

Hot Mess: Teasing in the Skin

When I was a young child we used to play word games with one another. I remember a popular one that introduced a word new to our youthful vocabulary, one that, at the time, suggested something vulgar. It would cause our little minds to whirl while our prepubescent and underdeveloped sexes tingled with the impending promise of explorations into a sensual world that at that time we could only barely begin to imagine, a world that we knew mostly through television and tabloid images.

“Your epidermis is showing.”

“No it’s not.”

“Yes it is. Your epidermis is showing.”

It was true, mine was showing. But I did not know what it meant, and the thought of me exposing something that I was unaware of caused delicious fright. My face flushed: panic quickened the pace of my heart and caused my palms to sweat. How did it get out? What got out? What? My epidermis? Why did no one tell me?

I was left to wonder all day, fretting about how something had gotten out of my control, overlooked, and how I must have been appearing to those around me, for how long, in a way totally unintended. I could be thought of as a tomboy then, attempting to act and feel comfortable around the boys. But when they played such jokes on me, I could not help but be reminded of me, of how I differed, and how I had appearance and manners that were different from the guys. Did I let something girly out without realizing it, while they did? Did the boys know something about me that I did not? What was that? What was *it*? Their laughter stuck around as we continued to romp through woods surrounding most of the neighborhood’s houses and backyards. After a while I pretended that I didn’t care, like it was okay, so what if *it* was showing?

“Your skin,” my father, a pediatrician, told me that evening when he arrived home from work. “Your epidermis is your skin.”

Oh thank goodness. What a relief. It was only my skin.

This little joke left me with a different conception of skin: it is the part of the body that is the most exposed. “Your epidermis is showing. I see your epidermis. It’s everywhere.” It is the organ mostly seen and experienced. It flakes and scabs, scars and leaves marks. Traces of past incidents are there until eventually, if the scars are not too severe, they are not. Skin senses heat and cold, changes color when exposed to the sun. It is complex, folding around the form of the body to give it shape. It’s elastic. I know a person by the features that appear on their skin. I read faces depending on what their skin tells me I am seeing. I think I know a person’s history, or may try to deduce a person’s past experiences, by the marks inscribed in their flesh. I feel my flesh, and it is through it that I am able to build a dialogue about myself in the world.

Teething Terminology

Gestures are revealing. They express how we sense/feel ourselves in the world, and so do our eyes and our voice. What happens in the unseen regions of our minds is expressed through our actions. What affects the unseen regions of our minds comes from without as well as from within. I recall a neuroscientist telling me that our bodies are in tune with the way the neurons in our brains are acting. When we feel that we are not safe in our surrounding, afraid or uncertain, the nerve endings retreat in, as do our outward gestures. The opposite happens in times of comfort. When we are happy and sensing no harm, the nerves extend out to make connections in the brain, just as we show ourselves to be more expansive and limber in how we embrace the world (as in actions and in thought). We are both thought and expression at once, without any particular order, incapable of discerning at any time which is feeding the other. We feel our bodies in the world as we register them in language. Sensations and words are immediately intertwined in the brain, all of its actions expressed through and by our physiognomy. We are flesh and we are thinking.

So what happens when we come across something we have never experienced before, like a word? Do we extend out and in? In and out? How do we expand our view, how can we know more when not knowing causes fright? And what does this look and feel like?

Not understanding a word is anything but a simple experience, and its weirdness is reflected in our behaviors, expressed by us in the flesh. If a person comes across a word for the first time, he or she may (automatically) try and find the most logical way to interpret it. But what happens while this word has no place in a logical chain, without a reasonable way of being read in common language? Can we even

begin to think what must occur at that precise moment when a person is thrown into nonsense by a word or phrase? Within the split of a second a person can find him or herself in a relationship with something which is outside but which puts him or her in the middle of the outside, engrossed by an experience of that which surprises understanding and suspends a person within an invigorating inaccessible excessiveness. On the surface our skin and gestures (already involved within the perpetual activity of forces in the world) express the grossness of this encounter. On the inside, we become aware of a vastness that, like the one experienced before us, opens up a space in our mind. The perception of this space is perhaps comparable to that “airheaded feeling” we equate with stupidity. I think of it as our minds in whirl.

It seems that when something is unrecognizable, it comes off as being grand and immersive, bypassing reason and leading to a shriek, yelp, or simple and generic expression (nowadays even expressible in text: “OMG!”). In other words, it is so big that no description works for it, at least not immediately, not until it is placed in an order and sequence which will give it a meaning. A meaning that we re-emerge from this momentary and sometimes hardly even noticeable flash by grafting it onto a new word or a new way of thinking about the world. This re-emergence may, nonetheless, begin with a phenomenon of experience and our ability to recall it in a way which places it within a relationship between us and the world.

“Word”

Words are symbols and their content is dependent upon how they assimilate past experiences to accommodate immediate one’s cultural decisions.¹ A word may fit in various ways into my vocabulary; I can use it to suggest different ideas. Like when I say I see a rat, I may mean a vile nasty rodent, or a person who stinks of conceit and dishonesty. Words may shift meaning as they come to be used in different contexts and languages, and we express this in our manners when thinking through language. Language extends as we come to know it, but not necessarily in a predictable way, as in a system or diagram that can be foreseen or generated by progression. It’s more arbitrary than that. The symbolic sign is

¹ Eco, Umberto. “Many so-called symbols are characterized by the vagueness of their content and by the fact that the correlation is not produced but invented at the same moment in which the expression is produced.” Peirce defines a symbol as “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of its Law, usually an association of general ideas...It is thus a general type.” *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*,(Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1984), 138.

culturally coded from without, not from within an internal structure but rather projected in a way to incorporate it into a description about it and the world. Being defined from without, words provide us with a topological map of the globe, us moving around in the surface, our vocabulary demonstrating our ages, our homes, our knowledge and our place within the history of human technology and thought.

How is it that we condition phenomena of experience into an organization that may be expressed through language (which by default is largely multiplicitous because we are partially a condition of regionalized perspectives and slang)? How did I learn to express myself with my voice? I know my place is part and partial to the construction of how I tell you of my thoughts, as is yours. We have between us a variety of languages, dialects, accents, and I value this complexity of communication. It is powerful and fills the world with wonder by being able to open it up to that: an immense place of discovery and description. The sounds of languages—tones, beats, punctuations, slurs, etc.—are unique and explode into a cacophony of rhythms. Through language we tell one another about our feelings and actions, we tell our personal narratives. We relate to the means by which we are socially organized. Syntax decrees order. So even if we may not always understand one another, we do agree that communication is central to how we look towards the future, and into the past.

As I see it, the world, at least the natural/sub-atomic/near-invisible world we live in, does not begin in such a temporal and spacious reflection. What is comforting to us, this idea of norm and reason, is so because it can establish a kind of rationalized distance to, and from, the near invisible “chaotic” world, keeping it from slipping willy-nilly into the outer limits of nonsense. I suspect our actual existence to take place in non-sense. And so we may just as well tread in the terrain and be both rationalized beings and pure percipi in the world, allowing the occasional tongue-tied in awe of blind-of-sight phenomena and sensation, ooh-ing and aw-ing and OMG-ing until that’s all we have left to say. After all, that is where thought may start to take shape.

Mouth Charting

But let us back up for a minute, and begin again at the beginning, in an encounter with a word that makes a young girl feel a bit daring yet incidentally naughty and reminds her of her being in her flesh. This little girl is playing outdoors in an early spring evening and is being told that she is exposing her epidermis while at the same time a butterfly flies by and a cool breeze tames the heat braising the hairs on her face. She is involved with the air, and on this mild sunny day, with bright sun

and blue skies, a toppled tree trunk supports her weight as she poises her body with crossed legs and a straight torso, allowing an upright position to be maintained at the cost of legs and feet falling asleep from lack of blood flow in and around the folded joints. She looks composed, she is undone. She may tell you what the heat feels like on her face yet she knows not that her epidermis is part of it. She is confused, and anyone who can look past her upright position would notice her shoulders rolled forward, a clicking of fingernails tapping on the tree bark, the shiftiness of her eyes and counting of her breath. She is thinking: “what the hell are these boys talking about?” Humps and sighs push out from between teeth and lips and within a second they pour from her mouth. Air is moving from the diaphragm and out, up the brace of the spine, noise in and out, belly rolls, nostrils flare and relax, eyes look round, hair on arms there, doing whatever sensation we may imagine; from all this, and more, come words, unseen enigmas that roll passively off the tongue and into the texture of the wind. She says to them, “Yeah, I know.” But really, what is she knowing at this very second? She has not a clue about a word and yet she knows about the tree trunk, and her mind is racing like the ticking of her nails and movement of her eyes, and the wind rushing up her pant legs.

These incidents are happening all the time. As in an instance of attraction. It is a common occurrence we have all experienced, and more than likely it has happened to each of us more than once. A person, thought of as handsome, looks towards you and says, “Hi.” Within a flash you forget everything, and yet at that very moment everything happening around this encounter informs you of something which goes beyond what you already know, towards something you can intuit. Words are lost, sentences are caught in the throat. The whole body, in fact, is in action... awkwardly at least (knees shaky and stomach achy). The sensation of another coupled in vision complicates reaction and perhaps “recognition” of what cannot be named for certain, and this affects the way words are formulated (as well as increasing the sweat on palms). Maybe “swept off my feet” is the most appropriate saying for this ever complex situation... though it is more like being taken for a spin. In such scenarios a preoccupation of this situation reveals more than a mere appearance. More often than not there is not a singular thought, but many, and spokeness takes a rambling quality...

We find ourselves in the world through a distance from and absorption within what I want to call *sensuous blindness*. Reason and blind-sight support each other. Blind-sights poke reason. Reason searches for a way to make sense of and shape blind-sight into order and organize that information gathered in through the senses. This ability to reorient through deciphering and taking apart expansive phenomena helps to rein it in.....

Read the rest of the essay in **Vestiges_00:Ex-statis beauty as the experience of the limit** ,
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