

# STRANGENESS

Lyn Hejinian

I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me... Talk of mysteries! —Think of our life in nature— daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it —rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?*”

—Thoreau, *Ktaadn and the Maine Woods* (1848)

July 10, 1988

Because there is a relationship between the mind and the body, there are inevitable experiences of instability and therefore of loss and discontinuity.

Loss of scale accompanied by experiences of precision.

July 11, 1988

Scale and precision do not contribute to a theory of description but rather to a poetics of description, which I'm here basing on examples of its exercise on two strange terrains, the terrain of dreams and the terrain of what were in the 17th and 18th century the unknown regions of the world, hence the terrain of exploration.

By description I don't mean after-the-fact realism, with its emphasis on the world described (the objects of description), nor do I want to focus on an organizing subjectivity (that of the perceiver-describer); nor, finally, am I securing the term to a theory of language.

I propose description as a method of invention and of composition. Description, in my sense of the term, is phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal, original, with a marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is toward objectifying all that's described and making it strange.

Description should not be confused with definition; it is not definitive but transformative. Description, in the examples here, is a particular and complicated process of thinking, highly intentional while at the same time ideally simultaneous with and equivalent to perception (and thus open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence of what appears). Or one might say that it is at once improvisational and purposive. It is motivated thus by simultaneous but different logics. Inferentially between induction and deduction.

Although my argument is based on examples of non-artistic description—dream reports and explorers' journals—description is obviously a problem of writing. Vocabulary and grammar are themselves an intense examination of the world and of our perceptual relations within the experience of it. One may agree with Ludwig Binswanger's aphoristic comment. "To dream means: I don't know what's happening to me", but its description is intended as a means of finding out. Description then is apprehension.

August 4, 1988

The term *apprehension* is meant to account both for some motivating anxiety and for what *Webster's Dictionary* calls, "the act or power of perceiving or comprehending"; apprehension, then, is expectant knowledge.

Both anxiety and a sense of anticipation or expectation excited by particles occur in dreams, or as dreams.

Descriptions of dreams, or dream reports, have increasingly come to interest me specifically as writing problems. The very writing down of a dream seems to be the act of discovering it (one "remembers" more and more as one writes until one wonders if it's the writing itself that "dreams") but it is also and problematically the act of interpreting it.

The dream description challenges the appropriateness of selection, since peripheral items may turn out to be central after all, and because details may have been lost in the instability of the dream terrain or in one's own forgetfulness. In this case, dreams present reportage problems, not unlike the reportage problems that are an issue in explorers' journals (Captain Cook's, for example) or in writings like those of William Cobbett (*Rural Rides*) and in Gilbert White's Selbourne journals. There is a disconcerting similarity between records of dreams and records made by the explorers—the same apparent objectivity, the same attempt to be accurate about details and to be equally accurate about every detail (presumably because one doesn't know which details are the important ones, either in Tahiti or in the dream).

The dream description also presents problems of framing. It questions the relationship between subject and object, since the "I" of a dream is often either unassimilated or diversely identifiable, so to speak reversible, wavering between selves called Me and Not-me.

Is "I", the dreamer, identical to the "I" of waking life? When, for example, I write of a dream, "I am in a locker room in a prison and use a key to unlock handcuffs so that three of us escape", who am "I"? Did it really feel (in the dream) that I was there in the way that it would if *I* was there?

In dreams, the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one. In fact, the dream's independence from binarisms like form-content, male-female, now-then, here-there, large-small, social-solitary, etc. is characteristic and makes polarity irrelevant or obsolete, and elaboration occurs, in some instances with terrifying effect.

My health was menaced. Terror came. For days on end I fell asleep and, when I woke, the dark dreams continued. I was ripe for death. My debility led me along a route of dangers, to the world's edge, to Cimmeria, the country of black fog and whirlwinds. I was forced to travel, to ward off the apparitions assembled in my brain (Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*).

August 8, 1988

*Dream of September 28, 1987:* A dress, or a woman wearing blue or black. She is a mannequin or a living woman. The figure fullface or maybe in silhouette. A view then or afterwards of a saddle-stitch stapler and a book nearby.

*Dream of 31 January, 1987:* Kit has written a novel —it is a large old oak desk, or maybe only the drawers of the desk. The top drawer is out of the desk, I think Kit is holding it. The bottom drawer is on the floor in front of Carla. Barrett and Carla and Kit and I are discussing his novel. Kit explains that the first chapter sounds as if it had been written by someone who was “going nuts, which it was.” This is a problem — he doesn’t want it to sound like that. He is worried, too, that nothing happens in the novel. I say, “going nuts is something”. Kit and Barrett break the drawer apart. “I could have and auction”, says Kit. “I had to spend the whole first chapter naming things, but the readers could find out what they are when people bid for them.”

“Someone might bid for a dog”, I say. This is very funny and everyone laughs. I’m pleased to have made a joke, but actually I’m only repeating what I thought I heard one of them say. It occurs to me that you really need a studio if you are novelist, since novelists have to build things. All of this dream is occurring in a room, which is maybe a small backstage area. The light is “natural”, but dim, more white than yellow —I’m not thinking about it, I don’t notice that I notice, but I do notice the dust and some black and white decor, maybe just panels, maybe just white ones and not black ones.

Now we are examining the end of the novel. Another drawer. It is falling apart too —the back is separating from the drawer, so there are gaps between the sides. I think to myself that it won’t hold water. Carla is talking about the chapter. Barrett is at the back of the desk, hammering a nail into its side.

*Dream of November 2, 1986:* I am taking part in a project to measure the planetary system. Other people are involved including a tall thin man and a woman with enormous breasts. In the project to measure the planetary system each participant slips into place between other participants to form a sphere. We are like sections of a citrus fruit. Once in place, hanging upside down, we form a sphere and ride around pressed against each other for 24 hours. I am afraid of being smothered by the woman’s enormous breasts. We pull out of the sphere and all talk about coming up with a better design for measuring the planetary system.

Among the things one notices about these dreams, keeping in mind that they are presented here as writing problems, not as psychological events, is that nonetheless persistent figuring occurs in them; the descriptions, like the dreams, proceed by virtue of various calculations and determinations. The dream of planetary measuring is exemplary of this, since it is *about* figuring, and about the metamorphic processes that result. What appears to be a search for the right word is more often and more accurately a search for the right object, itself as unstable as the word and located in an unstable terrain. The figuring that occurs in moving through the mobility of the dream, and the literal refiguring of figures in the dream, take place also in the course of writing. For me, in this sense, the process of writing, like the process of dreaming, is a primary thinking process. Thinking explores, rather than recording prior knowledge or an expression of it.

August 9, 1988

It would be inaccurate and inappropriate, even ludicrous, to characterize the dream as an example of self-expression. I'm not even sure one can regard it precisely as an act of introspection, though it is impossible to think of dreams as myopic in this respect. But if dreams are not introspective, properly speaking, they nonetheless exhibit some of the effects of introspection on our experience of experience —which, at least in my case, often occurs as writing.

My use of the term “introspection”, and my sense of the introspective method and its effect on experience and ultimately their emergence in poetics, are indebted to William James's philosophy of consciousness and thereby of language. But it is Gertrude Stein who extended James's philosophy into literary practice, a practice foregrounding the consciousness of consciousness and its linguistic character. In essence, Stein proposes the act of writing as the organization and location of consciousness in legible units, and not just of consciousness but of the consciousness of consciousness, the perceiving of perception. As she says in “Poetry and Grammar”, “One of the things that is a very interesting thing to know is how you are feeling inside you to the words that are coming out to be outside of you” (209). What I am here calling the consciousness of consciousness, or the perceiving of perception, is the proper function of introspection.

The introspective method has certain consequences. James argues that consciousness can best be described as a stream —he speaks at length of the “stream of thought” and the “stream of consciousness” —but introspecting the contents of the stream, and, more precisely, a particular item floating along it, arrests the item, detaches and isolates it.

As we take [...] a general view of the wonderful stream of our consciousness, what strikes us first is [the] different pace of its parts. Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings [...] The resting-places are usually occupied by sensorial imaginations of some sort, whose peculiarity is that they can be held before the mind for an indefinite time

and contemplated without changing; the places of flight are filled with thoughts of relations, static or dynamic, that for the most part obtain between the matters contemplated in the periods of comparative rest. Let us call the resting-places the “substantive parts”, and the places of flight the “transitive parts”, of the stream of thought. [...] Let anyone try to cut a thought across in the middle and get a look at its section, and he will see how difficult the introspective observation of the transitive tracts is. The rush of the thought is so headlong that it almost always brings us up at the conclusion before we can arrest it. Or if our purpose is nimble enough and we do arrest it, it ceases forthwith to be itself. As a snowflake crystal caught in the warm hand is no longer a crystal but a drop, so, instead of catching the feeling of relation moving to its term, we find we have caught some substantive thing, usually the last word we were pronouncing, statically taken, and with its function, tendency, and particular meaning in the sentence quite evaporated. The attempt at introspective analysis in these cases is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks (236-37).

If one looks at my dream of September 28, 1987, one sees a sequence of substantives lacking their transitives. And this is true in several senses. There is a kind of oscillation, even reversibility, between the dress and the woman, which seem to be metonyms for each other, existing spatially (which is to say substantively) but atemporally (intransitively). The dress and the woman may stand for each other, but they are not synonymous not even overlapping. The objectified figure, even if perhaps a live woman is static, while the dreamer-observer, from whom “I” have been stripped or withdrawn, sees her or it from several vantage points: “fullface or in silhouette”. The female figure is then replaced by a stapler and a book nearby.

“I”, the dreamer-observer, experience no self-consciousness. I exist as if absorbed into an audience, or as if no one at all. But the female figure is me. I know this because of the familiar blue or black clothes. The saddle—stitch stapler I recognize as the particular heavy antique one that I used in putting together the Tuumba Press books. Now I have loaned it more or less permanently to someone who publishes a magazine. It is emblematic of certain things I’ve done and know how to do —make books, for example, both by writing them and by printing and publishing them— and of certain attitudes I have regarding literary communities.

The woman appears first in the dream, and the other three things are elements in a description of her. The dress, stapler, and book are three metonymic entries in a description. I recognize these various elements as me; however, they are entirely displaced —we are shifted apart from each other, indeed there are numerous removes, in a complex of dispossession. “To the psychologist”, says James.

the minds he studies are *objects*, in a world of other objects. Even when he introspectively analyzes his own mind, and tells what he finds there, he talks about it in an objective way. He says, for instance, that under certain

circumstances the color gray appears to him green [...]. This implies that he compares two objects, a real color seen under certain conditions, and a mental perception which he believes to represent it, and that he declares the relation between them to be of a certain kind. In making this critical judgment, the psychologist stands as much outside of the perception which he criticizes as he does of the color. Both are his objects (183-84).

August 10, 1988

Introspection has writing as its exemplar, as a radical method with disintegrating and dispersive effects.

The dream about measuring the planetary system may be an attempt to counter this, but “we pull out” in the end.

August 12, 1988

The elements in the September dream are atemporal, only spatial, though remarkably without the sense of continuity that is provided by landscape. They are like props, picked up by perception and then put back. They don't do anything, in a temporal sense.

On the other hand, the person, so-called “I”, in the dream of planetary measurement is notably caught in a temporal figure, one which occasions a kind of spatial disintegration —first “I” am afraid of being smothered, and then, I (“we”) break the figure apart in order to regain some sense of integrity.

The disjuncture or discontinuity between the spatial existence and the temporal existence of a person ruptures the connection between body and the mind —it is a paradigm for all models and experiences of discontinuity, that fountain of postmodernity and anxiety. And it is the non-coherence of dreams, or of the objects in dreams, which is exactly what makes us suspect them of being unreal. It is thus that our dreams pose an epistemological problem to philosophy.

Objects of sense, even when they occur in dreams, are the most indubitably real objects known to us. What, then, makes us call them unreal in dreams? Merely the unusual nature of their connections with other objects of sense. [...] It is only the failure of our dreams to form a consistent whole, either with each other or with waking life, that makes us condemn them (Russell, 85, 95).

This is true only until our examination of the “real” is such that its components too are dispossessed of their obviousness and necessity. They are, at least in my experience, not so much decontextualized as arrested, until the entire universe of context seems to implode into them, abandoning the observer. It is the dreamer, the observer, the writer who is dispossessed. This is equally true when the object of inquiry is the self. As Adorno puts it,

Absolute subjectivity is also subjectless. The self lives solely through transformation into otherness; as the secure residue of the subject which cuts itself off from everything alien it becomes the blind residue of the world... pure subjectivity, being of necessity estranged from itself as well and having become a thing, assumes the dimensions of objectivity which expresses itself through its own estrangement. The boundary between what is human and the world of things becomes blurred (262).

This is one of the principle strategies of poetry, although perhaps “strategies” is not an accurate term in all cases —inquiry to such a degree is sometimes the motivation of poetry and sometimes furthermore the effect of poetry.

August 16, 1988

If one posits descriptive language and, in a broader sense, poetic language as a language of inquiry, with analogies to the scientific methods of the explorers, then I anticipate that the principle trope will be the metonym, what Roman Jakobson calls “association by contiguity”. The metonym operates within several simultaneous but not necessarily congruent logics, oscillating inferentially between induction and deduction, depending on whether the part represents the whole (reasoning from the particular to the general) or whether the whole is being used to represent the part (reasoning from the general to the particular). Or again an object may be replaced by another adjacent, the cause by the effect or the effect by the cause, spatial relations may replace temporal ones or vice versa, an action may replace the actor or vice versa, and so forth. Metonymy moves attention from thing to thing; its principle is combination rather than selection. Compared to metaphor, which depends on code, metonym preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship. And again in comparison to metaphor, which is based on similarity, and in which meanings are conserved and transferred from one thing to something said to be like it, the metonymic world is unstable. While metonymy maintains the intactness and discreteness of particulars, its paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points. Deduction, induction, extrapolation, and juxtaposition are used to make connections, and even “a connection once created becomes an object in its own right” (Jakobson, 312). Jakobson quotes Pasternak:

Each detail can be replaced by another...Any one of them, chosen at random, will serve to bear witness to the transposed condition by which the whole of reality has been seized (312).

August 17, 1988

Metonymic thinking moves more rapidly and less predictably than metaphors permit—but the metonym is not metaphor’s opposite. Metonymy moves restlessly, through an associative network, in which the associations are compressed rather than elaborated.

Metonymy is intervalic, incremental —which is to say, measured.

A metonym is a condensation of its context.

But because even the connections between things may become things in themselves, and because any object may be rendered into its separate component parts which then become things in themselves, metonymy, even while it condenses thought processes, may at the same time serve as a generative and even dispersive force.

August 18, 1988

Comparing apples to oranges is metonymic.

August 19, 1988

With respect to dream descriptions, psychological interpretation focuses primarily on identification and symbolism (metaphor), but a literary interpretation depends on the metonym (displacement and synecdochic condensation).

In my dream of Kit's novel, the novel is not a metaphor, and neither is the desk. They enter the dream as metonyms. The word "novel" (in the sense of "new") means Kit, whose job includes writing for a company *newspaper*. Also I know that Kit has used lines from newspapers in some of the poems he has recently shown me. But "novel" means me, too. I've tried to make use of lines from newspapers in imitation of Kit but I can't seem to get anywhere with it. And then there is the news itself, of course, or rather my despair over the efficacy (or inefficacy) of poetry in the course of events —the imperviousness of the world to such improvements as might be suggested by artistic work and artistic thought.

The dream is about writers and writing. The desk is writing —the place of production is substituted for the thing produced— agency replaces effect. In the dream we are improving the news; it is not irrelevant that several of us are working together to do so.

The phrase "going nuts" is initially metaphorical— the head looks like a nut, or it is hard on the outside and soft on the inside, or hangs on the neck, like a nut. But the plural is interesting; when one suffers from insanity one is transformed into a figure with several heads— one develops or suddenly has a fragmentary or multiple sense of self. The phrase here captures, albeit somewhat humorously, my own experience of extended introspecting, undertaken until the self is utterly unfamiliar and threatens to disperse into separate and apparently foreign parts. When I say in the dream that "going nuts is something" I think I mean that introspection is a real activity, and a worthwhile one— a possible basis for writing.

Perhaps the dream arrived at the word "auction" by association with "action", not quite a homonym. Kit is saying, Auctions are stronger than words. The dog that someone might bid for and the water that won't be held by the drawer actually belong together —the reference is to another group of poems, abandoned long ago, in a manuscript called "Water and Dogs", by which I meant the sublime and the



ridiculous, or realities on vast and on quotidian scales. Nothing seems more timeless than water to me and nothing more daily than dogs. The dailiness of the dog is like the dailiness of news. My obvious worry is that the fragility of the poem can't contain information on the scale of water. We are apparently trying to patch it up.

August 21, 1988

The metonym, as I understand it, is a cognitive entity, with immediate ties to the logics of perception. To the extent that it is descriptive, or at the service of description, as is true in my own work, it also has a relationship to empiricism. That is, to the extent that metonymy conserves perception of the world of objects, conserves their quiddity, their particular precisions, it is a "scientific" description.

What I am thinking about to justify saying such a thing are particularly the writings of the explorers and of the natural historians who accompanied them in order to examine and describe what they encountered. In this connection, one of Jakobson's observations on the literary use of metonymy (in his study of the cognitive uses of metonymy and metaphor based on work with aphasics), is interesting.

The primacy of the metaphoric process in the literary schools of Romanticism and Symbolism has been repeatedly acknowledged, but it is still insufficiently realized that it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so-called Realist trend (111).

August 23, 1988

In order to understand the metonym as a cognitive, perceptual, logical unit, one has to go back, I think, to Sir Francis Bacon, and the history of his influence, eventually on literary language but originally on scientific language. The project he called "The Great Instauration", of which only two parts were completed, the *Advancement of Learning* (1605) and the *Novum Organum* (1620), was to be a description of all knowledge, with an elaboration of the methods for obtaining it, in which writing figured prominently and essentially.

After having collected and prepared an abundance and store of natural history, and of the experience required for the operations of the understanding or philosophy, still the understanding is as incapable of acting on such materials of itself, with the aid of memory alone, as any person would be of retaining and achieving, by memory, the computation of an almanac. Yet meditation has hitherto [been] more [employed in] discovery than writing, and no experiments have been committed to paper. We cannot, however, approve of any mode of discovery without writing, and when that comes into more general use, we may have further hopes. (*Novum Organum*, First Book, #101.)

He goes on to speak of the “multitude and host” of particular objects, “lying so widely dispersed” which must be organized, “in living tables of discovery” so as to be readily available as “the subject of investigation”. And then, on the basis of “what we term literate experience”, philosophers (scientists) may “invent a different form of induction from that hitherto in use. [...] We must not then add wings, but rather lead and ballast to the understanding, to prevent its jumping or flying” (#102, #103).

In essence Bacon set in motion a reformation of learning, demanding that scientific attitudes be purged of established systems and prior opinions. Instead the observer should experience direct and sensuous contact with the concrete and material world, in all its diversity and permutations, and unmediated by preconceptions. Bacon and his subsequent followers were convinced that the components of the natural world are “eloquent of their own history”. Nature itself is a book.

The concept of nature as a book appears as early as Plotinus, who compares the stars to letters inscribed in the sky, constantly forming writing as they move. It recurs in literature from the middle ages on, and it played a significant role in the literary and art critical writings of the American Transcendentalists. Barbara Stafford, in her study of illustrated travel accounts, *Voyage into Substance*, quotes the geologist John Whitehurst, who in his *Original State and Formation of the Earth* (1778), wrote of a particular geological formation that its history “is faithfully recorded in the book of nature, and in language and characters equally intelligible to all nations” (295). The belief in the universality and equal intelligibility of the language of nature is important.

During the eighteenth century there was a great deal of speculation about the origin of languages and diverse projects were undertaken in hopes of discovering a universal language in past or present cultures analogous to that which seemed to occur in nature. Leibniz, while in England in 1673, set out to discover what he called “the real character” (what semioticians would call a sign) “which would be the best instrument of the human mind, and extremely assist both the reason and the memory, and the invention of things” (quoted, Stafford, 310). 18th century scientists and philosophers of science sought to determine and define the basics of such a language. In many ways this simply continued efforts proposed by Bacon in the *Advancement of Knowledge* to develop a philosophical grammar capable of examining the analogy between words and things. Interest in a universal language grew out of Bacon’s insistence that knowledge should be communicated in what he called aphorisms. Writing in “aphorisms”, which concentrate content, seemed to be identical with the inductive method of the acquiring and inquiring sciences. It was basic to the “plain” style that Baconians advocated for delivering information taken directly from and in sight of particulars.

In their speculation about the origins of language, and under the impact of writing by travellers and explorers in Egypt, some theorists turned their attention to hieroglyphs. In 1741, William Warburton, in the second book of his *The Divine Legations of Moses Demonstrated*, argued that hieroglyphs were secret symbols written by priests but rather public communication, universal, condensed, efficient,

and “original”. He sought to demonstrate that they were based on forms found in nature, so as to convey information directly to the eyes.

Warburton stresses the unmetaphoric, unsymbolic nature of the... hieroglyph: [it is, he says, a] “plain and simple imitation of the figure of the thing intended to be represented, which is directly contrary to the very nature of a symbol, which is the representation of one thing by the Figure of another...» Further, Warburton indicates that this simple hieroglyph functioned metonymically, not metaphorically... by putting the principal part of the thing for the whole...He implies that the return to metonymy, to the concrete fragment of nature,... is a return to tangible simplicity, to the convention-free (Stafford, 311).

If the individual hieroglyph presents a single fragment of natural reality, a “paragraph” or collection of them could only be organized paratactically. Parataxis is significant both of the way information is gathered by explorers and the way things seem to accumulate in nature. Composition by juxtaposition presents observed phenomena without merging them, preserving their discrete particularity while attempting too to represent the matrix of proximities.

August 25, 1988

Bacon’s model for the practice and description of the New Science had an enormous effect on a period when the world was opening into a field of inquiry and in which no hierarchy of inquirers had been established. Men, although not women, of letters were as “scientific” as anyone else and could and did travel to previously unknown regions as reporters of all that they saw. Thus a whole literature of description developed, and with it a theory (or, actually, multiplicity of theories) of language, some of it the parent of linguistics and some of it the parent of poetics.

About 20 years after the publication of Bacon’s *Novum Organum*, The Royal Society was established in England on Baconian principles, first as a forum for the discussion of new scientific discoveries and later, as the organization grew into a financial institution as well as an intellectual one, as a principal resource for funds for experiments and voyages of discovery and exploration, with the purpose of accumulating large stocks of data.

Bishop Thomas Sprat’s *The History of the Royal-Society of London, for the Improving of Natural Knowledge* (1667) was its first history, written to defend the Society from critics who felt that its scientific work was unholy. The volume is both a polemic and an anthology of the goals and achievements of The Royal Society’s members and proteges.

They have been... most rigorous in putting in execution... a constant Resolution, to reject all the amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style: to return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver’d so many things, almost in an equal number of words. They have

exacted from all their members, a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can: and preferring the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that, of Wits or Scholars (113).

Sprat insisted that the incorporation of new scientific data into poetry would make it comprehensible to everyone, since it could thus take advantage of the universal character of scientific language. He attacks the “trick of *Metaphors*”, which impose their deceptive beauty, obscuring information and limiting learning. Linguistic descriptive tasks are, rather, identical with scientific observational ones.

According to 17th and 18th century philosophers of science, there is a specifically scientific way of seeing, which looks at, not over, the object of inquiry. Thus prospect, view, scene, and panorama are essentially unscientific —and the extent to which a metaphor is scenic is further ground for disqualifying it from realistic description.

Description narrates nature but principally by exhibiting its particulars. To the extent that metaphors can be said to give things names which properly belong to other things, they were held to be inconsistent with a respect for particularity. Ultimately, conditions are incomprehensible without the use of analytical conceptual structures, but an initial, essential recognition of difference —of strangeness— develops only with attention to single objects, while others are temporarily held in abeyance. The popularity of the explorers’ writings was partially due to the narrative tension that was established between perceptual immediacy and a deferral of complete comprehension.

August 28, 1988

The explorers were in many respects required to be literary men. Information about what they saw, and what they knew about natural and new realities as a result of having seen them, could only be transmitted through descriptions and through the drawings and paintings made by the artists who often accompanied them on their voyages. The explorers’ methods of discovery involved a nonmetaphoric examination of particulars, and this became a significant examination of particulars, and this became a significant aesthetic element in their writings. Explorers and scientists sought to discover the tangibility and singular distinctness of the world’s exuberant details and individualities without spiriting them away from each other. One important result was that the particular, under the pressure of persistent and independent seeing, emerged in the “low” genre of the travel narrative to give back the intensities normally associated with traditional “high” genres and the “elevated” emotions provoked by the heroic and the Sublime. The “literature of fact”, intended for the instruction of public, developing in response to the demand for verifiable truth enunciated by philosophers and scientists,

revitalized literature just when it seemed to have become trivialized with “too much art and too little matter”.

August 30, 1988

When the term “realism” is applied to poetry, it is apt to upset our sense of reality. But it is exactly the strangeness that results from a description of the world given in the terms, “there it is”, “there it is”, “there it is” that restores realness to things in the world and separates things from ideology. That, at least, is what Bacon argued and what the practising and theorizing empiricists believed, though argument over the adequacy or inadequacy of such a description, and of the knowledge we acquire from such a description has propelled western philosophy ever since —through Hume, Kant, Hegel, Russell, Wittgenstein, to the present. The ontological and epistemological problem of our knowledge of experience is, to my mind, inseparable from the problem of description.

An evolving poetics of description is simultaneously and synonymously a poetics of scrutiny. It is description that raises scrutiny to consciousness, and in arguing for this I am proposing a poetry of consciousness, which is by its very nature a medium of strangeness.

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