

“0 my things! What conversations we have had!”

Vicki Kirby

I'm headed to my analyst's for one of those sessions that already seems pointless. I'm feeling a little sour, even resentful after battling through the early morning traffic, the streets still dark, the day's sense of possibility and hope rapidly dissolving. I anticipate the always precise, exactly-on-time invitation to walk down the hall and begin my session, but while I wait I take in my surroundings. In this outer room things are surprisingly austere and shabby. A chair from the early seventies, smoky pink upholstery now dirty and crazed with time, occupies one corner. Its neighbour, a green velvet couch whose elegance probably expired with its original owners, isn't helping to lift my mood. The small wooden coffee table, battered and sullen, is the final insult. I wonder if he sees his patients as animated versions of these forlorn objects. He must be wealthy and yet this is a room of salvaged things, miserable and cheerless. Why would he choose them? To save money? To acknowledge without words an enduring irritation with his broken patients? Are we so undeserving?

I settle into my judgement. I think him mean. And yet such thoughts as they congeal feel unwelcome, hostile, even blasphemous, because of course I love him dearly, this man who holds me tightly in his disciplined care. I see the room again through my fondness for him, his bodily fragility - he isn't young - and I'm sensing what I can only imagine. Because I can't know for sure, or indeed, at all, about the detail of his life. I wonder. He's astutely attuned to the noisy chatter of things that still speak to him of past comfort and the security of home... and I know the appeal of these thingly conversations because I live in that same garrulous world. Perhaps he remains tethered to the exuberant joy of an early marriage that rejoiced in the scandal of pink, a chair that turned his world around with its promise and seduction. And childhood memories of boyish obsessions near the couch where his mother sat knitting, casting a supervising eye over the fierce combat that saw her sons risk everything on the coffee table's battlefield.

Sitting in front of him after my summons down the hall the oblique arrangement of our chairs provides a degree of modest propriety, some semblance of dignity in this naked encounter. He lingers over my words. He's digging away at something... nothing. I feel impatient, irritated. Sometimes I think I'm smarter than him. He's wasting my time. Because there's nothing here, nothing to see in these words he anticipates will prove him insightful.

“I see this means a great deal to you,” he pronounces with the gravitas of revelation.

“No it doesn't, really, not at all” I complain impatiently, wishing he'd listen more carefully to what I'm actually saying. I'm indifferent to the scene he's asked me to describe. Indeed, haven't I explained this twice already? Do I have to save face for *him*, pretending he has the perspicacity he imagines and that something hidden might be discovered?

How to determine what matters, when it matters, how it matters. When are we imagining, musing, or *just* perceiving? Nothing to see... really, absolutely nothing!

The analyst is weighing the moment, because suddenly its lack of significance has accrued an uncanny weight. His look has become penetrating, almost rude. He takes his time. And then the pronouncement that counters what now seems a feeble attempt on my part to deny the inevitable. To my insistence that what I've been describing has no particular consequence his

response is final, hailing me to attention like the bells of St Mary's across the park where I live. "I think it does," he insists. "I think it does." "I think it does." "I think it does..."

What was previously just an opinion, a hunch, what I thought was a misguided perception on his part now has visceral force. My face crumples. I feel bewildered... is it shame? I am ambushed, ugly, betrayed. Because I haven't lied, at least, not deliberately. I have betrayed myself unwittingly. But who is this "I," responsible for such a disavowal, somehow knowing what is not known? And surely this is strange because the defensive tactic is so intelligently calculating, almost clairvoyant in its forensic appreciation of what must be denied and ignored. Is "responsible" the right word here? It's not as if the punctum of the analyst's words has revealed the hidden content behind what I've been avoiding. And anyway, I'm not sure this is about retrieving some forgotten episode in a story that might better explain an old one. This moment in which shame is productive brings a knot of sensations, associations, congested memories all tangled together in a terrible feeling that I still can't reckon. I now apprehend that I don't know how I am who I am. And given this mangle of "who" and "how," or what it is to know, surely the question of responsibility in its personal and more political contexts can't be assumed. Perhaps more importantly for this particular meditation, nor can assumptions that define the imagination as a creative flight that transcends *mere* perception.

How could I determine the difference between a simple perception, a straightforward description of data received, and those words and actions snagged by the unruly layers and textures of a life lived through others' perceptions? One might think that the point of psychoanalytic thinking is to explain the workings of the unconscious, as if the wild associational energies of its subterranean forces, its poetic movement, can sometimes ambush consciousness and betray the stories we tell ourselves. But if there is no actual segregation of a fully present cogito from its dark but also playful subterranean motivations? Indeed, if there is no subterranean, no elsewhere? What I'm suggesting is that consciousness as we understand it - I can realize my intentions, I am the author of my own life, I know what I'm doing - is better understood as an un/conscious in play. Indeed, this "other" that I am is the very stuff of perception. And if this sounds counterintuitive because perception is immediate, quick, here and then gone, what if the act of perceiving is a dynamic poesis of synaesthetic superpositions, a surface "archaeology" of transpositions rather than something the imagination supplements? Freud's struggle to explain how perception and memory are entangled in the child's toy, the *wunderblock*, is helpful here, as it introduces a quantum world of space/time confusion where the past has yet to arrive and entities arise and dissolve in the constant of instability (1940). Causality is significantly complicated in this example because the undecidability of "what is," its transfigurations - transubstantiations? - are all embracing; banality, the mundane and quotidian, already materializing this dynamic as ordinary life.

We can appreciate why Jacques Derrida might say, with obvious frustration, "I don't know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists" (1970, 272). However, I prefer to claim perception as what Gaston Bachelard evokes as possibly infinite. "Did Rilke not say: 'In order to write a single verse, one must see many cities, and men and things; one must get to know animals and the flight of birds, and the gestures that the little flowers make when they open out to the morning'" (2002, 5).

If there is no self-present subject, if perception involves a cacophony of inputs whose resonances enable and explain the vagaries of experience, then subjectivity and objectivity

are not oppositional. What to make of this? Donald Hoffman in *New Scientist* risks an absolute assertion, “Everybody knows that we don’t see all of reality. I say we see none of it” (Lu et al., 2020). Although seeming to echo Derrida’s outright rejection of perception, Hoffman’s adjudication does something else. By assuming a difference between reality and what humans perceive *as* reality, he segregates the reality that endures “under the impassive regard of Sirius” (Benveniste, 1971, 44) from human illusion, thereby rendering the human condition essentially un-natural. But what if the subject of the phrase “perceiving reality” is reality itself? What if we read the present participle as an adjective?

Bachelard champions the imagination, its poetry, movement and creative potential, requiring a static reference point against which its difference will be legible. And yet he admits that “What I would actually like to examine in this work is how the imaginary is immanent in the real, how a *continuous* path leads from the real to the imaginary (2002, 4). I want to suggest that there is no pathway out of perception’s magical liaisons because it was always wayward, experimental, a/ssociative; always/already what Bachelard would add to it. We are left with a question about “who” perceives, evident in Bachelard’s rather odd statement that, “In human reverie, the world imagines itself” (2002, 14). Is it possible that the world perceives itself through these subjective entanglements? And can this reimagined *worldly* subject “who” perceives, reconfigure objectivity and “the how” of a “who”?

References

- Benveniste, Émile. (1971) *Problems in General Linguistics*. trans. M. E. Meek, Miami: University of Miami Press.
- Bachelard, Gaston. (2002) *Air and Dreams: An Essay On the Imagination of Movement*. trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell, Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1970) “Conversation,” in Richard Macksey & Eugenio Donato (ed.), *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. (1940) “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’” trans. James Strachey, *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 21 (4), 469-74.
- Lu, D. et al., (29/1/2020) “What you experience may not exist. Inside the strange truth of reality,” in *New Scientist*.