Seeing with the I

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Everyone is gone.

Before setting forth to write this essay, I took a shower. As I ducked my head beneath the cascade of hard water that always seems to loosen thoughts from my mind, two distinct screams sounded in the near distance. Shrugging them off (but not entirely), I nervously finished washing and dried up. Absolutely nothing broke the post-shower silence as I opened the bathroom door into my room. I had left four or five people when I got into the shower; but now, no one remains. I peek out into the hallway—silence. I drift ghostlike to the window. The only sound is the shallow, tinny din leaking out of the headphones on the desk. Outside, the streets lie fallow. From a manhole cover, only a burp of steam rises, all that's left of humanity after the world has swallowed everyone but me. Full of the emptiness, I turn to the indifferent laptop computer on my desk; the thin black cursor winks at me from where my first paragraph should be. Half-sitting in a chair that has never been so uncomfortable, I begin to write: "Everyone is gone."

It remains, however, a curious property of my solitude that when I am most alone is when I see most clearly. And it is still more curious that when I see most clearly, I recognize that I am often not seeing very clearly at all. Take, for instance, the daisies in empty root-beer bottles on my windowsill. The flowers have been dying since the day I bought them, dying for two weeks. As if I were the last man alive surveying an empty world, when my mind reached out through my eyes and found the melancholy daisies, I realized that, for at least the past day, they simply had not existed for me. Now, apologizing for my ignorance, I grant these blooms of tragic beauty my full attention, expecting them to unfold their essence unto me. But they do not. I see only flowers with standard adjectives attached to them. Something here unmistakably escapes me no matter how long I look, nothing changes.

Like Walker Percy's observer in his essay "The Loss of the Creature," "the harder [I look] at it, the less [I] can see" (512). But I wondered what does it mean to look harder, to see, and to see less? Though these words "look,"

"see," and "less" pertain to the same event, they are not equivalent. As with my flowers, looking does not necessarily mean seeing, and looking harder does not mean seeing more. Similarly, Percy concerns himself in this first part of his essay with the Grand Canyon, perhaps the most often disappointing of national treasures not for its lack of grandeur, but for the immensity of its visitors' expectations. He wonders, "Why is it almost impossible to gaze directly at the Grand Canyon under these circumstances and see it for what it is…?" (512). Again, he draws a distinction between gazing and seeing. In doing so, Percy challenges us to read further into how we read, to consider whether our seeking gets in the way of our seeing, and he calls us out early in the text. "Every explorer names his island Formosa, beautiful…but to no one else is it ever as beautiful," he forewarns, "except the rare man who manages to recover it, who knows that it has to be recovered" (511). We cannot passively look at things and expect beauty to unfold itself to us; we must claim it. Yet such a claim demands immense courage, especially when we wish to see beauty in something that is already surrounded by a cult of meaning: a national landmark, a famous painting, a Shakespearean sonnet. If we seek to see something for what others say it should be, our expectations cloud our ability to see the thing plainly, as it is. But even a disappointing visit to the Grand Canyon, Percy implies, can inspire us, provided that we have the courage to accept our disappointment as part of the experience. I can envision a disillusioned Percy squinting over the Grand Canyon, then hurrying back to his hotel room to write "The Loss of the Creature."

On second look, the daisies on my windowsill aren't very special.

"What did you expect?" they ask me plainly, looking at me in much the same way a mirror does.

How, then, do we claim beauty? Before answering this question, Percy tests the effect of his first paragraph on us. He follows, "Garcia Lopez de Cárdenas discovered the grand canyon and was amazed at the sight" (511). Assuming that Percy researched this topic, we can venture that he knows that Native Americans lived in and around Grand Canyon for at least a thousand years before Cárdenas arrived. Initially, most readers will accept Percy's falsehood as fact because it agrees with what they expect: most textbooks effectively write Native Americans out of American history. And just as oversimplifications like this keep us from an accurate picture of American history, Percy illustrates how conceptualizations in general prevent us from seeing accurately. To look with an open mind is not enough; we must look without mind, with only our eyes open. Yet non-conceptualization is not an easy task. Throughout our biological and psychological evolution, concepts have

proven their value to our survival and are a deeply-seeded part of the human psychic structure. For instance, conceptualizing all snakes as dangerous kept many of man's more curious ancestors alive. Concepts fail us, however, when we desire more from life than mere survival.

For modern man as a social animal, communication is nearly inseparable from life. What we desire from life, therefore, we should desire from communication, and good communication is the prime virtue of seeing clearly. The artist must struggle to build as much of his truth into words, sounds, or images as he can, and I must struggle to extract as much of his truth, in all its complexity, as I can from them. The artist, though, may be anyone with something to say; his or her art may be a concerto or a conversation over breakfast. But the more complicated the truth—that which he or she must communicate to me—the more we must struggle, for ideas do not fit easily into and out of words. Indeed, Virginia Woolf, in her essay "Craftsmanship," claims that "words are the only things that tell the truth and nothing but the truth" (633). As she implies here, words are our witnesses to the truth, but if they are human enough to be sworn in by our judicial procedures, they can also be capable of perjury. Woolf treats words as living beings, describing their licentiousness: "They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them to-day—that they are so stored with meanings" (635). Words, we see, do not stay in one place very long. By extension, our truths must be equally if not more fluid.

While telling the truth with words seems tantamount to drawing a picture with ants, we can step back from a text to read it more clearly. Woolf makes use of the London Underground to illustrate how words stick to each other. The words in the name of a passing station, Russell Square, bring to her mind rustling leaves and stucco squares, until Woolf misses her stop. "Thus, one sentence of the simplest kind rouses the imagination, the memory, the eye and the ear—all combine in reading it…but they combine unconsciously together," she recognizes (635). And so, while words themselves are complex, we can read them as undertones, hearing the symphony for what it is rather than analyzing the notes played by each section.

Though it may seem so, this is not a simplification of words. We allow them to act as symbols, complex creatures which, like all things living, interact with each other and their environments—hiding, breathing, seeking. Contrast this with the function of concepts, signs which stand idly in place of things that move. Language, Woolf suggests, evolved out of the need for representations—what the semioticians call signs—of things in reality. But like

their creators, our signs have snowballed in complexity and begun to associate and aggregate into symbols. Language today, therefore, is more like meta-language: our words refer not only to the world but, through self-reference, to our use and understanding of them.

In the field of artificial intelligence, self-reference is a benchmark for the complexity necessary for consciousness. Correspondingly, our pointing inward is perhaps the most human thing we can do. Thus, Woolf's assertion that words are alive is well-founded, for indeed her essay unassumingly points to itself. She implicates copious unidentified quotations in the structure of "Craftsmanship," pointing to the essay's prime idea that the artist must "[combine] old words in new orders…so that they tell the truth" (636). "The Loss of the Creature" claims self-reference as well. Quite plainly, Percy tells us how to recover his "creature," and yet the "creature" is nothing short of Percy's idea itself.

As we humans tend to do, however, I have entered into the sphere of meta-language. Though I hope to have made some sense out of this madness, I can only have done so by connecting symbols—"idea," "artist," "Virginia Woolf," "word"—in effect making their relations more complicated. Then again, complexity can be most beautiful. From symphonies to soliloquies to scientific theories, complexity is the most effective tool for communicating aspects of our byzantine reality.

Why, though, should we struggle to understand something that cannot be completely understood in the first place? The question remains: what can we communicate—what and how can we understand and try to make others do likewise? Such a question each individual must answer on his own and for his own reasons. Perhaps he paints simply because he can, or he writes for the dignity of boldly asserting himself before the fearsome complexity of the world. Roland Barthes's answer, embracing aspects of both of these purposes, is love.

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes concerns himself with the nature of love, though his is a love more mystical than romantic. "To expend oneself, to bestir oneself for an impenetrable object," he proclaims, "is pure religion" (135). Somewhere between enlightenment and ignorance, Barthes resigns himself to knowing the precise limits of his knowledge, and from "I cannot know you" bursts forth "I love you." Though this love most clearly applies to other people (for we as symbol-users are the most enmeshed in complexity), one can love an art object, a mental construct, even and especially one's self. Moreover, as Barthes notices, this movement to embrace the unknown is essentially religious. It requires faith—faith in himself not to drown in the

endlessly-enfolding complexity of his love and faith that the unknown will not harm him. Hence, through this faith, we may bless ourselves: we need no longer fear the unknown, and we can find substance and meaning in our love, a self-sufficient love that need not be returned.

In fact, the nature of this love is that it cannot be reciprocated. Søren Kierkegaard, in his discourse *Fear and Trembling*, imagines a love like that of Barthes, one that "is the entire substance of his life, and yet the relation is such that it cannot possibly be realized" (41). The lover in this passage is Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith, religiously devoted to the unattainable, the unknowable, the absurd. He is the personification of the maxim that "even in loving another person one ought to be sufficient unto oneself" (44). Through the kind of love that Barthes describes, Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith claims sovereignty; in terms of meaning, he needs no validation from anyone else, for he has the courage to declare that his interpretations are right. Unlike Percy's disappointed Grand Canyon tourists, the Knight looks out over the yawning gorge and makes his declaration. Either he claims that, despite what others think, the canyon isn't all that special after all (for symbols can lose their conventional meanings, as Woolf has shown us), or he claims for himself all that the sight inspires within him. In either case, he has struggled to claim the canyon, and it is his and his alone.

As for the others, Percy warns us that "unless [they] also [struggle] for [themselves], unless [they know] that there is a struggle, [they are] going to be just what the planners think [they are]"—that is, concepts (523). For nature's reciprocal justice imposes the penalty for reducing the world to concepts: being reduced to concepts ourselves.

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