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The wound that does not heal

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“Self-Portrait with Burned Weapon”: the Wound that Does not Heal

Mark Dorrian

Inevitably, in one sense at least, early work arrives late. For it gains its particular meaning and status only when we are directed to it by subsequent “mature” productions, which, by forming an interpretative context for what has come before, place demands upon it. Typically, the “early” is examined for intimations of what will emerge and given importance insofar as it displays these. Indeed, it is difficult to see how work that showed no discernible connections of this kind could be described as “early” at all. Approaches of this sort are implicitly teleological – the value of early work is established on its documentation of the development of the artist who is bound to arise; it is juvenilia whose unnecessary features will wither away to release the work into what it had to become.

But this is not the only way to think. Another would be to set aside organic metaphors of growth and maturation, and look instead for a differential pattern of potentials and possibilities that, while sharing affinities, do not imply a single, inevitable future. This allows us to attend to early work in a different way, opening questions of what it did not – or even “failed to” – become. The title of an early drawing series, *Lost and Found* (1973), which Lebbeus Woods partially reprised many years later on his online blog, hints at something like this – a more discontinuous process of losing and finding (actions neither arbitrary nor unmotivated, this further complicating the relations between “early” and “late”). Of it, he wrote: “What is interesting – and a little frightening – is that the basic forms and ideas were there from the beginning.”¹

Xenographics

The aim here is to explore some manifestations of the early work of Lebbeus Woods, trying to draw out aspects of the architect’s thought that were – to me, at least – unexpected and different in kind from the usual narratives given. My sources are a limited number of the “black notebooks” that Woods kept in the 1970s. The notebook as an object, an object that was also an idea, clearly held a special meaning for him. Tied to his longstanding sense of itinerancy, the notebooks are portable and mobile, while also offering, as he later said, a home and space of safety.² Their regular 11”x 14” format provides a constant that survives the frequently changing addresses written in their inner covers, the tension between the two reaching a height in the inscription for #16: “Lebbeus Woods < No address at present > Call collect (317) 255-7066 if found.” This seems as much a statement of principle or epigram as a declaration of fact. He assumes Xenon (Greek for “stranger”) as a persona, contemplates wandering “the great cities an outcast, a stranger to their multitudes”,³ and adopts the

monogrammatic X – the mark that is the sign of the mark itself, the minimal index of an anonymous presence. Complex artefacts – spaces of drawing and delineation, and of the written elaboration of ideas – the notebooks also join a tradition of spiritual diaries, records of the interior struggles and self-exhortations of their author. In this, they are powerful instruments of auto-construction, in which the self is reflected, explores its identity, dwells on what it could become, but also confronts what it might not.

In the notebook-without-address we find a drawing titled “Self-portrait with Burned Weapon” (1975). **[FIG.1]** A figure looks out at us, his head tilted to one side. The vertical dark stick that is in his hand (is the “burned weapon” charcoal, and does the left hand indicate that this was drawn with a mirror?) could as easily be a nail driven through the finger as an implement grasped by it. What appears to be a sheet of paper in front of the figure is blank, but the surface that supports it is inscribed with a line and then a flurry of other marks. These reappear, seemingly as wounds, streaming from the hand that grasps – or is fixed by – the weapon and also the upper arm. The drawing comes after a sequence of images that begins with a small drawing of a man outlined in a square frame, his head occluded by shadow, his wrists bound in barbed wire, and a bleeding gash on his chest. Below we read “Amfortas”, the character from Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* (premiered 1882) who has been stabbed by the spear that pierced Christ’s side, leaving an agonising wound that can only be healed by an “innocent fool” who wields again the weapon. The next page seems to reprise the image, now as a helmeted figure engirdled with, once more, barbed wire. Then comes a frame with a face, and then a gaping visage with “Fool” inscribed below.

In this sequence, are we looking at a series of self-portraits? Certainly, Woods strove for, as he wrote, “integration” and “coalescence”, which could be understood as kinds of healing; and the sense of being wounded – indeed, of the wound as being the source of his work – recurs in his thinking. In a remarkable page, its text set out in a T-shape like a Tau cross, he writes: “An interlude of one / week, then vehemence; / The wounds split wide”.⁴ **[FIG.2]** Later, in a reflection on poetry and architecture, he states that his work “is not poetry: it is a symbol of poetry. It is not a symbol but a wound, a cry of mingled joy and pain found upon my pages”.⁵

The architect as symbolist

Opening Woods’ notebooks, one is struck by the page composition, the precision with which the image is placed on the sheet, intensified by its framing and sometimes by the blocking-in of the framed area with a tonal wash. **[FIG.3]** This can give the sense of looking through an aperture rather than at something on the page. Notwithstanding the priority he gave to the

nonconceptual, to the spontaneous and the found, there is a powerful deliberativeness. He would later write: “the contents of the notebook are not ‘sketches’, preliminary attempts that will be finished later, but finished works in themselves”.⁶ The spacing and arrangement of texts often share in this, taking on distinct spatial and architectonic qualities that seem close to symbolist predecessors like the poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898). Vectors, or perhaps trajectories, come to traverse and dynamise the textual surface, and text combines with image to produce an array of oracular icono-textual symbolisations. **[FIG.4]** While these certainly have a foot in the modern modalities of the film storyboard or comic strip **[FIG.5]**, they also appear to reach back to William Blake and to doctrines of the symbol as revelation that pass to Woods through sources such as William Butler Yeats’ *A Vision* (1925), whose occult thinking at this point permeates the architect’s ideas. **[FIG.6]**

For Woods, the epochal task of any art, and indeed of a life, is the forging of symbols: “to reach that plane”, he wrote, “to fulfill my mind and body, to wrench the symbols of unity from the grasp of the unknown and return with them to light constitute a single journey, whose vehicle is drawing”.⁷ This is a search for “wholeness of being” and it is the privileged role of the symbol to act as its monument and threshold. Woods finds contemporary treatments of “symbolic architecture” bifurcated and inadequate to his conception of the symbol – he drafts a letter to a journal that had published some postmodern houses and writes a response to Christian Norberg-Schulz’s *Intentions in Architecture* (1965) (“his theory is not so much untrue as it is half-true”), finding that both neglect the awful fervour of Dionysian life forces.⁸

The priority Woods ascribes to the symbol arises against a background of necessary conflict. It is the symbol’s task to express and transcend the conflict in an apprehension of coalescence, a heterogenous unity on a higher plane that is unavailable to the differential structuring of rational thought. Woods historically associates this revelation of totality through the symbol with ritual and religious experience, although in the late modern context the search is an individual one undertaken under a condition of “personal power” exerted in the face of stifling group institutions.⁹ There is a markedly countercultural mood to his thinking here.

The architect’s reflections on conflict were shaped by Nietzsche-informed interlocutors such as Yeats and the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957). Through geometric-rational and animalistic-serpentine forms, drawings in the *Lost and Found* series had explored the interplay of Apollonian serenity and Dionysian turbulence. This was further developed in the extensive drawings and notes for the *Four Houses* (1975), which reworked Yeats’ lunar Great Wheel, and his idea of antithetical impulses that wax and wane according to the

interaction of vortex-like “gyres”, as a cyclic journey between opposed conditions of intellect and will. **[FIG.7]** Woods restated this in various ways. In one account, intellect (which is creative and commands the power of symbolisation, although sterile without the will) and will (a condition of pure sensation and affective energies) are understood to enact a kind of violence upon themselves, this producing the torsion of the circuit. Through its abstraction of matter, the intellect ultimately negates itself, while the will’s incorporative appetites lead to the dissolution of its own boundaries, propelling it toward the intellect. Most important for Woods were what he calls the “balance” points, at which art can wrest some kind of momentary totality. Within this system, four locations on the cycle – intellect, ironic balance (intellect’s passage to its submergence in will), will, and heroic balance (will’s movement toward intellect) – became metaphysical cardinal points, sites for “temples” as Woods called them, which he drew in a play of destruction and recomposition.¹⁰

As intellect falls into and dissolves in the will, it deposits the broken remains of its prior symbols in the latter’s domain, which await discovery like – Woods suggested – the chthonic antique ruins that animated the Renaissance. Perhaps it is this condition of vestigial survival and haunting that was articulated when he wrote: “In my dominion, which is a ruined temple, there are creatures only half-formed by outer civilizations. Past the cities, or rather beneath them, are ancestral realms unlike graveyards, distant even from underworlds.”¹¹ It is likely that this sense of conflictual combination and co-presence underpinned Woods’ fascination with animal-human hybrids, which, despite his avowed appreciation for the artist Max Ernst (1891–1976), seem more like *emblemata* than surrealist monsters **[FIG.8]**; likely too, that his search for symbols able to both encompass and unify conflict underlay his euphoric response to experiments using transparent Mylar to produce, through bilateral symmetries, fluctuating alternations between a-formality and geometric effect.

The patch

And yet, despite the excitement of such discoveries, it seems that a constant sense of despair haunted Woods’ project of symbology. Perhaps this was to do with an understanding that the symbol, by his own account, was fated always to remain on the side of the intellect, drawing up to the edge of an abyss that must remain unknowable and unnameable. For while only extra-rational inspiration could grasp truth, “all symbols [must remain] devices of the intellect only, while integration is of the whole being”.¹² It is a despair that flickers throughout the notebooks and that one senses even in – maybe especially in – their moments of heightened affirmation.

Seen in this way, the symbol looks less like transcendence than a symptom of desire for it – a patch that is placed on top of a wound it cannot close over and must be suffered, unhealed, below.

¹ Lebbeus Woods, “January 21, 2008: Lost and Found”, in *Slow Manifesto: Lebbeus Woods Blog*, ed. Clare Jacobson, Princeton Architectural Press (New York), p 16.

² Lebbeus Woods, “March 15,2009: Notebook 97-3”, in *ibid*, p 67.

³ Lebbeus Woods, Black Notebook #16, April 6, 1974–May 3, 1975 (no pagination).

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ Woods, “March 15,2009: Notebook 97-3”, p 67.

⁷ Woods, Black Notebook #16.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Lebbeus Woods, Black Notebook #12, Oct 13, 1973/March 7, 1974–June 6/7, 1974 (no pagination).

¹⁰ Woods, Black Notebook #16.

¹¹ Woods, Black Notebook #12.

¹² Woods, Black Notebook #16.