

## *Balthus' Picture-Book*

### Chapter One: Parsing the Enigma

"...and there was the first contact with books, picture books, but books all the same since picture books are narrative. I have just bought twenty of them for the school children of Bilignin and they are narrative."

--Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*

1. The landscapes of Balthus promise adventures. The routes of travel in the world on the further side of the picture plane are almost as clear as though one held a map in hand; and the scene is such that it promises meetings. In "View from Montecalvello" (1979) one looks down not merely on a ruined fort on a white cliff and a patchwork of fields beyond, but on a world of possible dramas, dramas we would necessarily be bound to experience if we walked through the window of the canvas. Balthus bypasses the innocent intentions of illustration, for his stories are always unknown, lost, except as preserved in his images as fragments of non-extant tales. In "Vernatel" (1941-42) a man leads two oxen dragging a tree cut to serve as a gibbet along a foreground that fronts on a village nestling in a green valley. Then there are the other landscapes devoid of human action, but scenes of a vast interweaving of life; scenes in which the fundamental premise of narrative is taken to its metaphysical limit: in "Larchant"

(1939) a township is set in the countryside in such a way that it is like looking down on a gigantic piece of weaving from the main bar on which the warp is strung: a foreshortened world, with only the central axis of a sacred building contradicting the flat checkerboard grid. The world is made of the structure of to and fro, horizontal and vertical, woven as a tapestry. In "The Triangular Field" (1955) the image of land and the painting itself have acquired all the texture and pile of a sublime carpet. The world is an endlessly complex fabric, and where everything interrelates, stories cannot but happen.

2. Among the few influences Balthus acknowledges, the illustrations for the children's stories from the *Images d'Epinal* and *Der Struwwelpeter* provide the crucial clue to the figure with parted legs, the figure in mid-stride. This figure recurs again and again; it is walking, or in some other arrested ambulatory gesture; it is going from one place to another; it has intention and destination; it is a figure who is part of a story.

In "The Street" (1929-33), Balthus' first large picture, each of the large-headed figures walks like a puppet on invisible strings down his own trajectory of the checkerboard grid, which is turned at an angle to the picture plane, else the echoes of the Looking-Glass world might mean more than they should. For Balthus has more to speak of than a world, such as the one Alice visits, where every curious inhabitant seems to go obliviously on his way in the progress of his own singular story, though this is indeed part of the message. All of the

characters in “The Street” have been simplified into geometrical forms which subsume them into the grand design of an orderly universe even as the stylization of their identity into a narrative mode confirms the existence of an over-arching intelligence. Their paths cross, but they will never collide, for the only figure whose legs are not parted, who exists outside the bounds of Story, the cook (who is no person at all, but a sign for a bakery) *gives* the sign that all the characters obey the common law of two-dimensional structure, the rigid composition of positive and negative spaces in which all these pyramidal figures with the triangular spaces left by their parted legs, fit. They are calm, but so similar to the naughty children of *Der Struwwelpeter*, the shock-headed children who, while acting out a cautionary tale- a tale eminently *made* by an over-arching intelligence – break rules, as the artist does. Baudelaire called the artist “a child with virile organs”; he is the one who reverses the climax of the cautionary tale, and is rewarded, rather than punished, for breaking rules handed down by his parents. Here is an aspect of Balthus’ revisionism.

3. Throughout Balthus’ oeuvre one comes across figures asleep or reclining whose legs are parted and bent at the knee as though, even in their sleep, they were walking. What is the nature of the landscape through which they are travelling? And of what story could they be a part?

At the age of seventeen, Balthus painted a copy of Poussin’s “Echo and Narcissus.” The figure of Narcissus lies on the ground, asleep, in precisely the

position Balthus later adopts and varies for his sleepers, readers and gazers in mirrors. He dedicated this copy to Rilke, his mother's companion, who earlier that year had written a poem for his unofficial stepson, titled "Narcisse." It seems clear that Balthus accepted the story Rilke assigned to him, for he set himself to learn more about it from Poussin. But although the figure of Narcissus, with whom Balthus identified, recurs again and again, it is always a female figure. "The Golden Days" (1944-45) is the most complete revision of Poussin's painting. The young girl subtly alters the Narcissus pose to recline in a chair while gazing in a mirror. In case one misses this clue to the girl's story, there is a basin on the table at the left. The young man turned from us concentrates on the fire, as Echo in Poussin broods on her passion; the man is supported by the frame of the hearth as Echo is supported by her rectangular rock. Even the drape in the modern room reiterates the tree in Poussin's composition.

In "Katia Reading" (1968-76), the girl, similarly posed, also reclines in a chair, but the mirror which took the place of the reflecting pool has been revised into a book. This equation of books and water, one of Balthus' inheritances from Courbet, who favored similar confrontations, is a reminder that one can sink into many sorts of rectangles, and find one's reflection in them. These pictures of gazers into reflecting rectangles are all figures of Narcissus, all images of "Vanitas"; in its perfectly logical construction, its ability to frame and thereby create order, the various rectangles which Balthus' figures confront—books, windows, cards, mirrors—all act as heuristic aids to awareness; for the other

meaning of the mirror in a “Vanitas” picture is “Know Thyself.”

Of course, the viewer confronting a painting takes just such a position. This is a situation of which Borges, the great meta-narrator, would approve. What is my own story? Can I know it through this that I see?

4. In “The Game of Patience” (1943), the young girl stares down upon a group of rectangles which contain, in microcosm, the pattern of a destiny; for cards distill the influence of a pattern of pictures upon action to an almost pure state. In this grotto-like ambience, surrounded by the intricate weavings of Persian carpet, herringbone wastebasket, straw marquetry box, and bargello pillow, the girl contemplates the reflection of her fate on a surface as green as a still pool. A curtain pulled back in the corner signifies at once that we are beholding a sacred space; at the same time it reveals a vertically striped wall- paper whose darker bands, joining at the bottom, subtly evoke the image of prison bars, a dropped portcullis that will admit no escape. The symbols of the suits from a different kind of deck, the Tarot-- the cup and the wand of the candlestick upon the table— suggest that the game of patience she plays is not the mere matter of setting out these cards in a particular pattern. The web of existence, like the patchwork panorama of Larchant, surrounds and imprisons her, not merely in the shape and identity of objects, but in the strict, tense relationship of green and red. If Van Gogh deliberately employed these complementaries “to express the terrible passions of humanity” in another picture of a room with a green-

surfaced table, then Balthus has revised that drama of red and green to include the abiding order which is a concomitant of these colors' strict relationship, breeding an ambiguous peace which is plenitude and yearning, but not anguish nor threatening disruption. The girl is as content to contemplate the pattern of a story which must work itself out, as is the Virgin of the Rocks in another grotto, who also gazes down with a slight smile upon the promise of story and the edge of a placid pool. Here the twin themes of order and passion find a perfect metaphor, for every shape in the picture either rhymes with the squares of the cards, or the curves of the girl. The nature of the color scheme contains order and passion, by virtue of the tension between complementaries, bound in an order they struggle against. Here is a statement on the act of living: the curtain rises on a sacred space where a figure, inhabiting the wonderfully stressful peace of accepted ambiguity, contemplates the binding necessity of ineluctable consequences. This is the world as beautiful prison, which is the great state in which an artist must live.

In the pictures where two persons meet over cards, the theme of order and passion becomes entirely evident; for what is this confrontation except the unphysical battle to settle who, by manipulating the pattern set down, shall determine the outcome of the story? The battle over control of the pattern is a purified enactment of the drama of life, for the will that prevails, and the vision of life it embodies, will determine the progress of other people's stories. The game of cards abstracts the nature of conflict to its essence. Here Balthus revises

Cézanne, another great theorist of universal order, whose card players all meet in the mutual understanding of sane politicians playing a democratic game. In Balthus' "The Card Players" (1966-73), which recalls the unscrupulous era of the Renaissance *condottiere*, the surface of the painting virtually erupts with the pressure of passionate rage in the area of the man's face.

5. Not all of Balthus' images of imprisonment are so benign as "The Game of Patience." In "Lady Abdy" (1935), a darker study in red and green, a beautiful angular woman, her long dress veiling the stride of Story, makes a futile gesture of hope before a closed window. Lady Abdy, who was an actress of some note, is the personification of the will to escape by virtue of her vocation: the story of her life consists of abandoning her own story to enter the stories of *characters*.

Yet she herself is caught in the action of seeking escape from this interior world, as well as from the role of beautiful woman to which her long red dress clearly assigns her, a role as confining as any house. From the darkness of the room she occupies she gestures towards the light, complex rectangle of the window, pulling the veil of the curtain aside, anxious both for, and about, experience.

6. In "Girl at a Window" (1957), the figure faces away from us, intently regarding a light-drenched landscape framed by the window upon whose sill she rests her hands in a gesture at once apprehensive and anticipatory. This square view which she faces is a larger version of the card and the book; the world

without is faced as the scene of possible experiences, possible choices. Looking out upon this glimmering world, the girl perceives an image of herself, the landscape-portrait of her being, becoming thereby the cosmic figure of the artist, who contains all nature.

But Balthus had not always seen the approach of experience so positively. In "The Window" (1933), a young girl, seated inside on the ledge of an open casement, withdraws from the sudden approach of someone who towers above her, someone we cannot see. One of her breasts is bared; she wears red and green; her legs are parted in the unconscious walk of Story. A complicated structure of buildings rears up behind her. It is almost the same gesture as Lady Abdy makes, but less despairing, more shocked. This girl can react more vividly to the vertiginous approach of experience, as she has not yet been encased in the prison of the red dress; the window she sits in is open; her garb still betrays the tension inherent in gender: and as her breast is exposed, paradoxically she is safe from the gothic immurement of the mature beautiful woman, for she is still naively sensitive to the erotic dimension of the world in the rectangle which awaits her turning around. The structural complexity of the view out the window renders at once the impersonality and the richness of experience. She will face it eventually, for even now her face catches the light on one side, the eye on the side in shadow catches the light, as does the exposed nipple, and both the defensive hands.

7. *Wuthering Heights*, which Balthus illustrated and which supplied him with the subject of at least one major painting, is a story about extremities of passion which happens to be one of the most perfectly structured novels ever achieved. It is in Balthus' fascination with this book that the great clue to his iconography is to be found, for the illustrations cease at the point where Cathy Earnshaw dies. Balthus' need to body forth this story in images was served only as long as the duality of Cathy and Heathcliff survived. If Cathy could say of Heathcliff "He is more myself than I am," it is certain that Heathcliff felt the same way about her. Balthus, picturing himself as Heathcliff, made his first wife into his Cathy. All of his wonderful young women are Cathy, that is, they are the images of his other self. For Cathy speaks for Heathcliff/Balthus when she says "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind-- not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being." And she might go on, to speak for Balthus of his immortalization of himself when she says "If all else perished and he remained, I should still continue to be..." Heathcliff/Balthus will always exist in the Cathys who are him, whom he will leave behind. But Balthus' affinity with this book is not only for the dual emblem of passion which is its main subject; he is equally entranced with the overarching structure of destiny, the working-out of an intricate, grand design, in which Brontë, another revisionist, retells Milton's tale of the allotment of Heaven and Hell. The metaphysical space of Piero della Francesca, who was at once a great teller of stories and "the Cezanne of his time," whose conceptual structure Balthus

adopted most devotedly at that period of his life, finds a literary parallel in the just, thoughtful, austere character of nature in *Wuthering Heights* and the serene literary artifice which embodies that conception.

8. Balthus employs the characters from *Wuthering Heights* in the first of his major composite portraits of the artist. For in "Cathy Dressing" (1933) we discover that the artist has three faces, no one of which dominates the space of the composition. Nelly Dean, the narrator, the constructor of patterns, represents the detached and authorial intelligence of the artist. It is she, protective, sexless, sibylline, who cares for Cathy's image by combing her hair, as Balthus himself "cares for" and makes the images of young women again and again in painting after painting. Cathy, Heathcliff's alter ego, another Narcissus by her mirror, is the fair, passionate, contemplative young woman who is Balthus' most famous signature. The figure of Heathcliff, a more conventionally faithful self-portrait, sits apart from the action of "making," uninvolved in the goings-on of life and properly dressed. This image of Balthus, dark and gray as a stone, embodies all the contradictions of order and passion in the creator's nature since, while civilized in its outward forms, it takes on the grim colors of a thunderous, wuthering world. He is the sharply restrained, containing personification of the elemental forces that identify the artist with the unknown from which he springs. He is a foundling who, like Heathcliff, disrupts the existing order with his passionate, well-considered and unscrupulous actions. In this triadic portrait,

Cathy and Heathcliff are the experiencing creatures of Story, while Nelly, the maker of order, stands between and behind them.

In another portrait of the artist, "Miró and his Daughter Dolores" (1937-38), Balthus takes up his favored idea of the artist's projection of a feminine self in a more literal vein. Here the story of relationship is so purely stated that it requires no objects at all for additional comment. The double story of father and daughter/artist and created female is so timeless it needs no reference but itself. Even the chair is barely visible. Miró holds the girl as gently as if she were a fragile aspect of himself, which by the similarity of their physiognomies she certainly seems to be, yet he holds her as his possession, and she wears her prison black-striped on her dress.

The most ambitious iconographic statement on the nature of the artist is to be found in "The Mountain" (1937), an enormous canvas containing seven figures in a mountainous landscape rent by a chasm. The three large figures on the left form a triad that elaborates on the ideas introduced in "Cathy Dressing." A young girl, asleep in the pose of Narcissus, seems to dream, lying in the wedge of shadow that cuts across the foreground. She holds the crook that further comments on her identity with Balthus, for it is the instrument one employs to ascend the heights, a kind of wand. Across from her, also in shadow, kneels the young man who is the counterpart of the feminine aspect of the artist/androgynous. His pose clearly quotes Courbet's famous stone-breaker, and he supports himself tensely with a climber's crook. One finds quite succinctly divided between these

two figures, the one staring and conscious, the other sunk in a dream, willingly given over to unconsciously bred Story, the two polarities of the creative process. For if Narcissus dreams of a perfect object of desire, does not this reminder of a stonebreaker recall Yeats' remark on the difficulty of writing poetry? Out of the darkness these two aspects of the artist inhabit, the blonde active girl of life and Story, the exulting projection of the artist, rises into the light. She is their creation, the work of art. She is Cathy, the image of the artist, his other self. The reach of her upstretched arms rivals the highest peaks. She carries a leather bag which identifies her as a traveller through the landscape of creation, which is both the artist's and God's. For the man in a red doublet standing in the middle distance, who holds a crook/wand and observes this group of three, is not only another figure of the artist, as passionate observer of his own process of creation, but an observer framed against a revelation of the interior of the earth, the yawning gap which suggests tremendous forces of upheaval, the same forces that imbue the landscape of *Wuthering Heights*. Farther back, another male figure with a wand points out a particular formation which has been yielded from the gaping of the earth; he is the artist as guide, the one who points to the existence of significant form. He, the woman who follows his hand, and the observing artist, are all silhouetted against the open rent of the chasm, which is light and detailed with vague rectangular forms. The artist in these two capacities, as guide and observer, must ever take up his stance before the accomplished fact of historically created form, whether it be the history of art, or the natural forms of this world. The

significance of the mountain lies in the fact that it is a surface rent to expose complexity and light; the mountain and the chasm it has yielded testify to the powerful and various creative urge of nature toward form. The figure of Cathy glories in being a part of this, as she raises her arms in exultation, while the midwives to her being rest in the shadow. Meanwhile, the tiniest figure in the painting, a man walking away over the dark, whole hill towards the horizon, is yet another figure of the artist, as he heads off into the future, into the reaches of uncreated form.

In "The Passage du Commerce Saint-André" (1952-54), the next huge, inclusive statement on the nature of the artist and his place in the great scheme of life, one comes sharply up against the ambivalence Balthus feels for the male figure. Within the space of this painting, which is almost a cube, nine figures appear, which divide into three groups. The three male figures illustrate the three ages of man, as do the closely positioned females on the left side of the canvas, of whom the Nelly Dean figure assumes the eldest's part. But whereas the girl-child, the young woman under the window, and the old woman are unambiguously presented, the old man hunches on the curb in an almost fetal posture, the little boy barely appears in the frame of the window, and the mature man's back is toward us as he walks away. This man who turns from our sight so severely is one of the two representations of the artist that can be found in the painting. He holds a baguette in one hand, a metamorphosis off the crook/wand; faceless, unmeetable, he is the artist as he appears to the world in the story the

world conceives he inhabits; he is the magical, impersonal maker with his wand, who is always travelling, always in motion, always going in the direction of the unknown, heading up a narrow street that ends in a hieroglyph. This is the artist as he appears from the outside; the other image of the artist is comprised of the work's three remaining figures, who do not fall neatly into any of the categories of the three ages of man. These are a dog, a timeless, asexual figure who obtrudes on the canvas at the left in a doorway like a niche, and the contemplative young woman in the foreground. The bestial, the eternal and asexual, and the feminine contemplator who is the sincerest self of the masculine author, these comprise a triadic image of the artist as known from *inside*, the strange but true counterpart to the man walking away. It is the sign on the building at the end of the street-- *REGISTRES*, Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages-- which provides the larger context in which these various figures may be set. For these three main points of life-- birth, marriage and death-- not only correlated to the six male and female figures of whom the externally recognizable image of the artist is one, they also relate to the implicit subject of *Story*, since the progress of life through these points is nothing if not undeniable evidence of the primacy of narrative in our lives. *REGISTRES* performs the same function the chef-sign did in the previous major painting of a street; the sign *is* the sign of how to read the painting, so that in reading one sign, we learn how to read in a more complex, hieratic sense.

These opposed images of the artist, seen from inside, seen from outside,

correspond to the structure of perception of love in *Wuthering Heights*, the first half an image of passion as experienced from within, the second the same, only seen by others, from without.

9. Balthus, at the age of fourteen, expressed a desperate desire to remain a child forever; so it is that the long series of evocations of this period of life in a female body are nothing if not the residue of his obsessive effort to recreate himself at this very stage. For Balthus' masculine persona does not need to be created, as it already exists. So Balthus' love for his models is truly the love of Narcissus. In pondering their image and fixing it upon canvas, he is studying and communing with the fleeting apparition of Cathy, the female "other" of his androgynous nature as the universe has objectively embodied it. This is narcissism of so high an order that it redeems itself as a mystical rite.

In "Thérèse Dreaming" (1938), an adolescent girl sleeps on a chair in the stride of Story, a variant Narcissus pose. Again the wallpaper bears the subtle bars of the prison that is this world. A cat lapping at a saucer by her chair recalls the other girl with a cat who entered the world of a dream to witness a series of exclusive, uncolliding narratives-- Alice, the protagonist of one of the artist's most cherished books. Therese is taking part in such a story, though we cannot see it; she is suffering the experience of a necessary order that is happening to her and, being asleep, she cannot choose but suffer it. Yet, by her expression, the dream seems to be neither happy nor distressing, but a complex ordering which

she must concentrate to follow and understand. She is another image of the artist, for sleep has this daring for all of us, that only artists experience so regularly in waking life, of affording glimpses of a profoundly captured reality. She is lit by the light of experience, to which the parting of her legs indicates her openness (whereas the face of the girl in "The Game of Patience," who is not experiencing life but rather contemplating an abstract description of its patterns, is in shadow). The same theme is more dramatically rendered in "The Room" (1952-54). The nude on the chaise longue is another image of Balthus, and the strange being who pulls back the curtain is the cruel, impersonal agent who causes life to happen to us, who lets in the light that experience must be. The young girl, who reels back in shock from the light, but does not close her legs, shows that we suffer this rude exposure, albeit erotically.

10. Another of Balthus' unspoken genres of narrative is to be found in the way he identifies people and objects. In the most unobtrusive manner he rhymes the forms which compose them, so that a story necessarily inheres there. If the shape of a pitcher and a standing nude can face each other so impassively, as though, looking so much alike, each knew exactly what the other is about ("Nude in Front of a Mantel" (1955)) what is the nature of the intimacy between them? "Mme. Pierre Loeb" (1939) and the "Vicomtesse de Noailles" (1936) are both seen in terms of the spare furniture that supports them: an eyebrow mimics the back of a chair, the feet point like table legs. Some stories are so subtle one hardly

suspects them, though they co-exist with the more obvious goings – on of this world as certainly as the land on the further side of the looking-glass.

11. The unsuspected, ongoing life of things is rendered fully in “Still Life” (1937), a canvas in which broken vessels of glass, a torn loaf stabbed by a knife, an old piece of meat with a fork stuck in it, and a hammer which has just struck, cohabit a plain wooden table. The unusual positioning of the objects makes implicit a story, of which their present staging is but the residue. It is a somewhat sacrilegious picture, in that the disposition of these emblems of civilized life contradicts the traditional narrative they have so often been used to imply. Balthus, revisionist narrator, exults in upsetting the old story and having its characters turn on each other in inexplicable, violent ways, as the chessmen in *Alice* do, as the rampaging figures in children’s books do in their convincing, nonsensical fashion. Depicting the historical evidence of human passion and action, this painting has something to say about the mute pathos of objects, which contain so much experience and yet are silent.

In “Still Life with Figure” (“*Le Goûter*”)(1940)) a young girl in profile intrudes on a canvas whose main subject is a table supporting a golden bowl full of apples, a glass of wine, and a loaf half cut by a knife. This constitutes a far more radical revision of traditional narrative than any previous still life. One can hardly help seeing that the girl, the underpainting of whose face blushes a marvelous *trecento* green, is an early Renaissance angel, approaching the laid tale

in a room whose drawn heavy drape reveals, once again, the stripes of the barred room that is existence, a sacred space. She beholds the objects on the table which are symbols of the murder of the Son of God, and the contrasting luscious, nourishing beauty of natural life in the bowl of fruit, the sign of temptation. The Fall is set against the Redemption, and they stand in equal space on the table, veiled with two cloths, that supports them. But the apples are painted so much more sensually, the viewer's eye is drawn to them above all; one of them virtually floats over the edge of the bowl to tempt us. The apples are what we adore; they contain the sweet flavor of being which exists despite the constant proximity of the symbols of martyrdom, which are painted with no comparable vibrancy or love.

In "The Living Room" (1941-43) (aka "The Drawing Room") these apples in the same footed bowl recur. Here is a room in a bourgeois house; two girls, probably sisters, inhabit it, one sprawling and dozing on the sofa in the background, one half kneeling, half supine on the floor, reading a book. The bowl of apples is on a table which stands between them. The girls show two ways of succumbing to the fruitfulness of existence: one sinks into slumber, experiencing the story that is a soon-to-be-forgotten dream, the other stares down into a book which is the mirror of her own nature, glimpsing the form of her desire as Narcissus did, as it is to be hoped we all may, each time we read a reflecting story. During these activities the covering upon the table is pulled half back to reveal the shape and color and smoothness of the surface upon which the

fruitfulness and temptation of existence rests. The bowl of fruit sits on the veiled half of the table, securely and without the slightest suggestion of motion. The picture testifies to the artist's firm belief in the strength of the ground of being and how, while this subsists, the two modes of inspiration, passive and intellectual, will continue to be entered in the most quiet, everyday circumstances.

12. But less obscure revisions of timeless situations are not far to seek. In "The Dream 1" (1955) one finds such a traditional recapitulation of a Renaissance annunciation in a modern, secular setting that it is hard to avoid the applicability of this ancient story to our own quotidian routine. Here, in another modern living room, a girl with parted legs sleeps on a striped couch while a woman, in profile, strides into the picture and gazes down at her, holding a red flower over the sleeper. Nearby a crystal vase (also to be found in "Thérèse Dreaming") carries forth the old iconographic tradition of the sacred vessel, for the sleeping woman contains in her dream an essential narrative. This picture also speaks of how we are at moments angels to one another, especially when we are sunk in a state of defenselessness, such as slumber is, and how the age-old story of visitation and blessing is still occurring in our everyday lives. In "The Golden Fruit" (c.1959), a very similar composition, the apple of temptation replaces the flower, and thus is conflated with the image of the annunciation and the myth of the Hesperides in a terrific revisionist *coup*, while the totally bourgeois details of a lyre-back chair and the curving panels of a wardrobe's doors hovering behind

the blissful sleeper call up Apollonian associations of order and the image of the portals of Heaven. Here, in a living room such as we all familiarly know, the stories of pagan and Christian legend are seen to be happening in so natural a way that we hardly suspect they are occurring. And yet the very degree of ease with which they fit into so recent a world makes exactly the statement intended, that these stories exist simultaneously inside and outside time, and that all of us are fated to re-enact them.

13. All of Balthus' major images draw on a repertoire of eternal stories. As early as 1927, in "The Luxembourg Gardens," the young artist was drawing on the Adam and Eve of Masaccio's Expulsion fresco for the pose of the two children who must leave the garden at the close of day, while a soldier sounds the trumpet of doom that further elaborates on Balthus' feelings about the end of childhood.

Returning to "The Street" then, it becomes clear that here, in the midst of modern Paris, one finds the enactment of stories that date from the beginning of the world. The faceless man in blameless white who carries a plank re-enacts the most famous story in painting, the march to Calvary and the construction of the cross; the woman walking away bearing the puppet-like child with a somewhat clerical sailor cap is a furtive comment on the story of the madonna and child. The adolescent girl, in profile, hairstyle, pose and untroubled expression recapitulates a *quattrocento* angel, while her violent captor, far from presenting us

with a sordid instance of sexual assault, in the light of her identity as an angel becomes an ecstatic Promethean figure with whom we can all hope to identify. The little girl with the racket bears the masculine, impassive head of classical statuary on the thick body of a German dwarf, quoting simultaneously two distinct traditions of non-Christian narrative. In any street one walks down upon any day one will discover such eternal stories as these going on with perfect unselfconsciousness. But the final statement on the nature of these stories' presence in our lives is made by the central figure of the boy striding towards us, who so recalls Tweedledum and Tweedledee. (Once one has remarked on this resemblance, it is hard not to see the shape of the Red and White Queens in the conical figures of the two women.)

Looking closely at the history of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, one finds it has much to say on the subject of eternal stories, for when Alice meets them, she knows what is yet to happen to them, which she proceeds to recite in a verse. She knows how they will quarrel over the spoiling of a rattle, how they will don ridiculous armor to battle, and how the battle will be interrupted by the frightening descent of a big black crow; she knows it because in the looking-glass world time goes backward, and so historical events are recorded long before they have actually happened. But she cannot help telling them their destiny, as Balthus cannot help showing us our limited fate. For the brothers' story qualifies as an eternal one on the grounds that they are doomed to enact it. This is the underlying assertion of Balthus' picture-book, which is constituted by the

paintings, an unbound series of illustrations for as many verbally untold, mysterious tales.

Here, he says, I will show you the few simple plots of which every life is composed. Reading the stories in my paintings, you will see your own fate and thus your true face. My paintings are beautiful and those who are lucky enough to recognize their heart's desire in them will gaze on them long. And as long as this happens, I will go on creating more figures of Narcissus.

## **Image Links for Works Discussed in Chapter One, “Parsing the Enigma”**

“View from Montecalvello” (1979) at

<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/search/balthus%20montecalvello>)

“Vernatel” (1941-42) (aka “Landscape with Oxen”) at

<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/balthus/landscape-with-oxen-1942>

“Larchant” (1939) at <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/balthus/larchant-1939>

“The Triangular Field” (1955) at

<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/balthus/great-landscape-with-trees-the-triangular-field-1955>

*Images d'Epinal* at

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