Art and Perspective

(Extract from *Images in Stone*)

In short, dualism reflects the constant oscillation between nodes of authority and power, centralized and popular, as well as the various mechanisms by which the allocation of power and authority are justified. We, for example, live in a society dominated by an economic division into two major classes, and this supposedly 'natural' division between capitalists and workers is supported at every opportunity by the values which emerge when status is assigned. When foreigners come to live in our midst we do not as much isolate them in separate communities as isolate them by assigning them 'lower' 'standing'. These words are placed in single quotation marks, tedious as it is to read, in order to call attention to the fact that even our relevant metaphors and adjectives are dominated by a sense of the artificiality yet necessity of maintaining hierarchical divisions. Ranked statuses are made to seem 'natural' by restricting alternative means of overtly describing social boundaries (see Levi-Strauss 1967). Yet our cultural paraphernalia are by no means dominated by elements of a discourse which merely validate social hierarchy. There is instead a process of metaphoric transformation of the major themes of our social and political ideology. Cinderella, for example, is a story not as much concerned with validating the hierarchical elements of her world -- indeed, it presents them in a bad light, if anything -- as it is concerned with movement: mice and pumpkins become horses and a coach (complete with liveried footmen -- hierarchy is far from absent in the story); Cinderella runs away from the ball at the stroke of midnight; the prince searches among various villages for the owner of the glass slipper, etc. It is a story which uses movement, the 'far' and the 'near', in order to tell a tale about hierarchy -- the 'high' and the 'low': the supernatural and natural domains (fairy godmothers and mortals), princes and commoners, mothers and daughters, workers (Cinderella) and non-workers (the wicked step-mother and her daughters). So does visual imagery invert, at least in broad outline, the terms of the political compromise that acts as a necessary mediation of a vitally important contradiction. If in some tribal societies the structural tendencies towards aggregation and dispersal are implicitly interpreted by people as a concern with 'far' and 'near' in the social and economic domains of life, then it could be expected that the resulting divisions which mark political hierarchies, the 'high' status of having power and the 'low' status of its absence, are artistically interpreted (literally, re-presented) as 'far' and 'near'. If hierarchy is a political compromise, in other words, 'far' and 'near' will dominate the tacit organizational features (perspective, for example) of visual imagery as attempts are made to divert attention away from

the necessary political compromise of 'high' and 'low'. Yet the major ideological terms of political and social discourse in these societies is in fact dominated by value s which reflect a concern with 'high' and 'low'. In sum, visual art implicitly supports the institutions of compromise, all the while explicitly, critically and perhaps blatantly rejecting the dominant terms of this discourse.

It is not surprising that the essentially spatially stagnant Middle Ages of feudal Europe gave birth to religious sensibilities concerned with expressing the notion of 'heaven above and earth (or hell) below' in almost mythic terms. The grandeur of God and His works was literally given form in the vaulted cathedrals built at almost incalculable cost. Their soaring ceilings correctly captured the spirit of the era, yet it was the organization in two-dimensional space that was considered to be the important allegorical statement: the placement of the side chapels created a cruciform shape, emblem of God's power on earth. Even such physical movement as was typical (or, perhaps, emblematic) of the era, pilgrimages and the Crusades, was conceived in religious terms. Yet in folklore motifs the Holy Grail was 'far', but the farther it was the holier and 'higher' it and its seekers became. This world view emerges as the use of flat -- some would say, an absence of -- perspective in painting. In the absence of visual clues which clearly link background with foreground, the art of the late Middle Ages of western Europe implicitly distin-guishes 'far' from 'near'. The viewer is thus unconsciously engaged in creating interpretive links between the distinguishable planes on which various motifs are placed. In short, the main currents of political discourse -- 'the 'high' and 'low' of the various estates and their relation to one another -- are explicitly avoided by pointedly calling attention to and exaggerating (or denying, if you will) another type of difference: between 'far' and 'near'.

Nor is it surprising that the spatial tempestuousness of the close of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance corresponds to the development of a capitalistic ethic in the social relationships of the marketplace and to a gradual displacement of feudal relationships. As 'far' and 'near' ceased to have any existential impact on the implicit values of the emerging bourgeois class, they were replaced with 'high' -- as in economic class -- and 'low' as tacit descriptions of the new moral order. By the same obfuscating tendencies typical of political compromise in territorial societies, these 'high' and 'low' existential values emerge in modern political ideology as tendencies towards democratic levelling and freedom; more fluidity, in a word. Religious idioms waned under these conditions, to be replaced with an equivalent metaphysical concern with 'far' and 'near', structurally equivalent to a denial of 'high' and 'low', in the newly emergent popular culture of Europe. There are all sorts of reasons why Europeans started exploring the world, including the

new knowledge brought back by Grail seekers, Crusaders and returning pilgrims. Yet surely the new arrangement of the moral order within the equally new cosmology of incipient capitalism played a not inconsiderable part in stimulating and giving form to a desire to reach and cross geographic -- and class, ethnic, religious and even, in philosophy, Aristotelian -- frontiers.

The modern era is marked by the invention (merely the re-emergence, in fact) of three dimensional (central or diminishing) perspective in western art during the 15th century. Diminishing perspective clarifies the relationship between 'far' and 'near' by emphasizing the linkage of one plane to another by, in fact, dissolving the limits implied by the notion of 'plane' as a flat board which contains images within itself (notwithstanding the simultaneous use of several geometrically distinct horizon lines and focal points in the same picture; the overall effect is still one of lines converging on a distant point). The viewer is drawn into the depths of the picture, and is tacitly occupied with the task of re-defining and clarifying what is 'far' and what is 'near'; more specifically, of clarifying the role of background in defining the main foreground image. Not only do the terms of reference 'far' and 'near' displace the 'high' and 'low' of economic and social discourse, but the political compromise of coming together on the political plane is also implicitly re-affirmed, just as the political compromise of modern capitalism involves a denial of 'high' and 'low' as emergent terms of political discourse -- a political levelling, as Americans often put it. In sum, this political compromise is in part validated by the privileging of a particular artistic idiom which implicitly supports the explicit and exclusive categories that are associated with the major political and social divisions.