

FRIEDRICH DANIELIS

# *Passing Through*

*an experiment*

*T*he gods, we are told, dwell on earth when and where it pleases them. The mastery of pleasure, I suspected early on, may well have been their source of immortality. They do not work – they play: what else could bring someone who is born (sometimes in the most spectacular or unlikely way – but then even the immortals love to brag, to embellish a story, the story being, after all, their life), born to the blessed state of ageless existence, without the slightest pang of regret as time in a timeless life cannot be wasted, to come here and pay a visit? What else would lead them to sweep down to our way of living under roofs, in caves, wearing hats and doing all to shield us from too many heavenly blessings? Is it pleasure they bring, or do they seek it here? – Such questions must be struck out, I fear.

No wonder that where the Blessed Ones touched the earth, perhaps touched mortal life, monuments, temples, sites for offerings spring up, as man tries to tie himself to the magnificence imagined in immortal dreams.

## *Observation*

Women, it has been observed, become harbingers of this incredible state, when, their eyes swimming in luminosity, surrounded by joyous silence, they find themselves impregnated by their unfathomable commerce with imagination, in shapes of fabled existence or dreamlike transport, and sigh contentedly at the thought of being walking temples. Such are the dreams that turn into monuments and statues in orchards or secluded spaces, dedicated to the sacred knowledge of earthly joy.

Overcome by such pious thoughts brought on by the heavenly host one should not ignore the amazing precision that enabled the gods to land in the desired lady's lap – what aim! Sweeping from above these gods hit where they wish to lay. Something sublime, nay, ethereal might be learned there.

No wonder earthlings seek protection from the outside world, by means decidedly less heavenly, and build their shelters in ways so com-

mon and yet dreadfully strange, willing to live in leaden houses, their doors shutting with a dull and hopeless thud, their silly gardens growing shrubs of meanness, to ward off unwanted visits from above.

But once such a visit occurs the ground is sanctified in memory.

Such space often is surrounded by a wall or forms an island in a stream, clean waters washing away all misplaced curiosity. To further shield a clearing or an orchard from discovery time withdraws a bit to grant space in suspension, and generates that quiet otherness we recognize at once when we dare encounter it. To be a little out of one's mind, ready to lose one's skin and leave it behind, in short, confused by the sickness and the health of love invariably helps.

But do not trust it. No leap of fate!

*Some fatal geography*

Once you know such a place, something has to be done. – Quickly the fates' dice are cast. It suffices to throw them once, with conviction. Thus

we may force destiny's hands – the fates cannot bear maddening certainty – and instead of wasting our time trying to guess what they have in store for us, or, in an effort to poll their inclination gamble away our own life hoping to secure it (to march in tandem with the fates is a way to reach death rather early in the game), with one bold throw all is decided: the way I want it, of course. A climb over the wall, a leap of faith, and here we are, in a world of myth, longing and sensuous reality. It drips with promise.

### *And history*

Alongside the pond of *Leopoldskron* there was, there is, there might well be a deserted park, surrounded by a wall, and with it a provincial baroque palace, put there by a theatrical genius who found the stunning silhouette of the domineering fortress too martial and the view of the big mountain oppressive unless a soft, smiley roof of something bearing promise behind dark trees and walled gardens would ease the

fierce onesidedness of nature and the man-made edifice portraying might and ignoble rule.

But the curtain had long since come down on this mysterious production, the master of this stage (MAX REINHARDT) dead and his heirs not willing to take over in a world that lacked memory and kindness. The palace was used in the summer for some functions, the park, however, sank into weeds and this is how it presented itself once the intruder had his feet over the wall and on the ground.

### *Fancy house*

And stepped into a world of silence humming in the ears, of mossy stones and strange shapes all overgrown, a thick barrier of bushes and vexing undergrowth between old, uncared for trees that sprouted more mistletoe than I had ever seen – a paradise for kisses –, nettles and thorny branches demanding a retreat. But there were signs of former life – a quiet presence submerged by exuberant wilderness and reckless

growth, a strange arrangement of shapes and undefined forms in the shadows of deeper green; bird-song more soft and mellow than before, as if all creatures were under water or muffled by a spiders web, and then a glasshouse, a winter-safe shed, maybe once heated to bring relief to potted lemon and a freezing gardener, with glass blinded by dirt and a barely yielding wooden door. A push, and in a flash it was transformed into the glassed-in studio I always wanted. Alright, there would be buckets of rubbish to clear up, the rotted shelves and their dusty cracked pots would have to go, the odd pane be replaced and the whole glass wall washed thoroughly, but then, imagine! the light floods in, the broken stove in the corner works again, a blue and white rug adorns the floor, the easel is put up just so, and in this mighty space of light, protected from the world by the very wall I had just climbed, finally master of my universe would be, ah well, but one must not be found out, not be caught, so, fortunately before anybody could drive me away the studio of delight returned to its proven state: house of broken glass and intact dreams.

But all was silent, so there ought to be the time to explore. Gingerly stepping through messy grass as thorns were ripping my trousers (why does one never have the right shoes or clothes for the moment?) I made it past the shed. Now it seemed much larger, maybe there would be enough space for a library and, better still, a kitchen. There must be water – what use is a glasshouse when no-one can water the plants? Would it be still connected and, if so, could a turning meter betray my presence to a busybody? Thoughts sped ahead of my feet while wishes started to set up house in a world they had not known a moment earlier, furnishing it generously and settling in, so all would have to admit that it was mine, and mine to remain, and in this proprietary fog I stumbled upon my first Goddess.

### *Flora*

This place was inhabited! And how? Most gracefully. There she was, I even knew her name: FLORA, the guiding godmother of gardeners,

young, beautiful and naked, lying on her stony plinth supine, awaiting, no doubt, her visitors with timeless patience, gentle and unafraid. That I had not startled her was no surprise: she was the mistress here, and had been for a while, as the soft, mildly damp moss, a silky second skin, would show, while it was sending mossy shivers down my spine – ready for her godly part, a bunch of never wilting flowers in her arm.

And I would worship her with all the adolescent ardor my pagan love for antiquity could muster – that much was certain. A closer look was probably permitted, as she was tranquil in her quiet glory, and all shyness had left me once I had peered into her even, open face, her unseeing eyes certain to overlook my clumsy fervor. We would meet often, I was sure, and later on I could, should take other adored girls to meet her, as a secret only I could show and share, and, why not? have her bless the experiments on flesh modeled in her image, the probing of the other worlds that might discreetly appear, when soft female skin, a hue of downy hair replacing moss, emerged next to FLORA's.

And things would be as they should be.

## *Durable specters*

But there was more, and struck by the discovery that there was more in this walled world of wonders than my own little comfortable fantasies had allowed for, I would have loved to beat retreat from all the monuments of love's battles emerging from the shadows. Stumbling into a clearing I found myself surrounded by the carrying off of HELEN of Troy, the vessel of tears already fallen over to spill ten years of war and carnage, bitterness and destruction, the exile of old men and children, into the swampy ground forever; the rape of the Sabine women, strangely overgrown by creeping vines that let a joyous scene (to bring some lusty women to the City of the World with shrieks of passion to populate it, before it could turn into a graveyard tended by priests) change ominously into a naturally grown model for the curse LAOCOON would have to grapple with. The most royal visit of them all, the queen of Sheba and king SOLOMON modeled on a pedestal that would not be able to carry anything more noble and so remained the basis of

all unfulfilled space, – all this made the head spin and the heart beat wildly: that leap across a wall had opened much more than a garden sinking into weeds.

In order to return one must retreat. And think, and sleep, and dream, then tell the tale to a friend. Or keep the secret, until, like borrowed pearls, one could show it to some beauty – mysterious beauty used as a key to other beautiful mystery.

### *Experiment*

Ill-disguised enthusiasm was the driving force in my first experiment with a striking blonde, her white-golden hair like a tight cap on a freckled face, with little teeth in a rather catlike mouth, and the promising round shapes of a baker's daughter – I had, in fact, detected the sweet smell of vanilla-rich concoctions, which made her my favorite dancing partner. To her I opened a vision of gods having a picnic in the countryside, of ancient myths repeating themselves perennially under moss

and vines in a shady hidden paradise – all in my reach and therewith hers, if she would just come with me and risk a little trespassing. A recent fall during a particularly daring twirl of boogie had caused me to bring her down as well under the heartless laughter of a merry crowd, and much reduced my standing and with it her desire for any sort of trespassing. Not even a description of beautiful FLORA and her gardeners' reign, a glasshouse of dreams, persuaded her and so she crossed herself off a list of possible enchanters with a whiff of vanilla and regret – if, as was obvious, a whole empire of unseen, unimaginable wonders could not outweigh my downward tumble at a dance, I had to cast around for someone less impressed by gravity.

*Freckles or antiquity?*

But then it turned out that there were other difficulties beyond the pull of matter, and what was planned as joyful science regarding the female body, the union of curiosity and desire and finally the answer to all my

questions (they were all wrapped around the same answer), assumed more and more the shape of a bed of thorns.

Meanwhile it had dawned on me that somehow there was a problem with reality: Next in line, but inhabiting a larger space in my wishful thinking was a young woman somewhat older than myself, with floating eyes and a warm voice full of promise. I had spent time studying the lively liquidity in her face, (a portrait of her eyes, enlarged, was hanging on the wall of my renovated glasshouse next to Genius Loci's most recent masterpiece), and thought it natural to take her to my lakeside labyrinth. To show her the splendor was the easy part. Her lively mind not only read the images' allegorical message, perceived the eerie beauty of the place, where time not only stood still but moved in waves, transported myth and light, longing and promise in an emotional groundswell that bedazzled senses and suspended sense, she also read in my strange elation the signs of a confused youngster's battle with reality, my life prey to an elated idea of ancient myth and present longing, as if a leap across the garden's wall had cost the solid footing of sturdy legs that should go far and I had slipped up.

As I was following the supreme narrative of FLORA's body with my fingertips and, in the spirit of my science, tried to apply my newly gained knowledge on a warmer surface, she made, with gentle soothing words that were carefully chosen to avoid injury, a gallant effort to lead me back to her good sense – where things were ordered to a point, one knows what is important and gets things done with a purpose, to make a good and comfortable life. That this “reality” of hers excluded her, her body and her eyes incensed me. Clearly the entire carefully planned experiment was, her lovely freckles notwithstanding, a colossal failure and I was ready for a rant.

### *Laying on hands*

With grim determination I went into my sermon about a world that paid fools a good salary to preach lunacy to other fools on Sunday from a pulpit, but would not spend a penny for an architect to build a house beautiful enough to serve as home for what she called god's favorite

creatures. The world of practicality was blasphemy, where greed, stupidity and avarice undid what fantasy could build in the image of life's glory. I never minced words when I got going.

Right here, in this place, how could a beautiful human being deny the arts' solidity and put her trust in insurance mathematics and the maddening concept of a future nobody knows, while not laying hands on the present, the only matter that mattered?

Well, there went that one. Maybe it was the laying on of hands that caused the trouble.

Gently advising "wait and see" she swung her lovely legs over the wall, a gesture of elegant denial.

And I? I waited, and I saw.

### *A little anatomy*

A naked woman looking very much like FLORA's daughter, her firm breasts erect just like CATULLUS' *gemina poma*, turning her face aside as

if to look for who would see her, growing out of leafy decoration, to blend her body back into the urn she so nobly adorned; a dolphin who with smiley eyes kissed such an urn; a woman dressed in fluttering shrouds, flying up in a bearded man's sturdy arms, another lifted up by air, as time had eaten away the arm that held the beauty, no less determined in expectation. Bare buttocks, shapely legs, long necks and quiet faith in what, arranged by some nymphs and good god PAN, would come to pass between the stony revelers.

What under other circumstances would have been quite impossible – to watch, to learn how what was done between the sexes – was as a joyous lesson in anatomy freely granted. Furtive glances at a swiftly covered thigh, the promise of roundness under a cotton blouse, the real blush in exchange for an imagined gift of insight, all that fell away in this quiet place of eternal longing and educated lust.

And yet, and yet: if scientific progress would continue at this pace, the stony promises so reluctantly kept by lovely if earthly creatures with a heart of gold or stone, one would turn mad. Or blind. Or both.

## *Determination*

So, back to the place behind the wall, more real, it would seem, for better reasons, where stone relayed a tale it had been told by a sculptor's chisel, and light played imaginative games with one's eyes.

And flesh that would not grant me favors would be turned to stone, and stone to flesh (not quite!) – in any case, most people were thrown out of paradise, but I would come here, as often as I could, more often than, they say, one should, but anyway.

The forms that shaped my formative years remained intimate, the stories told since antiquity had presence as sharp, as biting as my longings, and past and present remained one; the tangible link, I was resolved, would be myself.

## *Damaged gods*

My frequent visits, always over the wall, had until now gone undetected. There was word, however, that strange things had been observed in the night. Concerned neighbors, as they like to call themselves even next to paradise (a paradise they know nothing about and would rather have “closed down by the police”), out to do their dog’s business, had seen one night long shadows leap around a fire on the small island in the middle of the pond, and some girls had started to talk among themselves about the strange boy who took his adored in to the thick of a secret garden to – well, about that there was varied and wishful speculation.

Obviously I was under observation, as my pagan sidesteps had raised eyebrows among the guardians of my soul.

What was more, someone (a purist, or a commercial genius who wanted to steal and sell her?) had cleaned FLORA of her mossy skin, she seemed cold and dead now and her quiet stare began to bore me. But

still – the magic, now under threat, might have worked one day, and so another attempt to woo a warm heart beating under a supple bosom with damaged gods had to be risked – a crowning experiment after a chain of increasingly hilarious failures, as two delectable sisters, as audacious as they were pretty, had compared notes about my verbal lyricism while I kept probing with hot fingers in flesh what I was showing off in stone, and I had come out a repetitious cad, content to recycle a nifty turn of phrase if it worked a second time.

### *Passing through*

This time the most grown up and most soulful of my idols (idolatry in painters must, I thought, absolutely be forgiven) turned, with her natural elegance and the gracious way she leapt across the wall, the whole effort into quite another direction. Her mind seemed in tune with the quiet music in the trees; her beauty – close to that of the beauty of her artist father, who was, I knew, the absentee landlord of her heart –

felt well at home among such wonders; for once, there was genuine enchantment, a sense of joy and wonderment. Even for a greedy boy something is and must remain sacred, and be it only a completely unexpected confession I received next to that eternally overflowing jar of tears. I felt disarmed by her trust and her radiant presence outshone the searchlight of my private science.

Something was broken and, oddly, it was not a heart.

But then this spell was broken too by a sudden change: now there were voices, chatter, people very near – high time to disappear behind the bushes and over the wall. But instead, the beautiful enchantress walked with confidence towards the noise, and with horror I realized that she (with her assurance and her clothes she would get away with it) was about to join the festive crowd coming out of the palace, where a concert had just come to its end.

I would be caught, my explanations laughed at, and, at best, there would be banishment forever. But there, with a smile, my idol entered a

spirited game: she climbed onto one of the unadorned bases and stood there, one arm reaching into the evening, the other falling to her side, like another marble-like goddess, more recent, and not quite for eternity.

Following her example I too stood still on my temporary pedestal, my appearance more rumpled and endangered by the ripple of barely suppressed laughter. And then the last guests had left. We climbed down and walked, for this only time, through the wide open gate into the road. And passing through it I decided not to return.

Ever since I have waited, but not seen. In fact, I see less all the time, so I have to make it up as I go along. Pictures, stories, life, it's all the same to me – as long as there is a wall to get across and escape you can count on which way I would be going.

A rather learned observer has pointed out that nothing I have ever done or said was true or genuine. She may be right: just wait and see.

*p.s.*

A reliable report has it that a marble company at the nearby central cemetery eventually got the statues, cleaned them and sold them to adorn some other suburban venue. The fate of gods, once in the hands of men, is not to be desired.

My photographs were taken with a large camera (borrowed from my brother and, I just realize, still not returned) that still took glass plates, but with an adapter also rolls of film. The glass screen allowed me, an ignorant in many fields, to compose and take pictures the same way I painted.

To my knowledge these pictures are all that remains of that secret place.









































## *Colophon*

The text of *PassingThrough* was shaped and set by CHARLOTTE KARNER  
in New Baskerville.

The photographs were scanned and prepared for printing by ANSELM MÜLLER.

The Digital Fine Art Prints were printed by STEFAN FIEDLER  
using pigment printing on Lana smooth white 256 gr.

The box is by PETER GRÜNAUER.

The edition is limited to twenty-one numbered and signed copies  
plus three copies not for sale.

Completed on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2004,  
this copy is nr.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....