

Briefly Noted

David Ben Liebana, *The Sciagraphy of the Infinite* (New York and London: Gnomon Publications, 1987), 365 pp.

The text as impostor occupies a small but important place in literary history. Borges' fabrication of apocryphal manuscripts "reprinted" in a bogus archeology have tricked more than a few gullible readers into quoting as genuine such "original" authors as the non-existent Suarez Miranda. But, the overall effect has been a numbing of the public sensibility to the point of making acceptable all facts as lies, all texts as parodies. Jaded and cynical, the reader now regards such masqueradings of false authors and doubly encoded texts as commonplace. The *Quixote* with its troop of transcribers, translators, and book-vendors now seems standard. Apuleius's intercalated fables, narratives and apothegms in *The Transformations of Lucius* hardly satisfy the new appetite for the counterfeit.

Into this scene saturated with mirrors and trick-doors, Liebana's most recent *Sciagraphy of the Infinite* advertises for the benefit of the Library of Congress cataloguers its credentials as a work of theoretical physics. Indeed, there are moments when the most sophisticated and suspicious reader wonders whether he, Liebana, or both may not be on the verge of insanity.

The Sciagraphy of the Infinite would on the surface of things seem to be a straightforward historical account of the discovery and theoretical understanding of x-rays. But those familiar with the conventional account of Roentgen's discovery will be astounded at Liebana's contention that this "history" extends to the remote mists of antiquity, where even the nomenclature bears some relevance to the modern views. Through the exegetical labors of one possessed, Liebana draws heavily from the compilation of Stoic philosophy of Andrea Steuco and the Neoplatonist Macrobius to exhume a theory resembling that of Lucretius, that x-rays were until the 16th century a physical phenomenon far different from what they are today. Parallel radiation from a generalized "up" direction flowed towards an equally gen-

eralized "down." And, until mankind conceived that such deleterious rays could be deflected, pinched, lured into vortices, confused by diversions, or in some cases imprisoned, society was victim of the sky as the ethereal source of a cosmic "gaze" that seemed to prove the scriptures of St. John about the Word of God. Such an Adamic state of affairs was, Liebana argues, not pleasant. And it was not until mankind developed a talent for deceit that it was able to do more than hide in cyclopean caves.

If this book were not a work of fiction, one could truly marvel at Liebana's "etymological proofs," such as the derivation of the name Jove from the expletive verbal response to thunder, or the relation of the triangular pediment to the image of an eagle. Similarly, Liebana's imaginative reconstruction of primitive architecture as a series of strategies to extend the cave's shielding properties through various "wedge-shaped" devices (pediments, pyramids, domes) ingeniously revolves about the central idea of the wedge or burin (*caelum*) whose name is homophonous but semantically distant (?) from the word for "heaven" (*caelum*). Further architectural illustrations enable Liebana to circumvent difficult problems of astrophysics in order to focus on human response. The seasonal worshipers of Wilhelm Worringer's thesis of "agoraphobic" and "agoraphilic" stages of civilization may derive new impetus from Liebana's contention that either mass (Mycenaean, Babylonian, Hittite, and Roman architecture) or geometry (the Gothic) provides a suitable shield once the efficacy of magic devices such as Herms, labyrinths, Janusian gates and anamorphs declines in the wake of reason. Saxl, Panofsky, and Kliban-sky's own anatomy of *Saturn and Melancholy* serendipitously corroborates many of Liebana's descriptions of the cosmo-psychology of x-rays, which might as well have been at this point called "black bile." Heroes and poets alike

were afflicted by this madness whose other face was genius.

The central claim that will alert the most casual or naïve reader to the dark dealings of parody is almost totally unsupported, however, by physical or philological evidence: the so-called "phase shift" of the 16th century, where x-rays' flow changed from a predominantly parallel pattern to a thoroughly randomized bombardment (from where? to where?) of shortened, dense, and unpredictable micro-physical "events" that interrupt ongoing processes — trains of thought, sentences, long walks, economic five-year plans, vacations, Wagnerian *Leitmotifs*. This peskiness is given geometrical identity as little x's or (for the Classically minded) *chi*'s, after the Greek letter of that name. Liebana's reasoning, stretched to extremity at this point, nevertheless manages a semblance of credibility by collating a vast number of common occurrences whose connection would otherwise be incomprehensible.

Unlike the bombardment of parallel rays, the seemingly random 'x' or 'chi' rays relish unpredictable connections of disparate realms: past and future with present; day with night; here with elsewhere; life with death. Liebana finds this as true of antiquity, where the famous problem of the *Roma quadrata* is interpreted as a micro-structural 'chi', or *templum*, constituting the central figure of the primitive altar. The Middle Ages' cartographic dependence on the schema of the T-and-O map is interpreted as a variation on this theme. And, to the compendious literature on the *omen*, *prodigium*, *portentum*, *miraculum*, *ostentum*, and *monstrum* Liebana adds the worrisome idea that all such signs of the future (chirromancy?) are composite figures of chiasmic, and hence catastrophic, structure.

The architectural significance of this phase-shift becomes apparent from the start. Neoclassicism turns to necromancy in the attempt to find the "exquisite corpse" of originary form. Palladio, imitating Dante, prefers a Hell of torn symmetries to the torment of the sky, which he admits only to the precincts of a perfect x-plan, the infamous Rotunda. Later, Piranesi voluntarily commits himself to the tomb of Rome, attempting in extremity a perfection of its vertiginous densities in the *Carceri*. In the

well furnished wake of Perrault, the French make official the final x-*parti* of dead and dying form, as if to live out Vico's prediction that in the last age of returned barbarism, men "go mad and waste their substance." Two hundred years later, the zombies of chiasmic form still roam at large. Even under a vow of silence, Mies dares to reveal its signature in the famous corner-detail, that reveals two I-beams welded together into an argute *crux spinarum*.

Advocates of chic atrium spaces designed to sustain corporate and consumer-oriented activities within a jewel box of glitz and filtered air will be alarmed to find the surprising vulnerabilities of architecture's favorite motifs to the malefic x's. Liebana contends, with some originality, that the unusually accelerated deterioration of building materials in Post-Modern structures is traceable to the accumulation of x-sedimentation encouraged by features such as glassed-in elevators, multiple-story lobbies, revolving restaurants, moving sidewalks, and interior fountains. The civic exists no longer, Liebana argues, because our public spaces have been given over to continuous movement and perspectival visibility that encourages veritable chiasmic blizzards.

It is impossible to assess the end of *The Sciagraphy of the Infinite*, whose prose seems itself to become contaminated with x-rays. Ostensibly, Liebana addresses the chiasmic conclusion of the "history" of this fictional phenomenon by asserting an apocalyptic stage where chiasms multiply unmercifully. The principal symptom of the afflicted is, ironically, a denial of even the possibility of discontinuity through the elaboration of concatenated systems of seamless relativism. The horror of Scipio's nightmare is revealed: the dead think they are alive, and the living seek the *chiaroscuro* of the tomb. The Second Coming is at hand, and there are only two Books (one two many!). The reader of *The Sciagraphy of the Infinite* does not finish, for he fears that he is named in the final pages. His future is the past. This reviewer can only condemn Liebana's monstrous literary experiment, for to praise it would fulfill its most subtle prophecy.

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