

1957

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Recommended Citation

Stangos, Nicos (1957) "Three Stops for an Artist," *Exile*: Vol. 3 : No. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol3/iss2/11>

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THREE STOPS FOR AN ARTIST

BY NICOS STANGOS

I

My condition is getting worse and worse. I act as if I were thirteen again. All I try to think of is who has and who hasn't invited me for tea. I suspect conspiracies, I make stupid jokes, I spend my time with the idle philistines of the city, I am insulted. I imagine things that have never been said or done. I am ridiculed. I cannot find any rest among those that appreciate me. I like to return all the time to the rooms of the fallen princes with their pointed self-centeredness, their nihilism, their boredom. O how I love those that ignore me. I am expecting to get my redemption from their empty hands, though I very well know that they will never get out of their state of boredom, satiation, the movies, the new automobile, the high-class bars. And even those snobs (*sine nobilitatis*, if you don't remember) declare that I am a decadent and a snob. I know, I know very well my condition, but I cannot do anything.

No, I am not sick; the sickness isn't in me, it is in my dreams. But why should one ignore you, consider you ridiculous, hate you at the end, when you say that you love him or her? What makes people love those that ridicule them? But why am I talking about others, am I not doing the same? Am I not ridiculing those that give me their love, and adoring those that fill me with bitterness? I have always admired the great despisers. When I was very young I admired F. because he had the privilege to be admired by everybody. But as soon as we came closer, when I took that halo off his fair head, I despised him. I have always loved G. His pride has always enchanted me. I loved D. when she was making fun of me; I don't, now that she appreciates me. Now I admire her as a talented person, but where is that pleasure she made me suffer when I was crawling like a worm, humiliated, so much humiliated? O how I love, the one after the other, those little gods of arrogance and of pretense.

Maybe I am in love, and love is a dangerous thing for babies.

Then my art. But what art when my head echoes that buzzer, when my heart burns. Now a new face takes place in my agony. He has a room behind the house where I live. A very clever, blond, young somebody; he looks like a German and they say that he is very intelligent. I hated him from the first minute. How jealous I am of him; he has fascinated me. He is the personification of success in life. I know that he is a poor painter; his paintings are like washed bleached hair of a prostitute in Frankfurt. His life is a dull exclamation mark hanging from nowhere, and this coincidence . . . Yes, he is going out with M. and the other night they came and made love under my window. They were sighing and moving in the thick summer night like two devils in flames. Their whispering echoed in my room and my empty mind, and what could I do? What did I do? I organized a party the next day in my room and I invited them too; to take my revenge. In some time everybody was drunk except myself. My wine was the best red wine; you could get drunk just by smelling it. They were all lying on the straw-mats on the floor, under the faint light of some candles, and I had those two in front of me making love again, kissing, sighing. The huge mirror on the wall was reflecting everything like a huge eye, and under the simmering flames, little devils of candles, I was sitting there for hours looking at them, and everything started to faint in my eyes from the smell of wine and sickness around me.

I was trying to concentrate on everything as hard as possible. I wanted to see everything; their lips coming together, pressing, and then the feeling of the excited tongue slipping, penetrating through the teeth; eyes piercing through eyes, wounded animals, weapons in disguise. O how I wanted to see and feel everything; the hands gripping and then the lips on the hands, and the little tongue again, burning, burning; the limbs in tension moving as if lost in the summer night. I could feel every muscle shivering in my body, shivering and moving, ready to jump out of the flesh and lie down on the floor looking stupidly at me. I didn't want to move. I couldn't move because I was sure that if I did, I would dissolve on the straw-mats, in small pieces of muscle. The half-full glass of wine was glistening red light and the light from the torturing candles. I didn't want to see those candles any more, I didn't want to see the red eyes of the wine glass looking at me in embarrassment, I didn't want to have the odor of love on my nostrils, dancing naked and insane, cutting her breasts off, making love to a monster, raping babies in their cradles; but I couldn't do anything. I had to stay there and suffer all that. If I could only get hold of a sharp knife, then I would end all that, deeping the sharp edge of the knife in

closing eyes, in this hateful flesh, the stinking candle-flesh; everything would easily come to an end in that way . . . This lasted until three o'clock in the morning when everybody silently and cautiously left. There I was with a throb locking life out of me. I had to do it. I had to suffer so much.

II

Now I can work again. Colors and shapes take life in my hands once more. My work is one and the same with my dreams. I am so happy that I can work again. My life is now monotonous, unreasonable and strangely exotic. Something has changed. The weather maybe. No, it isn't the weather. It is a very little thing that happened five days ago; it gave me strength and something new, new. O, my head is turning, my heart is wounded. But I didn't mean to hurt her, I didn't, as a matter of fact. It isn't that I suffer from bad conscience either; I never do, anyway. But I will tell you everything as it happened. Five days have gone by since that night that a young girl, ten years old, was posing for me. It was the day that L. had left for Paris and I had mixed feelings as always. That young girl—how can I ever make her portrait, I would never be able to handle all this beauty and grace, a little devil dancing on the lakes of her eyes, her nose my Sunday loneliness and contempt, her hair the waves of the sea or the waves of the light-brown soil when you look down a mountain. We were left alone that night, by God's will. It was a night for wine and love. One of those nights when you can smell the faint odor of lemon-flowers in the air, when you can hear the slightest noise, the noises of the city coming from far away, the noises of the city traveling on crowded busses and on old taxis, a night when you want to lie down on the grass and take in you everything that is, while you can feel what is not, to lie down on the grass, facing the night, smiling at the embarrassed eyes of the stars, wedging a tear in the white heart of the moon. That was a night for wine and love. One of those nights when you lie on the grass by yourself and cry because there is no head of the beloved to weigh on your chest, to listen to the strange events of your heart. After trying again and again without any success, my pencils were in ecstasy looking at her, I caressed her hair with trembling fingers. You cannot imagine hair softer to touch than hers; she looked at the floor. I kissed her and she kissed me too. She said that she loved me. Can you imagine those ten-years-old-sea-lips of a girl whispering "I love you?" I kissed her again on her young breasts, her hands, her lips, her feet. She was trembling like a dry leaf left alone on a winter tree. She was trembling but she wouldn't say anything. When she left, and I was left alone, I didn't know what I

should feel. I couldn't feel anything but the perfection and the tenderness of her skin and the perfume of her spring-body.

Next day I went and told everything to D. She said that I was an animal and then she told me to go away. But why? What is so bad about it? No, there is nothing bad. They are all ignorant. They are jealous because they have never felt a ten-years-old voice saying "I love you." I felt it though, five days ago. It was blue velvet on my ears, it was my lover the sea drowning my body in the heavens.

I will take her with me on the mountain out of the city. We will climb up, high up together, and I will hold her hand. The snow will be whiter than ever, the sky will be the most precious stone, the fir trees will bow like young bridges and the quietness, the absolute, infinite quietness will pierce our mouths to make them dumb forever. What do I care now whether I can explain it to D. or not? What do I care about anybody who will stick his nose under my coat to find out what in the world takes place in the factory of my heart? What do I care about anything? Ten years old, and she loves me as innocently as a daisy-dawn. We will walk together silently and the icy wind will fade in our beauty, because we are beautiful. The black snakes of my past, the snakes of that night in my room crawling on the strawmats, making love and mocking . . . Now I can laugh, I can cry, I can make my art jump high in the air and shock all the little somebodies. Do I pity the small arrogant fallen gods and princes? No, I don't. They are too small for me. I love them now as ever. But I have nothing to do among them anymore. Do you hear me? Who cares about their pointed red tongues licking their empty life in admiration? Ten years old and she gave them all to me, with a sad smile, a sad trembling of the body. They are fragile, those ten years, but my hands are so soft; there is no danger. What does D. know about me? What does she know about my hands? My father used to say that I should become an archbishop so that the people will kiss and admire my hands, their whiteness, their slender form. I can hold those ten years in my hands.

Up on the mountain, in the coolness of the air and the whiteness, of the snow and the green, green fir trees bowing like young brides, I will take those ten years on me forever. I will never give them back to anybody. They are mine. Who has the right to touch me? I am sacred. Those ten years will sing a song for me every morning and the song will come from the sun, over the cities and the world, over all those that die too early or too late, that song will come to me and for me only.

III

Everyone holds a different pain in his palm. When I was there I used to think: They will wear their tear and they will live in loneliness, counting the past on their fingers. They will count every incident, those who have died and those who still live. They will count the tapping of their pulse, my pulse, their pain, their joy, everything, because everything can be counted.

When I left, I thought: Everything created is the product of two opposing forces, the product of the struggle, of the process of their struggle. When one of the two opposing forces overcomes the other at the end, creation loses half of its values, it acquires a title. My art was everything to me. My art was my dreams and myself and now my art has reached the point of stillness. I was redeemed and now my art has lost the other half of its value because what is art but a struggle for redemption, a struggle toward a white flower, a struggle which has no end as long as one lives the life of others. I was redeemed and redeemed art does not exist but in the mind of the hermit, and that is the perfect art, perhaps.

The sea looks like an old dream. I will walk down to the sea now; I am happy because I am empty. If I could only sing a song for the sea . . . But I cannot. Because a song is art and there is no art in those who are calm and happy; in them there is only God and light. The sea is beautiful, but this is not the same sea I knew. Something is lost and something is gained.

"The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yes is needed: the spirit now wills his own will and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world." I have said my "Yes." That girl was flesh for one moment only, then it became spirit and the spirit became myself. I can even die now. There will be nothing more, I promise.