

Art, Radio and Alibi

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What follows will be lamentably abstract and compacted, since having such a short time to speak permits me only to say very large and billowing things. With longer, and with luck, I might have been able to have said far less.

I am not an art critic and when I speak about art on the radio it is mostly by accident. But I was called upon to do so recently in the course of a conversation I was having on *Nightwaves* about something I had just written on the imagination of the air. The interviewer invited me, politely and pertinently enough, to say a few words about the significance in the history of the representation of air of Joseph Wright's 1768 painting *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air-Pump*. It was a difficult moment. I was supposed, it seemed to me, to have a facsimile of the picture available to me for inspection and transmission. But, unlike my wife, Lynda Nead, who has the most extraordinary capacity to summon to her mind's eye and indeed to her tongue images in their absence, I have a very poor visual memory. I forget what I have seen as soon as I stop looking at it, and sometimes even while actually doing so.

Why might this difficulty be some good?

When we see things, we see them as something to be seen. Seeing is appropriation – *voir* is always a kind of *avoir*. We see the things we take them for. Seeing is a kind of naming under your breath. We take the things we see for what they are. In this sense, we may be said to see, not objects, but meanings and concepts, gatherings-up, seeings-as, takings-for.

In all of this the visual object is something like the *ibidem*, the *ibi-idem*, the identical thing in that place there – the outward and visible sign that there is palpably something there, something on the scene that is ready and waiting to be seen. In order to loosen this conviction, one would need to relocate seeing, to an elsewhere, an *alibi*, another place.

By why, in any case, wish to loosen this conviction? In order, I'll say, to start seeing the image as an object. To see something as an object, rather than an image, it is necessary to look away, to constitute it as an imaginary, rather than an actual image, and see it as something other and more than something already and thereafter there for the seeing. It is, if you like, an attempt to subtract from seeing the radical subtractiveness that constitutes it. In a sense, one has systematically to unsee it, to work on the image in order to make it invisible, inapparent. One must try to make out more than meets the eye, since what meets the eye is only what the eye is able or disposed to make out.

One does this by trying to induce oneself to see what in fact cannot be seen – relations, contexts, omissions, implications. These have reference to visibility, but are not themselves of the order of the visible. Think of the notorious blind men exploring the elephant and giving report of what they separately encounter – it's a snake, it's a tree-trunk, etc. It is clear what lesson the fable is meant to teach: that only the eye can synthesise what the other senses gropingly make out in comical dribs and drabs. But did anybody ever really see 'an elephant', that is to say, everything that an elephant is (and isn't)? Paradox: I can only see what I can name: but I cannot see names, not because I am blind to them, or because they are hidden from view, but because names are not of the order of the visible.

You will say that the process of making an imaginary object is just an elaborated version of the taking-for: one does not internally construct a radiant abstract of the object as in itself it is, one sieves and drizzles it with concepts, substituting names for images. I acknowledge it, this is perhaps even more of a taking-for than the work of vision in the first place. But it is one that can allow a return to the visual image, equipped to see it as something other than the eye's satiety, that is, as an object, which is to say something imaginary. An image is something there for the seeing. An object is something we imagine we can see.

Why are objects imaginary? To see an object, in its wholeness, to see the wholeness of an object, to see how it comes up against us (*ob-iacere*), one must tease it away from the factitious syntheses of the eye. You cannot see wholeness all at once, because you cannot see 'wholeness' at all, or not with the eye of flesh alone. We mistakenly identify wholeness with unity or completedness. We think that objects are finite, while meanings are open and indefinite, but the opposite is the truth. What we call an image is fixed, because an image is precisely a fixing; by being something offered for sight, an image allows one to economise on seeing. An object, by contrast, that is, something that has no need of my seeing,

and is thereby rendered, not infinite, but un-finite. An image is something offered for sight; an object is something that I can see that I cannot see all at once.

The object visibly apprehended holds thinking together, allows us to maintain, *main-tenir*, hold in the hand-held camera of the eye, our thought, Radio urges and allows us to find some other principle of holding-together, some other writing-in-thin-air, tightrope-walking continuity. Radio helps to decompose the flashbulb immediacy to which the artwork is always liable when subjected to seeing, shifting it from the spatial *nebeneinander* of the glance that pretends to take everything in by missing almost everything out, to the temporal *nacheinander* of the ear and the voice. By looking away from the image or visual object, one begins to nudge it from the order of the instantaneous and the altogether to that of the serial and the emergent. Like the songs and poems reconstructed in memory by the prisoner in solitary, the object is rescued by being first lost, then piecemeal retrieved. Of course, one always synthesises, but this synthesis can learn gradually to eschew the hypothesis, the underwriting, of the outward and so-called visible. Objects are a kind of absence that radio, though not always and maybe not even often, can help to make present. When one returns to the image, or encounters it with a radiolised vision, one is better equipped to see the more than meets the eye of the imaginary object (the only kind of object there can be).

We believe that an object is a dead thing, distant and over and done with. Hence the worst thing we can do is to objectify. Far better, we are told, to own up to our constitutive role in making the object out, in constructing the so-called object. Yes: but not if in the process we simply claim to take ourselves into account, or put ourselves into the frame, to see our seeing for what it is. Then we are back in the realm of the taken-for, and the seen-to-be.

Objects are unassimilable to us, which is why we depend upon them. An object is the warrant of the self's essential aperture on to what is not self, and so its protection against taking itself as a mere object. Only objects can give rise to the things we call subjects. A subject is a form of being able to constitute objects, able to see what it cannot see. This is why we are in fact so rarely and intermittently subjects, why subjectivity flickers in and out, depending on how far we are able to gain remission from ourselves in objects. Objects are the distance we are able to take from ourselves. They are a blind spot, that radio can help us see that we cannot see (a blind spot that we also are).