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HIK: HESITATION

Introduction

This is a lecture on hesitation. As a lecture it does not take a straightforward path. Instead, I propose contemplation of a certain dog - a dog rendered by the Spanish painter Goya in 1819 or so. By contemplation I mean something more intense than ordinary looking. There is a kind of attention that the German poet Rilke calls *einsehen*, "in-seeing," and that he practiced as a way of sharpening his own eyes. He describes this practice in a letter of 1914:

....Can you imagine with me how glorious it is to in-see a dog, for example, as you pass by it ... and by in-see I don't mean to look *through*, which is only a kind of human gymnastic that lets you come out immediately again on the other side of the dog...What I mean is let yourself precisely into the dog's centre, the point from which it begins to be a dog, the place in it where God, as it were, would have sat down for a moment when the dog was finished, in order to study it...and to say that it was good...

(Rilke, letter to Matta von Hattingberg, Feb 17, 1914))

I wonder if we can find our way to this place of in-seeing Goya's dog. I think we might find it is a place of hesitation. And if I were God I would wonder why that is the case. Where and how and why does Goya's dog hesitate?



Part 1

At the start of pandemic time, in those days with no design, I was having trouble working, although I had an assignment - to translate a Sophoklean tragedy, and I was grateful to have been given this assignment, but the translation just wouldn't get going. I made several starts. I attempted different approaches and various voices. They all bored me. I was at a loss. Then C gave me a gift. A new desk for my workroom. He commissioned our woodworker friend J to make it, using wood that we chose from sample blocks in J's studio, shaped according to C's and J's idea of the perfect desk.

Unquestionably, the perfect desk. I did not question it. A very large, very lovely, three-kinds-of-wood desk. A round desk.

Left alone with my new desk I placed a chair. Moved the chair. Moved it again. Every position looked wrong. A round desk has no front or obvious orientation, like a snowstorm. I sat down anyway, with a sensation of falling off the edge of the room, and placed a pile of work in front of me. Then placed several other piles at different places around the circumference - *you can work on many things at once!* had been a selling point of the round desk. All the piles of work looked wrong. Untidy. I gathered the piles into a stack in front of me. Impossible. Now the untidiness had moved inside my head, I could not take hold anywhere. The stack slid dangerously. I left the room.

In the days that followed I came to accept that work piled on a round desk never looks tidy, that chairs placed at a round desk always feel off-balance, and that my own oft-quoted favourite advice from Gertrude Stein was now taking its revenge on me. "Act so there is no use in a center," she advises. How serenely over the years I had offered that advice to anyone who asked about beginnings or endings or writer's block or method, never myself facing the real distress of having no act available - no idea, no glimmer, no place to start, no point of entry, no smell of warm blood, no altar in the church. I had not realized how much difference roundness would make. There was nothing to do but hesitate.

The English verb "to hesitate" comes from the Latin verb *haesitare*, "to stick fast," also used of people who stammer. To hesitate is to hold yourself fast/still/in place on the brink of time; to stammer is to hold a sound fast by repeating it, as if that might also repeat the present moment. Here is an interesting incidental fact (told me by Sjón): when the filmmaker Fellini was shooting his film *Petronius Satyricon* and wanted to convey the brokenness of our relation to the past of ancient Rome, he deliberately made a badly dubbed

soundtrack, so that the actors' mouths do not align with the sounds they are expressing. Time stammers.

Part 2

In 1792 the painter Goya became suddenly and profoundly deaf, for reasons on which experts disagree. Nonetheless he continued to work and made himself the foremost court painter of his time. Then in 1819 he moved to a house on the outskirts of Madrid called Quinta del Sordo, The House of the Deaf Man, and here made 14 paintings. People call these The Black Paintings, possibly because they use lots of black pigment, or because some of them treat horrifying subject matter, or because Goya suffered from melancholia at the time. The dog we are contemplating is one of the subjects of the Black Paintings, which, for reasons known only to Goya, were painted directly on the walls of the house, not on canvas and also, for reasons known only to Goya, painted on top of other murals that were already there. When he departed the house in 1823 the paintings remained on the walls. Ownership of the house was transferred at this time to Goya's grandson, who sold it to a French banker, who had The Black Paintings peeled off the walls of the house in order to sell them, but instead he ended up donating them to the Spanish state, who placed them in the Prado. Before removal from the walls The Black Paintings were photographed, and we will return in Part 5 to these very important photographs. Meanwhile the process of removal and photography revealed very different artwork underneath the Black Paintings - happy bucolic scenes in bright colours. Goya evidently had a serious hesitation, or a change of mood, inbetween the 2 layers of work. One wonders why. Was he bored; was he disenchanted with his function in the art world; did he not want to spend any more money on canvas? Or was he fed up with the post-Napoleonic world of endless warfare and possibly with Napoleon himself?

So far as we know, Goya did not have a dog. So far as we know Napoleon did not have a dog either although he did have a deep and difficult relationship with his wife's dog, Fortune, who liked to sleep on Josephine's bed in lieu of

Napoleon. Napoleon also had a deep and difficult relationship with the Duke of Wellington, who would eventually defeat him at the Battle of Waterloo, and who enjoyed hunting so much that he (the Duke of Wellington) brought his hunting dogs with him from England to Spain when he fought the Peninsular War. Three evenings a week he took the dogs out to run down rabbits. The rabbits were then given to the army kitchen to supplement the dinners of the soldiers of the Duke of Wellington - at least most of the parts of the rabbits. The ears and tail were traditionally awarded to Wellington's dogs as a treat.

None of this latter information about Napoleon, Wellington and their dogs has any bearing on our topic, which is hesitation, but I have retained it here as evidence of how much difference roundness makes - how roundness can get caught in your head and change your thinking. A round desk has no up or down, no north or west, no linearity, no logic. I have heard of a theory, endorsed by the poet Rilke in letters to friends, that the stone of great cathedrals is changed over the centuries by organ music from within the church, shaping it into new vaults and arches overhead. I was at first inclined to dismiss this as a crackpot idea of Rilke's, but then found myself confessing how the roundness of the round desk got into my head and changed my thinking, and I had to hesitate. I cannot resist offering one more instance of round thinking, viz. that when Napoleon became emperor he passed a law making it illegal to name your dog Napoleon.

Part 3

I was sitting at the round desk one day thinking about thinking, when a chipmunk ran past the window outside. A chipmunk, as you may know, is a small striped rodent with an exuberant manner and a short life span (3 years). A chipmunk's heart beats very fast. Its movement is by running or bouncing. It has very tiny hands. Chipmunks live mainly in North America and Siberia. They are valued in the region of North America where I live, which is plagued in summer by a tiny insect called a "tick," because chipmunks eat ticks. And

so I came round in my thinking to the tick that was kept alive in a laboratory for 18 years without nourishment by a zoologist named Jakob von Uexküll. For 18 years the tick hesitated between life and death.



Jakob von Uexküll was an Estonian zoologist and philosopher (1864-1944) who invented biosemiotics, suggesting that every animal, human or non-human, has a distinct perceptual universe (an *Umwelt* or "world-surround") in which it exists and acts and makes meaning. The animal's *Umwelt* encloses it completely and does not refer to anything beyond itself. The human *Umwelt*, on the other hand, is open toward the future and toward transcendence (Jakob von Uexküll , *Foray* p. 219). Jakob von Uexküll's work influenced other philosophers, notably Heidegger, who distinguished animals from humans on the grounds that the animal does not perceive the elements of its *Umwelt* as things-in-themselves. "The behaviour of the animal is not an apprehending of something as something," Heidegger says. The tick does not apprehend waiting as waiting. It simply has no aim in life

except to wait for a smell of warm blood to pass nearby, then drop down and drink blood. A tick has no sense of world or self or anything except the smell of warm blood: for Heidegger this is an instance of "the poverty of animals."

Jakob von Uexküll sees the same situation less negatively. For him the tick and the warm blood are two elements of a single musical score, a giant musical score in which everything in the cosmos participates. "Attunement" is what he calls this. You might find his musical creationism quaint or romantic but it does remind us to look at all life in terms of wholeness, perception and purpose. Biologists nowadays understand life as a thermodynamic process in which complex systems harmonize to achieve equilibrium. Jakob von Uexküll seems to be moving toward the same vision by a different path when he celebrates the subjectivity of non-human beings as a pattern of attunement. "Is the tick a machine or a machine operator?" he asks. Other biologists see animal action as a matter of reflex, i.e., a transfer of stimuli by electrical impulse. "But," says Jakob von Uexküll "a stimulus has to be *noticed* by the subject."

This sort of "noticing" or "attunement" is something I witnessed once in a different context - in church actually - in the spectacle of a truly religious person. This person came into church late, a messed-up-looking man with strange haircut and fantastic overcoat. He fumbled to a pew, anxieties all around him in a sort of swarm. Then he caught sight of the altar. And he attuned. He was loose, then he attuned; his whole body straining forward, as if every molecule in him wanted to merge with the altar and would have done so except for this incidental barrier of body that kept them separate; all his anxieties moved forward into that single faith and that single longing. The poet Rilke might have said that the man was *in-seeing* the altar. I wonder whether Rilke and Jakob von Uexküll ever had a conversation about their concepts of attunement, noticing and in-seeing, for the two men knew each other quite well. Jakob von Uexküll's mother-in-law was one of Rilke's wealthiest patrons. We will return in part 4 to this provocative relationship.

But first, let me underscore the link between religiosity and hesitation. For some people, to pray is to hesitate and to hesitate is to pray. One such person was Sappho. Sappho, a Greek poet of the 7th century BC, lived in a culture saturated by gods and religious awareness. The following is the oldest written testimony we have to Sappho's poetry, a formal hymn of invocation to the god Aphrodite, calling her to come from the island of Krete, where Aphrodite is, to a sacred grove on the island of Lesbos, where Sappho is:

here to me from Krete to this holy temple
where is your graceful grove
of apple trees and altars smoking
with frankincense.

And in it cold water makes a clear sound through apple branches
and with roses the whole place
is shadowed and down from radiant-shaking leaves
sleep comes dropping.

And in it a horse meadow has come into bloom
with spring flowers and breezes
like honey are blowing

In this place you Kypris taking up
in gold cups delicately
nectar mingled with festivities:
pour.

(Sappho fr. 2 *PMG*)

Everything in this poem is waiting. Animation is suspended. Its first word is an adverb meaning "here, hither, to this place," an adverb usually followed by some imperative verb like "come" or "go." But in this case the imperative doesn't arrive till the last word: "pour" (*oinochoaisen*). By implication Aphrodite (here Kypris)

arrives at the same moment; until then the sacred grove and the poem vibrate with the lack of her.

At the centre of the centre of this vibration is a dropping down of sleep - from the Greek word *koma*. This *koma* is a rare and weird word, used in the medical texts of the lethargy we still call a "coma," turning up in poetry always with connotations of an other world. *Koma* partakes of the timeless time of divinity. Yet the poem is set in the human present tense: grammatically speaking, the tense of hesitation. Stylistically speaking, the poem is constructed as a "ring composition" - an ABA structure whereby the poet circles round at the end to the same thing that came at the beginning, framing a difference in the middle.

Ring composition is an elegant and reassuring compositional device, famously practiced by Homer in his *Odyssey*. To read this poem is to follow Odysseus round and round the many rings of his fictions of self. And this ring structure is a space where Time hesitates - however, as we learned from Fellini, time is plastic and technical, easy to manipulate for artistic effect.

Something else I noticed when reading Homer: as you may know, Homer calls his hero *polytropos*, "the man of many turns," partly because Odysseus is always lying. He makes up a different story of who he is for everyone he meets, including his own wife, his own son, his own father and the goddess Athene. Being a fraud is how he survives. And to teach us to mistrust every story or form of storytelling is one of Homer's main lessons in the poem. It struck me then how easily roundness associates itself with unreliability. Sitting at the round desk I found myself constantly worried that objects would fall off the edge, so I moved the Greek lexicon towards the center of the desk, but then I couldn't read it so I moved it back, but then toppling off looked imminent, so I tried for a middle position and in fact the worry of all this was like noise and instead of writing sentences I was doing nothing but move my lexicon around, avoiding the edge. Interesting, though, to speculate on what

this "edge" represents. Obviously, a square desk has edges too. But they don't seem always threatening to give way. And I wonder do animals worry about falling off the edge of things? Do they see edges at all? Do they see an edge as an edge? Is that what the dog in Goya's painting is gazing at, or searching for, as he stares upward into a vast empty yellow void in the sky above him?

At that point it struck me that Goya's vast empty yellow void has something pre-Socratic about it. The pre-Socratics were those philosophers of antiquity who sought to discover what single substance constitutes the world. Water, said one; fire, said another, air said a third; but it was the Milesian thinker Anaximander who identified the essential and original substance as something he called *to apeiron*, which means "the unbounded or boundless." The thing with no edges.

Anaximander was very concerned with the edges of everything, both in space and time. He was the first person to make a map of the world; he also mapped constellations in the sky; and he invented the *gnomon*, or sundial, a vertical pillar that casts a shadow to indicate the time of day. It interests me that Anaximander's thinking about edges and edgelessness led him to a cosmology that is also moral or ethical. Only one fragment of his thinking remains to us in his own voice:

Whence things have their coming-into-being,
so they have their passing-away,
for they pay recompense to one another
for their injustice, according to the ordering of time.

No one is clear what kind of justice is meant here. What kind of giving of recompense. Or, for that matter, what kind of things are boundless. Is darkness boundless? Or light? Or emotions. The space and time before you

were born. The absence of you after your death. Or the vast empty yellow void surrounding Goya's dog?

Part 4

To escape boundlessness for a while, I go outside and sit on the back porch, eating blueberries and watching chipmunks race around in the flowers.

The flowers shake and bounce on their stalks as small furry forms cavort under their leaves. Then one of the chipmunks makes a dash for the porch. I am aware of it under my chair. I can't see it but I can feel its tiny hesitation, like a pulse. I drop a blueberry. The chipmunk leaps on it. Grasping the blueberry in its very tiny hands it begins that particular staccato chipmunk-chewing action back and forth like a manual typewriter. Soon the blueberry is gone. I drop another, soon it too is gone. The chipmunk sits upright and looks at me. Its tiny black eyes have a blankness that seems to reach down and back, down and back behind both of I don't know where to or where from.

I like this boundless blankness. Perhaps it is what in-seeing feels like to the in-seer.

At any rate, the chipmunk and I are sharing this blank, although separately. We seem aware of a border between us. We hesitate, just gazing at one another. During the gaze, time is forgotten; and when we return to time there is a dislocation in it, a jumpcut, a sort of stammer, as on Fellini's bad soundtrack. I drop a third blueberry for the chipmunk. The chipmunk ignores it and dashes away.

Had there been a moment of attunement between us? Had one of us failed it?



This might be the right place to consult one of the most celebrated poetic/philosophical texts on the topic of attunement between humans and animals. Rilke's "Eighth Duino Elegy," written 1922, begins with this description of the difference between us in English translation:

With all their eyes Animals (*die Kreatur*) look into
the Open. Only our eyes are
turned backward and surround them
like traps, as they emerge into freedom.
What is outside we know only
from the animal's gaze....
(Rilke, Eighth Duino Elegy)

What Rilke means by "the Open" seems to be the world itself, that is, the world unmediated by all the names, categories and knowledge that humans impose upon it - "the arrogance of concepts" as Elias Canetti put it. "The animal's degree of consciousness" on the other hand, as Rilke says in a letter of 1926, "is such that it comes into the world without at every moment setting the world over against itself (as we do). The animal is *in* the world; we stand *in front of* the world..." And *never*, Rilke says later in the Elegy,

Never, not for a single day, do we [humans] have
before us that pure space into which flowers
endlessly open...."

(Rilke, Eighth Elegy)

He goes on to praise also the life of insects, which he sees as enjoying a particularly pure immersion in this thing he calls the Open, especially those insects that are born from seeds so as to never have to leave the security of the mother. These are the relevant verses:

Oh bliss of the tiny creature which remains
forever inside the womb that was its shelter;
joy of the insect which, while still *within*, leaps up....

(Rilke, Eighth Elegy)

Admittedly, most readers of the 8th Elegy find this insect-passage a curious or awkward addition to the poem. However, as we mentioned above, Rilke and Jakob von Uexküll were related by marriage and friendship. It is said that the poet and the zoologist went for walks together. And I wonder if, on their walks, Jakob von Uexküll ever brought Rilke around to his lab and had him pause before the cage containing the world's most patient tick.

Part 5

So, another day, I am sitting on the back porch, wondering about Rilke and the tick. I am again entertaining the chipmunk, who sits in front of my chair forcefully typewriting back and forth on a blueberry. A difference: today the chipmunk is fixing me with its boundless gaze *while continuing to chew its blueberry*. And suddenly the comradeship of the whole scenario stirs a question.

What if, suddenly by some apocalyptic mischance, the chipmunk and I found ourselves alone on the planet? How would we regard one another? How would we organize our days? Would we share blueberries? Would we reassume the power relation that has obtained between humans and animals since time began, and which seems to replicate itself endlessly in the power relation between social classes, between races, between sane and insane, between people who look good on instagram and people who don't - or, instead, might we hesitate a moment and reimagine all that? Speculation of this kind seems foolish or empty until you meet someone who has lived its terms. Such a person is the anthropologist Nastassja Martin.

Nastassja Martin (see *Croire aux fauves*, trans. by Sophie R. Lewis as *The Eye of the Wild* 2021) was hiking down a glacier in Siberia when she literally ran into a bear. The bear opened its jaws around her head and bit down, then (as she says) "went off with a chunk of my jaw clenched in his own." Many reconstructive surgeries later, she still never uses the word "attack" of this encounter, but describes it as a meeting, an implosion of boundaries, a melding of forms or even "the bear's kiss." She speaks in fact "...of the bear's kiss on my face, the bear's teeth closing over me, my jaw cracking, my skull cracking, the darkness inside his mouth, the moist heat and the pressure of his breath..." as an intimacy beyond anything she could have imagined. (p.11). She understands her experience as one of transformation not destruction and speaks of herself and the bear as "twinned souls." A Siberian

word *medka* becomes her designation for herself - it means "she who lives between the worlds."

It isn't hard to see how an experience like this could undo your sense of what a species is. "Our bodies were commingled," she says of herself and the bear, "there was that incomprehensible *us*, the *us* which I confusedly sense comes from somewhere else..." (p.59). This is more than in-seeing, it is in-being. Yet she also calls her encounter a "negotiation" (p. 49). She is someone hesitating on a boundary. Pondering the long aftermath of her encounter with the bear she speaks of "how to survive without what has been deposited in the other's body," as if she and the bear had had an exchange of gifts between them. (p.2) The bear's gift, I suppose, was to let her stay alive. I am not sure what Nastassja gave the bear. There is no mention of Anaximander, yet Nastassja and the bear might well be participating in a creaturely act of cosmic justice, giving recompense to one another for their injustice, within the ordinance of time - creature to creature.

Returning now to the creature with whom we began, the dog of Goya. This painting, done on the wall of Goya's house, had no title. You might see it called "Drowning Dog" here or there, but this is an invention by someone wishing to give the dog a tragic narrative. Clearly there is no water anywhere in the painting, nor does the dog appear distressed or desperate, let alone drowning. He is simply attentive. He is caught in that moment of hesitation that dominates a dog's day, the moment of noticing what's coming over the horizon. This is, arguably, also the moment that dominates an artist's day. Noticing.

But we should be cautious about noticing what an artist is noticing.

When I began researching various parts of this lecture, I looked at several books and many, many websites featuring the dog painting. Reproductions of the painting vary in size and quality but, as you would expect, all are more

or less the same - until one day I opened an email from a Goya expert at the Prado with whom I'd been corresponding, and saw a version of the dog painting with a piece of entirely new content. Suddenly there were two birds flying high in the sky in the upper right quadrant of the picture. Where had these birds come from? Who painted them? Why had I never seen them before? Further correspondence with the Prado expert revealed more of the birds' and the dog's problematic history.



You recall that Goya left the House of the Deaf Man in 1823 and it was later sold to a collector who had the paintings taken off the walls in 1874. But before this removal, photographs were made of everything (in 1870).

Here is what the Prado expert said about the situation:

The birds flying appear only in the photographs taken when the paintings were still on the walls of the Quinta del Sordo. There are many theories and none of them reliable; some experts believe the restorer in charge of transferring the paintings to canvas retouched what Goya had painted. Others think that they are cracks in the wall or an optical effect, but the truth is that today no trace of these two birds can be seen in the original.

So then, if the photograph showing dog plus birds dates from 1870 and Goya left the house in 1823, it is most likely that what Goya painted was a dog noticing two birds flying high overhead in the sky. Not a dog gazing into some unexplained vast yellow void. I confess I was disappointed by this conclusion. I had wanted the painting to give me an image of my own postmodern lost self. I had wanted the dog to be having a deep, serious, strange experience of Anaximandrian boundlessness. Instead Goya depicted a creature gazing upward, perhaps hungrily, at what might be his dinner. It surprises me even now, how much difference the birds make to the picture. I know this cannot be the case, but it seems as if the dog's eyes actually swivel upward to fix on the birds as they fly. Without the birds, the dog's gaze is straight into the Open. Seeing becomes *einsehen* (in-seeing).

Part 6

Back porch again. Me again sitting on my chair, blueberries in a bowl, no chipmunk in sight. Eventually I get bored. I take a large, fat, shiny blueberry from my bowl, place it on my chair and go back inside. Later that night,

gathering laundry from the porch, I notice the blueberry is gone. Oh good, I think to myself, human and non-human animals in a moment of attunement. If I were Nastassja Martin I might speak of "the interpermeability of two souls, the tanglement of ontologies, the dialogue between worlds...." (p.84).

Or maybe I wouldn't. Next day comes a surprise. In the morning crossing the porch, I notice something on my chair: I go closer and see it is a large, fat, shiny blueberry. Just sitting there. Was it the same blueberry? Had the blueberry been returned? Rejected? Given in recompense? Was it perhaps a chipmunk joke? I am still thinking about this. What mystifies can often be explained, explained away. Still, there it is.

To sum up. In the end is ignorance. I have been wrong about a number of things, among them the inner life of animals, including Goya's dog and the chipmunk on my back porch. Confronting the intransigent form of my round desk, I have treated hesitation as a block, an inertia, a hard solid sleeping thing, rather than to notice its nerves running into the future. I have studied and admired poets like Sappho and Rilke, who each in their way take a posture of prayer towards creatures and creation, but I have not found a way into this piety myself. As a human being facing the stubborn consciousness of animals, facing the mysterious consciousness of the round desk, I remain (to paraphrase Rilke) a guest who has turned up late and accidentally at the party, speaking a different language. I remain standing in the doorway, wondering whether the disjunction between the two known versions of Goya's dog painting is actually a jumpcut in the soundtrack to a very ancient movie I should have watched long ago.

And therefore one final hesitation: contemplating Goya's painting one day I began to idly wonder if it could be a painting of a deaf dog, gazing up at birds he cannot hear. This highly unlikely and unhelpful notion gave way to a less unlikely and unhelpful one, namely that the dog is gazing at birds we cannot hear, insofar as dog hearing is about four times more sensitive than human

hearing, especially acute for high-pitched frequencies. Like birds. Of course all paintings are silent. Yet a painter may wish to depict sound, as Goya apparently did in an earlier painting, which you have probably seen, called *The Third of May 1808*, where a firing squad is discharging its rifles at a man in a white shirt. Looking at this painting you can *almost* hear the guns. Goya had no access to this *almost*. Deafness was not a metaphor for him. Is it possible he wished to depict a sound that you and I can't hear either, and to suggest the void that opens around that? Or at least to make us think about how we listen to one another, or are deaf to one another, across the many differences that separate us - differences of species, of consciousness, of attention, of recompense?

Maybe, faced with such differences, it is not such a bad idea to simply hesitate.

In the end is ignorance. And it is an incidentally interesting fact that the English word "ignorance" is derived from the Latin verb *ignoscere*; however *ignoscere* in Latin does not mean "to not know," but rather "to forgive."

THE END