

Against Distraction

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'Actual life was always first'
Saul Bellow, Interview

Because children, by definition, need to be looked after, they are looked at. Their lives are a continual apprenticeship in observation, in the vigilance of attention. And the ways in which they tend to be looked at by parents, by the wider family, by strangers, is often, one way or another, searching. Something is being looked for in all this looking: signs of life, and signs of whatever else might be going on. One of the many baffling and reassuring things that children have to deal with in growing up is being the objects of such attention. And whether or not this attention is concerned it is always intent, a spelling out of the adult's obscure desire. So for a child to pose in front of a camera – and this was perhaps first made vivid in Lewis Carroll's haunting and eerily contrived pictures of young girls – repeats in a particularly stark way the ongoing initiation rite that is childhood. Something is always being asked of the child – most drastically, of course, that it must not die, that it must make the parents feel better – and the camera has become our modern instrument, the modern symbol for the troubled innocence of our looking (having a family now means having a child and a camera). The link between

photography and childhood – the uncanny sense in which photography begins in childhood – is essential to the radically unsentimental artfulness of Toby Glanville's photographs. It is as though Glanville's extraordinary portraits – and not only his portraits of people – are informed by some strange sense of what it is to be looked at. As though the photographer could be a double agent.

For the child there is always, at its most minimal, the puzzle of what the adult might be wanting; the wish to comply and the wish to do whatever else might be possible, in the face of such riveting demand. It would not be surprising to discover that the child experienced the whole situation as vaguely sacrificial.

What is remarkable about Glanville's pictures is that he has, as it were, allowed his subjects their uncertainty; we seem to see the conflict on their faces not its spurious resolution. When a pose is the solution to a problem, the interest of the problem disappears. Glanville catches without capturing something very poignant about the child's perplexity about being photographed, which is the perplexity of being a child; and that is, by the same token, the key to

Glanville's refusal of the staginess of so much contemporary photography. He has not, that is to say, forced his subjects to make a decision about themselves, as a pornographic or a fashion photograph would, and must do. If Glanville's photographs are experimental it is because he allows his subjects their experiments.

Indeed what is so compelling about the children in his pictures is that it is as though we can see them going through the whole process of deciding who and how to be. And this sense that people – like all sorts of other natural and made objects – are the ways in which they compose themselves, is something like a theme in much of Glanville's work. There is, these pictures show us, nothing more revealing, nothing more amusing and embarrassing for a child than being photographed just at the moments in their lives when posing – when who one is starts turning into who one might want to be – is new (and there is, of course, nothing more reminiscent now of childhood than being photographed). Rather than an always simulated, always precarious composure – the kitsch sentimentality children learn to protect themselves with – what Glanville's photographs see so uniquely is the impossibility

of composing a self; the strain and the longing and the awkward grace it must always involve.

Composure is about there being something to face, a drama to be joined. And that there is always something to face, and that one's face is the most private part of one's body, is the drama of portraiture. Whatever is public about our faces escapes us. When we look we are usually out of sight of ourselves, hidden, if not actually hiding somewhere. Hidden, perhaps, in our eyes, or strangely unlocatable, nowhere to be seen. It is this baffling blindness of looking that Glanville's portraits are alert to.

There is nothing more confounding about ourselves, nothing more revealing of ourselves, than the drifts of our attention. Glanville's photographs seem to arrest the attention of his subjects, but without interrupting it. And it is this gift that makes his still-life photographs so eerily unintrusive. That it is possible to look at objects, or people, without violating them – that is, without trying to improve them, or improve upon them – has become shocking. If Glanville's photographs were essays they would be essays on the misgivings of self-consciousness.

They warn us away from making too many arrangements.

One of the most striking things about Glanville's portraits of people – apart, that is, from their unstartled stillness – is that his subjects are revealed but never exposed. His photographs seem to give people a sense of themselves, without exploiting their self-consciousness in front of the camera. There is an enigmatic straightforwardness about the ways in which Glanville's subjects look at the camera; and it is the camera that he usually wants them to look at.

Indeed, the poignancy, the exhilaration of Glanville's figures is that they seem to have a superstition about confidence; as though they are in awe of it, but can never quite believe in it. It is as though they are experimenting with boldness, with what it would be to be more blithely where they are, and how they happen to look. Whether or not they are flirting with defiance – and this is what makes his pictures of children so striking – they are somehow unresigned, unguarded. They are more than making do. They make us wonder, for a moment, what it would be like if embarrassment was dispensable; if we were undistracted by the consolations of shame.

What is remarkable about Glanville's portraits is that they remind us that what is interesting about people is not their furtiveness. That a face is not merely the silent confession of a secret life; that we can be moved by people – or perhaps that we can only be moved by people – when we are not intrigued by them. Nothing in the photographs provokes us into wanting to know more about the people, and yet nothing seems to be omitted. If much contemporary photography works by a kind of tantalisation effect – the insistence that there is more to this image than meets the eye, and that somebody knows what it is – Glanville's photographs seem to take it for granted that everything is already there to be seen (everything cropped, everything out of the frame seems utterly irrelevant in these photographs; the spectator never feels that he is missing out, or is not quite in the right place). No genuine mystery depends upon the keeping of secrets; it is the artfulness of Glanville's non-confessional art to show us just what it would be for seeing to be believing. Looking at these photographs, and being looked at by them – their unharrassed openness, their unfussy clarity – is like a reinventing of curiosity.

A looking at that is not even a wanting to see through; a feeling for the sufficiency of what happens to be there. The special effect of there being no special effects.

So it is perhaps not surprising that the special effect of ordinary sunlight – the radiance of what the light was like – is almost everywhere in Glanville's photographs. If Glanville wants us to remember that being photographed is for most people, at best, a break in the working day and not a day's work, it is because it is not the privileged moment that he is after, but the every day moment. After the photograph has been taken we know that things will carry on much as before (it's worth noticing just how promising uniforms are for Glanville). And yet the photographs are so vivid because they are, and because they are like, luminous excerpts; intervals rather than epiphanies. It is, Glanville wants us to notice, the provisional moment that is illuminating. If these photographs are against anything they are against the precious and the melodramatic; they are, in other words, against distraction.

And yet, of course, the photographer is trying to distract us; he wants to make us look. And the more voyeuristic the

photograph the more we will feel coerced, as though the photograph was the visual equivalent of an order. There are photographs that conscript our attention, and photographs that invite it. There are images that are calculated in their effect, and images that are less knowing in their ambition. What can be so unsettling about Glanville's portraits is that they don't tell us how to respond to them; Glanville's art comes without instructions. Indeed, in looking at one of Glanville's portraits the viewer is often in a position comparable to the subject; looking at something absorbing but not standing to attention. It is part of Glanville's unestranging artfulness to make the viewer feel as unco-opted as the image. It is about the making of something without the contriving of it: so we don't need to be suspicious in order for it to work. It is, of course, unusual, to come across contemporary art, or contemporary fashion, that is not trying to make initiates of us all. Because Glanville's pictures are never arch or staged – they never intimate that one way or another Glanville has been ingeniously setting the scene – they redeem the sense of photography as, above all, the art of significant coincidence. As though there could

be a modern art form that happened as quickly as life itself. Something that might hold the immediacy of our experience back for us. As though the opportunism of the (modern) eye was itself a revelation.

What Glanville seems to be showing us in these luminous photographs is the absurd poignancy of our wish to be prepared. That we could never be equipped for what we are doing. The photographer didn't quite know what he wanted until he got it; and he didn't ask his subjects to decide for him, either. In this sense children are Glanville's emblematic photographic subjects. The children, like the photographs themselves, have the poise that comes from a chance taken.