What We Don't Know

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Constance Chatterley's early sexual encounters are characterized by separateness, a rift between her deeper freedom and the part of herself she gives to her lover. "One was in love with a boy afterwards, and a little inclined to hate him, as if he had trespassed on one's privacy and inner freedom. For of course, being a girl, one's whole dignity and meaning in life consisted in the achievement of an absolute, a perfect, a pure and royal freedom" (*Lover* 7). Upon reading these words, I must confess I felt inclined to admire the sentiment. Its veiled irony did not escape me; in fact, I felt slightly indignant at Lawrence's overstatement of the freedom that, at his time, women had so recently earned. I silently congratulated Constance on her inner strength and embodied liberation. Indeed, Lawrence paints his initial portrait of Constance as a girl raised free from the almost mythic oppression endured by women of the Victorian era. She and her sister had been sent to Dresden at only fifteen, where they celebrated their liberated femininity:

> They lived freely among the students, they argued with the men over philosophical and sociological and artistic matters, they were just as good as men themselves: only better, because they were women. And they tramped off to the forests with sturdy youths bearing guitars, twang-twang!—they sang the Wandervogel songs, and they were free. Free! That was the great word. Out in the open world, out in the forests of the morning, with lusty and splendid throated fellows, free to do as they liked, and, above all, to say what they liked. It was the talk that mattered supremely: the impassioned interchange of talk. Love was only a minor accompaniment. (6-7)

Lawrence's sumptuous description engenders in me the grand nostalgia of a collective female unconscious, and I can almost taste the ripe fruits of the hard-won battle. And those qualities for which, and with which, the battle was won—independence, intelligence—are finally allowed prominence in the social role of reformed femininity. Lady Chatterley's interactions with the opposite sex reflect her mental embodiment of the new female. Now allowed

intellect, Constance devotes herself to talk. Now granted independence, she revels in her freedom. Now sure of her value as an individual, she cherishes her privacy and interiority above all else.

In "Toward a Poetics of Uncertainty," Ben Belitt repudiates sensual knowledge of the world in his examination of certain poetic ideas. Exploring William Blake's meaning when he wrote, "We are lead to believe in a lie / When we see with and not through the eye," Belitt posits that "Blake chooses the eye among the available senses, to epitomize the delusions, falsifications, errors, deceptions, untruths of all sensuous knowing" (198). When we see *with* the eye, we take all the delusions, falsifications, et al. for truth, accepting what we learn from our senses as knowledge. But as our senses act as media and filter, we are delivered information that, though carrying the semblance of truth, is anything but. We often take sensuous knowledge for granted as the means by which to approach objectivity. This notion of one-dimensional perspectives as carriers of truth both misconceives and damages the ongoing search for real truth. In sensory perception, the *subject* subordinates the *object*, imagining it perceives the other, but perceives only itself, only its own interpretation. Thus, the only knowledge available to us is that of ourselves. I can say that I see a book lying at my side, I can call it thick, blue, paper-backed, I can touch and smell it. But I have determined through this process only that I see, feel, and smell a book, not that the book *exists*. Our consciousness—our *I*—comprises the all-important, singular truth which saves us from the abyss of unknown and unknowable external reality. Can we therefore blame Constance Chatterley, whose psychological fortifications preserve her interiority, and thus her personal sense of truth?

The true nature of an object, knowledge of which we seek vainly through perception, remains hidden. Sensual knowledge is not a means through which we come to truth, because even in the process of perceiving we change that which we perceive. Just as the object touched is no longer untouched, the object viewed has suffered the effects of the viewing. Even light rays modify perception, returning to the viewer a reflected half-truth. Only the unperceived and untouched object retains its pure state. Nothing can be both perceived and known. This comprises a basic realization of Quantum Mechanics, which goes on to describe how, in an unknown universe, probability is the only available means of prediction. Belitt quotes Neils Bohr, who wrote, "'Quantum provides us with a striking illustration of the fact that though we can fully understand a connection . . . we can only speak of it in images and parables'" (177). Just as our senses fail to communicate knowledge of things, so do we fall short in attempts to communicate with each other. A thought in

my mind must filter through my own sense of words before being taken up by my listener's understanding of those words. Much may transmit, but never exactly what I had intended. In an attempt to produce a reaction deeper in my listener's mind, conjuring up thoughts rooted in more than just words, I resort to image, or to parable. Something perhaps happens in the other mind, some spark of imagination fueled by my meager offering, but a rift exists between my own understanding and the understanding developing in the other's mind: "The incurable *otherness* from which *oneness* must always suffer" (Belitt 197). In the space between my understanding and that of another exists the unknown; the disconnect between *one* and *other*. The nature and extent of this rift is as uncertain as the individual perceptions it divides.

"One may liken dread to dizziness," Søren Kierkegaard writes, "He whose eye chances to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But the reason for it is just as much his eye as it is the precipice. For suppose he had not looked down" (315). The unknown, embodied as a "yawning abyss," inspires dread in those who choose to look at it straight on. Once again we return to the eye, but in this case we are dealing not with the *object* of visual perception, but with that which perceives: the *subject*. The unknown—though felt in the interpretation of every sensual perception, in the incurable incompleteness of knowledge derived therein—cannot itself be perceived. As the eye turns its gaze to that gap between *one* and *other*, it must come to terms with absence, with nothingness. The feeling brought forth by such an endeavor is what Kierkegaard calls dread.

Virginia Woolf, in "A Sketch of the Past," wonders at the shame she felt as a child when confronted with her own face and body: "I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it" (68). Her mother's beauty gives her "pride and pleasure," but the reflected image of her own face seems as taboo as it is compelling (68). She goes on to question her self-reprehension:

> What then gave me this feeling of shame, unless it were that I inherited some opposite instinct? My father was Spartan, ascetic, puritanical. He had I think no feeling for pictures; no ear for music; no sense of the sound of words . . . this leads me to think that my natural love for beauty was checked by some ancestral dread. Yet this did not prevent me from feeling ecstasies and raptures spontaneously and intensely and without any shame or the least sense of guilt, so long as they were disconnected with my own body. (68)

Woolf describes the Puritan aversion to the human body as an *ancestral dread*; the psyche's entire history confronted with a *yawning abyss*. To the Spartan-, ascetic-, and Puritan-minded, the human body represents all that is not of the mind. The functions of the body, both internal and external, inhabit the realm of the unconscious, governed by aspects of the brain that cannot be consciously understood. I have eaten, perhaps, a banana, and can feel it move from my mouth to my belly. But my interactions with it from then on are out of my mind's control. Neither can I identify the food's particles on their journey through digestion, nor make the functions stop by will alone. This is the realm of body, of autonomous physical function, relied upon but never *known*. Fearful of its lack of control even over the body, the inner *I* responds with shame, pushing away all that is unknown and dreadful. It retreats into itself, forgoing any "feeling for pictures, . . . ear for music, . . . sense of the sound of words." The sensual world only magnifies its feeling of impotence in the face of the abyss.

As she enters adulthood, responsibilities and circumstances deny Constance Chatterley the joys of liberated life that she had so ardently valued as a young woman. Though allowed to be present in the conversations of men, as soon as a single contribution escapes her mouth, "the men resented it: she should have pretended to hear nothing. They hated her admitting she had attended closely to such talk" (40). Talk, Connie's cherished liberty, and that which "mattered supremely" is denied her. So is her treasured female freedom curtailed by obligation to others. Her crippled husband depends absolutely on her, "he needed her every moment. . . . Alone he was like a lost thing. He needed Connie to be there, to assure him that he existed at all" (16). She is left with nothing but that internal privacy, that spark of truth at the core of her consciousness, kept safe and secure by the strength of her mind. But even this bud of constancy that sustains her mind cannot save her body, which falls increasingly into rebellious disrepair. Looking at herself in the mirror, she thinks "what a frail, easily-hurt, rather pathetic thing a naked human body is: somehow a little unfinished, incomplete!" (70). Her own body, in its frailty, shows the stress of years wasted in restricted freedom by "going meaningless, going dull and opaque, so much insignificant substance" (70). Throughout her life she has retained that "absolute" freedom of interiority, protecting it from her young German, her husband, and her lover Michaelis. And now, with essential liberties increasingly denied her, her psyche retreats deeper into that sanctuary of truth, and her body goes meaningless. According to Lady Bennerley, "So long as you can forget your body, you are happy," but Constance cannot (74). As she stands miserably in front of the

mirror, something in her revolts against the denial of "healthy, human sensuality that warms the blood and freshens the whole being" (71).

To Virginia Woolf, sensual experience inhabits the realm of the essential and whole. Her two first memories, recalled in "A Sketch of the Past," are little more than a collection of sensations. In the second, which she calls "the most important of all my memories" (64), she lies in a crib at St. Ives . . .

> Hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw out its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. (65)

The young Woolf lies, hears, feels, and sees, conscious only of her senses. She doesn't bother to interpret the meaning of what she perceives but lets herself be overwhelmed by the "purest ecstasy" of simply *being*. In this state, her senses mingle in a larger perception, the eye noticing this and the ear that, but the feeling encompassing all. The sun is no round disk or host of angels; it is simply a light, and the blind is yellow, and the waves splash. Perhaps at her young, as yet crib-bound age, Woolf had not yet learned the words for wave, splash, yellow, or light. She had not yet reached the age of abstraction, when concepts are universalized through language to make communication easier. Her purely internal feeling wonders at external sensations, at how such richness could emerge from the unknown. The feeling of "purest ecstasy" arises from a transcended paradox: "It is almost impossible that I should be here," she thinks, as her senses provide her with the sublime awareness that she is.

Constance Chatterley had reveled in "the impassioned interchange of talk" as the most valued of her feminine liberties (Lawrence 7). Sending her words into the medium, she had watched them settle in the minds of others, develop in that new environment, and come back to her in reignited energy. Internal truth had meanwhile provided her protective stability as she passionately debated with others. Now, without talk, she realizes that her youthful sense of "pure and royal freedom" had been an illusion (7). Though words had then inspired her, they now only recall her own alienation from the external. The stagnant, universalized concepts of language face off against the *yawning abyss*, stabilizing interchange across its expanse; but to avoid the sabotaging effects of dizziness, never looking down. "How she hated words,

always coming between her and life! They did all the ravishing, if anything did: ready-made words and phrases sucking all the life-sap out of living things" (93). By trying to name the essential being of things, words pin them down and trap them, disallowing the freedom of anonymity. Connie "in her bitterness, burned a cold indignation against Clifford and his writings and his talk: against all men of the sort, who defrauded a woman even out of her own body!" (71). In youthful folly, Constance had been deceived by a male standard of intellect that valued the mind over the body. Striving for "an absolute, a perfect, a pure and royal freedom," she sacrificed her sensuality to the independent liberties of a new femininity. But now, having retreated deeper and deeper into what was once a personal sanctuary, she finds herself trapped in a cage of her own making. Defrauded out of both her freedom and her words, Constance wretchedly grasps the bars as her vitality slowly depletes.

Virginia Woolf's earliest memories retain a power in her mind unparalleled by any adult experience. In an attempt to explain their power, and the ecstasy they inspired, she identifies a strength drawn from simplicity.

> I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength. Later we add to feelings much that makes them more complex, and therefore less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete. (67)

The defining characteristics of these memories, derived from their simplicity, are strength, isolation, and completeness. Later experience, however, suffers from the mind's ever-increasing range of interpretation. With age, the psyche develops a sense of context, and slowly realizes the necessity of trying to understand and interact with the exterior world. As the self, and a set of guidelines towards the preservation of that self, develops, the unknown becomes more threatening. Hypotheses of cause and predictions of effect complicate each sensual feeling. The young child, however, knows only of the feeling, the most visceral reaction to external stimuli, and has no reason to be aware of anything else. The young Woolf is "hardly aware" of herself. Unconcerned with cause and effect, personal context, known or unknown, her entire being surrenders to the feeling. Though isolated and complete, she connects with the external by something more than those un-crossable bridges of trust and faith. The external transcends the abyss and becomes internal through pure, inhabited experience.

At her most dejected and vulnerable, Constance Chatterley encounters the groundskeeper, Mellors. Allowing him to penetrate her physically, she still feels threatened and, like a caged animal, involuntarily retreats back into herself. "She knew, partly it was her own fault. She willed herself into this separateness. Now perhaps she was condemned to it" (Lawrence 126). But realizing her deep physical need for touch, for sensuality, she finally refuses to surrender to fear, "It was from herself she wanted to be saved, from her own inward anger and resistance" (173). And so she lets him take her, she "yielded with a quiver that was like death, she went all open to him." And now, at last,

> The billows of her rolled away to some shore, uncovering her, and closer and closer plunged the palpable unknown, and further and further rolled the waves of herself away from herself, leaving her, till suddenly, in a soft, shuddering convulsion, the quick of all her plasm was touched, she knew herself touched, the consummation was upon her, and she was gone. She was gone, she was not, and she was born: a woman. (174)

Constance is reborn in pure sensuality; touched to her very core by a merging of herself with the external. She both transcends the yawning abyss and looks it straight in the eye. It isn't the man who touches her core, but the dread, the sublime dizziness of a full and naked confrontation with the unknown. To reach this point, Constance's preconceptions must be released and her strong fortifications brought down. Only by yielding to the sensual penetration of her lover can she reach this place, this most ultimate center and truth of her being, and release it into a free interplay with the external.

Ben Belitt describes to us how, as much as he wishes to call attention to the eye as a filter, Blake does not attempt to "discredit the whole sensorium as such, as Plato did" (198). The senses, though failing in any attempt to reveal objective truth, still provide the means of understanding our own internality. Through sensual perception, the external sparks the workings of the internal, and inspires imagination. The strongest form of this interaction, according to Virginia Woolf, occurs in a mind free from imposed context or complex interpretations. These interpretations, in fact, only serve to confuse the psyche by suggesting that the ultimate aim of the senses would be a correct interpretation. We must realize, however, that no correct interpretation will be found, and that each individual's sense of truth will always originate internally. The importance of sensual perception is not the objectification of the world into a series of factual observations, but the inspiration of internal-

ity. In his essay "Art for Art's Sake," E.M. Forster writes, "A work of art—whatever else it may be—is a self contained entity, with a life of its own imposed on it by its creator. It has internal order. It may have external form. That is how we recognize it" (89). The individual, like the work of art, possesses an internal order based around the central truth of consciousness. Perceptible external elements may embody a form that echoes this internal order, but will never reveal all. A work of art's internal order must originate in the mind of its creator, and thus can never be fully understood by any other. External form, however, will trace out order's framework through sensual stimulations. The artist must manifest his/her own personality as much as possible within a work of art. If the artist manages to stay true to his/her internal truth and highly personal understandings, the externally perceptible elements of the art will reflect that cohesion. Only a feeling of organic completeness in the work can inspire the senses of the perceiver, whose interactions with it will spark his/her own imagination. The goal of art is not to send messages across the abyss, but—confronting it straight-on—to transcend its borders by providing for a wholly personal and imaginative experience. The ultimate viewing does not lead to a better understanding of the art, but to a better understanding of the *self*.

But in order for this sublime interchange to take place, the observer must first open his/her utmost core to the touch of the external. To Lady Chatterley, the crystallized shell surrounding her fervently protected interior could only be cracked by the utmost release to a penetrating sensuality. To Virginia Woolf, the most powerful instances of transcendence occur in a naive state of pre-crystallization. Our ultimate responsibility—as both artists and observers—is to resist the preservative instinct and embrace dread for what it really is: a sense of limitless possibility. By *inhabiting* our sensual interactions with the external, we allow the unknown to play across our psyche, enforcing rather than denying our being. To capture the unknown means to harden it into a systematic, smugly satisfied, and predictable world view that prohibits any highly-personal interpretation. The mind must be as open and as resistant to preconception as possible, and it must always, with unwavering strength, hold the unknown close to its core of truth.

But what of words? If the contextual effect of language does, in fact, alienate us from a sensual interchange with the external, are words therefore false and misleading? The naïve infant, as yet free from the complex confines of language, experiences entirely through the senses. The whole of external interactions points towards one conclusion: being. In retaining a perfect

openness to the sensual, however, the infant is "hardly aware" of itself. In "Style" Walter Pater writes of the prose writer's aim "to be transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of his sense of it," at which point, "he becomes an artist, his work *fine* art" (6). For the artist to transcribe his sense of fact, he must first know himself. His inspiration may come from un-self-conscious sensual experience, but to convey that inspiration, he must first understand it, and then name it. Language is a uniquely human characteristic. Through it, we attach names to objects, and thus in our minds, the objects become the names. As adults, we understand the world this way, through a series of abstractions linked to reality by nothing more than the agreement of other minds. Noam Chomsky identifies one of the most distinctive properties of language as "the use of finite means to express an unlimited array of thoughts" (45). Each linguistic abstraction, like a sensual experience, comprises an infinite number of individual interpretations, each as steeped in the unknown as any external object. Words presented artistically resist the urge to combine in expected or repeated ways, thereby solidifying. They revel in the "unlimited array of thoughts" that can be sparked in the mind of the reader, or listener. Constance Chatterley develops a hatred for words because of what they represent: the abstracted mind. But artistic language—used to describe the writer's sense of fact—carries the ancestral history of words over the abyss of limitless interpretation. Artistic language does not deny the unknown, but rather affirms it.

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