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Poetic Self-Experience

There is in the modern Western philosophical tradition a paradigm of introspection in which the present consciousness or "I" interrogates itself about its nature, seeking to determine what it can about its own essence, provenance, integrity, and identity. This paradigm may begin in Montaigne, who famously reported that "I do not find myself where I seek myself." Certainly it is codified in Descartes, and we encounter it over and over in post-Cartesian epistemology: in Locke's explorations of identity, Hume's refutation of substantial selfhood and Kant's theory of the transcendental unity of apperception. It is this kind of interrogation to which I refer with the term "self-experience," namely, the self's phenomenological experience of itself. This mode of introspection can include the self's experience of its own history, its continuity with past selves or the want thereof, but it can also, as it does in Descartes, entail only the present self's experience of itself and of own motions in *this* moment. Now, the very nature of the first-person lyric would suggest that such a form of introspection occupies poetry too, and there are obvious examples in the High Romantic lyric (think of "Tintern Abbey" or "Frost at Midnight"). Without further investigation, though, we cannot say if poetic self-experience bears the same motive. In all the philosophical cases I have mentioned, the motive is epistemological: a question has been posed to which the answer is sought through introspection, namely: what can the "I" *know* about itself? (And after Descartes the answers tend to be skeptical.) Some poems do explore the question of "what is in there?," that is, the question of the contents and the integrity of consciousness. This is largely a contemporary venture, to be found in Ashbery and in language poets such as Charles Bernstein. (Example.) Theirs is a properly ontological exploration, and properly philosophical in that a specific discursive answer is sought to a specific discursive question. Generally speaking, self-knowledge of some kind must rank among the aims of poetic self-experience but it is not necessarily knowledge of the kind the philosophers sought.Oftenthe occasion of poetic self-experience is such that it might be termed existential. It arises from "the importunate enigma of our existence," to quote Schopenhauer's wonderful phrase. Something in immediate experience calls forth a confrontation of self with self, or a delving of the self into its own nature, from an impetus and a necessity that are plainly psychological. The same questions may be posed, explicitly or implicitly, and the same enigmas may present themselves, but the need for inquiry is staged differently; in poems it may be urgent and personal.

The point makes itself if we return to the High Romantic lyric, particularly the kind that Wordsworth and Coleridge developed out of the 18th-century "poem of revisitation," in which the speaker returns to a place important to him or her in the past and is forced to perceive the changes he or she has undergone.In "Tintern Abbey" and the Intimations Ode, Wordsworth is shaken in his sense of "personal identity" – he desperately needs to know how the person he is now is related to the person he remembers having been –

because his conception of his being and his purposes is at stake. In "Frost at Midnight," Coleridge's speaker, marooned in silence and solitude, finds himself "vexed" by the self-entanglement of present consciousness, which, turned inward, can neither grasp nor escape itself. He revisits his past as a means of fleeing from the knot of the present. In both cases, the confrontation of self with self is partly unwilling; it both results from, and further promotes, insecurity, uncertainty and anxiety.

As the Romantic tradition has been refined over the last two centuries, this form of the High Romantic lyric has become evermore telegraphicand elliptical. I'd like to look now at some contemporary versions of poetic self-experience, beginning with a recent version of the old "poem of revisitation." Here is W.S. Merwin's "No Shadow," from his collection of 2009 entitled *The Shadow of Sirius*:

No Shadow

Dog grief and the love of coffee
lengthen like a shadow of mine

and now that my eyes no longer
swear to anything I look out

through the cloud light of this autumn
and see the valley where I came

first more than half my life ago
oh more than half with its river

a sky in the palm of a hand
never unknown and never known

never mine and never not mine
beyond it into the distance

the ridges reflect the clouds now
through a morning without shadows

the river still seems not to move
as through it were the same river

-*From* The Shadow of Sirius *(2009)*

The poem may not seem at first glance to involve a confrontation of self with self. It seems to concern the relation of the speaker to nature, specifically a lived-in landscape, a part of "home," and the question of whether the familiar landscape remains "outside," inhuman,unpossessed. But in the background there remains the old question of the self's history and its strangely elastic relation to time. Since Merwin is now in his eighties,

"half [his] life" must amount to a length of about forty years – a long length emphasized by his exclamation "oh more than half" – and he remarks the changes that have come over his body: "my eyes no longer swear to anything." That he has changed interiorly is implicit. The opening words may suggest this in their compact evocation of loss: "dog grief" (the volume contains poems about his dogs and at least one dog-elegy). The poem is entitled "No Shadow," and yet the first lines say "Dog grief and the love of coffee/Lengthen like a shadow of mine." The point, of course, is that the shadow appears only in simile, not in reality: the meditative moment, with its competing affects, prolongs itself, casting an invisible over his mind that is not echoed in the physical landscape. Literally, there is no shadow because the morning is cloudy; metaphorically, none because Merwin wonders whether the movements of his spirit have left a trace. When he looks out to see the familiar valley, it serves to establish a physical identity against which he can measure continuity and discontinuity within himself. There are thus several questions that this self is asking itself about itself, though there are not formulated explicitly: How am I changed? How am I the same? What was my relation to the world all this time? Has the journey been wholly interior, like a dream? Was it meaningful? Did I see what was real? Or is it all mere flux? In a lyric of sufficient generalizing force, like Merwin's, these questions are inevitably philosophical: we might preface every question asked above with the larger question, "what is the self such that…?" Because the first half of the poem establishes these issues, the poem can condense its meanings breathtakingly in its dramatic turn: "never mine and never not mine/never known and never unknown." The valley in its physical reality remains elusive to the mind's grasp – even now it is described in terms of optical illusion, the river seeming "a sky in the palm of the hand." But it is also his own selfhood that remains elusive, travelling as if beside him all these years, a thing presumed, a thing obscured – what has passed in him for himself and yet never allowed itself to be fixed.

Having reached this epiphany, the poem recommences with a shift, noting the way the landscape subtly registers the passage of time, or rather, itself subtly changes with time. Here it marks the passage of time since he began his meditation. The ridges reflect the clouds *now*; they must not have some short time before: the clouds have been moving. (We hear a wandering in the assonance: known – unknown – now – shadow.) Merwin names the clouds simply and naturalistically: we need no further cue to be reminded of their old poetic association with transience. Even older is the Heracliteanriver. It takes a poet sure of his mastery to trope that worn trope now, and Merwin does it brilliantly. Havingbriefly pulled back from epiphany, the poem now slingshots toward its poignant conclusion. "The river *still* seems not to move/As though it were the same river." The word "still" is ambiguous: there are a number of different durations to which it might refer, but it is most powerfully taken as a return to his first view of the valley – "oh more than half" his life ago – or to that first view and all the following views down the years since then. In the optical illusion created by distance, the river looks motionless (though of course it isn't) and therefore seems "the same" (though of course it is not the same even a moment later, much less forty years). When he avers that "the river still seems not to move," he expresses his natural wish for continuity and permanence within himself and the world; when he qualifies the claim, adding "as though it were the same river," he acknowledges the futility of his wish. And yet his longing persists; and has persisted all

these years; and has been, ironically, the single continuous fact – this naïve bias toward identity, which age has not subdued. Like many other poems in this volume, "No Shadow" ends with the speaker suspended in communion with a much younger self, a child self, who lives in him as if he were unchanged at the same time that the years have undone all its assumptions. Youth and age, past and present, longing and knowledge co-exist within him in a barely coherent structure, and this is the experience of selfhood.

I could go on to show how other Merwin poems take up the perplexing experience of selfhood, but for the sake of suggestiveness, I'll turn instead to the other of the two greatest living American poets, John Ashbery. His "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" plainly deals with the relation of self to time and the relation of self to self. These are frequent themes. Ashbery once told an interviewer that his poems deal with "the experience of experience," that is (as I understand it), with how one reflects on having a first-person perspective and reacting from within it to events, trends, changes, and self-mutations over time. The emphasis is not on what happens but on one's relation to the slippery unfolding of life. One could light down anywhere in Ashbery to demonstrate what this means, it is so ubiquitous. Some lines from "Soonest Mended" will illustrate:

> And then there always came a time when
> Happy Hooligan in his rusted green automobile
> Came plowing down the course, just to make sure everything was O.K.,
> Only by that time we were in another chapter and confused
> About how to receive this latest piece of information.
> Was it information? Weren't we rather acting this out
> For someone else's benefit, thoughts in a mind
> With room enough and to spare for our little problems (so they began to seem),
> Our daily quandary about food and the rent and bills to be paid?

Or one might choose the poem's beautiful closing lines:

> For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
> Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
> Making ready to forget, and always coming back
> To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago.
> - from*The Double Dream of Spring*, 1966

"Soonest Mended" particularly concerns the ebbing of youthful self-importance, the eclipse of the self's narcissistic adventure. This is one among many of the self's experiences of itself covered in Ashbery's poetry. Here is an Ashbery work closer in theme to Merwin's "No Shadow." "Objection Sustained" is a late poem that begins with a humorously direct statement:

> Like a French king, I
> Know and do not know what it is I am.

Suffering aimlessly, pointlessly,
I think I'm on the spot right now.

Other margins will invite us
toward life, pull out the stops
on a day's notice. Invitingly
the crowd stops, shrugs toward us,
passes some judgement.

Anyway, it happens this way.
The can of ice slipped and cracked.
All my worldly belongings weren't
so worldly anymore. Sometimes
in a dream the tremendous peachiness
of everything assaults you like a wave
you look back at, knowing
you saw it, already invested in
some otherness.

All of last week's energy preceded
us into the maze. We could hear their
surprise up ahead but were determined
to unravel our own opinion
on key issues. Gradually I lost
access to these. I don't know who the others are.
He died later in other films.

- from*A Worldly Country* (2007)

As it goes on, the poem evokes the confusion and disappointment of the quest for identity and self-determination. Conviction wavers, agency wavers, there are fits and starts Unwittingly one commits treason against oneself. The sense of meaning and the sense of self fade. Finally one admits ignorance. The last line goes back to being funny, but it suggests that the whole process may be reincarnated and repeated again. The perplexity of selfhood is an experience, not an idea to be assimilated once and for all.

The poems I've looked at offer no answer to ontological questions such as "is there a self?" or "what is the self?," nor do they attempt to answer them. Rather, they dramatize the importance of such questions to the self's experience of itself. The experience of selfhood is precisely the experience of ontological self-questioning. Even if it makes no sense to speak of "*the* self," it is nonetheless right to speak of the self questioning itself: selfhood, to repeat, is the experience of having something within exert itself to question what it is. As Kierkegaard put it, avoiding the mention of entity, the self is "a relation that relates itself to itself, or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation" (*The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Hong, p. 13). "Facing the self' is at once an impossible paradox and an everyday occurrence. In its approach to questions about the self, poetry differs from philosophy in that it looks at the place of such questions within ordinary

experience, where they remain enigmatic yet persistent. Indeed, it turns out to be the very vocation of selfhood to ask them, and perhaps the surest definition of the self is that it is such as to interrogate itself in this way.