

A Lawnmower and a Soufflé

Throughout my youth I felt like I was observing the world from a distance.

This probably stemmed from the fact that I was born in a town where nothing notable ever happened, in a country where nothing notable ever happens.

I lived in my grandmother's house from the age of seventeen.

It was a large house with many empty rooms, and both of us enjoyed inhabiting its vast space in each other's company. Fenced off by enormous hedges, it had an island-like quality – a good place to think. I would supply my grandmother with books to read and she would treat me to a bounty of delectable food in return.

I recall giving her *Justine* by the Marquis de Sade before having occasion to read it myself. I liked to do that sometimes, hearing my grandmother's assessment before my own encounter. I remember her saying: "it was dreadful what that young girl had to go through". Only later would I understand the full extent of that sentence.

My grandmother read the books at lightning speed, ready to discuss them the following day. We both enjoyed our discussions. So many books passed between us that I have forgotten many of them. There wasn't much else to do. A retired widow and an indolent teenager. The days passed by slowly like sleepwalkers.

There was one thing she was always adamant about: the big lawn needed to be kept trimmed, and I was expected to take care of it. I would push the lawnmower around the garden as her silhouette observed me from the living room. The lawn was like swampland, it was a major pain for me. Yet she was preoccupied by the garden, muttering occasionally under her breath: "It's getting longer again. Maybe it's time for you to cut it?"

The lawnmower vibrating in my hands, a big orange beast, obnoxiously loud.

We also watched films together: *The Exorcist* ("what's wrong with her?"), *Breaking the Waves* ("The devilishness of those people."), *M* by Fritz Lang ("That whistling is uncanny.").

On one occasion we watched *Eyes Wide Shut*. I remember regretting it when we got to the orgies. You wouldn't want to watch that with your grandmother.

Those were formative years. But I guess all years have that potential (if we remain open).

It was a time of exploration – a first gaze into the world – and I am certain it pushed me away from the usually-trodden path. There was one book in particular that affected me. I remember reading its first page to my grandmother. "That man is sick in his head.", she remarked with a blank look. She could be very concise in her judgment.

And so it became that little by little I became an artist, a *métier* I take no pride in by the way.

I am continuously haunted by this strange sense of puzzlement. How did it come to this? What am I doing?

And lately: how did my thoughts end up orbiting around a strange man such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau?

Why have I sought to tie myself to him? How does it come about that I have become obsessed with a painting from the first part of the 18th century?

The wonderful Watteau painting of Pierrot: If I try to answer the above question I would say that it has something to do with the timelessness of the questions that are addressed in the painting. The ambiguity of the character staring back at us. Is he disillusioned, or is he a cynic who has accepted his lot in life, and who plays his hand of cards with nonchalant panache? Hard to tell. This riddle has kept me attracted to this painting since my early youth. Time and again I have stood before this painting and pondered these questions. I can't decide what to think of him. Now that I have become somewhat of a performer myself, the question has acquired a heightened sense of urgency. Am I like him? And so, if I am like the character in the painting am I then disillusioned or do I play my hand with enthusiasm? No matter what I do I still can't decide.

Little is known of the painting's origin.

It is said that the work was once casually put on sale at a street market in Paris, a century or so after the artist's death. The vendor had written "Buy me, I'm all alone" across it.

All alone.

In Freud's book on Leonardo, he draws the analogy of the old master awakening in the night with everyone else asleep: a man of the future confined to the claustrophobia of his time. I regard Watteau in much the same way. Some individuals have it in them to become harbingers of the future. I think that great artists have the ability to become just that. This is what Watteau is to me.

I met with an artist recently who was deeply concerned about the audience of the future.
"Imagine a girl being born today. What will she think of your work in twenty years?"

I have come to believe in the artist's role as one which seeks to expand the human capacity for abstract thought. I think of my work as modest bottled messages, drifting hither and dither on the sea of time, until hopefully being picked up and experienced by the humans of the future; a better future populated by humans with expanded faculties for the Abstract.

At a time where the world seems to be regressing I ask myself: what are my thoughts worth?
And then I think of the beast of man, and I think of the finer souls who have revealed themselves to us through their work. Their messages have reached us.

One day my grandmother started drifting into the foggy lands of Alzheimer's.

I remember the first sign that I noticed.

One morning she implored me to sit and watch an episode of the the soap opera Days of Our Lives with her, which I did reluctantly.

About a minute in, I realised that I had already seen it (one other morning spent together). "But grandmother, you've already seen this, three months ago! Don't you remember?" I asked her half amused, half concerned. She was adamant that this was the first time she had seen it.

She still felt good for a long time and she continued to cook wonderful food for me. Until one day a soufflé deflated in the oven. She apologised. It was our last soufflé.