your mother, - said the goat, - your so beautiful mother».

Then something happened which the fishermen possibly didn't know, or that they had forgotten to pursue as an objective, as the crowning of their evening, considering that their faces with their horribly taut features seemed to experience an unexpected, futile pleasure - Pierre visibly swelled up.

He began, first shivering, then with force, to shake his arms and his trembling hands, to beat the air like a duck trying to take to the air, the current of air provoked by this bit us in the face like a marine breeze. The fishermen let guttural sounds escape, warbles, wails.

For the first time Pierre seemed to have a voice - the wounded voice of a child. «Rosine», we understood. And the force of this name defeated his vocal chords seeing that, incapable of continuing, strained in an effort that made his neck swell and the veins between his eyebrows white like chalk stand out, it was only possible for him to cluck «Ro-sie», The yellow and red cavity of his mouth let leftovers from his dinner come out and submerge his lips with friable pieces. He didn't cease beating the air and to exert himself with his arms and, while opening his legs, tried to call up that terrible name and to drive it out of that body of steel. A terrible stink of vinegar and manure was released from his person and invaded the room. He flapped about a bit more and then fell, his face against his elbow, by the legs of the table and remained there without sign of life. Somebody opened the door. The fishermen took up their discussions again without allowing themselves one glance at the giant, without turning their eyes towards us or looking at each other, seeming to

address themselves to the tables, to murmur a prayer, a form of choral exorcism.

What evil had just been driven away, what innocence reestablished? The innkeeper made us a sign with his head.

«Come» he said to my friend called Appel, a painter. Some youths were dragging away the prostrate giant who was lying in a large pool. The other fishermen didn't help them; they would do it later, after the prayer. They would take him back to the island in which... We paid and went forward into the night which was becoming more tender and towards the east was colouring itself a light blue; we were looking for a place to sleep.

(*Op reis met Appel*, Strengholt, Amsterdam 1964, in *Karel Appel. 40 ans de peinture, sculpture et dessin*, éd. Galilée, Paris 1987, pp. 161-66).