

THE GAZE
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Can a gaze change a man's life? I'm not talking about the gaze of the poet who, after contemplating a Greek urn, thought about changing his life. I'm referring to much more terrible transformations.

I didn't like to eat until the episodes I'll narrate in just a moment took place. I had the money to nourish myself on the choicest foods, but the pleasures of the table didn't appeal to me. For various reasons, I had never entered a restaurant. I was a vegetarian and liked to say that I needed only sustenance of the spirit – music, books, theater. Which was stupidity, as Dr. Goldblum would later prove to me.

My profession is writing, as everyone knows. I needn't say what type of literature I produce. I'm a writer whom literature professors, in one of those arbitrary categories they impose upon students, call "classic". And this never bothered me. A work is considered classic for having held the attention of its readers uninterrupted over time. What more can an author want? So let them call me "classic", or even academic! Even before I began to write I preferred those works of art that time had consecrated, creations immortalized because of the purity and perfection of their form and style. Fortunately, access to the classics of literature and music doesn't present the difficulties

that exist in relation to the theater, for example. Music shops and bookstores, however base they may be, always offer the works of one great master or another along with the abominable trash usually marketed. Not long ago, in a bookstore teeming with Sheldons and Robbinses, I found a beautiful edition of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* in Italian, a pearl among swine. As for the theater, the situation is disheartening. Rarely can one see a staging of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, Ibsen, Strindberg. What is commonly offered to the spectator are the dejecta of the provincial American theater or the decadent mediocrities of the European theater – not to mention Brazilian theater, confined to Nelson Rodrigues's sordid suburbs. Cinema is a lesser art – if a cultural medium incapable of producing a truly classical work can be called art. As for opera, I consider it entertainment for the ascending bourgeoisie, who presume this primary mixture of drama and song to be refined. In truth, even recently, opera merely satisfied the cultural cravings of the riffraff.

This was how I thought, back when I spent my days at home writing and, when I wasn't writing, listening to Mozart and rereading Petrarch, or Bach and Dante, or Brahms and St. Thomas Aquinas, or Chopin and Camões. Life was too short to read and listen to all that was available to the spirit and the mind of a man like me. The interesting synergy between music and literature afforded me a sublime sense of fulfillment.

I must confess that I was also, before the episodes I'll relate, somewhat of a misanthrope. I liked to be alone and even the presence of the maid, Talita, made me uncomfortable. Therefore, she had received instructions to work a maximum of two hours a day and then leave. I would send her away when this time had elapsed, even if the spinach *soufflé* she made every day wasn't ready, so as to be able to write and read and listen to my music without anyone disturbing me.

A parenthesis: When I'm going to write, I prepare the table first. It's a very simple thing – a stack of artist's paper of special pure linen made "*en los talleres de Segundo Santos en Cuenca,*" which I receive regularly from Spain (I can write only on this; "*los papeles contienen mezclas de lañas teñidas a mano, esparto, hierbas, helechos y otros elementos naturales*") and an antique fountain pen, of the sort that has a transparent shaft. Nothing else. I find it humorous when I hear of fools who write on word-processors.

But let's get back to the story. One afternoon, while I was reading Propertius to the strains of Mahler, I began to feel weak and then fainted. When I came to my senses, I realized night had fallen. A sickening cold sweat covered my body, which shook in spasmodic convulsions. These were punctuated by chills that made my teeth chatter like castanets. Then I began to have visions, to hear voices.

Reeling, I went to my desk, picked up the pen and wrote a poem. Then I fainted again.

Dr. Goldblum, the physician I consulted the next day, said my problem was malnutrition.

"That explains why the visions went away after I drank a glass of warm milk with sugar. "

"The saints used to have visions because they fasted, and they fasted because they had visions, an interesting vicious circle. I'll confess something to you: I actually would like to have this type of vision, at least once. Now I'm going to read your poem," said Goldblum.

I had given my poem over to the doctor, supposing it to deal with some abject semiotic material that would help to diagnose the flash of morbidity I had experienced. Now that I knew it was all but a simple and fleeting case of malnutrition, I no longer wanted Dr. Goldblum to read what I'd written in my delirium; coarse words that classic writers, with a few exceptions (I thought of Gil Vicente, Rabelais), would never use. I tried to take the paper the doctor had in his hand, but he was quicker and, protecting himself behind the table, read the poem:

THE WORKERS OF DEATH (for Megnin and H. Gomes)

Joyce, James was moved by the brown mark
of poop on the panties
(not quite panties in that era)
of his beloved.
Now the woman died
(his, yours and mine)
and that brown stain of bacteria
begins to take charge of the whole body.

finally tenebrio and ptino do away with what was left of man, dog and other species.

No one resists this army contained in one sole feces.

"Crude language doesn't work in poetry," he said.

"It was a nightmare, nightmares are vulgar," I explained.

We, doctor and patient, continued to chat about music, literature, and painting in the air-conditioned consultation room until the nurse, concerned with the growing number of patients waiting to be seen, cracked open the door, stuck her head in and said:

"Mr. J. J. Monteiro, Jr. has arrived."

"Tell him to wait."

"And Mrs. Evangelina Abiabade."

"Tell her to wait."

"And the engineer, Bertoldo Pingler."

"Let them wait, let them wait", said Goldblum, irritated.

The nurse disappeared, closing the door.

"You need to eat", said Goldblum. "The most creative thing man can do is eat. I have great respect for gluttony. Eating is vital – a given, at times forgotten. Art is hunger."

"Art is hunger. At that moment I didn't comprehend the profundity of Goldblum's statement.

"Let's have dinner together tonight," he said. Goldblum had recently separated from his wife and he ate out every night at different restaurants. "I'll come by your place at eight."

I didn't know how to say no. After all, Goldblum had been very kind and attentive towards me; to turn down the invitation would be impolite.

Back at home that night, I was listening to Schumann when Goldblum arrived. Goldblum, I neglected to mention, was a heavy man with a big belly, bald, with round, wet eyes.

"I'm going to take you to the restaurant that has the best fish in the city", he said.

The restaurant had an enormous aquarium full of blue trout. Goldblum led me to it.

"Pick which of these trout you want to eat," he said, while we watched the fish swimming from one end to the other. "Trout is a light fish, it won't give you any trouble."

I felt no desire to eat trout or anything else.

"What criterion should I use in making my choice?" I asked, to be polite.

"The criterion is always that of taste," responded Goldblum.

"Which is the tastiest?"

"Some like the bigger ones. Others, the smaller."

Faced with this answer, which I considered idiotic and evasive, I decided that I wouldn't eat trout. Certainly they would know how to make a spinach *soufflé* there.

Suddenly I noticed that one of the trout was eyeing me. It swam more elegantly than the others and had a warm and intelligent gaze. I was charmed by this gaze.

"Lovely, the look of this trout." I pointed to the fish.

A waiter approached, attending to Goldblum's pointing fingers.

"This one and this one," said Goldblum. The waiter dipped a net into the glass tank.

"No, no!" I screamed, but it was too late. The two fish had been caught and the waiter was heading for the kitchen with them.

"I'm not hungry."

"Eating and scratching...You know the saying..." said Goldblum.

The trout were served *aux amandes*, along with a German *trocken* (Goldblum allowed me one glass). I didn't want to eat. Goldblum had to insist repeatedly.

"You need the nutrients of this fine salmonoid," he finally convinced me.

So I put the first piece in my mouth. Then another tidbit, and another, and the trout was completely devoured.

Eating that trout, I must admit, was a more than pleasant experience. I didn't expect to feel such great pleasure and joy just from ingesting a miserable piece of fish meat. And yet when Goldblum tried to arrange to have dinner the following night, I excused myself with a false pretext.

"I'll call you one of these days," I said, privately having vowed never to call the doctor again.

For a few days I ate – actually I stopped eating – Talita's *soufflé*. I was thinking about the trout in an extremely complex manner: the taste of the meat, the elegant movements of the fish swimming in the tank, the strange sensation I had had upon opening the trout with a knife, like a surgeon, following Goldblum's instructions; and I thought primarily about the trout's gaze responding to mine.

During this, I dove into ethological and literary lucubrations. I remembered the Cortázar short story in which the narrator turns into an axolotl, and Guimarães Rosa's tale, where he turns into a jaguar. But I didn't want to become a trout: I wanted to *eat* a trout with an intelligent gaze.

I didn't know restaurants and didn't remember the name of the one in which I'd eaten the trout with Goldblum. I went to one restaurant that claimed fish as their specialty. I went in, ill at ease, and sat down. When the waiter came over, I asked to see the fish tank, since I wanted to choose my trout. The waiter called over the maitre d', who explained that they didn't have an aquarium, but that the trout were fresh, that they'd come in from the Bocaina mountains that day. Disappointed, I ordered trout *aux amandes*, like the last time.

My disappointment was immense. The fish wasn't the same as the other I'd savored. It had no head, no eyes. I paid it the same meticulous attention, separating the meat from the bones and skin, but, when it came time to eat, the taste wasn't like that of the meat I'd had before. It was an insipid meat, without character or spirit, bland, without freshness, unappetizing, without *élan*, with the taste of something diluted – a chill pierced my body – of something dead.

The next day, with the phone book in front of me, I called all the city's restaurants to find out which had tanks where the customers could choose the fish they would be eating. I took down all their names and, that same day, went to eat at one of them.

This time I went in with more confidence. I chose, from among the various fish swimming nervously in the aquarium, a

trout similar to the first – in color, in the elegance of its movements, and, above all, in the significant brilliance of its gaze. When they placed it on my plate I felt such a *great frisson* that I feared the occupants of the neighboring tables might have noticed. Upon eating the trout, I was happy to confirm that it tasted as delicious as the first.

My life changed after that day. I spared Talita from making any more *soufflé*. I went out to dinner every night at one of the restaurants with fish tanks.

Some also had lobsters and crayfish, which I also began to eat with great pleasure, even though these animals had tiny and opaque eyes. But the vital force that emanated from their solid meat compensated for the lack of a sensitive and intelligent gaze. I was attracted to the robust, archaic asymmetry, to the monstrous pre-historic structure of these crustaceans.

From then on, my mind ceased to wander in nebulous poetic digressions. While I listened to music during the day, I thought about what I would eat that night.

The waiters knew me by now. They knew I only ate trout, lobster and crayfish taken live from the tank. But one day a new waiter asked me what I wanted to eat.

"Is there something else?" I asked.

"We have rabbit stew, goat, lamb..."

"Where are they?" I asked, looking toward the aquarium.

"Where are they?" asked the waiter, in turn, perplexed.

"Yes," I said. "I want to see them."

"They're in the kitchen," answered the waiter. "Just a moment."

The waiter returned with the maitre d', who recognized me.

"Wouldn't you like a trout tonight, sir? A lobster?"

"The waiter suggested a rabbit," I said. "I've never had rabbit. Is it good?"

"Our rabbit is excellent," said the maitre d'.

"I'd like to see them."

"See them?"

"Yes. To choose."

"To choose," repeated the maitre d'.

"Yes. As I do with the trout and lobster."

"Ah, yes. Yes. I understand. But it happens that the rabbits are already – " He was going to say dead, I sensed that he was going to say dead, and yet he perceived that this might shock a customer like me, and preferred to say " – seasoned."

"Seasoned? "

"Yes, seasoned." The maitre d' smiled, satisfied, for having managed to come up with such a convenient metaphor. "Rabbits, unlike trout, must be seasoned for a while before being savored."

"Then show me the goats," I said. Perhaps influenced by the waiter, I had decided to that day eat a different animal, of the land and not of the sea.

"With the goats it's the same thing. They're already, um, seasoned."

"And where can they be found?"

"Where?" The waiter sensed that he was perspiring; discreetly, quickly, he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief taken from his pocket. "Where? On serving platters."

"May I see?"

"Yes. But they're not whole. Goats are large animals; I'm not sure if you've ever seen one."

"No, I never have. Do they have horns?"

"Yes, they have horns. But they're small, their horns. You needn't be concerned while eating, we remove the horns." A nervous smile and another quick wipe of his forehead. "Roasted, with broccoli, they're delicious." (He didn't tell me, but I later found out that lambs are eaten quartered.)

"And the rabbits? I've never seen a rabbit either."

"They don't have horns."

"That I know. The animals that have horns are the ox, the goat, the rhinoceros."

"The giraffe..."

"You have giraffe?"

"No, no, we don't. What I meant to say is that they have horns. Small horns. Giraffes."

"Larger or smaller than the goats?"

"I would say small in comparison to their size. Giraffes are tall," said the maitre d'. He seemed very perturbed. (Bluteau's definition is that "the giraffe is an animal larger than the elephant.")

"You needn't be concerned while eating rabbit," said the maitre d', penetrating my thoughts. "Abilio," he said to the waiter listening to the exchange, "bring a rabbit stew for the gentleman."

And so I ate that exquisite food. It was an unexpected taste, different from anything I had known up until then.

I ate, conscious the entire time, of the peculiarity of that taste, a sweet taste, not like honey, much less like sugar, a taste that gave me an unexpected sensation of singular pleasure.

Upon arriving at home, I put Satie, that rebel, on the stereo and imagined how rabbit would fare with me if I could choose it immediately before it was prepared, as I had done with the trout and lobsters. What gustatory pleasure would be mine if I could see the eyes of the rabbits before they died. I recalled the differences in taste between the trout that had been placed on my plate without my having seen it before (and it having seen me) and those that I would choose after prolonged mutual contemplation. Trout that I would select after seeing and perceiving all that they signified, objectively and subjectively: color, movement, and above all, the furtive and subtle returned gaze. Yes, the trout looked back, surreptitiously, a timid thing, at the same time shrewd, astute, seeking to establish a feigned communion with me, secret and seductive.

The next day I went back to the restaurant and said that I wanted to see the "seasoned" rabbit.

The maitre d' reluctantly took me to the kitchen and showed me a rabbit lying on an aluminum tray, which he'd taken from the refrigerator. The rabbit was whole, but without a head and with a hole where its viscera should have been. This didn't surprise me; I knew the animals were disemboweled before being eaten. Trout had entrails, too; the same held true of lobster.

The decapitated rabbit was an ugly thing to me, something undefinable, between a cat and a dog, since the head distinguishes these animals from one another when they're dead and skinned. An animal without its head is missing something very important: its eyes.

I ate the rabbit they'd shown me, having first asked that the cook explain to me how that dish – rabbit stew – should be prepared.

The cook taught me other things.

I went to a pet shop in the city. I wanted to see a live rabbit. There were several in the store, gray or white, and their evasive look, from within small eye sockets, was difficult to capture.

Ah, what a clever animal, I thought. One of them was so pretty that I bought it, even though it was more expensive than the others. It was a beautiful angora rabbit with long, silky fur.

On the way home, carrying the rabbit in a cardboard box, I stopped at a market to buy carrots and potatoes.

The rabbit wasn't interested in the potatoes, but ate the carrots lovingly, settled on the Persian rug in the living room. While listening to Brahms, I sat contemplating the rabbit's silent chewing.

How daintily animals feed themselves, I thought. I'd never seen a pig eating, but I imagine that, even though they may seem more voracious than other animals (according to what's been written), they too, like all of us, exhibit the fragility and beauty essential to their singular animal condition during the act of eating. Art is hunger.

The rabbit's evasive look made me a bit uncomfortable. It lacked the candor, the frankness, of the trout's gaze. But perhaps it was a question of sensitivity and perspicacity – but who, which, would be more sensitive and/or intelligent than the other? I knew that some of nature's most intelligent animals lived in the water, but the trout wasn't usually included among these; it was better known for its physical energy, its peripatetic vigor.

I knew nothing about rabbits. They were a mystery to me. But I now knew how to slaughter them and cook them as the chef at the restaurant had taught me.

I held the rabbit by the ears with my left hand. The animal's legs were extended, but the rabbit soon contracted them and threw me a look. Finally, a meaningful and direct look!

"Thank you, thank you for that spontaneous and candid look," I said, all the while holding the rabbit by the ears. I turned our faces, mine and the animal's, towards one another, up close.

I read its look, a look of vague curiosity, of mild interest, as if what was about to happen didn't matter. It wasn't an inquisitive or probing look. I'm being held by the ears, is all the rabbit must have been thinking.

With the edge of my right hand, fingers extended and together, I gave a blow to the back of the rabbit's neck. The cook had assured me that one blow would suffice to kill the animal.

But all those years I'd spent occasionally eating spinach *soufflés*, either seated, writing, or lying down, reading and listening to the great classics, had contributed very little towards the development of my muscular strength. The rabbit trembled upon receiving the blow and kept its eyes open. The animal's eyes now expressed slight fear. It wasn't an irrational sentiment; the rabbit knew what was happening, that it was at the mercy of a powerful being, that it couldn't flee, and that all it had left was its resignation.

We faced one another – the rabbit trembling without inhibition, its stoic eyes opened wide.

Three or four blows were required. Finally, the rabbit ceased to struggle.

I was exhausted. This must be what the winner of a marathon feels, I thought, noting that, along with fatigue, I felt sheer euphoria.

I put on Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and, completely naked, headed to the bathtub with the rabbit, a knife, and two large kettles. As yet inexperienced, I was afraid of dirtying the kitchen with blood once I gutted and skinned the rabbit according to the chef's instructions.

The knife was sharp, and I had little trouble. Seated naked in the tub, I completed the excoriation and evisceration of the leporid. The job done, I put the remains – disgusting entrails, fur, ganglia – in a kettle. The rabbit, ready to be seasoned, went in the other.

Next, I cleaned the tub and took a long, hot bath.

From the bathroom, now immaculately clean, I went to the kitchen, where I prepared the rabbit in a stew with carrots and potatoes while listening to Chopin's *Nocturnes*.

At last the rabbit was ready, there before me.

I began to sample it, delicately, in small portions. Ah! What supreme pleasure! It was a slow meal that lasted the length of

Mozart's *Jupiter*. Mozart wouldn't mind that I had used his music as mere *tafelmusik* if he knew of the satisfaction I had felt.

Then I went to brush my teeth. Deep in thought, I contemplated the tub through the mirror. Who had told me that goats had a gaze at once tender and perverse, a mixture of purity and lewdness? And the human gaze? Hmmm... That tub was small. I would need to buy a bigger one. Maybe a jacuzzi, one of the big ones, with jet-stimulators.

I continued to look at my face in the mirror. I looked at my eyes. Gazing and being gazed at – something irreflective after all, a steel shaft, lava being spewed out of a volcano, an endless cloud.

The gaze. The gaze.