Emergent Time and the Ludovisi Throne: A Sequence of Fragments

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Emergent Time and the Ludovisi Throne: A Sequence of Fragments

When what is just out of reach leads us on, can we stand in wonder.

Vladimir Nabokov

Fragments offer an image of what it's like to live life when we are most awake to our experience. They are unexpected, uncomprehended, simply there. They break continuities, dislocate time, and, once we are stripped of these familiar supports, we can reach the center of ourselves, the place where we are always beginning. “Suddenly,” as Gaston Bachelard has written, “all commonplace horizontality disappears. Time no longer flows. It gushes.”

1: Introduction

As one of the most enigmatic of classical sculptures, the Ludovisi Throne has deeply touched artists through the ages. As an artist, I have been intrigued to hear other artists speak of the spell this sculpture casts and to have felt that spell myself. It was the photographer Diana Michener who first led me into the small room in Rome where the Ludovisi Throne is housed. I remember the physical impact it had on me and the dead stop I came to the moment I saw it. At the time I knew nothing of the history of the sculpture or the mythology associated with it. I came upon it with only the prelude of Diana Michener’s excitement over it.

In his essay “The Innocent Eye and the Armed Vision,” Roger Shattuck quotes Edward Sapir:
Emergent Time and the Ludovisi Throne

In spite of the oft asserted impersonality of culture, a humble truth remains that vast reaches of culture, far from being “carried by a community or group... are discoverable only as the particular property of certain individuals who cannot but give these cultural goods the impress of their own personality.”

Shattuck goes on to say, “To ‘certain individuals’ I would add ‘certain individual works.’ Those works concern us not so much because they display cultural uniformities but because they embody strong or subtle personalities we wish to keep near us.” For artists, these works can act as a muse; for all of us, they can inspire a reverie from which we emerge transformed, even if it is too much to say reborn. It is this realm, the realm of a muse or a reverie, that I wish to address.

2: Mythology

The fragmentary masterpiece known as the Ludovisi Throne is a three-sided relief in the Early Classical style of Greek art. Its central panel presents two women (time has obliterated their heads, but we still see the long flow of their robes and their bare feet standing on a rough, pebbled surface) lifting a third, apparently out of the waters. She is covered by a light drape that allows the curves of her body to show through. On the left panel, a sumptuously nude girl (one of the first female nudes in Greek art) reclines on a cushion playing the double
pipes the Greeks called *auloi*; and on the right, another woman, seated and heavily veiled, sprinkles incense onto a brazier.

The subject matter of the central panel is purported to be the birth of Aphrodite. This cannot be proved, but it does seem to be the best guess around. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aphrodite is born from the castration of the god Ouranos, "Sky." This violent mutilation somehow releases the god's procreative power and disperses it throughout the world, where it is gathered together and reconstituted in the form of seafoam, out of which Aphrodite is born. She emerges from the sea as a fully grown woman. In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates expands on Hesiod's story of Aphrodite:

No one, I think, will deny that there are two goddesses of that name—one, the elder, sprung from no mother's womb but from the heavens themselves, we call *Ourania*, the heavenly Aphrodite, while the younger, daughter of Zeus and Dione, we call *Pandemos*, the earthly Aphrodite.

The art historian Andrew Stewart follows up Socrates' idea, believing the central panel to show the goddess' birth assisted by two Fates, with temple servants on the side panels...; this has suggested Lokroi as a provenience. Here an important Aphrodite cult involving ritual prostitution could provide a context for the monument, which was possibly an altar. If so, the two women at the sides would allude to Aphrodite in her manifestations as Pandemos ("Vulgar") and Ourania ("Celestial") respectively.

There are other readings, however. For example, the figures Stewart sees as "Fates" have also been identified as two Horai, or "Seasons," in which case we would have Aphrodite born into the world assisted by the principles of cyclical time. And the side panels, of course, do not have on the one hand two widely united and on the other two widely differing passages.

A similar subject has long taken the form of the Throne—or the Great Throne, if the central panel is on a large-scale stand. The woman veiled and seated, however, as obviously differs entirely from this scene. Eros ("Love") and a pair of women dressing a coteau respectively as the then recreating the world; the Trojan War starts. There is much about this oracle and the principles of life. The side panels seem to suggest a young married couple, a man and a woman, on the one hand. But the Boscoreale tomb is more than the Lucanian mosaicists claimed that we can know, and that we can approach.

3: Approach to Lightness

Without knowing every work of art, one should be able to see the principles of everyday life.
Emergent Time and the Ludovisi Throne

There are two servants on the one side, and a clothed, respectable matron working through part of a religious ceremony on the other, they can be understood to present two widely different aspects of womanhood united and overseen by the goddess. We just don’t know.

A similarly shaped monument now in Boston—long taken to be the counterpart of the Ludovisi Throne—only complicates our ignorance. On its central panel, a winged youth holding a balance scale stands between two seated women, one veiled and obviously in mourning, the other just as obviously joyful and alert. A number of entirely different readings have been suggested for this scene. The youth has been described both as Eros (“Love”) and as Thanatos (“Death”); and the pair of women as Persephone and Aphrodite witnessing a contest for the life of Adonis, or alternatively as the goddesses Eos and Thetis contemplating their mortal sons, who both fought in the Trojan War. The only thing we are safe in saying about this central panel is that it presents the principles of life and death in balance. The side panels seem to carry this idea further, depicting a young man playing the lyre and an elderly woman, on the right and left sections respectively. But the Boston relief also presents an additional problem. Its carvings seem to be of a later date than the Ludovisi Throne, and some scholars have claimed that it is not merely a reworking of the original stone, but an outright forgery. More than that we cannot say.

Approach

Without knowledge, how does one approach a work of art? Italo Calvino writes in his essay “Lightness”:

But I know that any interpretation impoverishes the myth and suffocates it. With myths one should not be in a hurry. It is better to let them settle into the memory, to stop and dwell on every detail, to reflect on them without losing touch with their language of images.
4: Emergent Time

When I first encountered the Ludovisi Throne I was struck by the feeling that I was not looking back in time to a sculpture made in 450 BC, but rather at a sculpture emerging in time as I was looking at it. It was, to borrow a phrase from Yeats, “pure becoming.” It balanced on the brink of sculpture and emergent time, as though this was the first, fresh moment of time. Without my knowing anything about it, it breathed the air of creation. There was the freshness of the image itself. A woman is being lifted out of the waters by two other women. The lifting up is a gentle pulling into existence of a grown woman rather than the violence of childbirth. She is looking up with such an expression of wonder that it makes one ache to see the world anew. This brings to mind a fragment of a poem by Rainier Maria Rilke:

Once more let it be your morning, God.
We repeat. You alone are primal source.
With you the world arises, and a fresh start gleams.
On all the fragments of our failures....

5: Gazes

The three figures whose faces we see on the Ludovisi Throne have very distinct gazes. The central figure has an expectant, hopeful, newborn gaze, as if looking for the first time. It is almost stunned looking, but it is not shut down. Instead, it has a wide-open, vulnerable look. The clothed woman on the side panel has an intent, focused gaze. She is intent on the work she is doing. Her gaze is careful, precise, serious, directed toward the task at hand. Her gaze is not open, but it too is directed out. The third figure, the naked flutegirl, has a hazy, dreamy gaze. Lost in the creative reverie of her music, her gaze is circular. It falls outside of herself but is not seeing and is pulled back toward herself by her own music making. Soren Kierkegaard’s question in *Repetition* seems apt: “Is it not mental derangement to be always awake, always clearly conscious, never obscure and dreamy?” These three distinct gazes seem to echo the artist at work. First, there is the wide-open, anything-goes disposition—casting your net and keeping everything open and fresh. Next comes a vague idea, the focus, the work coming into being and needing your acute attention. Finally, as the work gathers its own steam and really starts to emerge on its own, you can drift into that dreamy realm where it is now pulling you.

6: Samvega

As Coomaraswamy explains, the Pali word *samvega* is often used to denote the shock or wonder that may be felt when the perception of a work of art becomes a serious experience. The “shock” or “thrill” need not involve a recoil but may be one of supersensual delight.
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Gregory Orr addresses this shock of encounter in his poem, "A La Mysterieuse":

Only in books I knew you or in dreams where, elusive, you were the bit of dress that disappeared in the city filled with light which I knew and did not know, its streets constantly shifting. Nothing prepared me to meet you, to round a corner and find you whom Heraclitus worshipped, dipping his hand in the river of your hair, letting the current take it to the small of your back.

In this poem there is acknowledgment of a prior idea of a reality which, when it comes, makes you realize that you knew and did not know, which makes even the pathways (here, city streets) shift constantly. "Nothing prepared me to meet you": the experience of a work of art is to be pulled and stretched in such a way that your borders are never the same as before. It is an expansive moment to share a reverie.

With a mind thus emptied, one can perceive the total impact of the art work. Once the work of art is finished, the artist's power is released and exists within the form — its force and form accessible to one who can see and assimilate its impact.

Ajit Mookerjee

Things answer our gaze. They appear indifferent to us simply because we regard them with an indifferent eye.

Gaston Bachelard
The Right to Dream

With these two statements, we are reminded that any experience of art is a shared reverie, and the state of the viewer can influence what her perception will be. It is not a passive thing to step in front of a work of art, at least not if one is awake to its possibilities. Sometimes, the viewer can even be the maker, as in Richard Wilbur's "Piazza di Spagna, Early Morning":

I can't forget
How she stood at the top of that long marble stair
Amazed, and then with a sleepy pirouette
Went dancing slowly down to the fountain-quieted square;

Nothing upon her face
But some impersonal loneliness, not then a girl,
But as it were a reverie of the place,
A called-for glide and whirl;

As when a leaf, petal, or thin chip
Is drawn to the falls of a pool and, circling a moment above it,
Rides on over the lip —
Perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.

Here we have a descent and response to the glide and response to the glide and response to the fall. This is the experience (the poet's experience) when he sets out to find her, and to his response. It is a map on the bank which may or may not be in both places.

8: Transformations
The dispersion, the whole story, the without resist...
Here we have a girl drawn into a reverie of descent and place. Caught up in her own response to the "reverie of the place, / A called-for glide and whirl," she is unaware of her audience (the poet). He is standing on the bank. But when he sets out to make his poem in response to his response to her response, he is standing on the bank watching himself drown. He must be in both places to make his poem.

8: Transformation
The dispersion and the reconstitution of the self. That's the whole story.

Charles Baudelaire

What is seen and felt to be a myth of destruction and creation in the Ludovisi Throne we echo, in some measure, by our experience of it. We can be transformed, in varying degrees, by our experience of it—transformed, that is, simultaneously to exist more vigorously in life and to become more vulnerable to what it means to be in life. There is pathos about being transformed, a strange pang that comes, not from loss, but from the vulnerability of being struck so fully that we resonate even more.

Think of an old bell, how being struck by the clapper tempers it, how over time it gathers resonance. Its molecules are realigned into new configurations, its very metal is transformed by the experience, and the whole vibrates freely and without resistance, bell and clapper both attuned.

Likewise, the molecular structure of our psyche is hit by the work of art and is rearranged. It is not when we think about it that it happens but at the moment when the work is there: transformation is in the striking.

But it is not merely a passive thing to stand before a work of art—so many do just that without being touched at all. Rather, it calls for a difficult mental maneuver to drop the pretense to understanding, wrong ideas or otherwise, and remain perfectly still so that what happens happens. You can let it happen, or you can resist it, endure it, interpret it, and maybe be shattered by
it, a brittle bell. Understanding can come later, but God help you if you try to go into it with understanding: no transformation then, only breakage and violence.

At the end of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel, Transparent Things, we find the protagonist trying to escape a burning house:

At last, suffocation made him try to get out by climbing out and down, but there were no ledges or balconies on that side of the burning house. As he reached the window a long lavender-tipped flame danced up to stop him with a graceful gesture of its gloved hand. Crumbling partitions of plaster and wood allowed human cries to reach him, and one of his last wrong ideas was that those were the shouts of people anxious to help him, and not the howls of fellow men. Rings of blurred colors circled him, reminding him briefly of a childhood picture in a frightening book about triumphant vegetables whirling faster and faster around a nightshirted boy trying desperately to awake from the iridescent dizziness of a book or a box grown completely transparent and hollow. This is, I believe, it: not the crude anguish of physical death but the incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental maneuver to pass from one state of being to another.

Easy, you know, does it, son.