

Coming to Transience

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At the Tate Modern's *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera* exhibition last month I found myself transfixed by one work in particular. It was Giovanni Anselmo's *Untitled* (1968), where a lettuce is squashed between a large standing block of granite and a smaller one, held in place by a copper wire. As the lettuce wilts the wire loosens and the smaller block is released. The dying lettuce enables a new energy – something else to begin. The time this takes, like the duration of all life, is impossible to predetermine. Standing in front of the work I was abruptly confronted with my major preoccupation – our own mortality. Are our lives in a constant state of trauma and loss? Is our acknowledgement of transience a characteristic of being human? Is loss positive enabling us to move on? Does death bring new life, new energy?

While contemplating these questions I was reminded of Adam Phillips's book, *Darwin's Worms*¹, where he offers liberating insights into confronting transience and death in a secular world. Using texts from Freud and Darwin, who both did much to undermine our vanity and self-importance; he claims that death is not alien but integral to our sense of ourselves. He writes that we need to recognise that we do live in a constant state of trauma and loss, where transience has a permanent presence in all our lives. He encourages us to face up to our mortality and conveys Freud's belief "that it is impermanence that confers value; it is the fact of death, of the prodigal forms of transience, that creates pleasure". Freud celebrates life being provisional where it is impossible to love life without loving transience. Phillips explains how both Freud and Darwin return to losses again and again in their writings, "losses that could be survived – or even seen to be sources of inspiration – and by what survived, as evidence, of lives that have been lived".

But this is all very well when we are talking about the transience of a lettuce or a worm. It is how we deal with our own transience, our loved one's transience that is hard to cope with. It is painful and tragic...and yet...we know it is inevitable. The utter death that awaits us is a certainty – it is the one thing that all life shares – and it is what it means to be human. Phillips intimates that provided we are able to mourn, to feel grief and pain, then life can successfully enrich and renew itself, allowing us to move on. His optimism is invaluable, not least in airing and sharing the necessity for us to think about death in an entirely different way. In *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*², Hélène Cixous suggests that only at the end of life will we be able to understand life's secret: "When you have come to the end, only then can beginning come to you." She sees life as a quest to find what comes after knowing, knowing how not to know.

I like to think that in making art we are attempting to come to terms with some of these experiences. We can perhaps seek a way to confront the contradictions of life and death; permanence and transience; reality and illusion; everyday and spiritual. Content and meaning can come from making and process. The work becomes a vehicle, a resource, a means to an end, not an end in itself. It does not represent things, but is a thing in itself. We are searching for something enabling – allowing us to move on –

not to alleviate but to empower
not to prevent but to allow
not to diminish but to enhance
not to answer but to question

Wittgenstein proposes that: "If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then (s)he lives eternally who lives in the present. Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit"³. Perhaps that is why we make art, to come to transience by living in a limitless visual field.

¹ Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worms*, Faber and Faber, London, 1999

² Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 1991

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, 1922, 1961