Itinerant Philosophy: On Alphonso Lingis

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Published by Punctum Books

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Willows, rocks, cascades, clouds, peregrines, dragonflies: real things. They are present, in the present. Having left them, we find them again. They are where they are, independent of us, whether we locate them or not. There are times when all our names, categories, and uses for them fade away, and we are confronted with their brute reality.\(^1\) The urban and historical context of the Place de la Concorde fades away and we find ourselves standing on rough stones glistening in the rain.\(^2\)

Evolutionary biology contests Platonic metaphysics and philosophical idealism: our perception of our environment is not essentially different from the perception of other biological species. Fish, birds, and mammals survive because the things they perceive are indeed external to their minds, independent of them, and as real as they are.

Things turn to us one side of themselves at a time. But as we stand before an armchair and shift position, this side of it tilts up another side and indicates sides to come. To see a real thing, and not a fixed surface pattern, is to see it as a cohesive and coherent whole existing in depth and across duration.
We see the front plane of the refrigerator and see its solidity extending down the sides and across the back.

Things are present before us with their pasts and futures. A rock retains the shape given it centuries ago by water freezing and melting; a tree trunk retains the swerve it took decades ago to distance itself from the shade of the adjacent tree. Its growth in good season and bad can be seen in the rings of its trunk. A corpse retains the expression of resignation or pain the body felt at the last movements of its life.

The wall that is green was green and will be green; a spread of green that would be there only an instant would lack the substantiality of a real thing. The garden bench emerges from its past and its substantiality shows its future. Descending the canyon, we see its shapes cut by the water and the wind that are even now wearing away the path under our feet.

As we walk we see the continually elongating, widening, and narrowing sides and stretching or shrinking patterns each thing turns to us. As the shifting of the cloud far beyond our reach can hold our rapt gaze, so our eyes, without surveying, without any practical concern, are absorbed by the changing facets of a building, by the turns and swirls of a pine as we walk up the hill.

The reality of things is not confined within their contours. A rock compresses the earth below it and is supported in its place by the earth. Under the sun it radiates heat and light about itself. A bush crumbles the earth with its roots and emits gases into the atmosphere. An abrupt discharge of electricity in the storm clouds emits a thunderclap that shatters a goblet in the dining room.

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Things also engender doubles of themselves. Rocks and fences cast shadows on the ground, trees across the sidewalk, the
crests of snowdrifts and sand dunes shadow the troughs. The brook sends streaks of light downs the reeds and the willows. The reeds and the willows flick reflections of themselves into the water and into the translucent globes of the eyes of herons, deer, and humans.

The colors of things bleed out of them to tint or tarnish the atmosphere. The shapes of things merge into one another to form waves and swells and compressions. The buildings radiate their wood or stone tones upon one another and into the light and the air, making the atmosphere of one town different from another. In twilight the colors of the forest disengage from the contours of the leaves and dissolve the branches in a miasma of fermenting greens. The metal chains and jewels of the matrons in the benefit dinner link up with the glitter of the glasses and gleam of the silver. The colors of a face do not only outline the surfaces and pores of the carpentry of that face, but also interact with one another in the brew of a sensual, swarthy, or porcelain complexion. Yasunari Kawabata contemplates the strobe dabs of sulphurous glow from fireflies on the cheeks and brow of a woman in the night garden.  

Aural images of things move off them. The fruit rolling down the roof sends a run of rumble across the ceiling. In the bamboo thicket canes flick long thin shrieks into the wind. The water splashing over rocks in the brook sends a syncopation of sputterings over its banks. The fallen leaves send on with the breeze the whirr of their slidings and raspings. The sonorous images of things, their cracklings, thumpings, and thuds link up to form rustlings, rolls, or din. The splash of the raindrops echo in the splashes of raindrops all about to compose sizzle.

Many of these emanations are ephemeral while the things are enduring, but others endure after the things have passed on or passed away. The grass retains the imprint of the deer’s
body after it has left; the shale holds the shape of the dinosaur whose body has long decomposed.

Things react to these doubles; the moss flourishes in the shadow of the building, the grass lifts itself out of the imprint of the deer’s body. Things react to their own doubles: bushes raise their flowers above their shadows.

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Things cast doubles of themselves upon the surfaces of our bodies and upon our sensory surfaces. They cast reflections of their colors and shapes upon our eyes, send their reverberations into our ears, from a distance spread their tang and sweetness into our nose and mouth. And things cast the doubles that other things cast on their surfaces upon our sensory surfaces. The pond casts the zigzags of sunlight upon our eyes; the snow relays upon us the gesticulating shadows of the leafless trees.

Our bodies, like other things, cast shadows on the ground, send their reflections on the surface of the pond and the window and on photographic film, radiate their colors onto other things and into the light and the air. They also cast doubles of themselves upon the sensory surfaces of other bodies.

Our bodies also generate doubles of themselves that they leave in the past and project into the future. They leave imprints of their shape on the bed, on the beach, on photographic paper. They project doubles of themselves in the dance floor at the end of the drive, on the guests awaiting them at the wedding feast.

Our bodies also shadow themselves, have a double perception of themselves. Our eyes see, our hands touch little of ourselves. But as we sit, walk, reach for and manipulate things, a postural schema takes form in our bodies, holding our parts and limbs together, and giving us an inner sense of
where and how our arms and legs are positioned. It gives us an inner sense of how our legs are extended under the table and how our hands are extended groping in the dark. We also have a “body-image”: as we sit or walk or reach for things, we have a quasi-visual image of how our bodies look from the outside. It is not an “image” our mind is imagining; it is a perceptual sense of how our body looks as it would be seen from a viewing distance outside, which is generated by our postural schema. Like a reflection or a shadow cast by our postural schema.

Martin Heidegger argued that perception is intrinsically practical; we look about in order to get somewhere and do something; we perceive things by moving among them and manipulating them. But that is surely wrong: when we sit on the deck or walk to the store, we see and hear leaves fluttering to the ground, tree branches zigzagging across one another, birds careening in the sky, clouds drifting, wind gusting, crickets chirping, patterns, rhythms, tonalities, reverberations, mists, glows, glimmers, sparkles that we are nowise manipulating or using, nowise looking at them in view of doing something to them or with them. All that—lures and ensnares the eyes.

When captivated by the realm of shadows, reflections, reverberations, the I is but a semblance of its active self. It no longer focuses, disengages objects and objectives, and launches initiatives. Our eyes and our bodies are moved by the rhythm of the reflections of the trees and the clouds swaying on the surface of the lake. As the plane descends, we watch the lights of the city spreading across the dark below. We arrive at the concert hall, find our seat, survey the audience for people we know or know about, look at the musicians tuning up, appraise the conductor striding to the podium. Then the music begins, the sounds detach themselves entirely from the substances whose metallic or wood or catgut nature they revealed, are set free in another dimension where
they link up in rhythms and melodies. Our freedom is bound, caught up in those rhythms and melodies; we follow the music like and with anyone about us. But involvement in a rhythm produces an intense sense of presence, an obsessed lucidity quite different from the obscurity and indistinctness in which habits, reflexes, or instinct operate.

We feel contentment when the substance of things fills a lack or need, a hunger or thirst. We feel satisfaction when the things do not obstruct, but lend themselves to our manipulations. But so much of our pleasure in the world, pleasure in being in the world, is a pleasure in the glows, gleams, and halos about things, in the reflections and shadows things cast about themselves. Our gaze skips and sways with them, attracted and delighted by them.

These doubles the things generate can also be disquieting and threatening. The oversized shadow on the window of an intruder. As twilight advances, the shadows advance over things, finally engulfing them, but we sense that in the night the sonority of the things intensifies and spreads far from them while they close in upon us, touch us without being seen.

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Artists take up and prolong the fascination of our eyes and ears not with the “properties” of things, the shapes and colors that are stabilized in their integrated and subsistent structures, but with the shadows, reflections, auras, and mirages the things engender. Photographers capture the mists harboring a valley, the light blazing in the hair about a face. Music captures in the resonances and movements of sound forces that move us, that we receive in emotions.

In our lives, in our actions, what we do is ordered—by the paths and the obstacles, by the tasks, by the people about us, by the hungry horses in the barn, by the rivers and the for-
Lingis: Doubles

ests, by the sun and the night. There are imperatives, injunctions, directives, prohibitions in the things about us. Enlightenment philosophy championed political freedom, from tyranny and oppression, and subsequent philosophy came to identify freedom with the very essence of humans. But effective action is ordered by the possibilities and prohibitions that the things and the setting contains.

The shadows, reflections, halos, and reverberations of things also appeal to us, summon us, and order us. The sparkle of the dewy morning summons us outdoors. The shadows of the forest trees invite our footsteps and our rest. The luminous waves and runs of light in the coral sea orders our pleasured submission as we move into it and under it. The tone and atmosphere of the Zen temple imposes quiet and contemplation. Kawabata writes of the sound of the mountain that guided his itineraries, his ascents and his returns. The rumble of the waves in the night orders our heartbeat and respiration as we sink to sleep at night. The cries of the fledgling bird fallen from the nest appeals to us. The rumble of the avalanche prohibits our advance.
