

# The Rite of Understanding

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**O**n a family vacation, I was in the brilliantly green Tibetan mountains, which seemed to reach their endless arms up into the sky, impaling the clouds above. The lakes at the feet of these giants were such perfect, polished mirrors of the images above them that it was easy to lose all sense of up and down, to feel as if one were swimming in the sky. I, however, did not have a chance to appreciate the magnificent scenery around me.

As a rule, my meek, well-behaved, thirteen-year-old self was opposed to uttering swear words of any kind. But here I was, following my grandmother's well-intended suggestion that I take part in the tourist activities, on the verge of death by falling off a galloping horse, while a large man roaring Tibetan folk songs urged the horse on faster. A first-time rider, I clutched desperately for my life as the guide ignored my begging and refused to slow down because, as he told me jovially, "There are other customers waiting!"

I, in turn, said to the apathetic Tibetan sky, "What the fuck is going on?"

Perhaps Walker Percy, upon hearing my anecdote, would tell me exactly what was going on—that I was, in a way, gaining what he would call "sovereignty" over the experience, a concept he explores in "The Loss of the Creature" (753). What I went through on my horse ride was quite unlike the experiences of the other tourists, whose guides kindly walked their steeds, pointing out the beautiful scenery all around. The luckier tourists nodded along to what their Tibetan guides told them as they sat like potato sacks on their plodding horses. "See that mountain? See that lake? See this horse? Everything is so Tibetan, so foreign here!" their guides happily announced.

I saw those mountains; I saw the lake; I saw the horse. But I saw them through the blur of terror, the blur of being in a strange land with absolutely no control. Everything *was* so Tibetan, so foreign there, and to me, that didn't just mean the pretty mountains or the lakes—it meant something else entirely. I saw the foreignness of the place in a way that my grandmother didn't.

Percy might compare my adventure to his example of a bomb exploding in a laboratory where a student studies a dogfish. After the student regains his consciousness, he sees the dogfish in front of his nose, and only at that moment can he “see it directly without let,” or obstruction, as “the simulacrum of everydayness and of consumption has been destroyed by disaster” (759).

Disaster, indeed. Certainly, this wasn’t the ideal travel experience, as my heavily bruised backside told me the next day while I bounced along on a ten-hour bus ride. Maybe Percy would be right in saying that I gained *something* besides a dirty mouth and a hilarious story. While the others trusted in the expertise of the Tibetan horse guides to tell them the value of what they saw, I, of course, wanted nothing to do with that asshole guide in any way. So, the value of my experience was not based on what someone told me it should be, but rather on my own feelings and reactions to what happened. Percy might say that “the thing was restored” to me (759).

When we trust in experts to *tell us* what we should see, feel, and experience—from a Shakespearean sonnet, a travel experience, an academic essay—Percy would say that we have lost “sovereignty” over the experience. We have lost the actual value of the thing, the value of our interaction with it and what it can teach us; we have lost our control of it. For it is how *we* interact with or experience something that matters, not necessarily what an expert tells us we are supposed to get out of the interaction or experience. And, when we take in and accept what the expert dictates without examining, thinking, or questioning, something is taken from us in return. When we don’t fully appreciate the thing for the mystery or glory of its “thingness”—its quality as a unique *thing*—we settle for what we’re told it’s supposed to be.

But, as I listen to what Percy says to me about my experience of winning so-called sovereignty, I find myself nodding along in the way that the other tourists nodded along to their guides. At this moment, Percy leaps up and shouts in my face, “Aha! Caught you!” because Percy, as a writer, is an “expert” *himself*, and I, as a reader, am a “consumer.” So, by automatically buying into his convincing words, am I not doing the opposite of what he tells me I should be doing? And if I don’t accept his words, if I question the expert as he says I should, then doesn’t that *make* his words true?

Even if it would be difficult to extricate myself from the paradox I’ve uncovered here, perhaps simply recognizing it can imply a different way of seeing.

While Percy criticizes the tourists' loss of sovereignty over experience, Jacob Bronowski would likely argue that it is not the poor tourist's fault; this is just how we learn and feel, as humans. In "The Nature of Scientific Reasoning," Bronowski says that by comparing things in nature—Newton's apple to the moon—we make connections between ourselves and the world, and we gain more insight into how we perceive and interact with everything around us.

"All science is the search for unity in hidden likenesses," Bronowski writes (444). But the search for likenesses extends beyond the scientific realm. Percy describes a sightseer looking at the Grand Canyon after already seeing it depicted on a postcard, and asserts that the sightseer does not see the thing purely, because "he will only be conscious of the disparity between what it is and what it is supposed to be" (752). According to Percy, the sightseer's satisfaction in seeing the canyon lies in "measuring up the thing to the criterion of the preformed symbolic complex" (752). In doing so, the sightseer tries to find a strand of likeness, a link between what he knows (the postcard picture of the canyon) and what he doesn't know (what the canyon looks like in real life).

Percy frowns upon the sightseer's focus on the disparity between the postcard and the real canyon, but Bronowski would say that looking at disparities in science is not only inevitable, but crucial. The forces of gravity that Newton found in the apple and in the moon "agreed only nearly; the likeness and the approximation go together, for no likeness is exact" (445).

Science, then, is the search for likenesses in the world, and can only be achieved through a creative and usually unpredictable process; it is not a "collection of facts" (Bronowski 443), and it is certainly not as simplistic, facile, and dreary as "seeking the Truth."

The scientist, as Bronowski says, has long been regarded as a kind of clinician, plucking facts from the air one by one—facts that "expose themselves like a photographic plate" (443). But scientific "facts," if they even exist, cannot be easily pulled from the sky; as in art or music, fact-plucking and idea-forming require a person of innovation and unique vision. Bronowski offers the example of Copernicus, who was the first to publish the idea that the planets revolve around the sun, not the Earth—a revolutionary thought for the time. Copernicus did not conceive of this idea by doing regular, random calculations; "his first step was a leap of imagination—to lift himself from the earth, and put himself wildly, speculatively into the sun" (444). Most people would not consider the creative act of imagining, dreaming, and conceptualizing different and "crazy" ideas as an act of science.

Yet the concept of fact-plucking as science leads to bigger misconceptions than the idea that scientists are not creative or imaginative. Calling scientific guesses “fact”—even the laws and mechanics that scientists theorize rule the universe—is problematic. Fact is, by definition, absolutely and irrefutably true; but, as Thomas Kuhn writes in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, constant revision of scientific “fact” throughout history has already disproved its absolute and irrefutable nature (69).

To Kuhn, scientific discoveries are not necessarily direct moves towards truth, but rather “non-cumulative developmental episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one” (92). The scientific community works with paradigms, or worldviews, building upon theories that have already been established as “true”—until a new paradigm comes along and revises previous “truths.” Most scientists do not actively try to create new, paradigm-shifting theories, says Kuhn. “Instead, normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies” (24). As Bronowski writes, humans seek out likenesses in the world—but in looking at what is alike, we also notice what is different. It is when we can no longer ignore differences that discovery happens and motivates a paradigm shift.

The discovery of difference does not only allow for revolutions in science, but also in artistic forms like music, exemplified in the premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*, or *The Rite of Spring*. Though it is mostly performed as a concert today, the original piece was conceived as a ballet. Stravinsky knew from the beginning that the music he heard in his head was unlike any other in the contemporary repertoire; the piece was based on a vision, the image of a dark, ominous scene. “I had dreamed a scene of pagan ritual in which a chosen sacrificial virgin danced herself to death,” Stravinsky wrote (Hill 3). The music fit the theme well—the wild dissonance leapt from the instruments, puncturing the ears and minds of the audience. To many, the piece “negated the idea of music as a language” (Hill 44).

When *Le Sacre du Printemps* premiered in 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, the audience, accustomed to more traditional styles of classical music—influenced by its “preformed complex” of what music should be (Percy 752)—was shocked by the feral quality of the music and the violent choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky. People booed and hissed, and eventually caused a full-fledged riot. Even renowned composer Camille Saint-Saens, according to legend, stomped out fuming after hearing the first few notes of the bassoon solo, which were in a register so high that he considered the sound abusive.

What the audience experienced that day was so vastly *different* that they could not find the likeness, as Bronowski would say, between what they encountered and what they had known before. *Le Sacre* required the audience to take the leap Copernicus took “into the sun” to see and hear in a new way, but many of them were either unwilling or unable to make such a leap (142).

Yet, in an article written a few weeks after the premiere, we see audiences beginning to come around: “We are either surprisingly quick or else surprisingly careless in accommodating ourselves to new forms of art,” (57) writes H. Colles, a reviewer describing the positive reactions that followed *Le Sacre*’s violent premiere. But, even as people proved themselves flexible in growing to understand Stravinsky’s difficult, revolutionary work, Colles insists on capping human tolerance and flexibility: “There are certain [musical] clashes that will probably never please even the most catholic ear” (58).

But, in answer to Colles, perhaps our ability to gradually appreciate the dissonance in *Le Sacre* foreshadows an eventual capacity to be moved by even more extreme “clashes.” For it is human nature to explore, to feel, to struggle to understand the most difficult things. Sometimes, all it requires is a kick in the pants, a raving review, to create a paradigm shift.

In Kuhn’s words, people think within paradigms because “what a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see” (113). This declaration sounds a lot like Percy’s idea that our preconceived notions, our “preformed symbolic [complexes],” thwart our sovereignty over the thing itself (752). Percy might apply Kuhn’s idea to his own, pointing out that even scientists put their faith in experts, in those scientists who established the foundations of past paradigms. “It would take a truly great scientist to wrench a sovereign discovery from outside of a paradigm, without the aid of preconceived notions,” Percy might say, patting Kuhn on the back. “Only then could he gain control and see things in the *right* way.”

But here, Percy’s smile may begin to falter. Kuhn, like Bronowski, considers Copernicus as a revolutionary thinker:

Consider . . . the men who called Copernicus mad because he proclaimed that the earth moved. They were not either just wrong or quite wrong. Part of what they meant by ‘earth’ was fixed position. Their earth, at least, could not be moved. Correspondingly, Copernicus’ innovation was not simply to move the earth. Rather, it was a whole new way of regarding the problems of physics and astronomy. (149)

So, the world itself did not change with Copernicus' discovery; he merely presented another way of looking at it. After all, "whatever he may then see, the scientist after a revolution is still looking at the same world" (Kuhn 129).

Although we may consider Copernicus' work an immeasurable contribution to our understanding of the way the natural world functions, it would be limiting to insist that his theory of seeing the world is the one true irrefutable way—as people believed of Ptolemy's previous theory. By mistaking currently approved theory for Absolute Truth, we run the risk of eternal stagnation. And thus Kuhn would agree with Bronowski's statement: "Order must be discovered and, in a deep sense, it must be created. What we see, as we see it, is mere disorder" (445).

What is crucial here is not, as Percy would say, order that already exists in the world, order that we must find and gain sovereign power over. Rather, it is up to us to fashion order out of the chaos, or discover the order that resides in chaos. How we choose to fashion organization out of the madness doesn't just allow us to better understand nature, but also, like those Tibetan mirror lakes, reflects our *own* natures, perhaps not so very different one from the other.

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