

THE STRANGENESS OF THE OBVIOUS

by Jean Robert

Sometimes, the familiar scenery of highways, concrete, city skies which forms the immediately-perceived landscape of the urban condition gives me frightening intimations. I could say that it speaks to me of homelessness, but this would imply a need for something that I do not lack, since I generally have a place where I can sleep in a bed and money in my pocket to pay for it. What happens, rather, is that this very ordinary panorama suddenly appears otherworldly to me — martian, perhaps, but I am a Martian; I see a world of alien creatures and I am one of them. Looking at the world through an automobile windshield among evasive signs of evasion to elsewhere, I am nowhere and I feel I am from nowhere. The asphalt though is black-gray, steel structures are covered with tinted glass, lines of cars assemble on both sides: all is as it ought to be, everything is simply normal, terribly normal.

Although I enjoy the privilege of not owing a private car, commuting is for me a given, part of my human condition, as are the traffic landscapes through which others also wend their way. Nothing wrong with me nor with the shape of familiar things, nevertheless - the unspeakable dizziness. An explanation would not help. I could tell you that I live in a noisy neighborhood in one city, have a job in another, that the morning bus, often has no empty seat and so I travel standing. I could add details about this frequent ordeal, how I manage to live with, why I continue to refuse to own a car. But all explanations would only show how ordinary, how normal my condition is. I would just dissipate the dizziness, turning

it into banality or make myself look like a guy with a penchant for telling a story.

Sometimes I do not believe what my eyes tell me, do not like the taste of what I smell, nor the feel of the “stuffs” my eye touches. I am angry with what my feet see and what I hear tastes bitter. Today’s words tell me that one sees with the eyes, that the ear is the organ for hearing, that I had better hold the steering wheel of my life firmly in my hands. I am offered words to mend the cracks left by disruptive feelings.

Then once in a library, I found a catalogue of an exhibition of painter, Sydney Goodman. As I glanced at his ‘hyperrealistic’ pictures of traffic landscapes and windshield sights of highways shooting through suburb and country, I recognized scenes all too familiar. At first, I was puzzled as to why the artist had taken such care to portray these obvious banalities with painstaking exactitude. Then a now familiar feeling overcame me: the obvious turned weird, just a touch past bearing. An art critic quoted in the catalogue must have seen the same dislocation when suggested that the artist worked out of his own experience of estrangement: ‘...the light is a shade too high-key, the contrasts are too stark. There are intimations of other meanings. Doomsday could take us unaware, catch us short at the moment of our indifference.’

Sometimes, obscure stuffs hiddenly swarm beneath the familiar appearance of things. The feeling that this is happening makes seemingly obvious scenes appear disquietingly queer. I refer to this sensation as the experience of the strangeness of the obvious. I could, like Sartre, call it a nausea taking it to be the idiosyncratic alienation of a particular individual from things whose substance - for him - leaks away. But I refuse to psychologize this feeling, to locate it exclusively inside myself. Rather than a form of neurosis, it is, I believe, a perception. When the experience occurs, it is really ‘that out

Conspiratio

there' which is the source of the strangeness. When I feel this particular oddness, I feel it in an environment which I perceive as genuinely peculiar.

The experience of the obvious-turned-strange generally happens in an instant and dissipates as soon as sententious phrases weave their web, restoring the familiar appearance of things. The perception of the strangeness of the obvious can be like a fleeting glance through a tiny crack in things - a non-verbal insight into the substantial strangeness of banal stuffs. For me it is also a flash from the unsuspected depths of substance which pains my flesh, awakening me. If things did not sometimes hurt, I would never learn that reality is not a dream. In a poem by Paul Celan, I found an evocation of the unbearable lightness of stuffs — reality perceived as dream.

...and no kind of
peace.

Gray nights, foreknown to be cool.
Stimulus dollops, otter-like,
over consciousness gravel
on their way to
little memory bubbles.

Grey-within-grey of substance.
A half-pain, a second one, with no
lasting trace, half-way
here. A half-desire.
Things in motion, things occupied.

Cameo
of compulsive repetition.¹

1 Paul Celan: Poems, A bilingual edition, Selected, translated, and introduced by Michael Hamburger, Persea Books, NY. 1980. p.220-221.

Most of the routines which structure my condition as a modern man are compulsive repetitions of experiences which were once unique. There were once people who, for the first time, looked at the landscape through the window of a vehicle. What they then saw was assuredly more exciting than the spectral urban landscapes which flow past the window of my morning bus. Their pristine experience of 'speed' was something quite different from the opacity of my commuting to work. But I think I can explain the difference:

When novel experiences become routines they end up as a sort of daydream. And compulsive repetition makes one numb to the material presence of things. Then the materiality of perceived things can end up in a miasma of indifference. The obviousness of the obvious resembles the surface of a calm sea —something which the web of our certainties easily covers as the nets of fishermen stretch across a quiet bay. But shimmering surfaces can hide threatening depths.

In *Nausea*, Sartre wrote:

I was telling myself that the sea belonged to the class of green objects, or that the green was a part of the quality of the sea. Even when I looked at things, I was miles from dreaming that they existed: they looked like scenery to me. I picked them in my hands, they served me as tools, I foresaw their resistance. But all happened on the surface. If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then, all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had

vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder —naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. (p.127)

‘Things are divorced from their names.’ (ibid 125) (‘The Ocean boils with fear’, Du Bartas wrote in a comparable vein.)

In the daydream which engulfs compulsory routines, all too normal things can, in an instant, appear to be grinding up strange stuffs beneath the surface. Suddenly, things are no longer as they should be. But generally, all remains quiet. I have seen the process at work in myself. When I am jerked out of my complacency, I quickly reassure myself with commonplace “wisdom” and learned clichés. So, I am inclined to think that, if people were often to perceive the strangeness of the most obvious, new strings of words sewing together old ideas in novel fashions would conceal the disquieting feeling. Words can mend the cracks in the appearances of things, taming the unspeakable strangeness of the obvious.

Conventional wisdom, received ideas, common places, compulsory repeated formulas are the scarred fabric of perception in modern environments. They work to restore the obviousness of the obvious. But I feel that this mending is gradually anaesthetizing me. The restoration of the obvious is purchased at the expense of losing the real. The strangeness of the obvious, when it hits, hits the flesh like a boomerang. The backlash of the negated uniqueness of things perceived in or through the numbness of compulsive repetition whips the senses. I write this essay because I think that the wound, at least, is real.

The genuine perception of stuffs which can be strange, and the certainties that hold these stuffs in a web of obviousness are like two topological manifolds which partially, but not completely coincide. Or better, perhaps, one relates to the

other as the material depth of the sea relates to its visible surface in Sartre's *Nausea*. In the experience of the obvious-become-strange, I see the materiality of things angry at environments which negate this very materiality. Feelings then dissociate themselves from the words which conventionally describe experience. It is like the news that pain can speak my sorrow.

Though some of my friends tell me that they do not share this experience, I refuse to see my estrangement as a strictly personal quirk. I do not think I have come upon a private eccentricity, but a trait of, perhaps also a threat to, my condition as a modern man. To speak frankly, I think that one somehow deserves to perceive things the way he does. I must take responsibility for my perceptions. And if this is true then I am happy to see things strangely. My estrangement from the obvious is a 'disorder' of feeling and thought which does not call for therapy, but a discipline. It will either crush my judgment or enable me to face real questions: What is out there? What is real and what illusion? What is present which involves me? To what and whom am I present? I have no ready-made concepts to analyze an alienation that I feel like a sore spot in my flesh but nevertheless can cultivate as an entrance into reality. It is not 'something' to look at but a peculiarity of the eye, the grief of unseeing feet, the nose's quest for colors, the yearning of my skin for smells.

I feel that I live within imprisoning envelopes which maintain a homeostasis, a peculiarly modern invention. Yesterday, long ago, when the factory was a symbol of progress and men sang of tomorrow, Marx devised a theory of society which centered on the concept of production. His bottom-line he called 'the metabolism with nature.' For him, nature maintained a majestic permanence, so one could use her as an unchangeable stage on which different 'relations of production' generated various scenes. Only these relations were real, de-

termining the shape of society's fictions: cultures, religions, and ideas about nature (in this sense, 'nature is nothing for man'). Nature was present in the form of the 'laws of nature' and these were interpreted as necessary conditions of the social drama.

In Marx's late attempts to arrive at a 'natural science of man in society', man's 'metabolism with nature' meant that the 'laws of nature' defined the space in which all historical and possible 'relations of production' were confined. Matter, for Marx was the matter of the natural sciences of his day. He never dreamed of the possibility of a 'metabolism with nature' that would transform her very substance. He could not predict air-conditioned 'atmospheres', much less suspect that they would be of a radically different kind — belong to another genus — than the air he breathed. Marx imagined a metabolism with nature as the general frame in which the phenomena of his interest — relations of production — would take place. He could not see that a society's metabolism with nature would be capable of so profoundly affecting the perception of stuffs that one must now say: it shapes matter. Marx's materialism was not radical enough.

When traveling and obliged to sleep in motels, I always think of Marx's 'metabolism with nature.' The motel, the thirty dollars to pay for the room, the fact that I have money in my pocket, my choice of the Warren rather than the Hilton when I stop in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, all may perhaps be explained as expressions of 'production relations.' Yet each hostelry has the power to transform air into a noxious gas. I don't want to breathe that gas. Sometimes, in cheaper motels, I can turn off the gas and open the window!

If I want to speak of a 'metabolism with nature' today, I have to look at things like air-conditioning in a materialistic way. I have to start with the actual situation of my body enclosed within several envelopes which maintain a homeo-

stasis. Begin at home. Think of the warmth of your heated house in winter. You can still lower the thermostat or even turn it off. But think of public buildings, airplanes, hospitals, offices, and factories. Try to imagine what it would mean to turn off the machines. But how to let in some air?

I write with the conviction that our perceptions are also shaped by our power to “turn off”. If I can turn off the gas and open the window my space is changed, my perception is radically altered: hot and cold return. The several envelopes and shields which generally determine our metabolism with nature also shape the materiality of our perceived world. Strange dusty stuffs surreptitiously leak out from the envelopes which mediate our experience of nature. Layer after layer, the dust covers everything ‘outside’ in gray shrouds. They say that nature dies.

I live in a world where nature can die. I also live in a world where my homeostatic comfort is in proportion to my cowardice and where my courage lies in the strength of a powerless estrangement. I must accept that this is a strange world. In this, I have been assisted by a number of historians, philosophers and anthropologists who, independently from one another, but sometimes in conversation, have spoken of the radical strangeness of the modern world. In recent decades, they have raised the question of what they call the specificity of Western modernity. What they have written has helped me to understand my own feelings of estrangement and has moved me to examine the strangeness of the modern world in the light of their questions.

The question of the specificity of modernity has allowed me to break open the paradoxical loop of the ‘strangeness of the obvious’ by finding a third ground of historical comparisons. When matched against the records of history, most of what modern man considers normal is the exception. Looked at from the past, modernity indeed appears

strange. The one in me who looks at modern obviousness with an estranged eye may be what, in me remains of history. Modern times differ from all other epochs; a unique chasm separates the West from all other cultures. This, succinctly, is the specificity of the modern West. Historians will emphasize modernity, anthropologists the West. In its most abstract form, the question is about a difference — between epochs and cultures — which can be distinguished from all other differences. The modern West differs from anything previously seen in history by a difference which is ‘different’, specific, unique. Non-Western cultures and pre-modern epochs constitute a mosaic of extremely diversified forms which cannot be reduced to any common denominator. And no matter how open to differences and varieties, that mosaic cannot accommodate the modern West. The latter is not just ‘different’, it is radically other. The nature of its otherness resists any juxtaposition with other forms. It is not only a distinct configuration, but it is also situated in a topological space of its own. All historical societies differ in their shapes; this society is built from another stuff. From my perspective here, this means that modernity generates a mode of perceiving the materiality of the world which is unprecedented.

Theoretically, the question of modernity’s specificity meets with various difficulties. For example, it obliges us to elaborate categories for what we have lost. The history of the West, generally dealt with in terms of progress, discovery and development may come to be viewed as a history of losses. Further, pre-modern epochs and non-Western cultures never acted to develop a commonality of condition which would exist in opposition to us. Therefore, the categories in contrast with which we can grasp our specificity are ideal types. Several authors have already begun to elaborate such categories. Without these categories, modernity can only be defined as the result of acts of breakage.

But on the phenomenological ground of my experience, the question is barely tolerable —it directly and dramatically raises the issue of our radical strangeness. In relation to whom? To the dead and to the others —we are the dead's Other World and the other's strangers. And there is more. If I perceive this strangeness, I become an other to myself. I am split into a performer of routine gestures and an onlooker who can sometimes see the radical strangeness of the gestures. I confess to a feeling of powerless estrangement from the stuffs inherent in my condition of "modern man" - perhaps I am not quite normal. Introspection has shown me how to trick myself: a repertory of commonplace sayings, lessons learned at school, habits acquired at a job help 'normalize' my feelings again.

If I confront the serious and well-documented question of the specificity of the West with my own estrangement, cowardice, and small acts of courage, I may be able to open up the possibility of a disciplined distancing from modes of perception which have become intolerable for me. Through a historical understanding of modern stuffs, the world can, perhaps, acquire weight again.