OF NIGHT AND DAY

In 1963 I wrote an article for Photo Tribune in which I attempted to bring out the profound implications of the work of Nell Dorr, who, with Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White and Barbara Morgan belong to a little group of the best known women photographers of the United States. Each of these photographers expresses, with incontestable mastery, a very personal vision of life and the world. As I emphasized in my comments on THE BARE FEET, Nell Dorr differs from the other women photographers in the sacred character of her inspiration. Each of her works is a profession of faith. Transported by the elan of a profound spiritual awareness, she "re-presents" her intimate self on all that is human...on the universality of things. The great American poet, Carl Sandburg, wrote in 1954 at the time Mother and Child appeared: "It is more than a book, it is a sacred book." Nell Dorr possesses simultaneously, and to the highest degree, both the gift of motherhood and the gift of childhood. Through the intermediary of her camera, she is at the same time poet and philosopher; but to read the text accompanying her images is to perceive quickly that the poetic sentiment she expresses is not limited to the camera: she is a poet equally according to the letter and according to the spirit.

By the manner in which she formulates her emotions, she gives to everyday life a supplementary dimension, and nowhere in her photographs is there ever revealed the slightest trace of

presumption or of vanity. She wrote me in 1964: "In my little self is nothing, if not something more than I."..... In her extensive qualities, her "extra-planetary domain" as Grace Mayer so judiciously called it, she lives a life of silence and of serene wisdom with a monastic-like simplicity. Her greatest joy is to withdraw into music and the Bach B minor Mass is her preferred work.

Like MOTHER AND CHILD and THE BARE FEET, OF NIGHT AND DAY is a long meditation in which the author seeks to know "Whence we came?" --"Who we are?"--"What is our destiny?" The same questions posed by Gauguin, with whom, from an artistic viewpoint, Nell Dorr presents, in my view, a great similarity of thought. At the conclusion of an introduction of great depth, Nell Dorr writes: "There is no answer to the questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the cosmos? Knowledge cannot help us. Whether we know it or not, we live by faith and each day is a lifetime--each day a miracle."

A photographic review is not exactly the best place to discuss metaphysical problems: I will therefore content myself by revealing two examples that bring out the "connection" that most probably unites the texts and the photographs.

One critic called OF NIGHT AND DAY an unusual book. It is effectively that. All during her life, Nell Dorr has gathered excerpts and quotes from the most remarkable thinkers of all epochs. Her new book contains no less than forty quotations taken from the most diverse sources: from Sappho, Confucious and Lao-Tze to William Blake, Rainer Maria Rilke, Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman; from Plotinus to Blaise Pascal and Teilhard de Chardin; from the

Aztecs to Einstein, Jacques Maritain and so many others...

The unusual quality of this work resides not so much in the author's attempt to make her images reveal the text, but much more in her designs of light, in comparison to her figurative ones to which she has accustomed us. We count 20 of the former and 20 of the latter. One realization (p. 31) even combines the two types.

We are struck by the beauty of these "designs of light"--camera born--by their quasi-musical quality, by their evocative power, by this formulation of fascinating involvement. Their meaning however often remains difficult to decipher even without wanting to go so far as to translate them into words, which was less the case in the symbolic representations of MOTHER AND CHILD. In the introduction to this book, Nell Dorr wrote concerning the symbolic images: "They may take longer to understand...but I believe they are more easily understood than they are explained; therefore I shall not try. It is not important."...

In OF NIGHT AND DAY, the author cites Jacques Maritain: "If I do not know exactly what a given sign signifies, well, it is then free to signify everything for me. In a sense poetical joy and effective exaltation will then only become vaster in becoming more indeterminate."

At first view, these declarations do not enlighten us much. Let us try, however (without losing ourselves in theoretical considerations) to observe how Nell Dorr realizes the juxtaposition of a text and of a symbolic representation not directly

figurative.

Let's take for example a citation from Plotinus (3rd century): "What is this rapturous joy that thrills our being? This exultation upward, this yearning to escape the body and live in the Divine Spirit? This is the reaction that beauty must ever induce, wonderment and a delicious aching, longing and love and a trembling that is all delight."

Facing this text, long ribbon-like forms, grey and white on a black background, float upward as on gusts of wind, one leaning inward, the other turning toward the exterior, as in a fugue where the voices alternate, oppose and rejoin in a perpetual renewal.

Another example: The text is a poem taken from the Elegies of Ranier Maria Rilke: "Just once, everything, only for once. Once and no more. And we, too, once. And never again. But this having been once, though only once, having been once on earth--can it ever be cancelled?" Nell Dorr illustrates this text with a form of light that one imagines to be a celestial body with, at the illuminated extremity, a darker form that one seems to see melt into obscurity. Does the light form represent the earth and the darker form man at the instant he detaches himself to die? Perhaps! But has all this a sense of wanting to interpret signs with such a mocking precision? Isn't it enough that the graphic be in perfect unison with the poem?

Both Maritain and Nell Dorr are correct. Let us allow ourselves to be "invaded" by the graphic representation as we

would by music. There, also, there is no concrete content. There also, one does not describe objects but sentiments and "ideations" suggested by the images. It is largely the same for the figurative photographs. One could reduce them to their concrete content, but as Nell Dorr wrote: "It is not what one photographs that counts, but how one photographs."

It is enough for all the images in this book, as well as for those of her preceding books, to "contemplate" them to convince oneself of the power of emotion that they exhale. How she succeeds in moving soul and heart, with what expression she translates her vision of humanity and of things...Providing the soul listens!

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