

The Beauty of the Flame, Umberto Eco

The Beauty of the Flame

THE THEME OF THIS YEAR'S Milanesiana festival is the four elements. To speak about all four would be beyond me, so I have chosen to limit myself to fire.

Why? Because, though still essential to our lives, of all the elements it is the one most liable to be forgotten. We breathe air all the time, we use water every day, we continually tread the earth, but our experience of fire is in danger of gradually diminishing. The role once played by fire has slowly been taken over by invisible forms of energy; we have separated our idea of light from that of the flame, and our only experience of fire now is that of gas (which we hardly notice), the matchstick or cigarette lighter (at least for those who still smoke), and the flicker of candles (for those who still go to church).

A lucky few still have a fireplace, and this is where I would like to begin. In the 1970s I bought a house in the country with a fine hearth. For my children, then between ten and twelve, the experience of fire, of burning logs, of flames, was something entirely new, and I realized when the fire was lit they lost all interest in television. The flame was more beautiful and varied than any television program—it told countless stories, it could flare up at any moment, it didn't follow the set patterns of the television show.

Perhaps, among our contemporaries, the person who reflected most on the poetry, mythology, psychology, and psychoanalysis of fire was Gaston Bachelard, who could hardly avoid encountering fire during his research into archetypes associated with human imagination from earliest times.

The heat of the fire recalls the heat of the sun, which itself is seen as a ball of fire; fire hypnotizes and is therefore the first object and source of wonder; fire reminds us of the first universal injunction (not to touch it), thus becoming an epiphany of law; fire is the first creature that, as it takes life and grows, devours the two pieces of wood that have generated it—and this birth of fire has a strong sexual significance since the seed of the flame is unleashed through friction—and yet, if we want to pursue a psychoanalytical interpretation, we will recall how for Freud the condition for taking control of the fire is renunciation of the pleasure of quenching it with urine, and therefore the renunciation of instinctual life.

Fire is a metaphor for many impulses, from the fire of anger to being inflamed with amorous infatuation; fire is metaphorically present in every discussion about passions, in the same way as it is always linked metaphorically to life through the color that it shares with blood. Fire as heat governs that maceration of food matter that is digestion and shares with the feeding process the fact that, to stay alive, it must be continually fueled.

Fire is ever present as an instrument for every transformation, and fire is called for when something has to be changed: to prevent the fire from dying out requires a care similar to that for a newborn baby; fire immediately highlights the fundamental contradictions in our lives; it is the element that brings life and the element that brings death, destruction, and suffering; it is the symbol of purity and purification but also of filth, since it produces ash as its excrement.

Fire can be a light too strong to look at, like the sun. But properly harnessed, as in the light of a candle, it flickers and casts shadows, accompanying our night vigils, during which a solitary flame takes hold of our imagination, with its rays

that spread out into darkness, and the candle symbolizes a source of life and, at the same time, a sun that dies away. Fire is born from matter, to be transformed into an ever lighter and airier substance, from the red or bluish flame at its base to the white flame at its peak, until it vanishes in smoke . . . In that sense the nature of fire is ascendant, it reminds us of transcendence, and yet, perhaps because we learn that it lives at the heart of the earth, from which it bursts forth only when volcanoes erupt, it is a symbol of infernal depth. It is life, but it also dies down and is continually fragile.

And to conclude my consideration of Bachelard I'd like to quote this passage from *Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1964):

From the notched teeth of the chimney hook there hung the black cauldron. The three-legged cooking pot projected over the hot embers. Puffing up her cheeks to blow into the steel tube, my grandmother would rekindle the sleeping flames. Everything would be cooking at the same time: the potatoes for the pigs, the choice potatoes for the family. For me there would be a fresh egg cooking in the ashes. The intensity of the fire cannot be measured by an hour glass; the egg was ready when a drop of water, perhaps of saliva, evaporated on its shell.

I was surprised, then, to learn that Papin watched over his cooking pot using the same methods as my grandmother. Before the egg I had to eat bread soup . . . But on the days when I was on my good behaviour, they would bring out the waffle iron. Rectangular in form it would crush down the fire of thorns burning red as the spikes of gladioli. And soon the gaufre, or waffle, would be pressed against my pinafore, warmer to the fingers than to the lips. Yes, then indeed I was eating fire, eating its gold, its odour, and even its crackling while the burning gaufre was crunching under my teeth. And it is always like that, through a kind of extra pleasure—like a dessert—that the fire shows itself a friend of man. (translated by Alan C. M. Ross)

Fire is therefore very many things. As well as a physical phenomenon, it becomes a symbol, and like all symbols is ambiguous, polysemous, evoking different meanings according to the circumstances. This evening, therefore, I will not be attempting a psychoanalysis of fire but instead a rough-and-ready semiotic exploration, searching out the various meanings it has acquired for all of us who are warmed by it and sometimes die by it.

FIRE AS A DIVINE ELEMENT

Seeing that our first experience of fire happens indirectly, through the light of the sun, and directly, through the untamable forces of lightning and uncontrollable fires, it was obvious that fire had to be associated from the very beginning with divinity, and in all the primitive religions we find some form of fire cult, from worship of the rising sun to keeping in the inner sanctum of the temple the sacred fire that must never burn out.

In the Bible fire is always an epiphanic image of the divine—Elijah would be taken away on a chariot of fire, the just would triumph in radiant fire (“So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord: but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might,” Judges 5:31; “And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever,” Daniel 12:3; “And in the time of their visitation they shall shine, and run to and fro like sparks among the stubble,” Wisdom 3:7), whereas the fathers of the church spoke of Christ as *lampas*, *lucifer*, *lumen*, *lux*, *oriens*, *sol iustitiae*, *sol novus*, *stella*.

The first philosophers thought of fire as a cosmic principle. For Heraclitus—according to Aristotle—fire was the archè, the origin of all things, and in certain fragments it seems that Heraclitus did actually hold this view. He is thought to

have claimed that the universe regenerates itself in every era through fire, that there is a mutual exchange of all things with fire, and of fire with all things, like the exchange of goods for gold and gold for goods.

And, according to Diogenes Laertius, he is said to have claimed that everything is formed from fire and returns to fire; that all things, through condensation and rarefaction, are mutations of fire (which through condensation transforms itself into humidity, humidity consolidates into earth, earth in turn liquefies into water, and water produces luminous evaporations that fuel new fire). But alas, we know that Heraclitus was by definition obscure, that "the Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but gives a sign," and many take the view that the references to fire were only a metaphor to explain the extreme changeability of everything. In other words, *panta rei*, everything flows movably and changeably, and not only (I paraphrase) do we never bathe twice in the same river, but things never burn twice in the same flame.

We find perhaps the most beautiful identification of fire with the divine in the work of Plotinus. Fire is a manifestation of the divine because, paradoxically, the One from which everything emanates, and about which nothing can be said, does not move and is not consumed in an act of creation. And this primal object can be conceived only as if it were an irradiation, like a brilliant light encircling the sun and ceaselessly generated from it, while the sun remains just the same as it was, unchanging (Fifth Ennead, tractate 1, section 6). And if things are created from an irradiation, nothing can be more beautiful on earth than fire, which is the very figure of divine irradiation.

The beauty of a color, which is something simple, is created from a form that dominates the obscurity of matter and from the presence in the color of an incorporeal light, which is its formal reason. For this reason, fire is beautiful in itself more than any other thing, because of its intangibility of form: of all bodies it is the lightest, to the point of being almost intangible. It always remains pure because it does not contain within itself the other elements that make up matter, whereas all other elements contain fire within themselves: they, in fact, can be heated, whereas fire cannot be cooled. Fire alone, by its nature, contains colors; other things receive their form and color from it, and when they distance themselves from the firelight they lose their beauty.

The pages of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth to sixth centuries), which influenced the whole of medieval aesthetics, show a strong neoplatonic influence. This can be seen in *Celestial Hierarchy*:

I believe, then, that fire manifests what is most divine in the celestial minds; for the holy authors often describe the super-essential and formless essence—which has no form at all—with the symbol of fire, since it has many aspects of the divine character, if such can be said, insofar as it can be found in visible things. In fact, the sensitive fire is found, so to speak, in all things and passes through all things without mingling with them, and is separate from everything and at the same time, being all-luminous, remains, as it were, hidden, unknown in its essential nature—until it is placed before a material toward which it can demonstrate its own action—it cannot be taken hold of, nor seen, but it takes hold of everything. (chapter 15)

Medieval perceptions of beauty are dominated by concepts of clarity and luminosity, as well as proportion. Cinema and video games encourage us to think of the Middle Ages as a succession of "dark" centuries, not only metaphorically but also in terms of nocturnal colors and dark shadows. Nothing could be more wrong. People in the Middle Ages certainly lived in dark spaces—forests, castle corridors, small rooms faintly lit by their fireplaces; but apart from the fact that they were people who went to sleep early and were more accustomed to the day than the night (of which

the Romantics would be so fond), the Middle Ages was a time of bright hues.

It was a period that identified beauty with light and color (as well as with proportion), and this color was always elementary, a symphony of reds, blues, gold, silver, white, and green, without subtleties and half-tones; the splendor is generated from the overall effect rather than deriving from a light that envelops things from outside or exalts the color beyond the outlines of the figure. In medieval miniatures the light seems to emanate from the objects.

In medieval poetry this sense of radiant color is always present: the grass is green, blood is red, milk pure white, and a pretty woman, in the words of Guido Guinizelli, has a "a face of snow colored in carmine" (not to forget, later on, Petrarch's "clear, fresh, sweet waters").

Fire animates the visions of mystics, in particular the writings of Hildegard of Bingen. See, for example, *Liber scivias*:

I saw a dazzling light and in it a human form, the color of sapphire, which was all ablaze with bright gentle fire, and that splendorous light spread throughout the whole bright fire, and this fire was bright with that splendorous light, and that light was dazzling and that fire bright with the whole human form, producing a single glow of matchless virtue and power . . . The flame consists of a splendid clarity, an inherent vigor and a fiery ardor, but the splendid clarity possesses it so that it is resplendent, the inherent vigor so that it endures, and the fiery ardor so that it burns. (book 2, part 2)

Not to forget the visions of brilliant light in Dante's *Paradise* and which have been depicted in their maximum splendor by a nineteenth-century artist, Gustave Doré, who sought (as only he could) to depict those scenes of radiance, those flaming vortexes, those lamps, those suns, that clearness that hides "like an horizon brightening with the dawn" (canto 14, line 69), those white roses, those rubicund flowers that shine out in the third part of *The Divine Comedy*, where even the vision of God appears like an ecstasy of fire:

Within Its depthless clarity of substance
I saw the Great Light shine into three circles
in three clear colours bound in one same space;
the first seemed to reflect the next like rainbow
on rainbow, and the third was like a flame
equally breathed forth by the other two.
(canto 33, lines 115-20; translated by Mark Musa)

The Middle Ages was dominated by a cosmology of light. Already by the ninth century John Scotus Eriugena said, "This universal manufactory of the world is a vast lamp consisting of many parts like many lights to reveal the pure species of intelligible things and to sense them with the mind's eye, instilling divine grace and the help of reason into the heart of learned followers. It is right then that the theologian calls God the Father of Enlightenment, since all things are from Him, for which and in which He manifests himself and in the light of the lamp of his wisdom he unifies and makes them" (*Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy*, chapter 1). In the thirteenth century the cosmology of light put forward by the English churchman Robert Grosseteste built up a picture of the universe formed by a single flow of luminous energy, a source both of beauty and being, making us think of a sort of Big Bang. The astral spheres and natural areas of the elements are created from the single light by gradual rarefaction and condensation, producing the infinite shades of color and the volumes of things. Saint Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (*Commentary on the Book of Sentences*, book 2, distinction 12, chapters 1 and 2) was to record that light is the common nature found in all bodies, whether

celestial or terrestrial; light is the substantial form of bodies, and the more they possess it, the more they are a real and worthy part of existence.

HELLFIRE

But while fire moves across the sky and shines down on us, it likewise erupts from the bowels of the earth, bringing death. Thus, from the very earliest times, fire has also been associated with the infernal depths.

In the book of Job (41:19-21), from the mouth of Leviathan "go burning lamps, and sparks of fire leap out . . . His breath kindleth coals, and a flame goeth out of his mouth." In Revelation, when the seventh seal is broken, hail and fire come to devastate the earth, the bottomless pit opens up, and from it emerge smoke and locusts; the four angels, set loose from the river Euphrates where they were bound, move with countless armies of men wearing breastplates of fire. And when the Lamb reappears and reaches the supreme judge on a white cloud, the sun burns the survivors. And, after Armageddon, the beast and the false prophet will be thrown into a lake of burning sulfurous fire.

In the Gospels, sinners are cast into everlasting fire:

As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:40-42)

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matthew 25:41)

Curiously, in Dante's inferno there is less fire than we might expect, since the poet contrives to think up a whole range of torments, but we may be satisfied with heretics lying in fiery tombs; men of violence plunged into pools of blood; blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers struck by rains of fire; simoniacs shoved head-first into pits, with flames lapping at their feet; and barrators submerged in boiling pitch.

Hellfire was certainly more prevalent in baroque writings, with descriptions of the torments of hell that exceed the violence of Dante, not least because they are unredeemed by the inspiration of art—like this passage by Saint Alphonsus de Liguori:

The punishment that most torments the senses of the damned, is the fire of hell . . . Even in this life, the pain of fire is the greatest of all; but there is much difference between our fire and that of hell which, says Saint Augustine, makes ours seem painted . . . Thus the wretched will be surrounded by fire, like wood inside a furnace. The damned will find themselves with an abyss of fire beneath, an abyss above, and an abyss around them. If they touch, see or breathe, they will touch, see or breathe nothing but fire. They will be in the fire like fish in water. But this fire will not only surround the damned, but will enter even their bowels to torment them. Their body will become all fire, so that their bowels will burn within their belly, their heart within their breast, their brains within their head, their blood within their veins, even their marrow with their bones: every lost soul will become in himself a furnace of fire. (Apparecchio alla morte, consideration 26)

And Ercole Mattioli, in *Pietà illustrate* (1694), wrote,

Great wonder will it be that a fire alone contains perfectly within it, according to great theologians, the coldness of ice, the stings of thorns and iron, the venom

of asps, the poisons of vipers, the cruelty of all wild beasts, the malevolence of all elements and stars . . . Yet greater wonder, et supra virtutem ignis, will be that such fire, though one specie alone, can make distinction in tormenting those who sin most, being called by Tertullian sapiens ignis, and by Eusebius of Emesa ignis arbiter, since, having to match, according to the greatness and diversity of supplicants, the greatness and diversity of their sins . . . , the fire, almost as if it were endowed with reason and full knowledge, to distinguish between sinner and sinner, shall make its rigors felt with more or less severity.

And so we arrive at the last secret of Fatima by Sister Lucia, exshepherdess:

The secret consists of three distinct parts, two of which I am now going to reveal. The first part is the vision of hell. Our Lady showed us a great sea of fire, which seemed to be underground. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls in human form, like transparent burning embers, all blackened or burnished bronze, floating about in the conflagration, now raised into the air by the flames that issued from within themselves together with great clouds of smoke, now falling back on every side like sparks in a huge fire, without weight or equilibrium, and amid shrieks and groans of pain and despair, which horrified us and made us tremble with fear. The demons could be distinguished by their terrifying and repulsive likeness to frightful and unknown animals, all black and transparent. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, The Message of Fatima, June 26, 2000)

ALCHEMICAL FIRE

Halfway between holy fire and hellfire is fire as an alchemical operator. Fire and crucible seem to be essential in alchemical practice, which seeks to operate on a raw material so as to obtain from it, through a series of manipulations, the philosopher's stone. This is capable of projection, transmuting base metals into gold.

The manipulations of the raw material take place through three stages, distinguished by the color the material gradually assumes: the black work, the white work, and the red work. The black work involves a heating (and therefore the use of fire) and decomposition of the matter, the white work is a process of sublimation or distillation, and the red work is the final stage (red is the color of the sun, which often symbolizes gold, and vice versa). The hermetical furnace, the athanor, is an essential instrument, but alembics, vessels, and mortars are also used, each with their symbolic names, such as the philosophical egg, maternal womb, wedding chamber, pelican, sphere, sepulcher, and so forth. The essential substances are sulfur, mercury, and salt. But the procedures are never clear, since the language of alchemists is based on three principles:

1. As the object of the art is highly secret and not to be divulged—the secret of secrets—no expression ever says what it seems to say, no symbolic interpretation will ever be definitive, because the secret will always be elsewhere: “Poor fool! Can you be so naive as to believe we are openly teaching you the greatest and most important of secrets? I assure you that anyone who wants to explain what the Hermetic Philosophers write according to their ordinary and literal meaning will find himself caught up in the twists and turns of a labyrinth from which he cannot escape, and won't have Ariadne's thread to guide him out of it.” (Artefius)
2. When it seems that ordinary substances such as gold, silver, or mercury are being spoken of, other substances are in fact being described—philosopher's gold or mercury—which have nothing at all to do with them.
3. While no description is ever what it seems, everything always relates to the same secret. As the Turba philosophorum states, “Know that we are all in agreement, whatever we say . . . One person clarifies what the other has concealed and he who really searches will find everything.”

When does fire intervene in the alchemical process? If alchemical fire can be compared with the fire that precedes digestion or gestation, it ought to intervene during the course of the black work, when heat, acting over and against radical, metallic, viscous, oily humidity, produces the nigredo. If we can accept a text like the Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique by Dom Pernety (Paris: Delalain, 1787), we read that

when heat acts on these matters, they are changed first into powder, and oily and gluey water, which rises as a vapor to the top of the vase, then descends again in dew or rain, to the bottom, where it becomes almost as an oily black broth. This is why it has been called Sublimation and Volatilization, Ascension and Descension. The water then coagulating more and more, becomes like black tar, which has caused it to be named fetid and stinking earth, also because it emits a musty odor of sepulchers and tombs. ("La clef de l'oeuvre," pp. 155-56)

But statements can also be found in the textbooks to the effect that the terms distillation, sublimation, calcination, or digestion, or the terms firing, reverberation, dissolution, descent, and coagulation, are none other than the same "Operation," carried out in a single vessel, in other words, a firing of the substance. Thus, concludes Pernety,

this Operation must be regarded as unique, but expressed in different terms; and it will be understood that all the following expressions signify the same thing: distil by alembic; separate the soul from the body; burn; calcinate; unite the elements; convert them; change one into the other; corrupt; melt; engender; conceive; bring into the world; exhaust; moisten; wash with fire; beat with the hammer; blacken; putrefy; rubify; dissolve; sublimate; grind; reduce to powder; crush in the mortar; pulverize on marble—and many other similar expressions all mean simply to cook in the same way, until dark red. Care must therefore be taken not to remove the vase from the fire, because if the material cools down, all is lost. ("Règles générales," pp. 202-6)

But what fire is being described, seeing that different writers speak from time to time about fire of Persia, fire of Egypt, fire of the Indies, elementary fire, natural fire, artificial fire, fire of ashes, fire of sand, fire of filings, fire of fusion, fire of flames, fire against nature, Algir fire, Azothic fire, celestial fire, corrosive fire, fire of matter, lion fire, fire of putrefaction, dragon fire, dung fire, and so forth?

Fire heats the furnace throughout, from the beginning to the red work. But is the word fire also perhaps a metaphor for the red matter that appears in the alchemical process? And here, in fact, according to Pernety, are some of the names given to the red stone: red gum, red oil, ruby, vitriol, ashes of tartar, red body, fruit, red stone, magnesium, red oil, starry stone, red salt, red sulfur, blood, poppy, red wine, red vitriol, cochineal, and also "fire, fire of nature" ("Signes," pp. 187-89).

Alchemists have therefore always worked with fire, and fire is the basis of alchemical practice. Yet fire itself constitutes one of the most impenetrable mysteries of alchemy. As I have never produced gold, I cannot provide the answer to this problem, and so pass on to another type of fire, another type of alchemy, that of the artist, where fire becomes an instrument of new birth, and artists set themselves up to imitate the gods.

FIRE AS THE ORIGIN OF ART

Plato recounts in Protagoras that once upon a time there were gods, but no mortal creatures . . . and when they were about to bring these creatures to light, they

charged Prometheus and Epimetheus to provide and distribute the most appropriate faculties for each race. But Epimetheus asked Prometheus to let him do the distribution himself: "And when I have completed the distribution," he added, "you shall come and see." And so, having thus persuaded him, he started the work of distribution. And to some races he gave strength without speed, while the weaker races he equipped with speed.

And to others he gave weapons of defense and attack, while for others, who were defenseless by nature, he devised other faculties to guarantee their safety. To those races that he made small, he gave the capacity to escape using their wings, or to hide underground; whereas to those he made large he gave the possibility of saving themselves with their size. And he distributed all other faculties in this way, so that they balanced each other . . . and when he had provided the various races with the means to avoid mutual destruction, he devised a way for them to defend themselves against the inclemency of the seasons sent by Zeus, covering them with thick hair and leathery skin, sufficient to defend them from coldness and capable of protecting them from hot weather, and such that, when they slept in their lairs, these would serve as natural blankets suitable for each of them.

And some he shod with hoofs; others he gave tough skin and no blood. Then he provided different food for the different races: to some he gave the grass of the land, to others the fruits of trees, to others roots. And he allowed some races to devour other races of animals for food; and he provided that the former would have fewer offspring, and that the offspring of the latter would be numerous, to ensure the preservation of the race.

Now Epimetheus, who was not particularly clever, had failed to notice he had used up all the faculties for the animals: but at this point the human race had still not been provided for, and he did not know what to do with it. While he was in this situation of embarrassment, Prometheus came to see the distribution, and realized that whereas all the other creatures were properly provided for, man was naked, barefoot, homeless, and defenseless . . .

So Prometheus, in this embarrassing situation, not knowing what salvation to devise for man, stole technical wisdom and fire from Hephaestus and Athena (since without fire it was impossible to acquire and use that wisdom) and he gave it to man. (sections 320c-321d)

With the conquest of fire, the arts are born—at least in the Greek sense of technical skills—and thus the dominion of man over nature. What a shame that Plato had not read Lévi-Strauss, and had not also told us that the discovery of fire marked the beginning of cooked food; but cooking is, after all, an art and was therefore included under the platonic notion of *techne*.

Benvenuto Cellini gives an excellent description of how much fire has to do with the arts in his *Life*, recounting how he fused his Perseus, covering him in a clay mold and then, with a slow fire, removed the wax from it,

which came out through the many vents that I had made, for the more there are, the better do the molds fill. And when I had finished removing the wax I made a funnel around my Perseus, that is to say around the said mold, of bricks, interlacing one above the other, and I left many spaces through which the fire could the better emerge. Then I began to arrange the wood carefully, and I kept up the fire for two days and two nights continuously; to such purpose that when all the wax had been extracted, and the said mold was afterwards well baked, I immediately began to dig the ditch wherein to bury my mold, with all those skilful methods that this fine art directs us . . .

And holding it very carefully upright, in such a fashion that it hung exactly in the middle of the ditch, I caused it to descend very gently as far as the bottom of

the furnace . . .

When I saw it was thoroughly firm, as well as that method of filling it in, together with the placing of those conduit pipes properly in their places . . . I turned to my furnace, which I had made them fill with many lumps of copper and other pieces of bronze. And having piled the one upon the top of the other after the fashion that our profession indicates to us, that is to say raised up, so as to make a way for the flames of the fire, whereby the said metal derives its heat quicker, and by it melts and becomes reduced to liquid, I then happily told them to set light to the said furnace.

And laying on those pieces of pinewood, which from the greasiness of that resin that the pine exudes, and from the fact that my little furnace was so well built, it acted so well that . . . the workshop took fire, and we were afraid lest the roof should fall upon us. From the other side toward the kitchen garden the heaven projected upon me so much water and wind that it cooled my furnace. Combatting this for several hours under these perverse conditions, employing so much more effort than my strong vigor of constitution could possibly sustain, there sprang upon me a sudden fever, the greatest that can possibly be imagined in the world, by reason of which I was forced to take to my bed. (book 2, section 75)

And so, after so much planning, accompanied by accidental fire, artificial fire, and bodily fever, his statue took form.

But if fire is a divine element, then man, at the same time, in learning how to make fire, appropriates a power that until then had been reserved for the gods, and so even the fire he lights in the temple is the effect of an act of pride. The Greek civilization immediately gives this connotation of pride to the conquest of fire and it is curious how all the celebrations of Prometheus, not only in Greek tragedy but also later in art, emphasize not so much the gift of fire as the punishment that follows it.

Fire as an Epiphanic Experience

When the artist accepts and recognizes with pride and with hubris that he resembles the gods, and sees art as a substitute for divine creation, then decadent sensibility opens the way for likening aesthetic experience to fire, and fire to epiphany.

The concept of epiphany (if not the term) first appears with Walter Pater in the conclusion to his essay on the Renaissance. It is no surprise that the famous conclusion opens with a quote from Heraclitus. Reality is a sum of forces and elements that arise and gradually fall away, and only superficial experience makes us see them as solid and fixed in an importunate presence: "But when reflexion begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence, their cohesive force seems suspended like a trick of magic." We find ourselves among a group of impressions that are unstable, flickering, inconsistent: habit is broken, ordinary life fades away, and from this, beyond this, there remain single moments that can be grasped for an instant and immediately fade away. "Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone of the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us—for that moment only."

To maintain this ecstasy is "success in life": "While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend" (Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 1873).

All decadent writers feel aesthetic and sensual ecstasy in terms of radiance. But

perhaps it was D'Annunzio who first linked aesthetic ecstasy to the idea of fire; we will not be so banal as to associate him only with the rather hackneyed idea that (as Mila di Codro shrills in *The Daughter of Iorio*) "the flame is beautiful." The idea of aesthetic ecstasy as an experience of fire appears in his novel *Il fuoco* (*The Flame*). Before the beauty of Venice, Stelio Effrena has the experience of fire:

Each moment vibrated through the matter like an unbearable flash of lightning. Everything glittered in a sublime jubilation of light, from the crosses erect on the top of domes swollen by prayer to the delicate salt-crystal droplets hanging beneath the bridges. Just as the look-out on the mast-top shouts aloud of a storm at sea, so the golden angel on the top of the highest tower burst into flame and announced the coming. And so he came! He came seated on a cloud like a chariot of fire, the hem of his purple garments trailing behind him. (translated by Susan Bassnett)

James Joyce, the supreme theorist on epiphany, had read, loved, and was inspired by D'Annunzio's novel. "By an epiphany Stephen meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself" (Stephen Hero). This experience always appears in Joyce as fiery. In his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the word fire is repeated fifty-nine times, and flame and flaming thirty-five times, not to mention other similar words, such as radiance or splendour. In *Il fuoco*, Foscarina listens to the words of Stelio and feels "attracted to that blazing atmosphere like the hearth of a forge." For Stephen Dedalus aesthetic ecstasy always appears as flashes of splendor and is expressed using metaphors of the sun. The same happens for Stelio Effrena. Let us compare two passages. First, D'Annunzio:

The boat veered violently. A miracle caught it. The first rays of the sun pierced through the heaving sail, glittered on the bold angels on the bell-towers of San Marco and San Giorgio Maggiore, turned the sphere of the Fortuna to flame, crowned the five mitres on the Basilica with lightning . . . "Hail to the Miracle." A superhuman feeling of power and freedom swelled the young man's heart, as the wind swelled the sail that was transfigured for him. He stood in the crimson splendour of the sail and in the splendour of his own blood.

And then Joyce: "His thinking was a dusk of doubt and self-mistrust, lit up at moments by the lightnings of intuition, but lightnings of so clear a splendour that in those moments the world perished about his feet as if it had been fire-consumed; and thereafter his tongue grew heavy and he met the eyes of others with unanswering eyes, for he felt that the spirit of beauty had folded him round like a mantle."

REGENERATING FIRE

For Heraclitus, as we have seen, the universe regenerates itself through fire in every era. Empedocles was, it seems, on more familiar terms with fire—it was to gain divinity, or to persuade his followers that he was divine, that he threw himself (at least according to some) into Mount Etna. This final purification, this choice of annihilation in fire, has fascinated poets from all periods. Suffice it to recall Hölderlin:

Have you not seen? They are recurring
The lovely times of my entire life again today
And something greater still is yet to come;
Then upward, son, upward to the very peak
Of ancient holy Etna, that is where we'll go
For gods have greater presence on the heights
With my own eyes this very day I shall survey
The streams and islands and the sea.

And may the sunlight, hovering golden over all
These waters, deign to bless me in departure,
The splendid youthful light of day, which in
My youth I loved. Then all about us both
Eternal stars will scintillate in silence as
The glowing magma surges from volcanic depths
And tenderly to all-impelling spirit of the ether will
Arrive and touch us. Oh, then!
(The Death of Empedocles, translated by
David Farrell Krell)

Between Heraclitus and Empedocles, then, there is another aspect of fire—fire not only as creator but at the same time as destroyer and regenerator. The Stoics talked about ekpyrosis as the great conflagration (or fire and end of the world) through which everything, being derived from fire, returns to fire at the end of its evolutionary cycle. The idea of ekpyrosis does not actually suggest that purification through fire can be achieved by human planning and achievement. But certainly behind many sacrifices based on fire there is an idea that, by destroying, fire purifies and regenerates. And thus the sacral nature of death at the stake.

Past centuries are full of burnings at the stake, and not just those of medieval heretics but also witches burned in more recent times, at least up to the eighteenth century. And it is only D'Annunzio's aestheticism that made Mila di Codro say that the flame is beautiful. The fires that have burned so many heretics are terrifying, not least because they followed other tortures. It is enough to quote (from the medieval Story of Fra Dolcino the Heresiarch) the description of Fra Dolcino's torture when he and his wife, Margherita, were handed over to the civil authorities for the sentence of the Inquisition to be carried out. While the bells rang the tocsin, they were taken on a cart around the whole city, surrounded by their executioners and followed by armed troops, and in every district their flesh was pierced with red-hot tongs. Margherita was burned first, before Dolcino, whose face flinched not a muscle, nor did he utter any complaint when the tongs ripped into his flesh. Then the cart continued on its way, while the executioners plunged their irons into burning braziers. Dolcino suffered other torments and still he remained silent, except that his shoulders tightened a little when they cut away his nose, and when they tore off his male member he let out a long sigh, like a moan. His last words had the ring of impenitence, and he said that he would rise again on the third day. Then he was burned and his ashes were scattered in the wind.

For inquisitors of every age, race, and religion, fire purifies not only the sins of human beings but also those of books. There are many stories about the burning of books. Sometimes they occur by accident, sometimes through ignorance, but on other occasions, such as the Nazi bonfires of books, they are to purify and to destroy the evidence of a degenerate art. Don Quixote's zealous friends burn his library of books on chivalry for moral reasons and for the sake of his sanity. The library in Elias Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé* burns in a way that reminds us of the sacrifice of Empedocles ("when the flames finally reach him he laughs loudly, as he has never laughed in all his life").

Books condemned to disappearance are burned in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. My library in the abbey of *The Name of the Rose* is set alight by fate, but the cause is an originating act of censorship. Fernando Báez, in *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books* (2004), asks for what reasons fire has been the dominant agent in the destruction of books. And he answers:

Fire is salvation, and for that reason, almost all religions dedicate fires to their respective divinities. This power to conserve life is also a destructive power. When man destroys with fire, he plays God, master of the fire of life and death. And in this way he identifies with a purifying solar cult and with the great myth of destruction that almost always takes place through fire. The reason for using fire is obvious: it reduces the spirit of a work to matter. (translated by Alfred MacAdam)

EKPYROSIS TODAY

Fire is the destroyer in every time of war, from the fabulous and fabled Greek fire of the Byzantines (a military secret if ever there was one, and on this point I'd like to recall Luigi Malerba's fine novel *Il fuoco Greco*) to the chance discovery of gunpowder by Berthold Schwarz, who died as a result, in a personal and punitive ekpyrosis. Fire is punishment for traitors in war, and "Fire!" is the command for every firing squad, as if the origin of life is being invoked to hasten the end. But perhaps the fire of war that has most terrified humanity—by which I mean all of humanity, around the globe, conscious for the first time of what was taking place in one part of it—was the explosion of the atomic bomb.

One of the pilots who dropped the bomb on Nagasaki wrote, "All of a sudden the light of a thousand suns lit up the cabin. I was forced to close my eyes for two seconds, despite my sunglasses." In the Bhagavad Gita it was written, "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be the splendor of the mighty one . . . I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." These verses came to Oppenheimer's mind after the explosion of the first atomic bomb.

With which we come dramatically close to the end of my lecture and—over a more reasonable space of time—to the end of human existence on Earth or the existence of Earth in the cosmos. Because now, as never before, three of the primordial elements are under threat: air, throttled by pollution and by carbon dioxide; water, contaminated on the one hand and increasingly scarce on the other. Only fire is victorious, in the form of a heat that, by parching earth, is upsetting the seasons, and by melting the icecaps, is inviting the seas to invade it. Without realizing it, we are marching toward the first real ekpyrosis. While Bush and China reject the Kyoto Protocol, we are marching toward death through fire—and it is of little importance to us whether the universe regenerates after our holocaust, because it will no longer be ours.

The Buddha made this recommendation in his "Fire Sermon":

Monks, all is aflame. What is aflame? The eye is aflame, O monks, forms and colors are aflame, visual awareness is aflame, visual contact is aflame, and whatever sensation arises depending on the contact of the eye with its projections—whether perceived as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of attachment . . . Aflame, I tell you, because of birth, aging, and death, because of pain, sorrow, anguish, despair. The ear is aflame, sounds are aflame . . . The nose is aflame, aromas are aflame . . . Taste, O monks, is aflame, flavors are aflame . . . Touch, O monks, is aflame . . . The mind, O monks, is aflame . . . O monks, seeing all thus, the noble disciple who has understood the teachings is serenely disenchanted with the eye, with forms and colors . . . with the ear, with sounds. He is serenely disenchanted with aromas . . . with anything arising depending on the contact of the tongue with its objects, whether perceived as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

But humanity has been unable to relinquish (even in part) its attachment to its own aromas, tastes, sounds, and tactile pleasures—and to relinquish producing fire through friction. Perhaps it should have left the production of fire to the gods, who would have given it to us only once in a while, in the form of a thunderbolt.

[Lecture given during the 2008 Milanesiana festival of literature, music, and cinema, organized around the theme of the four elements—fire, air, earth, and water —on July 7, 2008.]

The end