

Josef Strau

Bohemian in the Mirror

Kneeling on the kitchen floor, I put a little of the most expensive cat food in my mouth, but didn't swallow it. The cat was beside me, because of the good smell of food. I put the mush back on the floor and the cat immediately ate it. Then I tried to stand up again. But I had drunk too much. It was December 24th. Beside me was the bench. I lay on it. Then it occurred to me that in the last few days I was trying to make something of an unpleasant sentence but hadn't got anywhere with it. Only, a stupid compulsion to keep repeating it plagued me, so I said, "Prussia, wake up, wake up, but wake up only in me." In the morning, when I had just got up, I caught sight of myself in the round mirror, and for the first time saw something really unusual. I saw not the normal face, which now and again had perhaps just got a bit older - this time it was a quite new, unknown face. And I knew, this looks like a bohemian, this is the face of a goast of a bohemian. But that's something I certainly never wanted to be, never yet, never had I thought I myself would ever experience the *vie de bohème* or anything like it, and far less, it's certain, did I think then, that I myself would suddenly assume the face of a bohemian in the mirror.

After my Christmas encounter with the mirror which showed, as if in a photographic moment, not my present but my past, an "inner" biographical past which I had suppressed, as if in a prolonged state of fatigue and lack of close self-observation, I decided I would from then on do all I could to ensure that the bohemian in the mirror was suppressed, became invisible again for the future. Unfortunately, I just tried to extinguish the results of the past not within myself, but at least from my face, by leading an ordered, regular life.

Seemingly for no good reason, that meeting in the mirror makes me think of that critical moment, which, nonsensical as it may sound, may have a great deal to do with a fundamental aesthetic approach to photography. It was like an uncanny pose not struck by me, but invented by my mirror image. It was just as Roland Barthes says, "that photography offers me the pose's perfect past, it places death for me in the future. I shudder at a catastrophe that has already happened." People say that mirrors and photography are closely connected. Like photographs the mirror image pursues us and, according to Barthes, mediates through the feeling of decay and time past. Till now I could never understand why, and I found the connection somewhat strained and stupid before, that photos are capable of offering some kind of evidence, the evidence of a mirror of our past in the eye of that essence of photography. For that organic essence there is only time, aging, and decay, there is no present.

My photographic mirror experiences have however not subsided since, quite the contrary. So now I live with the ghost of an officer from some old days. The first time he confronted me was in an article. A typical inhabitant of the country, it said, was for some people still something like a mysterious, highly educated officer, who went for walks along the conifer lined coastline of the Baltic. After reading this, I thought at first, I had totally forgotten this vision of this past officer. But when the shop assistant in a tea merchant's later in the day held out some Japanese leaf telling me in an language of order to sniff, it was as if examination panic prevented me from naming the aroma, which I normally might have been able to. So I looked at the tea in the packet and it appeared in color and form to resemble dark pine needles. So I said it smelt like conifers in a forest. No the assistant shouted at me, it smells like the sea coast. And so in that moment suddenly he stood in front of me again, in the same (almost photographic) moment, the uncanny gray officer. It was only back home, drinking the new tea from the new green teapot that my officer developed his full flavor. I'm still trying to

get rid of him. Or if that doesn't work, to justify him. That naturally works even worse. Then I have to think whether his ghost doesn't come from me myself, whether his stupid, compulsive repetitiveness might be a sort of recurrent self-portrait from an earlier time, rigidly programmed before the *vie de bohème*. I conclude that he has rightly become too uncanny, and that my growing affection for the mirror image is very banal and represents a no longer available, "decayed" past. Could there somehow, in this affection, be contained a possible reflection? And if so, the political reaction would have to be satisfaction at having vicariously overcome this officer in myself. In which case I would have to enter into a state of competition. What can he do that I can't? Did he speak a better French, a better English, could he play the piano better than me? It's disappointing, this fairy-tale unfolding within my own four walls. There the cold, gray strips of coastline without much light hang in white frames with round mounts, round like the organic round eye of the camera, but just without the goast of the uncanny officer in the green teapot.