

Towards a Linguistic Embrace

Comment peut-on parler du corps? Et d'abord, faut-il parler d'un corps ou plusieurs corps?

– Roland Barthes, 'Encore le corps'

So far as I can tell, most worthwhile pleasures on this earth slip between gratifying another and gratifying oneself. Some would call that an ethics.

– Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

– Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself'

It's hard to know intimacy without knowing the body. And it's hard to know the body without knowing language. I am using the verb "to know" and not "to understand", or "to talk about", here, because "knowing" seems to capture that hazy territory between talking and understanding whereby we are aware of and familiar with something, yet unable to fully articulate its nature. I look upon intimacy, language and the body through the same lens, or at least I have come to know them as creatures of the same ilk. To me, all are interminable shape shifters; inky, Technicolor blots that seem to have visible, comprehensible perimeters but which, upon attempts at embrace, become conceptually intangible and difficult to grasp.

As Ferdinand de Saussure taught us, there is no essence to language, only difference. On the whole I am convinced that this is true of the body, too. It is in the most intimate or extreme moments, of course, when this understanding becomes most apparent to me. I can try so desperately to ascribe a discrete and distinguishable place to a word on my vast and frangible web of meaning that I drive my understanding of it into oblivion. Likewise, during moments when limbs and epidermic borders become entangled and blurred, I am no longer myself as such – I mean this in terms of the conception I have that, much like my conception of words, I exist as a finite, differentiated human entity. In (good) sex, the grammar of me is lost and dissolved – or perhaps fused – with that of the Other. I am submerged, or even adrift, in a deregulated compound of thought and flesh: intimacy is abject; words escape me.

My body is also a container for difference. I am referring not just to the notion that I contain multitudes, but that I am the living sediment of *other people's* multitudes, acquired from the intimacy wrought by love and friendship. I embody linguistic idiosyncrasies picked up from private moments with others, words and phrases that bear no significant meaning except in the context of their utterance, who said them and my relationship to the speaker. As this language is reiterated by me, it evolves and reforms, just as the closeness I feel wanes from some and surges towards others elsewhere. If a loved one is no longer with or near me physically, I can conjure them by repeating a word or phrase that they embodied distinctly.

In this way, our body is an intimate vessel in and of itself, transporting language from flesh to flesh. It's strange how this phenomenon plays out through new moments of intimacy. I feel my reiterations redoubling to the point of fraudulency when a more recent loved one begins to embody linguistic tropes characteristic of someone I have loved and lost. In these moments I recognise that they have acquired language through me, but it is by this very process that I possess the language that they begin to embody: it is not something I have birthed myself. It is as if I have conjured and perpetuated a ghostly presence, disrupting the specificity of the original context in which the phrase was uttered and unraveling the safety that comes with being able to attribute a linguistic signifier to a singular place.

Bodies, language and intimate relationships are all slippery in meaning. A body takes seven years to replace all its cells. We acknowledge by now that the self is not a constant. Words and intimate relationships evolve, past definitions forgotten. I can most consciously define myself through my words, but what I say changes: past evidence of my language appears to me alien and peculiar. The same occurs with representations of my body: be it in the mannerisms or details of adornment, or in the more obvious elements of height, weight, age and experience, when faced with representations of the *me* of yesteryear, I can never quite relate to the flesh from which this language must have been projected. Of course, certain aspects remain a constant – some facial expressions and reactive tics – but it always strikes me how little remains.

[Notes]

I sometimes wonder if this is perhaps the result of incessant narcissism as opposed to the passage of time – in not being able to escape my own subject, representations of it are thus relentlessly fascinating to me.

But like the body, language is also perishable.

[Perishable]

[Language – container]

Language, like the body, is perishable

by which I mean that funny tool we've learnt to use in order to project who we are so that we might connect with, and be understood by, other perceiving subjects.