5

Are Some Things Unrepresentable?

The issue raised by my title does not call for a straightforward yes or no. Instead, it bears on this question: under what conditions might it be said that certain events cannot be represented? Under what conditions can an unrepresentable phenomenon of this kind be given a specific conceptual shape? Obviously, this line of inquiry is not neutral. It is motivated by a certain intolerance for an inflated use of the notion of the unrepresentable and a constellation of allied notions: the unrepresentable, the unthinkable, the untreatable, the irredeemable. This inflated usage subsumes under a single concept all sorts of phenomena, processes and notions, ranging from Moses's ban on representation, via the Kantian sublime, the Freudian primal scene, Duchamp's *Grand verre* or Malevitch's *White Square on White Background*, to the Shoah; and it surrounds them all with the same aura of holy terror. The issue then becomes how, and under what conditions, it is possible to construct such a concept, which proposes to cover all spheres of experience univocally.

I would like to introduce this general question starting from a narrower inquiry that focuses on representation as a regime of thinking about art. What precisely is being said when it is maintained that certain entities, events or situations cannot be represented by artistic means? Two different things, it seems to me. First, that it is impossible to make the essential character
of the thing in question present. It cannot be brought before our eyes; nor can a representative commensurate with it be found. A form of material presentation that is adequate to its idea; or, conversely, a scheme of intelligibility equal to its material power — these are not to be found. This first impossibility thus posits an incapacity on the part of art.

The second, by contrast, challenges art's exercise of its power. It says that a thing cannot be represented by artistic means on account of the very nature of those means, of three characteristic properties of artistic presentation. Firstly, the latter is characterized by its surplus of presence, which betrays the singularity of the event or situation, recalcitrant as it is to any plenary material representation. Secondly, this surplus of material presence has as its correlate a status of unreality, which removes from the thing represented its weight of existence. Finally, this interplay of surplus and subtraction operates according to a specific mode of address that delivers the thing represented over to affects of pleasure, play or distance which are incompatible with the gravity of the experience it contains. Some things, it is then said, fall outside the competence of art. They cannot adapt to the surplus of presence and subtraction of existence peculiar to it, and which in Platonic terms define its character as simulacrum.

To the simulacrum Plato counter-poses the straightforward tale, one without artifice, removed from the interplay of enhanced presence and diminished existence, and likewise free of doubt as to the identity of its teller. It is this contrast between straightforward tale and mimetic artifice which today governs the prestige accorded to the word of the witness in its two forms. The first of these esteems the straightforward tale, which does not constitute art but simply conveys an individual's experience. The second, by contrast, regards 'the
witness's narrative' as a new mode of art. This involves not so much recounting the event as witnessing to a *there was* that exceeds thought, not only through its own particular surplus, but because the peculiarity of the *there was* in general is to exceed thought. Thus, in Lyotard in particular, the existence of events that exceed what can be thought calls for an art that witnesses to the unthinkable in general, to the essential discrepancy between what affects us and such of it as our thinking can master. It is then the peculiarity of a new mode of art – sublime art – to record the trace of the unthinkable.

An intellectual configuration has thus developed that revokes representation in favour of either a Platonic plain tale or a new art of the sublime, placed under the patronage of Burke and Kant. It pursues two lines. On the one hand, it argues for the internal impossibility of representation, the fact that a certain type of object leaves representation in ruins by shattering any harmonious relationship between presence and absence, between the material and the intelligible. This impossibility therefore appeals from the representative mode of art to a different kind of art. On the other hand, it argues for its indignity. It then places itself in a quite different framework – a Platonic ethical framework that does not involve the notion of art, but where what is judged is simply *images*, where what is examined is simply their relationship to their origin (are they worthy of what they represent?) and their destination (what effects do they produce on those who receive them?).

Thus, two logics become intertwined. The first concerns the distinction between different regimes of thinking about art – that is, different forms of the relationship between presence and absence, the material and the intelligible, exhibition and signification. The second does not involve art as such, but only different types of imitation, different types of image. The