PLINTH reads PETER & PAUL and selections from SELECTED STORIES and *HISTORY OF THE POPES*

THE METHOD OF MYTH
by
Robert Cuttner

What Plinth does in his finest work is to show how an individual's life is, to that person, a myth he is creating, as rich and as varied and as meaningful within that person's closed system as the myth of Krishna is to the Hindus or the myth of Zeus to the Greeks. Within a person's life, for Plinth, there are constellated as well submyths, galaxies of fables which are the episodes in the person's past life. As the person moves away from an actual event in his life, the event moves out of time and fact, into fable, and then into the towering guidance from afar of myth.

Janusz Kozikowski has spoken of Plinth's method in his fiction as being "myth built out of everyday life. The opposite has been done by many moderns, but to make the commonplace mythical is more in line with the ancient method." The trappings of his myth structure are Popes, stylites, flag pole sitters and human flies, ecclesiasts, ghosts, and the androgyne.

"To make the commonplace mythical is more in line with the ancient method." When Plinth names a Jesuit boarding school in Wisconsin after the infamous Peter and Paul prison in the Kremlin, he is creating a myth-structure much like Joyce's use of the Odyssey for *Ulysses*, with this difference: that instead of an ancient literary parallel, Plinth uses a contemporary geographical and historical parallel. But it does suggest a dimension to the poem in a way which Plinth employed in *Total Mobil* by the use of Russian names. The stories in *Total Mobil* are all about Americans, but oftentimes they have Russian names; the geographical confusion suddenly becomes illuminating as the comparisons between the two cultures becomes clear. But there is a further element in *Peter and Paul*; the epic events of the prison and the memory of historical figures imprisoned there throw long shadows over the figures in the poem, and make them larger than life at the same time that they seem most powerless.

The subject involves what could have been a rather sentimental and ephemeral affair, the love between two boys who refuse to admit their love, and carry on their "affair" by means of insults and feigned contempt. But the poetic line carries echoes from diverse sources—the long Hebrew chant of Song of Songs, the alexandrine of Rimbaud and St. John Perse, the short lyrical chants recalling Blake and the American Southern chain-gang folk song. The imagery moves from extraordinarily visualized specifics to scenes involving vast space. Space has always been the important element where the intersection of place and infinite horizon can meet. Place and vast space are as important in the poetic universe of Plinth as time and the timeless are in Eliot. But whereas time tends to shrink proportions and diminish human reality for Eliot, place can be a prison for Plinth, but it can also be the point of departure for freedom, transcendence, *"a hollow between two waves of the sea."* Thus the revolt of the boys within their prison turns the dead tree wrapped in iron coils into a tree blossoming with blossoms and birds. They move through love from a Jesuitical to a Blakean universe in which the word is made flesh and blood. They are "heretics" like the story of Christ and Satanael which serves as the motif at the opening of the poem, a Gnostic story of Christ and his shadow. Christ, according to the Gnostic tradition, was born with a shadow, and as a boy the shadow comes to visit him. Christ's mother binds the shadow to the bed, but Christ comes in and unbinds his shadow, and embraces him

> that day we passed up to your alcove
> and found our opposite bound to a post.

It is not only through the use of Sir Thomas Browne and Edward Dahlberg that Plinth creates a new myth out of the Popes. He is also concerned to show this "reconciliation of opposites" in the lives of various Popes. But he does not use the materials of actual history in creating figures larger than life: he makes up stories or takes Greek and Peruvian and Roman myths and carves a place for the Popes among them. They are his Greek gods, his Lord Shiva, his Aztec exterminating angels and procreating gods, seen through the eyes of a Mediaeval peasant. "I wanted to see the Popes," he said in an interview in Horizon in 1970, "as a poor unlettered peasant woman might see them if she were to hide under the floorboards of their great palaces, and without understanding anything of politics or social change, see them from the camera perspective of Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*. I imagine her mind filled with an oral tradition of world myths, which she uses to explain the comings and goings, the appearance of three Popes at one time, the extermination of one Pope by another. That to me would be a true history—that is to say, a fiction, a myth."

He adopts this same method of seeing "from beneath the floorboards" in "Simon of the Pillar". Here a private life as it develops from infancy to age nine is seen almost like the evolution of the whole world out of original chaos and mingling, into more and more discrete separation, cooling, hardness, into the final image of the stone, the pillar. The development of the child, then, is seen as the growth into autonomy, but also into solitude, into alienation, in the growth of Simon into a Stylite. The style teeters at times on the edge of chant, particularly in the opening lines, but never falls into poetic prose. It continually moves forward, each line taking the development further, until what was at first a mixture of physical world and spirit has become pure, abstract spirit, much like the ghost in "Femme Fatale."

In perhaps Plinth's finest story, a Bishop comes to investigate a house reputedly "haunted" and falls in love with the inhabitant, a nervous, restless, passionate ghostess who will use any means to return to life. It is a variation on the Vampyr story, except that the style is as rich and as multicolored as Proust or *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*. We know the characters only through their astrological signs, and through the excess of their passion, so that by the end of the story they seem to live with one foot in each world, life and death, that place, Plinth says in *Peter and Paul*, "where moons and fables meet."

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PETER & PAUL

1.- PROLOGUE
2.- WALLS
3.- FLOODS
4.- THRESHOLDS