

UNKNOWN TUSCANY



IN THE OPENING OF ANDREI TARKOVSKY'S FILM *NOSTALGHIA*, WE SEE A CAR DRIVING BACK AND FORTH ACROSS AN OPEN FIELD IN TUSCANY, A PICTURE POSTCARD SETTING OF ROLLING HILLS AND FIELDS. AND WE HEAR THE NARRATOR SAY, "I'M SICK TO DEATH OF BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPES." SO BEGINS THE SEARCH FOR SOMETHING DEEPER AND MORE NOURISHING THAN THE MERELY VISIBLE, AN EXPERIENCE BEYOND THE QUOTATION MARKS OF CLICHÉ.

SOMETHING LIKE THIS IMPULSE, THIS SUSPICION OF THE ALREADY TOO OFTEN SEEN, GUIDED PATRICK ALT ACROSS TUSCANY. ALTHOUGH ALT HAD NEVER BEEN TO ITALY, HE KNEW WHAT HE DIDN'T WANT TO PHOTOGRAPH: THE HILL TOWNS IN SUNLIGHT (THOUGH ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, HE COULDN'T RESIST), THE TABLES LADEN WITH WINE AND FRESH BREAD, THE TERRAZZO VIEWS OF SAN GIMIGNANO AND ITS TOWERS. AND HE KNEW HOW HE DIDN'T WANT TO PHOTOGRAPH: IN LIVING COLOR, MAKING SURE TO GET THE DUSTY BROWNS OF THE FIELDS AND THE RED ROOFS OF THE FARMHOUSES. HE CARRIED HIS 8 BY 10 VIEW CAMERA, WHICH EVEN IN HIS SKILLFUL HANDS PROHIBITED DRIVE-BY SHOOTINGS, AND HIS COMMITMENT TO AN AESTHETIC OF BLACK, WHITE, AND SHADES OF GRAY. HIS *ITALY*, PRINTED IN PLATINUM, CELEBRATES A PLACE SHORN OF MEMORIES AND EASY SENTIMENT. IT SEEMS TO EXIST ON ITS OWN, A PARALLEL ITALY.

ALT LOOKED WHERE TOURISTS SELDOM DO, IN PARTS OF NORTHERN TUSCANY, FROM LUCCA TO THE APENNINES, WHERE THE FORESTS STILL ENCROACH ON THE VILLAS, WHERE DARKNESS HAS A HOME IN THE BRIGHT TUSCAN LIGHT, WHERE A CERTAIN FORLORN SILENCE INVESTS THE MONUMENTS OF SMALL TOWNS. ALTHOUGH I HAVE SPENT MUCH TIME IN TUSCANY, ALT VISITED SEVERAL PLACES THAT I HAD NEVER HEARD OF AND SEVERAL OTHERS I HAD LONG WANTED TO SEE BUT NEVER HAVE. THERE WERE PLACES YOU MIGHT PASS THROUGH WITHOUT NOTICING, LIKE GALLUZO, AND OTHERS, LIKE VALLAMBROSA, WHERE ALT AND HIS CAMERA FOUND STRIKING THINGS YOU AND I WOULD PROBABLY MISS WITH OUR COLOR-CLOUDED EYES.

FOR THE MOST PART, ALT AVOIDS THE LONG ESTABLISHING SHOT, THE OPEN VISTA, IN FAVOR OF INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS WITH SPECIFIC FEATURES. I WILL ADDRESS SOME OF THE EXCEPTIONS A BIT LATER, BUT HIS TRAVELOGUE IS PRIMARILY AN ITINERARY OF DETAILS: FENCE POSTS, DOORWAYS, BALUSTRADES, STEPS, BENCHES, WALLS, AND FOUNTAINS. THE ANGLE HE TAKES IS NOT THE CLOSE-UP, BUT RATHER THE MIDDLE DISTANCE, AS HE ENCOUNTERS THEM. SO WE NEVER FEEL THE KIND OF

CLAUSTROPHOBIA OR FRAGMENTATION THAT USUALLY MAKES US GLANCE OVER SUCH IMAGES AND WANT TO GET ON TO THE REAL VIEWS. THESE ARE THE REAL VIEWS, THE UNKNOWN TUSCANY THAT HIDES IN PLAIN SIGHT.

NEVERTHELESS, I CAN IMAGINE READERS ASKING THEMSELVES ABOUT SOME OF THE IMAGES, WHY THESE? THEY SEEM SO STRAIGHTFORWARD—WHAT WAS HE LOOKING FOR? ONE OF THE REASONS THEY MAY ASK IS THAT PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN TO ITALY WANT SOMETHING VERY SPECIFIC FROM PHOTOGRAPHS: AN AID TO RECOLLECTION. THEY SEEK WHAT THEY HAVE ALREADY SEEN, SO THAT THEY CAN EXPERIENCE THE SAME DISCOVERIES OVER AND OVER AGAIN. I AM CERTAIN MOST OF THEM WILL NOT HAVE HAD THE EXPERIENCE THESE PHOTOGRAPHS EXPLORE. THOSE WHO HAVEN'T BEEN THERE SEEK AN IMAGE OF WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN, THE ITALY THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE, THE ONE THEY ALREADY KNOW, BUT ONLY IN PICTURES. LIKE TARKOVSKY, ALT IS NOT IN THE NOSTALGIA BUSINESS, NOR IS HE A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE ITALIAN TOURIST INDUSTRY.

WHAT HE IS, HOWEVER, IS AN ARTIST, WHO SEES TUSCANY THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF THE LARGE-FORMAT CAMERA AND THE PLATINUM PRINT. READERS MUST GET USED TO THE IDEA THAT THESE IMAGES EXIST NOT FOR THE SAKE OF ITALY BUT FOR THE SAKE OF THE MEDIUM AND ITS REMARKABLE AESTHETIC PROPERTIES. FOR EXAMPLE, THE VIEW CAMERA, WITH ITS LARGE FORMAT NEGATIVE (AND INFLEXIBLE LENS SYSTEM—NO ZOOM) IS CAPABLE OF REGISTERING OUTSTANDING DETAIL, BOTH CLOSE UP AND IN DEPTH. ALT UNITES THIS CAPABILITY WITH THE TONAL TEXTURE OF PLATINUM (AS OPPOSED TO SILVER) PRINTS AND EXPLOITS THE COMBINATION IN SO MANY WAYS THAT THE FIRST QUESTION ONE NEEDS TO ASK OF AN IMAGE IS NOT WHAT'S IN IT, BUT HOW DOES IT LOOK. THE GRAPES AND GRAPE LEAVES OF GREZZANO LOOK AS THOUGH THEY WERE ACTUALLY GRAVEN BY A SCULPTOR, AND THE DULL SURFACE OF THE GRAPE SKINS IS ALMOST PALPABLE. AT FIRST GLANCE, THE IMAGE OF A CHAPEL AND WHEAT FIELD NEAR CORTONA DOES SEEM A BIT LIKE A CONVENTIONAL TUSCAN LANDSCAPE, BUT THE CLARITY OF THE WHEAT GIVES THE IMAGE ANOTHER CENTER OF ATTENTION, NOT THE PICTURESQUE PAST OF HISTORY BUT THE SEASONAL PRESENT (WHICH IS ALSO CYCLICAL). AND PERHAPS MORE: ALT MADE SEVERAL STOPS IN PLACES THAT SAW FIERCE FIGHTING IN WORLD WAR II, AND I CANNOT SHAKE THE SENSE OF ANOTHER TUSCANY, NEARLY FORGOTTEN RATHER THAN UNKNOWN, THE TUSCANY OF FIELDS UNDER WHICH LIE THE MANY DEAD OF A GENERATION THAT IS ABOUT TO PASS FOR GOOD.

IN THIS MEDIUM, WE GIVE UP TEMPORARY PLEASURE FOR MORE ENDURING REVELATION. MOST TRAVELERS WHO HAVE BEEN TO ITALY THINK OF THE TUSCAN LIGHT AS RICHLY COLORED, REDDISH GOLD, OR, AT NOON, BLUE. THE PLATINUM PRINT GIVES A COMPLETELY UNEXPECTED TRANSLATION OF THAT LIGHT, A LIGHT FAR STARKER AND MORE DRAMATIC ON THE ONE HAND, AND SUBTLER ON THE OTHER. I AM THINKING OF ALT'S VIEW OF DUDDA'S GRAPEVINED HILLS AND CLOUDS, ALSO THE IMAGE OF TORRI'S TOPIARY TREES WITH THEIR STARK SHADOWS, AND THE STORM CLOUDS ABOVE THE POPLARS AT

IL CORNIOLO. AT THE END OF THE SUMMER, THE WEATHER IN TUSCANY CAN TURN VIOLENT AND STORMY, AND ALT'S CLOUDY SKIES GIVE US GLIMPSES OF THAT POWER. ON THE OTHER HAND, ALT'S POND AT VALLAMBROSA, WITH ITS BLURRED REFLECTIONS, IS A DELICATE CANVAS. VALLAMBROSA WAS A BENEDICTINE MONASTIC CENTER IN THE MIDDLE AGES, AND THE IMAGE SUGGESTS THAT THE REAL MIRACLE STILL MANIFESTS ITSELF, RIGHT IN THE CENTER OF TOWN, IN THE WATER'S TEXTURES—AGAIN, HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT UNTIL THE ARTIST COAXES THE MIRACLE OUT.

THE MENTION OF POPLARS BRINGS UP ANOTHER POINT ABOUT ALT'S UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACH TO TUSCANY. ONE OF HIS MOST SUCCESSFUL IMAGES IS A STATELY YET DELICATE STAND OF POPLARS NEAR SAN GALGANO. WITH ITS RUINED ABBEY AND BEAUTIFUL NATURAL SETTING, SAN GALGANO IS ONE OF THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED SITES IN SOUTHERN TUSCANY, A REGION ALT MOSTLY AVOIDED. IT IS A MYSTICAL LANDSCAPE THAT FIGURES PROMINENTLY IN THE TARKOVSKY FILM I MENTIONED. ALT DOES THE ABBEY—HOW COULD HE IGNORE IT? BUT HE GAINS PURCHASE ON IT BY FORMALIST REDUCTION, SEEING IT AS SERIES OF RECEDING ARCHES. IN ANOTHER IMAGE, HE FINDS, OF ALL THINGS, A PALM TREE GROWING NEXT TO ONE OF ITS WALLS. WE KNOW OF PALM TREES IN THE PIAZZA DE SPAGNA IN ROME, BUT IN TUSCANY? AND AS FOR MYSTICISM, THE POPLAR GROVE IS A MEDITATIONAL INSTRUMENT. ALT HAS PLACED HIS CAMERA TO GIVE US NOT ONLY A SENSE OF THE GROVE'S PERFECT REGULARITY, BUT ALSO SIMULTANEOUS VIEWS DOWN TWO ALLEYS OF TREES AT EITHER EDGE OF THE FRAME, LEADING TO TWO DARK PATHS. NOT TO PUSH THE SYMBOLISM TOO FAR, BUT THIS SUGGESTS A REFERENCE TO THE POET DANTE, FINDING HIMSELF IN A DARK WOOD "WHEN THE STRAIGHT WAY WAS LOST" AND BEGINNING THE JOURNEY THAT WOULD RESULT IN THE DIVINE COMEDY. WHICH PATH? ALT SEEMS TO ASK.

I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO GET AT THE QUALITIES OF PARTICULAR IMAGES AS A WAY OF POINTING OUT WHY ALT'S TUSCANY IS SO UNUSUAL, BUT REALLY THE SENSE OF PLACE HE EVOKES IS SOMETHING MORE ELUSIVE. IT MAY BE JUST THAT TRICK OF FORCING US TO SUPPLY THE COLOR OF TUSCANY, IMAGINATIVELY, OF GIVING US THE POETRY OF UNDERSTATEMENT. ONE OF THE PLACES ALT CLEARLY FOUND MOST FASCINATING WAS THE GIARDINO GRAZZONI AT COLLODI. WITH ITS ELABORATE, TERRACED GARDENS AND OVER-THE-TOP SCULPTURAL DECORATIONS, THE GARDEN EMBODIES A FANTASY MADE REAL. ALT TURNS IT BACK INTO A VISION, A STATIC WAKING DREAM. IN A SENSE, HE REASSERTS THE POWER OF ART OVER EVERYDAY REALITY, NO MATTER HOW PICTURESQUE, A POWER TO TRANSFORM THE REALITY OF THE TOURIST AND VISITOR. FOR ALT IS NOT INTERESTED IN BRINGING BACK IMAGES OF SOMETHING ALREADY THERE AND WAITING FOR US, BUT RATHER IN CAPTURING IMAGES OF A TUSCANY THAT DOES NOT YET EXIST, THAT COMES INTO BEING ONLY AS HE DEVELOPS HIS PICTURES. THIS IS THE UNKNOWN TUSCANY, NOT OF UNTRAVELED BYWAYS, NOT OF UNEXPECTED LIGHT AND SHADOW, BUT OF THE ARTIST'S IMAGINATION. —LYLE REXER, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK