

Les formes sont variées où l'immuable se soulage d'être sans forme.

—Samuel Beckett, *Malone meurt*, 1951

One drawback of entering public space is the contingency with which physical memory is unobtrusively trapped—hardwired—by its bland architectural features. Certain circuitous paths, for example, lead us (fondly) to a favored watering hole or ill-fated outdoor bench (a bad argument); past the site of a legitimate stick-up; the street corner where the second nervous breakdown took place; the old White Castle drive-thru, host to a one-time al fresco fellatio caper, that will be, tomorrow, another luxury rental high-rise tower. This sort of empirical navigation can't be discovered through a helpful app—its compass is the unconscious knot that throbs in your lower gut when you learn the therapist's office is one level up from the fine French bistro where you first met her.

Each turn risks remembered triumph, odd foible, or defeat—with a force blunt enough to want some sort of safety helmet. As armor against the too-heavy psychic traffic; talisman for the tender ego; a funky chapeau to retrieve, before dinner, from the cloakroom with bravado; a “cushion from matters of life and death”ⁱ. . .

And so, like gravid tortoises, we return feebly to the narrow nest of our own private rooms. Where an overstuffed chair, soft carpet, and draped crepe de chine seem to cover over, not least pad, the emotional terror of civic (ie. social) exposure—and the mounting empirical evidence for a final theory of meaninglessness. Here a poor metaphorical imitation of the emotional support “animal” is found stylishly stamped into pleather and PVC, upholstering various supple surfaces portending supportive contact—the pathetic sublime in a chemically dyed (and dumb) menagerie.

The subtle frictions of—faux—eel skin, ostrich, snake, crocodile make for a tactile image of vital interiority; keep one from slipping haplessly through the ceiling cracks. But for even Fassbinder's Petra, a high-quality shag is no substitute for the bitterness of fleeting youth. “Life is irreducible to the terms with which we seek to grasp it.”ⁱⁱ

After the Greeks, F. Schiller's idea of grace was that it could be worn casually, like a belt; that is, a moral character accessory rather than inborn attribute. So an aesthetic of rigorous maintenance—a doctored facial expression, with the same tautness wrought by deeply tufted buttons—signifies a certain unhinged ethics (due diligence of the femme) if not “beauty.” And the rude maxim: mutton, dressed like lamb.

Where is the grace in giving up the illusion; in allowing yourself to be torn to shreds?

–Kari Rittenbach

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