

Feeling Things

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In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice is shown the sleeping Red King by Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and told that he is dreaming about her:

“And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?”

“Where I am now, of course,” said Alice.

“Not you!” Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. “You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!” (Carroll 1976, 238)

We do not relish being reduced to the condition of a thing, precisely because we feel that it is a reduction: to be demoted from being a subject of infinite potential and a potential for the infinite, into a fixed and finite thing, is indeed to come down drastically in the world. Things, we are sure of it, are less than we are, the proof of this being that we can contain them, while they cannot contain us. We enfold them, in our concepts, in our projects, in our feelings about them – in our dreams. We are subject, they are object. They must be kept in their place, and our place secured by keeping them clear of it.

Dreams and things are closely allied in the contemporary rhetoric of anti-consumption. We tell ourselves that we should not lose ourselves in the dream of objects, that we diminish ourselves in consuming, because simply to consume is to debase ourselves into the condition of a dream, to become no more than a kind of thing in our own dream of things. This rhetoric is ancient, going back at least as far as the Christian denunciation of idolatry, and extending through the suspicion and deprecation of every kind of fetishism, religious, sexual and economic. We are determined to maintain the absolute distance between subject and object, in order to reassert the ascendancy of the former over the latter.

We know all too well what an object is – the word itself tells us. *Ob-* and *-iacere* – it is that which is thrown up against us. But what of the subject, the name of which suggests that it is not over and against the object, but rather in some way under it, subordinated to it? In some remarkable paragraphs in his book *Statues*, unfortunately still not available in English, Michel Serres meditates on the puzzling prefix of the word *subject*. For Serres, to be a subject in the world is primarily and primordially to be subject to the world. If the subject is that which can be distinguished from objects, it is therefore

[t]hat which lies under that which lies before it, holds itself back: attentive, concentrated, humble, silent. Subject. This word retains the trace of an act of humility. The subject subjects itself to the dominion of

that which forms and loses it. Yes, kills it. Only the object exists and I am nothing: it lies before me and I disappear beneath it. (Serres 1987, 211)

Pretending just for a moment that thinking and feeling might be contraries, and even that it might be possible to distinguish the two, we might note our tendency to think of thinking as an action, and of feeling as a condition. Thinking, we feel, is what we do, while feeling, we think, is something that occurs to us, something we encounter rather than originate, even, perhaps, something we come up against, or comes up against us. So, though only subjects have them, feelings are therefore more object than subject, and may seem to make us their objects. The objects of emotion are the ones that make us subject to feeling and therefore the subjects of feeling.

In all of this, subjects and objects are hard to unplat. What is a subject? That which can be subjected to objects. Do animals have objects, that is, things that they know are beyond them? It seems doubtful. To be a subject is to be exposed, susceptible, up against things, to a certain degree defenceless. But, more even than that, it is *to be able* to be so exposed. It is to have what Giorgio Agamben calls impotential, which is not impotence exactly (but perhaps not entirely not impotence either). It is the active power of holding back from power, or relinquishing it to assume powerlessness. 'Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential', writes Agamben; we are 'animals who are capable of their own impotentiality' (Agamben 1998, 182).

This declares the defining tension between subjects, objects and emotions. Emotions are our impotential, which is realised through the exposure (literally, the setting-out) of subjects to objects. We need to feel *things* in order to *feel* things, and that subjection to the objects of feeling is what makes us subjects.

Let me try to draw this together in a story. In the early morning of 7th August 1974, the tight-rope walker Philippe Petit smuggled himself on to the roof above the 104th floor of the South Tower of the as-yet-unopened World Trade Center, his objective being to string a tightrope wire between the towers and walk across it between them. But the first link between the towers was to be a fishing line fired with a bow and arrow by a confederate in the North Tower; this would literally be the guideline for successively larger ropes, until finally a 450 pound steel cable would be hauled across. But it was still dark, and, although he knew from his radio that the line had been shot across, Petit could not see where it was. Catastrophe. Unless it could be found, none of his elaborate preparations could avail. Petit, a man who lived on tiptoe, inch-perfect in his petty pace, knew immediately what he must do. He stripped himself naked, and swam slowly about the in the gelid gloom, fishing not with, but for the line, until at last he felt its infinitesimal flicker on his skin. If he was to be able to set out on the wire, he had to become a faculty of pure, deliberate exposure.

Michel Serres has called this quality of exposedness, of that which 'can be expanded from its natal position toward all exposures', the soul (Serres 1997, 31). Man is, as Nietzsche said, a rope, stretched over an abyss (Nietzsche 2003, 43). But though it is the only road into the air, a rope cannot be grappelled on it: it requires at least two fixed points. Let us not shy away from calling them the subject and the object, equal and opposite and mutually contending and dependent. What we call subjectivity cannot be

all on this hither side of things, here on the South Tower, for to be fully subject, fully taken up in my own being would be to condense into a black stone, or to hunker in darkness like an animal in its den, in its merely bestial being-there. To be a subject is to be able to take leave of your subjectivity, to be able to set out on the line between subject and object. 'The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine!/Feels at each thread and lives along the line' writes Pope in the *Essay on Man* (Pope 2006, 278). the spider in its web being a traditional conceit for the soul, both withdrawn from the world and in its twanging midst.

There is careful calibration and calculation in this relation, but there is also quivering sensibility, the tremor of terror and attent joy. As Serres, mountaineer and gymnast as well as mathematician and philosopher, has assured us, 'highly precise muscular and nervous dexterity leads to subtle thinking' (Serres 1997, 13). This is why you should never allow yourself to bolt down the doltish lie that thinking is the opposite of feeling, though you will hear it din a dozen times a day. Reason without passion is unreasonable, even irrational. Our settled conviction that thinking and feeling are at opposite ends of the line is one of the many ruses we use to deprive ourselves and, more importantly, others of the emptying and amplifying exposure to things that only thinking can give, and without which no thinking can take place. Thinking that is not highly strung, that does not sing and shimmer with feeling, will not bear your weight, it flaps, slack and stupid. Feeling that is not threaded through with thinking attention - attention meaning, literally, stretching towards, *ad-* + Greek *tenein* - is as bleakly, rigidly abstract as a theory or a myth.

I depend on the world, which is partly for that very reason not independent of me. But I do not simply give rise to the things of the world, because in that case the world would be no more than a kind of thing in my dream, meaning that I myself, dreaming, would in turn be no more than a kind of thing in my own dream. But I do occasion the world, I provide an aperture of opportunity for the things of the world to come into focus as objects. I provide the potential for the world to come into being through my impotential, my possibility of stepping out beyond myself towards the things-in-themselves, that lie unreachably but enlargingly at the other end of the line I cast out into the world.

My promise in this talk was to show as well as tell. but I have time to reach for only one example of everything I have been saying. Here is my flash-drive, known as we know by more names than almost any other modern object - USB drive, external hard drive, memory stick, dongle. Its office is to be a kind of tuning fork, which I use it to keep the four different computers on which I regularly work, in three separate offices and on the top deck of the 91 bus, synchronised and singing the same song. It knows everything there is to know about me, indeed, far more than I do myself. Not only is it expert in me, it even has something of my own power of self-reference. The data on it is of course encrypted, with a password of such fiendishly unguessable complexity that I dare not trust it to my fitfully fevering memory; so I have saved it in an even more deeply encrypted file, which sits like a spider in the midst of the data to which it gives the unique, inscrutable key. It is a pleasing thing, and I am tempted to expatiate on its many virtues and felicities, not the least of which is that, though it can store 60 gigabytes of data, it is little more than the length of the top joint of my thumb. It is the most recent in a line of such devices, which, as they have failed, or been lost, have been replaced with versions that are at once more miniature and more numinously voluminous. But I

realised as soon as I had this thing out of its packaging that it was actually too small for me to be able to keep contact with; it lacked the reassuringly lumpy heft of my phone, or the friendly toothiness of my keys, which enable me to pass them in tactile review many times an hour during the day, along with the other things about my person that help keep my person about me. (And is there a more intimate and immediate apprehension of the void over which we daily walk, I am prompted to wonder, than those few seconds in which one must walk through security in an airport, rudely and nauseously denuded of the sustaining company of those fellow-travelling objects?)

But this object, wafer-thin, gossamer-light, seemed to have dropped below the critical mass necessary for me to verify its presence, and was thus likely to be swept away any time I reached into my pocket for change. In fact, the prescient boy in Maplins who sold it to me knew that all this was in store and offered to sell me as an accessory, and at almost the cost of the flash drive itself, a lanyard, hinting that they were hotly in demand and he had only one left in stock. One of the pleasing things about things is the way they can institute or solicit a thing-like curiosity or solicitude towards the words that name them. I could only have given the most hazy description before this point of what a lanyard was, beyond sensing that there was something nautical about it, and so am quite likely to have confused it with a capstan, say, or a bowsprit. In fact *lanyard* is an English adaptation of the French *lanière*, first cousin to the words *line* and French *lien*, link. It just means a short piece of rope, or twine, or perhaps leather, attached to something to secure it to something else. Nowadays, the centres of cities are thronged at lunchtime with people with laminated identity cards bumping on their chests, secured, as middle-aged lady treasurers and scripture teachers used once to secure their reading glasses, with little strips of fabric looped round their necks, that are known, I now knew, as – *lanyards*. By the time I had realised that I was indeed in need of a lanyard for the otherwise incipiently evanescent device I had purchased, and had hastened back to Maplins, the youth assured me with a mock-regretful smirk that it had been snapped up by a purchaser wiser than I to the ways of the world, and of its things.

With every acquisition comes a new need, for objects *are* needs. And, since then, I have been on the alert for alternative or improvised forms of lanyard with which to bind myself to this device. It turned out that I needed something more than the lanyard – I first needed something to fix to the flash drive to which I could in turn attach the lanyard, once I got hold of one. I found such a thing on a key ring and discovered that, exquisitely, the flash drive has a little hole drilled in one corner through which to thread the lug of this nameless contrivance, which I have decided to call, for the time being and, very likely for the rest of my days, a *vincula*. So my sleek flash drive now sports, like the extravagant earring of some pirate, a *vincula* that is almost the same size as it is, the sole purpose of which is to enable it to be attached to something else, yet to be acquired, that will enable it in due course to be attached to me. I have tried threading it with a gymshoe lace (scruffy and down-at-heel) and various lengths and colours of ribbon (rather too Grayson Perry for me). When I went came to the Wellcome to discuss this event with its organiser, Rosie Tooby, I was issued with a temporary security card with a red lanyard of Platonic perfection, which I thought of stealing, but had to return to the eagle-eyed attendant on my way out. And then, last weekend. I was in Sweden examining a PhD. and the student to whom I had acted as public opponent, startled to hear me admire her lanyard, to which her car key was attached, gave me a spare. (Just as it had never occurred to me that I would need a lanyard in the first place, it suddenly

became obvious to me that, of course, I too should at all times have, like her, a lanyard, or two, in reserve.)

Early dictionaries gloss the word *lanyard* with the Latin *ligula*, a bond, from which we get words like *obligation*, *liaison* and *liability*. We are truly bound to the things that bind us to things by ties that have religious solemnity, *religion* being another of these allied words of allegiance. As Philip Larkin says, they 'link us to our losses' (Larkin 1988, 106). We are not merely attached to things, things are themselves the forms of our attachments to the world. By tying to us the things we are like to lose, we keep in close contact with the ever-present possibility of their absence, the impotential in which they are profligate. There is anxiety, the anguish of possible letting go, in all this articulation of links. We lose ourselves, we take leave of ourselves in things, that is what they are for, that is why it is so important to cleave to them.

There is a pathos in this, the pathos of the unreachability or unkeepability of things. Things are our true others, and to that degree vital to our existence in a way in which other persons, the mere simulacra of otherness, are not. If we could truly keep hold of objects, truly close the gap between them and us, the gap at once closed and held open by all the strings and laces and lanyards and other ties that bind, then we would lose them more absolutely than ever. The role of objects is to resist our assimilation. Objects must be able, as D.W. Winnicott so wisely says, not just to receive our love, but also to survive it (Winnicott 2005, 3). We are impelled to try to assimilate to ourselves that which we have feelings of attachment, but if we were ever actually able or allowed to assimilate them, we would have succeeded only in annihilating them, and, with them, the tension between them and us that keeps us in being. It is for this reason that the things Winnicott calls transitional objects, comfort blankets and the like, have 'the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated' (Winnicott 2005, 3). The animism of children is indeed primitive, because to mistake things for the kind of thing I am, and to attribute to them the kind of inaccessible innerness that I assume I have, is to dwell in the magical dream of the omnipotence of thought, rather than to draw out thought's impotential. We can never reach the things of the world, which is exactly why they are so indispensable to us, since only things can give us the faculty of reaching out, of extending into the world. Only by not giving themselves to me can things help give me to myself, by embodying the possibility that there is in fact a world for me to be in that is more than my own autistic empire of self-seeming, which is to say the saving possibility that I may not be everything ('They told me I was every thing: 'tis a lie. I am not ague-proof' says King Lear.) The only way to be delivered from the illusion of being everything, from the soul-death that such absolute and all-encompassing selfhood must be, is through the possibility of pathos amounting sometimes to agony that objects keep open. So, like the line of ligatures connecting me to my flash drive, the line connecting thinking and being is stretched out further than Descartes thought. In place of the simple slip-knot or noose of the Cartesian slogan, *cogito ergo sum*, the line might run: I think, that is, I feel things, which means I feel *things*, which is to say, I can suffer from the loss of things, meaning that I am not ague-proof, therefore I am.

Let me say again what I have said with as little circumstance as possible: we need things, because only things can guarantee for us the sovereign status of the no-thing we are and wish to be. And, precisely because that relation is a need, a matter of life and

death, and not a mere abstract congruence, it hums with passion and pathos. Our relation with the world, which only the things of the world can keep alive, is a daredevil, do or die, midair thing, full of rapture, peril and unexpected comforts. So our dependence on objects is not one source of emotion among others – it is emotion (= ‘moving out’) itself. Things bear our weight, the weight they accord to us. They take the strain.

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