The experience of the sublime in the work of Caspar David Friedrich

I - Friedrich's Cold Romanticism

The romantic concept of intimacy and tendency towards infinity announced by the work of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) unquestionably overlaps any limiting stylistic associations. His predisposition towards melancholy reveals an idiosyncrasy shaped by the morphological coolness in which he operates, and impels his asceticism to a confrontation with a freedom of creation "compromised" by his inner understanding. From this introverted and solitary subjectivity emerges a sentimentality concurrent with the "(...) credit of sublimity, mystery, unknown, infinity, which are the very categories of the romantic, for Novalis [1], who met him personally" (França, 2006: 67).

In Friedrich, the consciousness of an unattainable and elusive absolute is echoed in Romanticism's infinite nostalgia — man finds himself as a privileged beholder when confronted with the silent and enigmatic nature. In this ontological poetics that elevates landscape to the realm of the transcendental, we find roots of an absolute Hegelian idealism: nature as an aesthetic experience capable of leading us to unity. Such a sublime harmony contrasts with the absence of this relationship in the world of mankind, and this tension is heir to the ambivalence of the romantic reflection.

Friedrich's work evidences deep traces of German Romanticism: a high sensitivity towards nature; the belief in the correspondence between nature and mind; the passion for the equivocal, the indeterminate, the obscure and the far-off (objects immersed in fog, a distant fire in the darkness, the fusion of clouds and mountains); the solipsistic celebration; the emphasis on death (Koerner, 2009). The gloomy atmosphere of his paintings stems from a deep religious education — based on Lutheran precepts —and a life marked by painful losses of loved ones [2]. The idea of death, oftentimes reasserted by the symbolic use of pictorial elements, is an intended alliteration, and the only path to redemption. The use of nostalgic elements is recurrent in his paintings: mist and fog, dead trees, dramatic light effects, ruins, a boat sailing away from the beach (an evocation of the myth of Charon, the ferryman of the netherworld), bleak cemeteries, among others. Friedrich exhibits a "(...) fanatical inclination for solitude and melancholy (…), he seemed to have deliberately narrowed down his sphere of life so that he might maintain the tranquility of his own inner world" (Zhang, 2003: 177).

The painter is tormented by political and social tensions in a scenario obscured both by the aggressive attacks of the Napoleonic armies and the "artificial world" (Hill, 2003: 8) that will be eventually shaped by the Age of Enlightenment — a civilization that had already been countered by Rousseau's ideas and one which will take on Hobbesian contours. Friedrich responds to such

a positivist reduction with new spiritual impulses that express a deep sense of disillusionment, while at the same time resorting to themes of the Nordic folklore and symbols of nationalism, in a spellbinding patriotic affirmation: the artist's loyalty to the Swedish crown [3] "(...) probably inspired by piety and [Carl] Gustav's specific politics" (Koerner, 2009: 60). Friedrich rose against the French Enlightenment and the destruction of tradition by the Napoleonic onslaughts, invoking a medieval past that legitimized places and peoples according to the particular thread of history [4].

Friedrich's cold romanticism will lead him to seclusion and spiritual meditation, his pantheism representing God's ubiquity in nature's various elements. The canvas is a medium that evokes the divine and its hermitage. The painter's voice uncovers the personality of a solipsist character:

I have to stay alone and know that I am alone in order to fully contemplate and feel nature; I have to surrender to what surrounds me, unite with my clouds and rocks, in order to be what I am. I need solitude for a dialogue with nature. Once I spent an entire week in the Uttewald Abyss amid rocks and firs, and throughout this time I did not meet a single living soul; it is true, I do not recommend this method to anyone — it was too much even for me: involuntarily, gloom enters the soul. But this very fact must prove to you that my company cannot be agreeable to anyone" (Friedrich cit. by Zhang, 2003: 177).

In his book, *German Romantic Painting* [5], William Vaughan suggests that the melancholy evident in Friedrich's art should be analyzed in the light of the Zeitgeist and not merely drawn from the reading of his nostalgic personality: "melancholy was fairly fashionable"at that time (Vaughan cit. by Zhang, 2003: 179). In spite of such truth, in his art Friedrich achieved a consummate union between "real" and "ideal" — the indelible sign of a philosophical poetry that Herder and Goethe will later consolidate.

II - The *Sturm und Drang* literary movement

Could it be possible that the enlightened postulates of immanence — conceiving nature as possessing an order susceptible of being absorbed by reason —, associated to the notions of progress and civilization, impelled the *Sturm und Drang* young German poets towards adopting a radical resistance to such universalist goals? The dissatisfaction resulting from the emergent superficiality is the precursor of a search for more authentic values, which can be found in the most genuine traits of popular tradition — thus triggering a consequent valorization of folk songs — and in the concept of nature as a true physical world: so long as it was not artificially produced (Hill, 2003). The founding concepts of this movement configure the existence of a "soul" that elucidates an intellectual autonomy while striving for an ideal society, perhaps still uncorrupted. Both this strong irrationalist movement that rejects any aesthetic doctrine — Gottsched — and the systematic rationalism do evidence the peculiar German spirit, separating it from the Enlightenment oriented towards more Western pathways (Sauder, 2003).

The search for religious meanings in daily life — prompted by the cultural movement associated to Pietism [6] — takes on a special prominence in understanding the influence of the *Sturm und Drang* movement on Friedrich's pictorial work [7]. Herder was one of the most important voices of this movement and he was deeply influenced both by Johann Georg Hamann (1730-88) — for whom "the love and knowledge of God encompassed the love and knowledge of the whole of creation" (Hill, 2003: 7) — and by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), who saw in a more primitive world an alternative to the falsity of the present world. Herder's cultural pessimism contrasts with the ideas of the enlightened faith in the progress of history "(...) from the less to the most civilized" (Hill, 2003: 8). In Friedrich's paintings we find signs of such pessimism in the rare representations of the human figure, which in themselves are a testimony to a period of disbelief in the realization of man's potential. This same isolation will confront man with the most sublime experiences presented by nature and which can only be apprehended through innate qualities. Such an expression, according to Herder, cannot derive from complying with rules and conventions at the service of talent and erudition, rather from the unusual capacity of the genius (Koepke, 2003).

Friedrich's artistic production will be founded on a philosophical idealism where tragedy, seen as a metaphor, occurred as "(...) a conceptual framework through which one seeks to understand the situation of separation in which man finds himself" (López, 2007: 175), thus uncovering a latent compatibility in a deep sense of disillusionment — which in Goethe's *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) sees death as the only possible way out. Perhaps Schiller resorted to this same philosophy of tragedy to ward off modern conflicts, thus gaining a lasting influence on Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel. And, together with Goethe and Weimar "Classicism" [8], Schiller does preserve a well-established sentimentalist tradition of a self-absorbed Self (López, 2007).

In a way, the idea of a pre-romantic nation is a reflection of a strong need for an "(...) integrity of the Self" (Hill, 2003: 22), whose implicit and underlying fragmentation will grant German Romanticism the semblance of a project rather than a reality: "Romanticism inhabits this space between immense ambition and slight achievement, between hyperbolic aims and ever-reduced means" (Koerner, 2009: 31). The unfinished as a mark of the romantic project is highlighted by Schlegel's reflections that "Romantic poetry is still a work in progress; it is indeed its true essence" (Schlegel cit. by Koerner, 2009: 30).

By converting itself into a metaphor that calls for a remote and unifying integrity, the fragment seems paradoxical in the face of the increasingly solitary Friedrichian interiority. But in Friedrich the fragment departs from its original context and isolates itself from its present, transforming itself into a self-enclosing whole. His signs of rupture reveal themselves as marks of individuality and autonomy, as a complete project that simultaneously must be "(...) totally subjective and objective, a living and indivisible individual" (Koerner, 2009: 32). It is from the dichotomy between the Romantic project's future fragment and the past fragment evoked by Friedrich's canvas that stems the historical sense of the spirit, whatsoever its direction may be (Koerner, 2009).

III - The sublime as a hallmark in Friedrichian aesthetics

By envisaging creative energy as standing above any kind of order, the *Sturm und Drang* young writers were seen as *Kraftkerle* (men of force) and *Genie* (geniuses). The strong individuality of language — as well as of poetry or art — will find its maximum expression in them. The implicit subsumption of the individual into the universal, as suggested by this proposal, cannot be regarded separately from a profound philosophical conception, from poetry that Novalis and Schlegel envisaged primarily "(...) as *poiesis*, as creation and action "(Seligmann-Silva, 2005: 317). According to this romantic conception of man's relation with the universe — greatly influenced by the absolute Fichtian Self and tending towards infinity — we witness the dissipation, by the contingency of human nature, of the ability to perceive such a deep spiritual connection. This task will lead Friedrich towards painful pathways in his search for the absolute, a profound seeking that seems to render him just objects, as Novalis wrote in his *Fragments*.

In Friedrichian philosophy, nature will represent the place where the differences between men are blurred. However, the movement towards the absolute will not contemplate a dialogue between mankind and the world solely rooted on the harmonic relationship provided by the experience of natural beauty. A more accurate look at his paintings, even at those that seem to fit into the aesthetic tradition, reveals moments of remoteness and solitude that only a theory of the sublime would be able to sustain: the harmony afforded by the judgments of the beautiful ceases to be able to explain the divisions of modernity (Rufinoni, 2007).

The overwhelming and immeasurable features of nature's phenomena are incomprehensible if we don't make an effort to "go beyond what we perceive through our senses" (Seeberg, 2005: 85). The task of making such spirituality visible and perceptible by the senses will be fulfilled through the figure of the romantic genius; a philosopher-genius who will be marked "(...) by the inability to be understood" (Seligmann-Silva, 2005: 319) and one who, from his isolated standpoint, will seek the revelation of the divine as a shared spiritual relationship [9]. The spiritual eye that the painter posits for such an overwhelming meeting seeks sublimity capable of elevating man above nature in search for a communal connection: "Close your bodily eye, so that only with the spiritual eye you can see your image. Then bring to light what you saw in the dark, so that it may retroact in others, from the outside to the inside "(Friedrich cit. by Seeberg, 2005: 82). Friedrich will express himself through a sublimity unrelated to any conceptualization. His paintings manifest the unlimited by producing a range of aesthetic reactions geared to the extraordinary and grandiose aspects of nature. It is perhaps the same sort of sublime experience found in Longinus's writings [10], who had described it as a feeling that "(...) enthralls, disturbs and draws from us an admiration merged with awe and surprise" (Longinus & Perez, 2010: 4), or, according to Edmund Burke's impassioned definition, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger; that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime" (Burke, 2008: 36). The same sort of sublime that Kant would later describe as capable of overcoming the force of the comprehensible in perception:

"(…) threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on. Compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place. And we like to call these objects sublime because they raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage to believe that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence" (Kant 1998: 158).

Despite its significant role in the aesthetic experience, nature also becomes silent and enigmatic. If, on the one hand, nature is for Kant the only place capable of triggering the sensation of sublime, Schelling, one the other hand, will grant the subject the ability to make it loquacious via something superior which becomes externalized through art.

Friedrich was able to venture out along paths that reveal a peculiar "solitary contemplation" (Zhang, 2003: 174). In this sense, his work *The Monk by the Sea* (Fig. 1) is representative of this immense solitude by positioning the monk — probably a representation of Friedrich himself given the physiognomic similarities of long blonde hair and rounded head — in contrast with the immensity of an infinite ocean and firmament. Confronted with such scenery, we catch a glimpse of the human impotence, of a figure in risk of being physically damaged and simultaneously incompatible with the human being's powers of perception that could only be explained by a deeply immaterial sense.

Fig. 1 – *The Monk by the Sea* (1809-10), oil on canvas, 110×172 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

The Monk by the Sea openly rejects the aesthetic contemplation of the *locus amoenus* by denouncing a tumultuous time in the spirit of the artist. His mournful and melancholic character is inseparable from a creation influenced by the *Eigentümlichkeit* [11] of his genius. Without the figure of the monk, the painting would have lost the humility and faith so typical of the Friedrichian solitude and wouldn't be able to translate the priority that, for the painter, represents the union of nature with the Self. The contrast of the abyssal infinite with the monk's

tiny figure is presented with a tremendous depth arising from the boundless expanse of sky and sea. The intangible evident in this endless sea and sky illustrates the fatalism of the human existence, and seems to narrow the distance between Friedrich and Burke: “Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime" (Burke, 2008: 67).

Contemporary analyses on *The Monk by the Sea* reveal that this work was subjected to several remaking, and therefore bears several diegeses. Initially the sky was painted in a uniform gray and a pair of boats could be seen in the sea [12]. Subsequently, Friedrich converts it into a nocturnal scene by adding the moon and stars. Finally, in 1810, when the painting is presented at the Berlin Academy, it shows a sky with tempest clouds and a bleak mist (Koerner, 2009). This fact denounces the artist’s progressive tendency towards an increasingly intense isolation, which will be evidenced in his later paintings.

The painter’s solipsistic and reverential spirit towards the unattainable is also patent in the painting *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (Fig. 2). This image is a representation of death and its ambivalences intersect rather than oppose each other:

> *(...) In the outer world there arises a connection that can be seen or felt solely by the inner, spiritual eyes — and this differential is an integral part of the representation itself, which thus preserves its symbolic meaning: The sky is for the beyond what the winter forest is for the ephemeral earthly life (Seeberg, 2005: 87)*

Fig. 2 - The Abbey in the Oakwood (1809-10), oil on canvas, 110 × 171 cm, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

This is a connection seen through the inner eyes: the earth represents death, and heaven eternal life; the forest is the earthly life, and heaven the beyond. The deep expression of melancholy manifests itself through symbolic elements that will be present, in an increasingly pronounced way, in the painter’s work. *The Abbey in the Oakwood* can be read as an allegory of

his spirit and as the final destination of a journey that nurtures him: "There is an unmistakable portending of death in this painting deriving from the wizened, leafless frees, the bushes and the crumbling archway" (Zhang, 2003: 174).

The seeming connection between the solitary contemplation of the abyssal infinite — which confronts the monk with a latent inability to understand — and the desolate landscape that symbolizes the end of life probably led Joseph Leo Koerner, Friedrich's theoretician, to suggest a line of continuity between the paintings *The Monk by the Sea* and *The Abbey in the Oakwood* . If it is true that death and the deep contemplation of nature's infinity are present in both works, in *The Abbey in the Oakwood* the painter suggests "(...) a solemn cortège of monks marching in pairs and bearing a coffin to an altar lit by candles"(Koerner, 2009: 130). This interdiscursivity highlighted by Koerner reveals a Friedrichian system that transports us to the point of our true return to nature — death — and envisages the reemergence of "an eternal wholeness." This spiritual journey will find the desired end in the comforting hope of redemption — symbolized by the cross that rises up in the derelict abbey [13], and thus transforms the pictorial couple in a representation of the artist himself in his eagerness to return to the core of existence (Stumpel, 2009).

Friedrich's sublime art can be appreciated in its entire splendor in the painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (Fig. 3). By using the *Rückenfigur* [14], "Friedrich seems to have intended that we may be granted a voyeuristic access to his private contemplation" (Zhang, 2003: 173), leading us to the world meant by such a deep interiorization. Leon Battista Alberti, in his treatise *De Pictura* (1435-36), instructs artists to populate his canvases with "(...) someone who admonishes and points out ..." (Alberti cit. by Koerner, 2009: 192), which is something that was not duly observed in Italian painting. In Friedrich, the *Rückenfigur* means the primary act of experience itself while defining landscape as the primary meeting place between the subject and the world. Such a struggle is seldom so strongly presented as in the monumental *Rückenfigur* in *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, a figure that determines the verticality of the canvas by dominating the visual space and by establishing the vertical axis that symmetrically divides the valley. Hence, the mountains on both sides and the banks of fog arise as extensions of Friedrich himself (Koerner, 2009).

Fig. 3 - Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (c. 1818), oil on canvas, 94 × 74.8 cm, Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

We are dealing here undoubtedly with an aesthetics of the sublime that legitimates a deliberate obscurity in the representation of the landscape, one that Burke places above the neoclassical ideals of clarity, precision and compliance with the rules: sublime terror and passion can only be reached through darkness, uncertainty and confusion (Burke, 2008). The idea that vastness and infinity, the key attributes of the sublime in nature, can only be reached through obscurity is shared by Friedrich:

> *When a landscape is covered in fog, it appears larger, more sublime, and heightens the strength of the imagination and excites expectation, rather like a veiled woman. The eye and fantasy feel themselves more attracted to the hazy distance than to that which lies near and distinct before us* (Friedrich cit. Koerner, 2009: 212)

The sublimity evoked by Friedrich is placed not in the object but in the subjective effect provoked in the observer. Thus the distant mountains and forests are not sublime in themselves. It is their obscurity — presence and absence as objects of contemplation — which, welcomed by the

subject, grants them this great power. Kant rejects this purely subjective sublime as a feature of nature and reaffirms that it can only be found in the subjectivity of our minds. In the painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* we become aware of our superiority when facing nature — both inwardly and outwardly —in a program that aspires to invoke a profound aesthetic subjectivity. The painted world, facilitated by the *Rückenfigur*, conjures up the beholder's inner world and appears as an emanation of his own gaze — indeed of his own heart, according to Friedrich.

IV – Friedrich's legacy

The atmosphere of melancholy and enigma removes Friedrich's paintings from any representation of an external reality and consigns the whole essence of ontology to the painter's— and the beholder's — inner world. His art resorts to symbols that imply a decoding and thus extract the work from the deepest abyss of his being: silence is all-pervading, all presence is an absence. This modern pattern of development does not reject a significant subject matter and seeks instead the "(...) representation of the difficulty in dealing with such a subject matter" (Seeberg, 2005: 88).

Friedrich's romantic aesthetics will impart nature's symbolic codified language to the world of art and emphasize its intrinsic traits [15]. And although being removed from a decisive shift from the figurative to the non-figurative — normally fixed by early twentieth-century art historians with the advent of the expressionist movement —, Friedrichian aesthetics nevertheless does make use of the "subject's inner will" to overcome the visual sensation received from the outside world: a renunciation to adhere to the sensitive world, understood as a union of the artist with the invisible forces of the cosmos — and a first step towards disfiguration (Argan, 1995).

The rejection of nature as a mere motif of representation, besides human preoccupations with an increasingly materialistic world, paves the way to the advent of modern art: Friedrich is associated "(...) to the inauguration of a new artistic thought of/about nature, later on perpetrated by the Impressionists and developed for the whole of the twentieth century" (Cruzeiro, 2005: 30).

This same Friedrichian poetic discourse of searching for a primitivism will influence, among others, the work of Giorgio Chirico (1888-1978) — in itself a source of iconography and metaphysical inventions —, the romantic symbolism of Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) with his mythological and allegorical figures, the fantastic elements of Max Klinger's etchings (1857-1920) and, later on, the Dadaist and Surrealist movements (França, 2006). The incorporeal and abstract representations of Friedrich's art suggest paths and interpretations, rather than absolute answers, and this will be a common denominator of much of the subsequent artwork.

NOTES

[1] Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg, aka Novalis, was an important representative of

German Romanticism (see *Wikipedia* [online]. Accessed on March 31, 2010 at: **http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novalis**).

[2] The most striking loss was probably the demise of his brother, Johann Christoffer, who reportedly drowned in a lake when trying to save Friedrich himself. Accessed on March 31, 2010 at: **http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caspar_David_Friedrich**).

[3] Greifswald was the birthplace of Caspar David Friedrich. By the time of his birth, it was part of the Swedish kingdom and was later on incorporated in the Prussian domain. (See *Encyclopedia* [online].) Accessed on April 11, 2010 at: http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Greifswald.aspx).

[4] To reinforce this idea, it is important to refer to the work *Osnabrückische Geschichte* by German jurist and sociologist (Koerner, 2009) Justus Möser (1720-1794).

[5] (Zhang, 2003).

[6] The Pietism movement emerged within Lutheranism in the late seventeenth century as an opposition to the neglect of Lutheran orthodoxy towards the personal dimension of religion (see *Wikipedia* [online]. Accessed on April 2, 2010 at **http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietismo**).

[7] Note also the importance of the sentimental style of writing known as *Empfindsamkeit* (Sentimentalism) developed by Friedrich Gottlob Klopstock (1724-1803). (Hiller, 2003).

[8] Weimar Classicism, also known as Sentimental Pre-Romanticism, emerges when Goethe moves from Frankfurt to Weimar (1775), thus marking the end of the *Sturm und Drang* movement (Hill, 2003: 13).

[9] Friedrich seems to be influenced by theologian Schleiermacher, for whom, apart from the revelation of the sacred scriptures, the divine was susceptible of being found in nature (Seeberg, 2005).

[10] Longinus (3rd century BCE), also known as pseudo-Longinus because his true name is unknown, is the name given to the Greek author of the *Treatise on the Sublime*, a work that extols the use of the sublime in rhetoric writing. (See *Wikipedia* [online]. Accessed on April 11, 2010 at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longinus_(literature).

[11] A German term that the Romantics often associated with the figure of the genius and which means *distinctive feature or quality*, *peculiarity*, *bizarreness* (See *Dictionarist*, accessed on April 11, 2010 at: http://www.dictionarist.com/Eigentümlichkeit

[12] According to Joseph Leo Koerner, the painting originally conveyed a sense of life and a sign of hope (Koerner, 2009).

[13] In *The Abbey in the Oakwood* the ruins are not intended to evoke nostalgia for the past, but rather a picture of solitude and mourning by eliciting a more introspective contemplation (Zhang, 2003).

[14] Person represented in the pictorial scene from behind, able to incite the beholder to take his place and thus to try to understand how the human being interprets the scene (See *Wikipedia* [online]. Accessed on April 11, 2010 at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caspar_David_Friedrich.

[15] Friedrich probably identified himself with the theory of Wilhelm Wackenroder (1773-1798), one of the founders of German Romanticism and who in 1797, in his work *Outpourings of an Art-Loving Monk*, recognized that this artwork emerged from the artist's soul and feeling (Cruzeiro, 2005).

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