

*Rain, particularly to a child*, carries distinct smells and colors. Summer rains in the Tyrol are relentless. They have a morose, flogging insistence and come in deepening shades of dark green. At night, the drumming is one of mice on or just under the roof. Even daylight can be sodden. But it is the smell which, after sixty years, stays with me. Of drenched leather and hung game. Or, at moments, of tubers steaming under drowned mud. A world made boiled cabbage.

The summer was already ominous. A family holiday in the dark yet magical landscape of a country condemned. In those mid-1930s, Jew-hatred and a lust for reunification with Germany hung in the Austrian air. My father, who was convinced that catastrophe was imminent, and the gentile husband of my aunt still blandly optimistic, found conversation awkward. My mother and her fitfully hysterical sister sought to achieve an effect of normality. But the planned pastimes – swimming and boating on the lake, walks in the woods and hills – dissolved in the perpetual downpour. My impatience, my demands for entertainment in a cavernous chalet which was increasingly chill and, I imagine, mildewed, must have been pestilential. One morning, uncle Rudi drove into Salzburg. He brought back with him a small book in blue waxen covers.

It was a pictorial guide to coats of arms in the princely city and surrounding fiefs. Each blazon was reproduced in color, together with a brief historical notice as to the castle, family-domain, bish-

opric, or abbey which it identified. The little manual closed with a map marking the relevant sites, including ruins, and with a glossary of heraldic terms.

Even today, I can feel the pressure of wonder, the inward shock which this chance “pacifier” triggered. What is difficult to render in adult language is the combination, almost the fusion of delight and menace, of fascination and unease I experienced as I retreated to my room, the drains spitting under the rain-lashed eaves, and sat, hour after entranced hour, turning the pages, committing to memory the florid names of those towers, keeps, and high personages.

Though I could not, obviously, have defined or phrased it in any such way, that armorial primer overwhelmed me with a sense of the numberless specificity, of the minutiae, of the manifold singularity of the substance and forms of the world. Each coat of arms differed from every other. Each had its symbolic organization, motto, history, locale, and date wholly proper, wholly integral to itself. It “heralded” a unique, ultimately intractable fact of being. Within its quarterings, each graphic component, color, and pattern entailed its own prodigal signification. Heraldry often inserts coats of arms within coats of arms. The suggestive French designation of this device is a *mise en abyme*. My treasures included a magnifying glass. I pored over the details of geometric and “bestiary” shapes, the lozenges, diamonds, diagonal slashes of each emblem; over the helmeted crests and “supporters” crowning, flanking the diverse arms; over the precise number of tassels which graced a bishop’s, an archbishop’s, or a cardinal’s armorials.

The notion which, in some visceral impact, tided over me and held me mesmerized was this: if there are in this obscure province of one small country (diminished Austria) so many coats of arms, each unique, how many must there be in Europe, across the globe? I do not recall what grasp I had, if any, of large numbers. But I do

remember that the word “millions” came to me and left me unnerved. How was any human being to see, to master this plurality? Suddenly it came to me, in some sort of exultant but also appalled revelation, that no inventory, no heraldic encyclopedia, no *summa* of fabled beasts, inscriptions, chivalric hallmarks, however compendious, could ever be *complete*. The opaque thrill and desolation which came over me in that ill-lit and end-of-summer room on the Wolfgangsee – was it, distantly, sexual? – has, in good part, oriented my life.

I grew possessed by an intuition of the particular, of diversities so numerous that no labor of classification and enumeration could exhaust them. Each leaf differed from any other on each differing tree (I rushed out in the deluge to assure myself of this elementary and miraculous truth). Each blade of grass, each pebble on the lake-shore was, eternally, “just so.” No repetition of measurement, however closely calibrated, in whatever controlled vacuum it was carried out, could ever be perfectly the same. It would deviate by some trillionth of an inch, by a nanosecond, by the breadth of a hair – itself a teeming immensity – from any preceding measurement. I sat on my bed striving to hold my breath, knowing that the next breath would signal a new beginning, that the past was already unrecapturable in its differential sequence. Did I guess that there could be no perfect facsimile of anything, that the identical word spoken twice, even in lightning-quick reiteration, was not and could not be the same? (Much later, I was to learn that this unrepeatability had preoccupied both Heraclitus and Kierkegaard.)

At that hour, in the days following, the totalities of personal experience, of human contacts, of landscape around me became a mosaic, each fragment at once luminous and resistant in its “quiddity” (the Scholastic term for integral presence revived by Gerard Manley Hopkins). There could be, I knew, no finality to the



raindrops, to the number and variousness of the stars, to the books to be read, to the languages to be learned. The mosaic of the possible could, at any instant, be splintered and reassembled into new images and notions of meaning. The idiom of heraldry, those “gules” and “bars sinister,” even if I could not yet make it out, must, I sensed, be only one among countless systems of discourse specifically tailored to the teeming diversity of human purposes, artifacts, representations, or concealment (I still recall the strange excitement I felt at the thought that a coat of arms could hide as well as reveal).

I set out, as many children do, to compile lists. Of monarchs and mythological heroes, of popes, of castles, of numinous dates, of operas – I had been taken to see *Figaro* at the neighboring Salzburg Festival. The wearied assurance of my parents that such lists already existed, that they could be looked up in any almanac or work of standard reference brought no solace. (My queries about anti-popes and how to include them visibly irritated my somewhat ceremonious and Catholic uncle.) The available indices of reality, be they a thousand pages thick, the atlases, the children’s encyclopedias, could never be exhaustively comprehensive. This or that item, perhaps the hidden key to the edifice, would be left out. There was simply too much to everything. Existence thronged and hummed with obstinate difference like the midges around the light-bulb. “Who can number the clouds in wisdom? Or who can stay the bottles of heaven?” (How did the writer of Job 38:37 already know about rains in the Salzkammergut?) I may not have cited the verse to myself in that drowned August, though the Old Testament was already a tutelary voice, but I did know of those bottles.

If the revelation of incommensurable “singleness” held me spellbound, it also generated fear. I would come back to the *mise en abyme* of one blazon within another, to that “setting in the

abyss." I would consider a fathomless depth of differentiation, of non-identity, always incipient with the eventuality of chaos. How could the senses, how could the brain impose order and coherence on the kaleidoscope, on the *perpetuum mobile* of swarming existence? I harbored vague nightmares about the fact, revealed in the nature column of some newspaper, that a small corner of the Amazon forest was habitat to 30,000 rigorously distinct species of beetles. Gazing at, recopying with water-colors, the baronial or episcopal or civic arms, pondering the unlimited variations possible on formal and iconic motifs, I felt a peculiar dread. Detail could know no end.