

SYLVAIN LOUIS-SEIZE: *THE KING OF THE GOLDEN RIVER*

Note: Titles are surrounded by asterisks

My title is from a fairy-tale, the only book composed expressly for children by the great nineteenth century art critic and social visionary, John Ruskin. For **The King of the Golden River**, written in 1841 “at the request of a young lady, and solely for her enjoyment”, the scene is set in a secluded and mountainous part of the fictional land of Stiria, in a valley of “the most surprising and luxuriant fertility.” This valley is fed by “torrents descending in constant cataracts,” one of which is so high that “when the sun had set to everything else, and all below was darkness, his beams still shone full upon this waterfall, so that it looked like a shower of gold. It was, therefore, called by the people of the neighbourhood, the Golden River.” (1)

Once you know the Ruskin story, it becomes almost impossible not to think of it—or at least of the river running through it—while gazing upon the insistently mythic landscapes that make up the mysterious paintings of Sylvain Louis-Seize.

Almost all of Louis-Seize’s paintings feature this golden river. It appears to begin from somewhere deep within the fictive space of the paintings—in a distant, gilded ocean, for example, or from within or beyond the dark, muttering, impressionistically unstable, ambiguously-located tracts of landscape that lie far beyond exactitude at the “rear” of the works. The fact that these paintings actually possess no “rear” or “background” area, however, any more than they possess a palpable or chartable foreground—or, for that matter, real rivers and skies—lends Louis-Seize’s effulgent paintings a particular strangeness, an uncanny quality that, both attracts the viewer and, at the same time, whispers a kind of de-romanticising caution. It could be argued, in fact, that a great deal of the energy possessed by these tossed, restless, convulsive paintings, is generated from the high-tension gap that swings open between what we allow ourselves to see in the paintings, and what we actually know about them—between what we actually see, that is to say, with eyes un-beguiled by the romance and fantasy Louis-Seize sets up for us, and that which, alternatively, we may then choose either to embrace or (keeping our heads), to approach only with considerable vigilance.

For the luridly romantic landscapes that are the apparent subject of the paintings of artist Sylvain Louis-Seize are so lush and lambent they seem initially easy enough to enter, to attain, even to escape into at first: indeed, there is an almost irresistible siren-call sounding at the heart of each of them, comprised of landscape memory, of our idealizations of earlier, storybook landscape experiences from childhood and adolescence, and of the rumbling, storm-tossed tonalities of movies imbued with “special effects.”

It seems to me, however, that these extravagantly voluptuous paintings provide an inescapably oxymoronic experience: first, they beckon us into the depths of their lush romantic *vitas*—with their winding rivers and waterfalls, golden in the reflected glow of Louis-Seize’s turbulent skies and walnut-dark, twilight landscapes (often presided over by a mysterious, solitary tree)—and then, second, they forcefully discourage any further such exploration because of the artist’s canny employment of a number of quite blatant distancing devices: moments of illusion-shattering objectification whereby we are no longer permitted to drift, complicit with the conventional mechanisms of romantic journeying, into the painting’s heart of darkness.

What prevents us? Well, a number of wickedly effective painterly ploys and feints.

First, there is the business of the words. The words, when Louis-Seize uses them (their appearance in his paintings is infrequent, but powerful enough, when they do appear, that they stick in your mind as somehow characteristic of his method), are usually golden like the rivers, and painted so that they seem cracked and blistered, as if with age and use. They appear almost to be made of gold leaf—gold leaf that, applied long ago, is now brittle and dusty, and is flaking off the canvas surface. The words Louis-Seize chooses to float in distressed gold over his landscapes are invariably generalized, lacking in denotation: words like “So”, “All” and “At”. Sometimes these hovering moments of curtailed and shuttered shards of expressiveness are not words at all, but are merely initials (such as “Z.E.”) or numbers (Roman numerals, such as, on one canvas, “VI”).

What is their function? Anybody at all familiar with developments in recent landscape painting might be led to compare Louis-Seize’s use of language, or meta-language, fixed in his panoramic, green-gold or powder-blue skies, to the language often found in the landscapes of the late David Bierk—an influence Louis-Seize readily acknowledges. A moment spent in comparing the work of the two painters, however, quickly turns up crucial differences in it, with regard to words. Bierk used words and phrases as meditation, as rumination. His paintings

of transcendent vistas—so reminiscent of the work of the 19th century American Luminist and Hudson River School painters (Frederick Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt and the like) Bierk admired and frequently referenced in his work—often bore words such as “Truth”, “Memory” and “Still.” And such words inevitably incarnated certain literary, and historicizing attitudes and auras. By contrast, Louis-Seize’s broken and truncated words and letters appear to be about the stress of discourse, about the impossibility of explanation or discovery. Bierk’s expansive words welcome you into his paintings. Louis-Seize’s fragmented words bar the way.

And then there are other Louis-Seize impediments to the impure rapture of pictorial escapism. There is the matter of those curious “hinges” or “flanges” of bleached white-gold that invariably hover near the tops of the paintings, positioned as if they were tabs that once held the painting, like a taped postcard or a poster, to the studio wall. These nearly-rectangular “tabs” of paint (sometimes long enough to be read as a “bar” of whitishness) tend to cling to the upper edges of the paintings, though you can sometimes spot one or two of them about a third of the way down, usually over to one side. What are they for? To bring us up short, I’d venture, when we start to drift, in reverie, into the spongy depths of the paintings.

There are also strange and sometimes almost disconcerting “swipes” in Louis-Seize’s skies: precipitous tumbles of white that suddenly plummet down through his robin’s egg blue or mossy, green-gold skies like the trails of falling airplanes; or rough, brown trajectories of pigment that arc through the paintings like the slushy residue from windshield wipers; in one painting—*ZE*—there is a large brownish, truncated circle hovering inexplicably near the top of the painting—like a water stain on a coffee table. What is it doing there? I would suggest it is merely being disruptive.

It could be argued, therefore, that there is a certain studied evasiveness of reality in Louis-Seize’s paintings, or at least an evasiveness of one kind of reality—the high mimetic kind. Look closely at any of the painter’s clouds, trees and rivers. What do you really see (be honest!)? Not clouds, but rather stains, coagulations, dark writhings of pigment. Not trees, but rather twisting, vibrating densities of paint, feathering out into the painted surround. Not rivers and waterfalls, but sluicings of gold paint like molten metal poured from a vat.

Andrew Graham-Dixon, in his study of British painter Howard Hodgkin (Abrams, 1994), refers to Baudelaire’s conviction that art ought to be nothing less, as Graham-Dixon puts it, than “responsible irresponsibility”, a “calculated madness capable of invigorating the world.” He cites the great poet-critic’s saying “I want meadows red in tone and trees painted in blue,” adding Baudelaire’s famously outrageous, dandified contention that “Nature has no imagination.” (2) Red meadows and blue trees sound like the stuff of Fauvism—which, a half century after Baudelaire’s *crie de coeur*, finally came across with the chromatic derangement the poet so fervently desired. And of course artists have progressively distorted the external world ever since.

But where does Sylvain Louis-Seize fit into all this? In a quite compelling way. Nature may have no imagination, as Baudelaire contends, but in the hands of a painter like Louis-Seize, nature is given a strange, alternate imagination of its own and, at the same time, systematically withstands our own recollections of it. Louis-Seize may not trade in Fauvist colouristic extremes, but his turbulent green golds, his mineralized, heavy-water rivers and waterfalls, his nut-brown, crepuscular trees and forests, are Sylvain inventions, pastoral fabrications, the stuff of insinuating but ultimately irrevocable upheaval: the originality of his work lies in the painter’s having substituted a restless, dissonant, personal poetry for the dependable givens offered by the geographies and topographies of naturalism.

Nobody has ever seen landscapes like the ones Louis-Seize paints. And that is because he paints only the Idea of Landscape. Which is both liberating and disconcerting. How are we to feel at home here? It may be impossible. As philosopher Karl Jaspers once noted, “Out of every finitude, we are expelled; we are set whirling”. (3)

1) John Ruskin, **The King of the Golden River** (Boston: Heath & Co., 1910), p. 1.

2) Charles Baudelaire in Andrew Graham-Dixon, **Howard Hodgkin** (New York: Abrams, 1994), p. 158.

3) Karl Jaspers, **Way to Wisdom** (London, 1951), cited in Dore Ashton, **The Delicate Thread: Teshigahara’s Life in Art** (New York: Kodansha International, 1997), p.93.