

## SHEILA ROSS / Givenness and the Word of the Creature

*Marshal McLuhan having said, "The name of a man is a numbing blow from which he never recovers."<sup>1</sup>*

German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote often of the unobjectifiable aspects of human being, signposts marking the way to a philosophy of the lived world. Around the question of embodiment, he put out a call to which I respond here, a beginning merely, the still unfinished the business of his fellows Husserl and Heidegger to recognize "everything connected with the experience of the body and the way it is phenomenologically 'given' the whole wealth of kinesthetic phenomena in which the body is felt and experienced" (70). As if the systemizing abstractions of philosophy and the play of poetry had both set off in the wrong direction and begun this business badly. As though a new body-concept was required from the start, some manifesto on embodiment to expose the givenness of the body, expose language to this givenness. The task is to break the natural attitude this way, revealing to experience what Gilles Deleuze calls the "delirium," the tenacious, near insuperable hubris of subject and object, ego and will. Deleuze distinguishing what is outside the delirium, the human substratum enfolding it, as "a life," within which "the life" so insolently and obliviously abides. Deleuze, too, seeking ways to conceptualize this naturalism in order to put human finitude into relief, its bodily *movement*. An ethics of post-modernism has as its root idea such living finitude. Say in our time this insolence has reached a kind of fever, this sweat of certainty.

*One's name being the most familiar word, so familiar it attains a kind of nameless palpability, like the incalculable meaning of family.*

The body's givenness will not appear by dwelling longingly on the prospect of A Life in whose invisible currents run the bewitching shapes of consciousness, this stratum

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Douglas Coupland's biography, *Marshall McLuhan* (Toronto: Penguin, 2009), 8. Coupland stations this remark as an epigram next to a list of names for McLuhan produced by "available internet name generators." For instance, MM's "Goth" name is "Lord Fragrant Desiccated Corpse."

of being over eons of time lapping quietly near sensate shores, a flux lapping at the machine remote in its absolute closeness. The fact of the body's givenness must appear some other way. Gadamer's enigma of health offers a clue: to feel whole, enabled, full of life, one feels not the presence of health but precisely its absence, an enigma powerfully analogous to the givenness of language, which also disappears into its use, and while in use cannot be objectified. Can we speak of risks not to health but of it, then, as though itself a certain lost quality of attention or presence of mind? The body's distant geography, faint signals and lost outposts receding from the understanding like a burden removed, as though presence of mind were itself the burden. One might well strain to look at the finger that points to the moon, look into the hand. Think about the arm. But remaining scandalously without name is a kind of bodily movement where a mood can color the space of knowing in a saturation as perfect as air. The thrombotic stillness of the body poised for digital life, the very image of violent alienation from the living world. Perhaps its fulfillment. Of and with and behind and ahead of consciousness, the ancient territory of the human body seems doomed to become an inner outer-space, the most near to us assigned the same incomprehensibility as the most distant, a reach which can only ever be a calculation, but never a grasp. Meanwhile, some mythical middle earth hums its way to our fingertips.

*The word-prosthetic extending the hidden body, phantom limb long forgotten.*

In that split-second of estrangement when a victim of violence regains consciousness to the sound of screaming and realizes the sound is her own voice, in this slash of time, is the "I" proposition not cast into doubt? When a scent disappears from sense precisely as we know it persists, what part of being moves into obscurity? The clarity of water and air, of suffering and numbing labour, the element of language, all this clarity our busy brains telling we are whole.

The experience of the body is curiously extended by the mirror. The mirror's property of flawless repetition is of course optically deceptive and a fraudulent conceit. Something we were never meant to see, the mirror's image is a numbing dislocation. We rarely take notice of the need to reverse what we see there. The right-handed body appearing left-handed. We overlook this, yet a visual artist knows that when she holds her work up to the mirror, it can look uncannily foreign there. All



the idiosyncrasies, the exaggerations, deficiencies, pleasing harmonies, these stand out. This may occur just briefly, before a rushing takes place, an alignment of the image with the understanding once more. Or, it may be more striking and prolonged. Yet there is a sense of loss at this moment of realignment. With this recapture something escapes. What is this movement? Our new concept is born just here, of this experience.

This alterity occurs because the work's creation, say a painting of a landscape, is a lengthy, incremental process in which the artist's involvement at every step is so full and intimate that an understanding of the work emerging is organic. She weighs every line, every proportion, every volume and contrast, the relations of all these, and then weighs them all again as some new refinement presents itself. But as the work emerges, it becomes, paradoxically, steadily more invisible. The artist feels herself sink into the work. The work becomes her. This is its gorgeous, tragic madness, this special blindness placing the artist so humbly at the mercy of an audience (she knows not what she does). A prototype for postmodern humility: this kind of knowing, whose stamp of authenticity is such a gloaming, a gathering dusk of familiarity. This is what will cause the work to obtain its strangeness in the mirror, its otherness. If art holds a mirror up to nature then it does so withholding a secret from the artist, a secret life.

In this prototype for humility, the artist knows the entirety of this experience but especially its gloaming. She knows there is a secret bearing the contours of her working. And any freedom comes as much from seeing the fact of the art's givenness as from her autonomous vision.

*My name called out repeatedly until strange, sense returns, returns to this pulse.*

How like the artist and her work is the reader and her text? The reader works too. But this embodiment, this disappearance of the word-work of reading into the body is like a lifetime of seeing one's body in a mirror: simultaneous with looking, a proprioceptive effort like touching your nose with your eyes closed without the need to dwell on the act or fact of this strange inner sight. Unlike the artist, the reader never undergoes a gathering secret. Or shall we say it occurs over both too long and too short a time, a lifetime of literacy, the instant of comprehension. She cannot witness her own helpless alterity, turn the work of reading toward a mirror it is

already and surprise herself with a glimpse of something strange. The artist can but the reader can't be a witness to the gradual, ecliptic embrace, disclosing the givenness of her own mad vision. So the fullness of the word entering the body and as body holding the reader in its spell, the miracle zone needs its penumbra of reminders, this figure of rapture needs its ground. The ground is knowing what the artist does, the experience of forging something, flexing the limb of language with closed eyes turned to the sounds of the ancient movements there.

*The work of art whose beauty strikes one gives the gift of astonishment. It comes like the way of its creation, with its own slow release of stone, a numbing course of familiarity. If one traverses the Vatican's Belvedere Garden daily, encountering again and again there the voluptuous Laocoon with its singular luminous muscularity, after a time it would be like one's name. Too much satiety, too much proximity perhaps an insult to the awesome labour of bringing stone alive in the first place, into rippling, gusting robes or twining serpents. The white marble's singing deadened not simply by the presence of so many others in the glutinous Vatican space, Apollo, and Apoxyomenos sullenly close. The white marble's singing is deadened by habit and servitude. Say beauty is a song we hear, a mere constancy in time of relations among sounds. To regard this gift and heed its disappearance is to locate beauty in the givenness of the body. Beauty is something that happens to us; it doesn't last. Its cousin truth also is something that occurs to us. In this family this is how they go on living.*

## Works Cited

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