

When Looking In, Watch Out

WENDY SALKIN

I know not “seems.”

—*Hamlet, I.ii*

I had my fist pulled back tensely in a shaky little ball. My skin was hot, sticky, too red. I could feel the excess mucus welling in my nose, compensating for the tears I was pushing back. And, if my mouth hadn't been so dry, I would have spit the sloshy rushes of my hate into his close-set grey-green eyes.

I had my left arm forcefully outstretched, shoving his slight shoulders against the white wall of my dorm's basement lounge. And he was shaking. Jesus, did he ever look scared. But maybe it was just his act.

I drew my arm back a little farther. My shoulder ached from holding the pose so long. He trembled a little more.

But, there was no amount of pummeling that was going to undo his lusts for another girl. I couldn't even figure out how we had managed, in those three hours, to move from sitting on the couches across from each other, “maturely” discussing our predicament, to this.

He was like a sick fawn. Maybe a dry plant. I couldn't impose any appropriate measure of pain by slugging him.

No swing, no miss. I couldn't follow through. Something was missing.

I had to enact some sort of personal plan to really undo him. I would make something so fine and proper of myself that he would be sick with remorse. (He mentioned having felt none at this point.) He would watch me, I established for myself. My words would always be strong when we spoke, from then on. I would always be put together, and just a little bit detached from whatever he was saying. I would be well-adjusted and unconcerned. Nonchalant. Friendly, to be sure. An unimpeachable image of strength who was so independent of him that he would vanish like a ghost of his former importance into an oblivion of droning, mediocre nothings. And I would rise

out of this awkward, obsolete rut. Simply by taking control of perception, I would redirect truth to favor the view I wanted to project.

Even though my punch would never connect, I wouldn't be pulling it, either.

But now, from morning until night, I am in my own peripheral vision. I observe. I am the observer of his responses to me. I am also, therefore, the observed. In a most cyclical manner, I watch and am watched; however, it is not so often that the two meet eye to eye—particularly because they are both looking out from the same direction.

Vladimir knew, when he was alone on stage, on a bare country road after Pozzo and Lucky left, after Estragon had fallen asleep, that he was also endangering himself in his thoughts. He claims, “At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on” (Beckett 108). In the very specifically constructed world of the characters' lives in *Waiting for Godot*, there is still a singular moment where the singular character, ripped away from all of the other characters that limit his individual exploration, is forced to examine himself. He becomes, in this time of solitude, conscious of the role he is playing for someone else. He is on the inside, while ably assuming that there is another on the outside looking back in. And what does this other see when “he” realizes that Vladimir *knows* he's there? What can this other self learn by realizing that Vladimir knows that he is assumed to be aloof? Who is this outside “he” looking in on Vladimir?

It can, most easily, be the reader. And if we are the readers looking in on Vladimir as he peers out suspiciously toward us, who's to say that somebody else isn't looking in on each of us, ignorant of our knowledge—assuming that we are asleep, assuming that we “know nothing?” The reflection between Vladimir and the man he suspects creates the beginning of an infinite regression in all directions. The observer can be anyone. And the observer, it is suggested, is also always an “observed” as well.

Foucault's discussion of Bentham's Panopticon uses the exact structure that Vladimir implies—only, for Foucault, it is a direct implement of a perfect disciplinary state. He claims, “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (198). Much as it is in Vladimir's circumstance, the realization for the character (from the inside) is that there is an observer. Some transcendent being perhaps. Maybe just some cosmic Peeping

Tom. Whatever the case, the important point is that it doesn't matter whether Vladimir actually experiences the glaring gaze of an observer. The point is that the idea of the observer allows the self-aware specimen to observe himself being hypothetically observed.

Vladimir is no longer simply the character being looked in on. He becomes also the man looking in on whomever looks in on him. Essentially, he is peeking over the shoulder of the potential observer to stare back into himself. This effect is similar to that of a mirror placed on both sides of a person. Whichever way you look, your reflection will extend out infinitely to the left and the right. If what Vladimir does is a reflection of what the onlooker will do, each onlooker will afterwards suspect that there is someone else looking in on him. And this first onlooker will move his focus out to try and see the man looking in on him. Like a violent game of visual leapfrog, perception will jump out infinitely.

But, the fact is that it is irrelevant to consider whether or not there is *really* an observer. No one, being a singular entity can rationalize this concern and negate it from the inside of her own mind. No one can step out of the structure of the Panopticon and think, "Hey, maybe no one's up in that tower after all."

We become our own captors, holding our actions at bay until we are "in the clear"—until we feel safe to be free and act in a manner conducive to our own preferences. Unfortunately, we are waiting for a time that will never come. For the observed (who is his or her own observer), there is no outside force. All fear of observation is generated from the mind that suspects that there may be an observer. There is always someone in the tower, because there is always someone who believes as much.

I was waiting to cross against the light on the corner of 86th Street and Lexington Avenue. My sandaled feet were cold and sticky and slimy because I refused to submit to the honest realization that Manhattan has too grimy a floor to walk on nearly barefoot. And I felt cold and slimy, so the whole foot ordeal is appropriate. I had just left a lecture at the 92nd Street Y where Sherman Alexie charmed and wooed a mostly middle-aged crowd. We had almost an hour of him speaking, telling wonderfully constructed, albeit completely tangential anecdotes. He answered questions modestly about his career, about his sons. He said Oprah has an enormous head and admitted to the audience his preoccupation with George W. Bush's alleged erection that day on the aircraft carrier, wearing the flight suit. He'd done his honest job

of telling a few good tales. I anticipated that he might sign books. So, I bought the second Sherman Alexie book I'd ever own.

As the crowd filed out to have books signed, I dog-eared pages furiously—making the book look well worn. I didn't want to insult him. He's a scholar. He's a published...a famous writer. The only thing to do if you haven't read a book and are put in such a situation is to overcompensate.

He's world-renowned. It was a necessary evil.

On line, I feel nervous. Everyone else has the hardcover. Is this one that I'm holding too new? He's going to know. He's going to find me out. There has to be a way to convince him that I am more than just a name to scribble. I want to say something wholly unique to him.

I get up to the table he's hunched over.

"Hi. I'm Wendy."

He smiles. It is both comforting and professional.

Silence. He's signing.

Do I have a pocket of time to make my comment—make the impression?

"I—um—this might sound absurd to you. I'm actually writing a sort of book review of one of your collections for a class."

Ellipsis.

"Well, and I just wanted to—I think you're incredible. I don't know. Really. Thank you for coming to speak."

He finishes signing. Looks up, perhaps *offended*. Offended? Oh God! What could I possibly have said wrong? Then, it dawns on me. Did I possibly say, "I just came because I am writing..." by mistake?

"Well, thank you." He smiles politely. Uncomfortably, too. "Good luck with your paper." My face flushed from cheek to cheek as I rushed down the stairs and onto the street, into the chilly breeze. It was all in the way he looked up at me. Perhaps it wasn't even the way he looked at me. I was, more probably, only concerned because of the way I thought about what he was thinking about when he looked up at me with (what I assumed to be) a dissatisfied smile.

It is a wonder that I was not run over crossing Lexington Avenue, as I could not see the cars, or the traffic signs. In fact, I couldn't see at all. I could only observe. I could watch Alexie watching me as I looked back at him across that table with the plastic yellow table cloth.

I cannot be sure that you can understand or believe what I'm saying as I relate my incident with Mr. Alexie to you. I saw what I saw, and I tried to look in on myself to reconcile my concern with what was, empirically, the truth. At some point, there is a blockade between my observation and the *truth* of the

matter. That is the danger with this perception business; it is marked by its instability, its obscurity. True to form, this incident that I replay in my mind again and again—each time with a slightly different slant, from the color of the table cloth changing to the intonation of my words to Alexie altering slightly—reflects much of what I found in his first collection, *The Business of Fancydancing*.

But, it's strange. Anytime I've ever told anyone about my awkward run-in with Mr. Alexie, they do not get thrown if I mention the table cloth as gingham and not green. They end the exchange by saying, *I know what you mean or, That's just how you are, Wendy or, That's what happens, sometimes we just say things like that...* and it's almost completely understood that that's-what-it's-like. In the process of observing others, it's almost as though we pick up pieces of one another for a collection that informs our own view of ourselves. Using each person as evidence of experience—collecting other people's memories, stories in a bin of "This Could Relate To Something Else Someday." Contrarily, it seems we also pick up pieces of ourselves and compare our own observations to the experiences of others. All to make it *familiar*. All to create small bullet-points that guide our understanding.

I have been trying to figure out what to call this. I thought this unified social understanding was a product of simple consciousness. I thought it was something we were, I was, in control of—as the observer. I thought every bit of information we collected from observation was as intentional as my seemingly intentional plans to control myself in Jonathan's presence. But, at the point when I realized that my concern over my actions around Jonathan began to control me, I thought better than to call it consciousness. And then, through some snap of the psyche, Jung came by and said: *In all chaos there is a cosmos, in all disorder a secret order*. And I thought that might have been the result of a teacher mentioning all manner of Jungian theory during classes.* But, wouldn't it be funny if Jung's philosophies had osmosed to me in some deeper capacity—maybe *through* the very collective unconscious that I was becoming conscious of? The observer, most destructively, finally able to observe her own inability to shake the powers of outside influence.

There is a piece in Alexie's collection entitled *Heroes*. It is a discussion that the speaker seems to regurgitate from memory of his interaction with Lester FallsApart. What is astounding is the immediate switch in narration from one first-person account to another. The speaker begins by describing the nature of his involvement with Lester. "Drinking all night, with Lester FallsApart, he tells me the story about the time he spent in McNeil Island Prison for writing bad checks" (70). The next line in the piece that is only one

paragraph long is an unquoted line by Lester, qualified as his voice with only the repeated phrase “he tells me” (70). But, after these two instances of the speaker suggesting that Lester will only be heard through the speaker’s own voice, the mid-section of the piece is, instead, a switch to Lester’s first person narrative of his experience in the prison. Lester replaces the speaker as narrator. And, although the switch is technically undocumented (to the standards of modern literary movement from one voice to another), the changing of the oratorical guard seems as natural as if the entire book were marked up with the implied quotation marks. How can I be sure that there are different voices dancing through these first four lines?

To confuse matters further, about half way in, when Lester becomes the first-person narrator, he decides to do the same thing that the original speaker did. He hands the baton over to the prisoner that his story is about, Silas Something-or-Other. The shift from Lester’s “Well, he says to me, during the war a few of us captured 20 Germans but we needed help” to the next line, “Shit, they must have got ambushed or forgot me or just plain left me because they never came back” is a second instance of a wholly undocumented shift in narrative voice (70). So, through the speaker, Lester FallsApart is invoked as a storyteller who invokes Silas Something-or-Other as a storyteller. And, when all is said and done, when Silas has said his piece, the first speaker picks up the responsibility of narration again. “That’s fucked up, I tell Lester, and he agrees and we drink one for Silas Something-or-Other, the only medal he’ll ever get” (70).

The seamless construction of the voices meld to become a voice. The strategy here is one of implying solidarity—directing the reader not only to connect to the tale, but to connect to the people-person telling it.

I remember being told once, in high school, that the reason anyone could muster the intestinal fortitude to read Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* at all was because it was told through one narrator explicitly telling the story of others. Marlow was said by my teacher to act as a cushion between the reader and the actual story, because his voice establishes a disassociation between the tale and the told. This division makes the heavy tale digestible, the teacher suggested to me, because it was once-removed. It seems to me that Alexie’s speaker’s direct transformation into Lester FallsApart, who almost immediately transforms into Silas Something-or-Other does the exact opposite of what Conrad’s characters do. Alexie’s characters flow directly from one to the next, and this fluidity of motion tends to include the reader in the process. The clear grounding of the narrative becomes soggy with the mudslides of confused voices. The division between what is *real* and what is *imagined* (the text)

becomes a subjective matter—a matter of perception. But, how?

I can no more understand my place in the reading than I can determine *how* it is that Alexie can transition between narrators without actually imposing verbal changes. I mean, it's just twenty-three lines of prose. Why am I able to distinguish between the voices without knowing the characters for more than a line or two? Is there a part in me that feels connected to others the way these dialogues are connected? This circumstance seems to suggest that perhaps I am not merely a solitary being, confined to my own little monitored post in the watched-city. I am watcher, too. As such, I can pick up pieces of others and connect them to myself. And, just because I am picking up on this nuance after a fourth or fifth reading, I cannot be sure that everyone does. Are there people who think that the story is told by one singular multi-personality speaker? My mind tells me that it *seems* plausible. But, it doesn't *feel* likely. I feel as though everyone can understand these undocumented shifts in voice.

So maybe Foucault was right in his rudimentary assessment of Bentham's Panopticon as "machinery" marked by its ability to make everyone self-chastising, self-observant. But there are more than just robotics that Foucault goes on to discuss later. Foucault divulges that "the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (196). This becomes so due to the arbitrary, yet all-consuming nature of power in the Panopticon. Each person has the power to observe from the towers, the right to be an operator of the Panopticon. The controllers are the members of the public. At the same time, no one is ever free from the observation of another. For this reason, the self that is aware of observation is not entirely a self—but a confluence of forces. Perception, in a way, becomes collective unconsciousness. All is known to one, and one has the potential to be known by all. The glorious estrangement of this discipline-complex is that it works to both *include* and *individualize*. In this way, there is a sense of communal understanding—an assumed undercurrent of common knowledge, and a common sense of self. However, the individuality is the part that observes each being as a particular self. The individualization works to distinguish between all that the inclusion works to unite. There must be a thread of common assumptions that act as the basis for perception. Something that makes our assumptions valid without making itself known to us directly.

So, is it more pertinent that I noticed the shifts in voice in Alexie's piece *Heroes*, or that at first I assumed them to be natural without giving them a second look?

I figured out (or, Carl and I figured out) the hole in the theory of the Panopticon—the user. The fact is that we know what we are thinking combined with the fact that we assume that other people are observers/the observed, too. We suspect. We are not merely reactionary in our self-observation, or in our observations of others observing us. We pre-suppose. Alexie’s shifts in narrative voice are just evidence of this incredible ability to “get the hang” of the mind and the not-wholly-punctuated way we think, or say, or do, or intend.

Something makes me feel like Elaine Brown is selling me short in *The Condemnation of Little B*. Somehow, she is slowly, but methodically, slipping herself out of her own book. Her voice is present, her intentions are clear. But, her story is mesh, and every time I try to piece together a vision of her interest in the discussion of New Age Racism, something drops out through the bottom, and I cannot reach under the soft cover of the book quickly enough to grasp it. What is, perhaps, worse is the fact that she does not acknowledge the lack of communication that she exhibits in doing this. And with ideas and allegations so strong—talk of the prison-industrial complex, discussion of socioeconomic hierarchy—it is impossible to remove oneself from the picture, because once I’ve read her heartily-researched claims, I’m going to want to find someone to answer my questions. I’m going to want to find someone to attribute the connection to.

The failure of Brown’s book is that she denies herself personal perception. She seems to have subtracted herself from the equation. This is particularly disturbing because she is both the observer of adolescent murder convict Michael Lewis (the condemned ‘Little B’) and the theorist of New Age Racism. Without showing her face (outside of a few specifically allocated scenes), she has left a gap. With whom am I speaking? To whom am I trying to connect?

‘What’s the matter, Ta-Ta?’ ‘What is it?’ they cried out together, holding her up, bending low with her. ‘Why’re you crying, Ta-Ta?’ so softly, sweetly. ‘I’m havin’ my birthday and my brother can’t even be here,’ she sobbed. There was the collective responsive of silent commiseration. ‘I miss my brother!’ (Brown 209)

I know where Brown is when she discusses these scenes. She contextualizes the tale for me, telling me that she will no longer see Michael Lewis “on grounds that [she] had ‘lied’ about [her] ‘legal’ relationship to Michael” (209). She relates her presence at Michael’s sister’s party as though she were a fly on

the wall. Giving the reader only Michael's sister. Exposing only the pain of someone other than herself.

Elaine Brown is the specter of the observer, the one following me around as I observe her observing me. I know she is always there, especially when she is not saying as much. She feels as though she doesn't have to. This is what *The Condemnation Of Little B* does. Because, on a completely visceral level, I want to deny her access to all of her abstract studies, as she has never cleared her throat in the book and explicitly directed a concern that includes her in her well-cited tirade to the reader. But, in being exclusive, she is metaphorizing exactly the sentiment that she'd like to. She is denying the reader that connection to what he or she is reading. Brown gives me enough to go on that I cannot completely discount her availability in the physical tale of seeing, speaking with, crying with Michael Lewis.

But, by denying me the right into Michael Lewis' one-hour-time-limit conversations, or by stopping before she tells me if Ta-Ta has seen her older brother, she is carefully wrapping her literary fingers around the throat of my suspense. Half of me wants to run as far as possible away—in anger, in frustration, for fear that I will never know exactly what I am supposed to extract from her tale. My power to be self-aware is gone because my own presence in her book is denied. But, there is the other half. The half of me that wants to give all the strength that I can muster toward trusting her. Trusting that the interconnection is already there because I can *feel it*. I do not need to be alone, in silence, on a barren country road (like Vladimir) to accept the words. They do not need to be words from my own mouth or in my own ear for me to have a transcendent connection to them. As with my understanding of Alexie's speaker-shifting, I am allowed to make a few assumptions.

That interconnectedness. How the hell does that work? How am I connected when I am both invited in by Vladimir and shooed away by Brown? Where is my place? A place. Is it only one place, if I'm both on the top of the tower and on the grounds being watched?

Okay. Amendment to all above deliberation: It's not solely about clarity, or even inference. It's a gut feeling. That's it. Understanding IS a gut feeling. In this experiment with observation, being observed, being in the thick of it, Vladimir is the control specimen. Right? Vladimir plays the role of the conventional guy feeling a little excess heat on his back and turning around to see who's staring. Check. And then there's Sherman Alexie. He doesn't *have to* indicate that he knows someone is watching or show that he's switching up the images. He assumes that whoever's watching is part of the greater worldly group of people that we share this big blue and green sphere with in such

a way that he doesn't absolutely *need to* clarify for us. We get the context, because it's fed to us everyday. That's what Jung might say. Right? But, Elaine Brown is a completely different story. I can't identify her using any sort of normative measurements. She's not telling me that she's observing Michael Lewis. Because, as much as her book is about Michael Lewis and his trial and his incarceration, it's not. Her book is about making the reader uncomfortable. Like a desert of human interaction—you go for miles, or for four hundred pages, at least, without another sign of true, level human discussion. But, she acts as though she's going to talk in the first person to make you comfortable. Tickling my wrist with her words doesn't mean she's going to hold my hand and guide me safely through the intersection of all of her ideas. More properly, it's as though she keeps interlocking her fingers with mine and crossing me half-way, just to stick me in front of some three-ton allegation that comes zooming down the page. “[T]he CIA facilitated, instigated, or was otherwise involved in the trafficking of crack cocaine to finance the group of Nicaraguan anticommunist guerrillas collectively known as the contras” (163). I'm eighteen. What am I to make of that? It is too much bigger than I, or Michael Lewis.

Brown inverts the implied safety of *collective unconsciousness* to lead you in with her first-person tales. Just to leave you naked, cold—standing in front of some of the biggest, most industrial-sounding numbers you have ever encountered. Should I feel violated by the trust I've invested? Or, should I feel encouraged, challenged to use my collective understandings in a personal way. To challenge the words I'm given. To challenge myself to respond even when, maybe, no one's there to listen.

Just because you can't see Brown's hand in the piece, directly, however, doesn't mean her fist isn't tight. She's enacting *her own* personal plan to undo the reader. Her words, strong. To the point. An unimpeachable image of strength who is so wholly independent of the reader that... This is beginning to sound too familiar. Brown is holding me up against the wall with her fist clenched, and she watches as I shiver and shake. But, I do not struggle, just as Jonathan did not struggle against me. Because, there is something understood between us. There is something understood that makes me realize that Brown isn't trying to demolish me; she is trying to prove something to all of us. And if I can perceive Brown to be just another person holding up defenses to prove a point, I can love her words for their gutsy display of passionate aggression. She's not there, but she's not without presence. Because her face is there, it's just in the implied periphery.

“I just keep falling back into wanting to hit you!...I want to speak to you. And, whether or not that implies that I care about you or anything you want to say, which it shouldn't, I think we both need this. I think this conversation would be good for you.” Each time I swung my arm, it stopped. I just *couldn't* connect. Nothing was connecting.

It had been a month since I had first taken aim.

I lowered my fist. I looked at him. I looked at him looking back at me. I looked back into my own face. “Jonathan, I want to talk to you. I think we should do this. C'mon. It's too goddamn cold out here.”

And it was. So, we left the rain, my cold words, his cold blank unresponsive face, and our bullshit—chucking it directly into the middle of Washington Square East where a taxi was sure to barrel down and smash it all into oblivion. We trekked down into the basement lounge.

I related this to him in the basement. “I was going to remind you how loathesome I find you, you know.” He gave me a face suggesting that I try another angle, like honesty. I descended, finally, from the tower. I decided to put myself and my voice back together.

“*Can we be real people?*” he asks, with his mouth in the cup of my left shoulder. The question is muffled, so I ask him to repeat it.

Can we be real people? Imperfections and all. Resigning ourselves to ignorance, or just to a “suspension of disbelief” that makes us feel like it's all right to not always notice the possibility of an observer? Of course. Because we make assumptions, and we understand before the information is presented. We suspect what we will see before we get to observe it, as it is in the back of this mind that we are sharing.

“You'll be able to tell when you see my nose growing and I'll do the same for you.”

“The problem is,” he said, “I can feel it. The growing. Awful noise.”

“Well, let's hope it doesn't happen anymore, then.”

I moved my arms so that they balanced equally across his shoulders, the ones that shook so much when I wanted to knock him clear into Tuesday, and whispered with tears that I will never tell him about... “Yes.”

“Wha?”

“Yes, we can be real people. I have missed you so much, sometimes.”

“I have missed you so much too, sometimes.”

And, after a kiss that was more like a parenthetical comment, “You taste like coffee.”

“Do I? Well, that would make sense. I had some coffee earlier, but I had a meal after that.”

“Well, precisely. But, only one cup of coffee is cancelled out by the meal. The other lingers.”

Something always lingers, unaccounted for. But, not unseen. In fact, we do not need to see it. We know it's there. It knows we're there.

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