

ASKESIS

There are many sites of askesis: monasteries, schools, madrasas, hospitals, forts ... any place that has afforded a retreat to a place of comparative safety and contained order. In this sense, every home, no matter how minimal, holds out just this possibility even if all others have faded. In this idea of shelter there is a specific distinction that qualifies the shelter as providing a cultural rather than (just) a natural protection. This is that what askesis flies from is not simply a natural or social threat, i.e. not bad weather or thieves, but something intangible that relates directly to fear when no object of fear can be found. To settle this matter within the concept of security would be premature. This would short-circuit the matter. The question would again be, "secure from *what?*" and "secured by *what means?*"

Retreat, withdrawal, implies a territory that was occupied and now left behind, a Paradise lost possibly, especially in the sense that Paradise is a term that is frequently awarded retrospectively. This departed land and the new place of retreat are separated by a boundary that is more functional as an imaginary line than any materially reinforced wall or militarily defended border could be. It is a line that compresses the suffering of loss. Like the wall of the Temple in Jerusalem, it shows that human loss can have no more effective form than an architectural wall that is stripped down to being the simplest of boundaries — i.e. a boundary that "goes nowhere." The radical *un*-functionality of such walls (think of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as belonging to this class) instructs us that there is, in architecture, an equally radical *dys*-function, and that dysfunction belongs to Venus, *venustas*, mother of Eros, the third of the three Vitruvian "virtues" but the least understood.

Just as *venustas* brings with it complexity, the children of the idea of beauty have equally complicated lives. To wit: the earliest studies of aesthetics as a philosophical issue did not at all treat the matter of beauty but rather of sense experience. And, from these beginnings, the issue was very architectural: a matter of how parts relate to a whole. And, if we pursue this matter to a time before philosophy, the story of Cupid and Psyche (where philosophy is personified as a curious woman), we get the same thing. Psyche, for her desire to see beauty uncompromised by any particular embodiment, is given three impossible tasks. Each of these tasks has to do with *gathering*, curiously: gathering that which has been dispersed in any impossibly undifferentiated way and "defended" against re-collection (we can take a leap here to say that memory and *anamensis* can possibly be involved) either by logic, or fierce natural forces (rams in Psyche's task of gathering wool), or death itself (Psyche must go to the underworld to obtain a box to hold beauty itself, a gift from Prosperina to Venus, to restore her beauty). This is the most moving of the three tasks, since it involves a tower that persuades Psyche not to throw herself off it — a truly ancient source of "*architecture parlant*"! We cannot afford to overlook this important *precedent*! The tower not only keeps Psyche from killing herself, it gives advice about how to navigate the underworld.

If we look at all parts of the Cupid and Psyche story, we see something of a formula for determining this “remainder” of the boundary of askesis, the remainder that is the minimum of architecture. (We must focus on the meaning of askesis — i.e. that it allows us to talk of architecture in terms of this minimum.)

First of all, Cupid is invisible and Psyche a visible, mortal woman. In their love, we must translate these characterizations as characterizations *of* something, and to get more quickly to the architectural essence, we see immediately that we are talking about visibility and invisibility, i.e. anamorphosis — the presence of visibility and invisibility without any murky middle term, or sliding scale; just visibility and invisibility “flat out.” Once we are in possession of this idea theoretically, we can take it forward through a succession of experimental conditions, found in history, where thinkers/theorists working along similar lines have constructed their own projects: Florensky, Vico, Kierkegaard (repetition), and all the magical spaces of fictional literature (Borges, C. S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, etc.) where there has been a keen and disciplined theoretical idea of the function of the boundary.

In this project of carrying forward the idea of the architectural minimum, architecture’s *venustas*, we must continually employ the idea of askesis and ask what are its parts. In Harold Bloom’s treatment of the askesis of the young poet in flight from the enchantment of the older master poet, five terms besides askesis are brought into play:

- *apophrades*, the words of the dead (“acoustmatic” words rather than acoustic ones)
- *tessera*, the breaking of tokens on behalf of future recognition of identity
- *clinamen*, the swerve or exception to the enforced smooth flow of things (by *utilitas* and *firmitas*)
- *kenosis*, a means of knowing without knowing (i.e. emergence)
- *dæmon*, the ultimate Other generated by fear (cf. Vico’s imaginative universal), “that from which one has no option but to retreat”).

Askesis is understandable — this is the thesis argument — *only by means of* these five other terms. Since askesis is also a negative, it is the function of the negative in these terms that ties them together. The search for the architectural “minimum essence” proceeds by means of explicating this primary vocabulary by means of a succession of “sites” (architectures, stories, landscapes, works of art, etc.) where the askesis of architecture is visible in some way.

Endnote: Theory is about resistance, not just resistance to appropriations by non-theory but resistance to its own desire for conclusions. This doesn’t mean that theory should be inconclusive, but that its “project” should always maintain an “openness” that is not a stupid form of relativism but rather an anticipation of an unknown future in the sense of Walter Benjamin’s *Novus Angelus*, based on the image by Paul Klee. History turned backward is prophecy.