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The Problem of the “Double Ego” in Paul Delvaux and Edmund Husserl

1. What is so Strange in Delvaux’s Paintings?

Delvaux is a surrealist painter who attains what other surrealists attempted but often had difficulties to attain: a “Being-dimension” of dream. Consequently, this is why Delvaux is simultaneously close to and far removed from surrealism. Delvaux creates “unconstructed” dreams, which do not flow out of the world of non-dream but which simply “are” dreams. This is also why, in comparison with Magritte for example, Delvaux’s surrealism can appear as “non-conceptual.” This does not mean that there are no abstract artistic “devices” in Delvaux; on the contrary, there is a logic whose aim is to create dream impressions. However, instead of being founded on the “distortion” of the logic of non-dream or of the logic of normal everyday life, this logic is often founded on a certain treatment of the phenomenon of the human ego.

Before taking up the function of the ego in Delvaux’s dreams, it is necessary to look at a certain aspect of this “dream logic.” First, Delvaux’s dreams are

“clear” and not blurred. One could think that a painter of dreams, who reproduces perceptible objects with utmost clarity, will sooner or later be obliged to “blur” some other, more abstract aspects of his paintings in order to guarantee a certain dream effect. With Delvaux even this is not the case. Where could one find a “blurred structure” in his paintings? The choice of elements remains incoherent, but the entirety of the painting does not appear chaotic. On the contrary, everything seems “in order” and “logical” here just *as if* everything that exists is based on reasonable thought.

Kant has installed the distinction between sensible knowledge (“*sinnhafte Erkenntnis*”) and intellectual knowledge and insisted on the existence of cases where the first is clear and the second is confused. To arrive at a clarification of both is the aim of the philosopher who is searching for true knowledge. In Delvaux’s paintings one finds, apart from the clarity with which he paints his objects, a logic or a “structure.” At the same time, this logic is not serious. Of course, it is not simply opposed to seriousness by being grotesque, chaotic or delirious, but it appears as a “played” structure – or perhaps as a logic playing at being a logic. This logic develops a sort of game that is easily recognizable as “untruthful.” But we can accept it as a game, which means, we can accept what we clearly know to be a deceit.

Everything is “clear,” perhaps too clear, or even “too true” in Delvaux’s paintings; and it is precisely this quality, which produces a dream effect. The immutable décor and the eclectic landscapes do not *oppose* scientific examination. As incoherent as they are, everything is open and nothing is hidden. Even the nudes with their lost stares do not inspire us uneasiness at the moment we are trying to observe them more closely. No “reaction” is to be expected from those subjects. Overall, Delvaux’s dream world is presented to us like on a laboratory table. Paradoxically, this “scientification,” which could be understood as an effect of demystification, appears here as the element of mystification *par excellence*.

Delvaux’s world is a “mystico-scientific” world offering no possibility for empathy though it can – mysteriously – provoke in us certain emotions. It is precisely this mechanism that can be likened to that of the dream. Very often, in this world where so many objects and persons are “obvious” as if presented by science, the emotions transmitted are accompanied by a feeling of strangeness. It is not yet Freud’s uncanniness, but it is a superposition of strangeness and familiarity, which creates the “played logic” at work in Delvaux’s presentations of dreams.

2. The Ego and the Other

It is via “strangeness” that we arrive at the main subject of this essay, which is the problem of the ego. Delvaux’s women are manifestly strange but strange in regard to what? On the one hand, their bodies are perfect and not distorted. On the other hand, their stares and their frozen positions, meaning their way of being, make them almost absolutely strange, independent of any environment. Delvaux has practiced this pattern for over forty years. Is the problem perhaps that these women are not “themselves,” that the strangeness is not based on an alienation effect but rather on an effect of auto-alienation?

Yes and no. Even though they are distant, it is still the women’s ego that is becomes manifest through the distancing effect. Troubled by the women’s absence of personality, the spectator will perhaps look for what Kant calls the “as such” (an sich) of these women. As a matter of fact, he will find it right next to them, in the form of an “alter ego.” Very often these women appear doubled and it is this doubling effect that is interesting in phenomenological terms.

Often, in those paintings where a “doubling” takes place, one sees two women who resemble each other very closely without being entirely identical. This is the case, for example, in *Sérenité* (1970) or *L’office du soir* (1971). The doubled women can be presented one facing the other, at a distance, back to back or side by side. Their positions are not important, but there is always some strangeness in their relationships. As a rule, there is no communication between them, a lack that is clearly visible though difficult to interpret. Is this an unnegotiable distance between the two individuals established by a profound effect of alienation? Or is this not rather a case of perfect understanding between these two individuals, an understanding that makes all communication useless? It will be shown later that in Delvaux’s paintings the effect of a non-communicability always remains ambiguous.

Let us return to the resemblance between the woman and her alter ego. In certain paintings, as in *Le Songe* (1941), *Le Dialogue* (1974), *Nuit sur la mer* (1976) ou *L’Abandon* (1964), the two women distinguish themselves by the color of their hair though, from another point of view, an obvious resemblance indicates that this could very well be the same woman twice. The ambiguity of resemblance is here pushed to an extreme. The same happens when the resemblance is created with the help of mirrors. The mirror placed in front of the woman does not reflect her as she really is (*Le Miroir*, 1936). The alter ego may be the reflection of the ego, but this reflection remains inaccurate and this

apparently happens out of principle. In other words, the mirror reproduces the ‘I’ of the woman without reproducing her own self. Usually the arrangement is too playful for even such an indication: In *Filles au bord de l’eau* (1966) the reflection of the woman “should” be her real reflection but one has reasons to doubt this because of the altered position of her arms.

The men, on the other hand, seem to have a more “normal” relationship with their alter ego: their reflections appear to be a real copies of themselves. In *Le Sabbat*, Professor Lidenbrock is looking into the mirror and has the opportunity to become acquainted with his own reflection, a reflection that is in no way misleading. He even seems to be very interested in his reflection, and he is interested in it in a scientific way, which creates a contrast with the mysterious detachment enclosed to the reflection or the presence of the alter ego in the case of women. Contrary to the professor, those women do not seem to look for knowledge about themselves. The reason is that they have it already. All that remains to be done is to present this knowledge in a playful way to potential spectators.

There are also paintings where one sees two women, one from up front, and the other from behind (*Les Ruines de Selinontée*. 1972-73; *L’Estacade*, 1966; *L’Escalier*, 1946). Nothing indicates here that this is twice the same woman, but there is an atmosphere which pushes us to make such an assertion. Why? As usual in Delvaux, there is no anecdotic indication. Those paintings do not represent a “story” constructed by the painter and to be reconstructed by the spectator. If there is a “resemblance” between two women, it is not a resemblance that has been temporarily hidden, a resemblance existing somewhere, and which the spectator could reveal by using analytical methods. On the contrary, it is the poetic constellation of the image that *produces* a resemblance that does perhaps not exist otherwise. More precisely: the poetic device is enacted by the reflection of the woman upon her alter ego.

This is also a poetic device typical for dreams. Like in dreams, what is not obvious can appear, for a moment, as obvious. A painting like *Les Belles de nuit* (1962) makes us believe that the woman who turns her back on us (is it a woman?) is an alter ego of the woman who comes towards us. However, there is no resemblance here apart from the fact that the two persons are nude.

In conclusion, one can say that in these paintings where the women can, in general, be recognized by their lack of personality, ambiguity creates its own logic, which is not a logic of being or non-being but a logic of the dream existing between the two. Even if all of Delvaux’s women form the character of

“the woman,” every woman must, before attaining this representative totality, go through an attenuation of her own being. In Delvaux’s paintings the women arrive at this state of attenuation by reflecting on their own ego.

3. The Mediation of the Ego: Delvaux and Husserl

Because Delvaux directed his attention to the ego, he appears more Husserlian than Heideggerian. No “Being-with” (*Mitsein*) surrounds these characters, there is not what one could call the “hermeneutic determination” of the ego by its environment. On the contrary, the environment itself seems to develop by taking the ego as a point of departure. There can be no “ready-at-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*) in these dreamlike paintings simply because nothing can be “ready at hand” in an eclectic and static environment, which looks rather like the still of a film.

An analysis of this dream, which presents itself in the form of an environment embracing the subject and his alter ego, can shed light on what is so particular in these images. Firstly, the characters do not *possess* an environment but are part of it. They are, as has often been noted, “figurines” without subjectivity, not interesting as characters but only within the interpretation of the dream within which they appear. This dream engages them and their world, as well as their alter ego.

It is for this reason that a phenomenological interpretation in the Husserlian style should be called for. With Husserl, one can say that Delvaux’s women-figurines appear like “egos plunged into transcendental meditation [like] transcendental spectators of their own life and their own being, which are all turned towards the world.”¹ The ego appears here no longer as a subject, but is reduced, as Jean Toussaint Desanti says about the phenomenological vision of the world, “to (...) the pure power of its look.”²

Also in Delvaux’s paintings, the ego is reduced to a point where it is no more than a figurine. However, this reduction does not aim to annul the inferiority of the ego; on the contrary, the reduction makes the interpretation of this inferiority possible on the grounds of an exterior world which has become visible and of which it is a part.

When the ego is reduced to a figurine, the alter ego often appears next to it in Delvaux’s paintings. Through an act of abstraction, the subjectivity of the ego, normally determined by the *Mitsein* of the environment, is reduced to nothing more than to its own Being. This Being appears no longer as a substance, but as a landscape, in which we see the ego as an object linked to its alter ego.

In Husserl's phenomenology, the reduced ego, through its transcendental subjectivity, develops a certain "intermonadic essence" (cf. Desanti, p. 117). We know that, according to Leibniz, the individual is the mirror of God, a mirror which expresses the entire world from its own perspective" (*Discours IX*). This pushes us towards a question, which is central in Husserl as much as in Delvaux: what happens if the ego sees the world from its own point of view? Does this mean that the ego will then see also its own self? And will it be seen from the same point of view? If yes – and with regard to Delvaux we are inclined to answer this question in the affirmative – another question immediately follows: if it is true that the ego perceives itself, does its own ego not automatically become the other as a result? It seems that Delvaux deals with precisely this problem.

But let us first have a closer look at the "point of view of the ego" in the context of Husserlian phenomenology. For Descartes, the ego is a *substantia cogitans* which is, in principle, detached from the world. The vision of a substantial ego, which situates itself opposite a world permits the development of a "transcendental realism." Husserl criticizes the point of departure of the Cartesian method, and suggests seeing the ego not as a substance, but as a "field of the thinking ego." For Husserl, there is no psychic ego but only the "field of the ego," and the problem of auto-perception appears at precisely this point. Within its own field, the ego not only realizes the world, but also itself. If Husserl speaks of the necessity of an *epoché* or of the reduction of the ego, his hope is precisely "that I will gain the last thinkable ground of experience on which I can become the impartial observer of my natural-worldly I and life."³ In this way the *epoché* as a method leads to the "phenomenological reduction" of the transcendental ego.

Husserl even postulates the existence of a gap, meaning the "doubling of the I" (*Ich-spaltung*) within the phenomenological reduction, because "the transcendental spectator settles above himself... [and he] also watches himself as the I given-to-the-world."⁴ While in the *Parisian Lectures* Husserl analyses the problem of a self-knowledge (*Selbstbesinnung*) of the 'I', in the Fifth Meditation of his *Cartesian Meditations* he treats the perception of the appearance of the other within the field of the ego in precisely the way in which it is useful here for us: "Let us suppose that somebody else enters our realm of perception. Primordially reduced this means: within the realm of perception of my primordial nature appears a body which is, of course, as a primordial one, only a determinative piece of my self (*immanent transcendence*)."⁵

The experience of the other is made, so it seems, by an *Einfühlung* but there is one principal obstacle that prevents this *Einfühlung* from becoming “perfect” or harmonious in a romantic or positivist sense. There is an apparent “incommunicability” which installs itself between the ego and the other. Of course, this incommunicability is only apparent, because, looking closer, it turns out to be inessential: a certain communication always seems to perpetuate itself through the gestures (or even non-gestures) of the characters of the ego and the alter-ego. *Einfühlung*, if there is any, is here ambiguous, and from this arises its problematical character. On the one hand, the ego can identify with the other and grasp it through an act of identification (this would resemble a direct *Einfühlung* in the Lippsian sense) or, in Husserl’s words: “It is clear from the beginning that only a resemblance which links that body with my body within my primordial sphere, can represent the motivational foundation for the apologizing conception which sees the one as the body of the other.”⁶

On the other hand, the “other” can be grasped only as the other, and any assimilation with the ego will make it different from what it is. Through an “analogizing approach,” the other becomes simply the ego; and yet, the interest that the ego has in the other is an interest it has in the other *as the other*. The other is in front of me, as a body, or as writes Husserl, “in seiner Leibhaftigkeit.” But this “body of flesh and bones” [Husserl distinguishes between Leib and Körper] does not permit us to feel “the other I itself [and] nothing of that which belongs to its proper essence.”⁷ If I could really grasp the Leib (and not only the Körper) of the other, this would have the effect of doubling my own ego. As a result, it would be nothing other than the effect of my own “sensuality” (Sinnlichkeit):

Were the authentic essence of the other directly accessible, it would be only a moment of my own essence, and finally I and him would be the same. It would be the same with his *Leib*, if it were nothing other than his body, which is the unity which constitutes itself purely in my real and possible experiences, belonging to my primordial sphere exclusively as an element of my sensuality.⁸

“Sensuality” (Sinnlichkeit), on the other hand, is limited to the ego which perceives *Körper* but no *Leiber*. The *Leib* belongs to the other, i.e. it is a matter of the ego (his ego) and flows out of his original consciousness (Originalbewußtsein). With regard to the *Körper* of the other and its “way of

appearance” (Erscheinungsweise) Husserl writes. “It evokes reproductively a similar appearance belonging to the constitutive system of my *Leib* as body in space. It is reminiscent of my bodily appearance *as if I were there*.”⁹

The perception of the other is linked to self-perception, but this does not mean that the simple equation of both would permit a perfect *Einfühlung* leading to an understanding of the other. On the contrary, it is at the very moment that the ego sees itself as the other that this “incommunicability” installs itself between the two. The ego and the other are “separated by a gap that I cannot bridge, because bridging it would mean that I gain an original and not a ‘representative’ experience of the other.”¹⁰ Still, this incommunicability, in Husserl just as much as in Delvaux, is ambiguous if not paradoxical. In the end, communication is always possible or even “overly possible” because the ego and the other perceive themselves on the grounds of an essential equality.

Conclusion

I believe that the chain of Husserl’s reflections, first on the self-perception of the ego and then on the impossibility of the perception of the other, is reminiscent of the variations on these themes operated by Delvaux in his paintings. The ego never perceives the other, not even where – or especially where – it resembles the other. One could say that whenever the ego wants to perceive the other, it must always first go through itself. Only through this ambiguous and sophisticated process can the ego and the other come closer to each other. A simple *Einfühlung* in the conventional sense of the term, on the other hand, will not lead to an understanding of the other.

This is why, finally, the experience of the other as the “non-I” remains inexplicable. *Einfühlung* always has a scientific and reasonable character, but the paradoxical state requiring the experience of the other as a second ego in order to exist as a proper ego, necessarily creates a mysterious atmosphere in those paintings.

Husserl’s observations are similar when he asks: “That the sensually seen *Leib* can without complications be experienced as that of the other and not only as an indication of the other – is this not a mystery?”¹¹ Husserl’s phenomenological model produces a vertigo as soon as one tries to pursue it in all its depth. This vertigo has dreamlike qualities, and as a consequence, the rigid gestures, empty looks and fake resemblances that dominate Delvaux’s paintings create a dream atmosphere that can be experienced as “profound.” In any case, it is very different from the “superficial” dreams of the surrealists. The

“dream field,” which is also a favorite topic of Lacan, is a landscape in which, in Lacan’s words, the “I is at home.”¹² In Delvaux’s paintings, we observe the genesis of the ‘I’ beginning with its “field” that is indeed often presented as a landscape.

¹ “...des égo[s] plongé[s] dans la méditation phénoménologique, [comme des] spectateurs transcendants de [leur] propre vie et de [leur] propre être qui, eux, sont tournés vers le monde.” Edmund Husserl: *Cartesiansche Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (Haag: Nijhoff, 1950), Sommaire français 1, p. 197.

² “...à la pure puissance de son regard.” Jean Toussaint Desanti: *Introduction à la phénoménologie* (Paris: Billiard, 1976), p. 56.

³ (“...daß ich den denkbar letzten Erfahrungs- und Erkenntnisstandpunkt gewinne, auf dem ich zum unbeteiligten Zuschauer meines natürlich-weltlichen Ich und Ich-Lebens werde” (*Pariser Vorträge*, p. 15)

⁴ (der transzendente Zuschauer stellt sich über sich selbst... [er] sieht sich auch als dem welthingegebenen ich zu. “ 1 (PV, p. 16)

⁵ “Nehmen wir nun an, es tritt ein anderer Mensch in unseren Wahrnehmungsbereich, so heißt das primordial reduziert: es tritt im Wahrnehmungsbereich meiner primordialen Natur ein Körper auf, der als primordial natürlich bloß Bestimmungstück meiner selbst (immanente Transzendenz) ist.” (5. Med., p. 140)

⁶ “Es ist von vornherein klar, das nur eine innerhalb meiner Primordialsphäre jenen Körper dort mit meinem verbindende Ähnlichkeit das Motivationsfundament für die analogisierende Auffassung des ersteren als anderer Leib abgeben kann” (ibid.).

⁷ “...das andere Ich selbst, nichts von dem, was seinem Eigenwesen selbst angehört” (p. 139).

⁸ “Wäre das Eigentwessentliche des Anderen in direkter Weise zugänglich, so wäre es bloß Moment meines Eigenwesens, und schließlich er selbst und ich einerlei. Es verhielte sich ähnlich mit seinem Leib, wenn er nichts anderes wäre als der Körper, der rein in meinen wirklichen und möglichen Erfahrungen sich konstituierende Einheit ist, meiner primordialen Sphäre zugehörig als Gebilde ausschließlich meiner *Sinnlichkeit*” (ibid.).

⁹ “Sie weckt reproduktiv eine ähnliche, zum konstitutiven System meines Leibes als Körper im Raum gehörige Erscheinung. Sie erinnert an mein körperliches Aussehen *wenn ich dort wäre* (p. 147, Husserl’s italics).

¹⁰ “...durch einen Abgrund getrennt, über den ich nicht wirklich hinüber kann, was ja hieße, das ich originale und nicht appräsenzierte Erfahrung von dem Anderen gewänne” p. 150)

¹¹ “Daß wirklich der sinnlich gesehene *Körper* ohne weiteres als der des Anderen erfahren worden ist und nicht bloß als eine Anzeige für den Anderen; ist diese Tatsache nicht ein Rätsel?” (p. 150).

¹² “Le je est chez soi.” Jacques Lacan: *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse. Le séminaire Livre XI* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p. 45.