

## **The Obstacle and the Threshold: Two Fundamental Metaphors Governing the Natural and the Human Sciences.**

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*The essay presents a description of two metaphors, that of the threshold and that of the barrier, each characterizing a different, but complimentary, fundamental attitude toward the world. The metaphor of the threshold addresses a human world of conversation centered on the question: "Who are you?". The metaphor of the barrier describes work-oriented human situations that reflect a never ending human struggle with a resistant nature. Natural scientific approaches guided by the metaphor of the barrier are allied to technology and to the profane workaday world. Social science understood as a natural scientific quest stands under the sign of the barrier. It involves itself in the day to day struggle to enlarge our intellectual and practical hold on the natural world. Human science, understood as a an inquiry guided by the metaphor of the threshold makes possible our appreciation and greater understanding of festive and hospitable reality; it joins itself to the hospitable and festive realm of human experience, whose central role is that of manifesting and cultivating subjectivity and personhood. The emblem of our difference with the uninhabited world is the barrier. The emblem of inhabited difference is the threshold.*

Let us imagine a geologist on a scientific expedition in a very remote and uninhabited region of the world. Let us further imagine that he has just arrived at his planned destination, and that he has installed himself on a small plateau from which he can overlook the surrounding, uninhabited wasteland. He has spent nearly all his forces in trying to reach this remote corner of the world, which he had identified on a satellite photograph some years ago, as a likely spot to gather data that might help resolve a scientific mystery.

Our geologist has traveled for several weeks on foot and under circumstances that would challenge the stamina of the world's greatest athletes. He is exhausted but happy to have reached his final destination.

What he sees before him is a plateau so arid that it resembles a lunar landscape. He finds nowhere a sign, either of animal or even vegetative life. The landscape offers little to the eye beyond a severe and wide sweep of sand, strewn everywhere with rocks and boulders of all sizes and shapes which here and there stand grouped together in all manner of strange configurations.

The exhausted geologist sits down atop a large boulder from which he can oversee most of the valley and he silently celebrates his arrival by taking a little food and drink from his diminishing supplies. He then takes out his notebook to begin recording his first field observations. As he begins to form a first idea of the natural history of the terrain he becomes aware of the traces left by what must have been a very forceful stream that many millennia ago crossed a then very different landscape. He discerns its path as having coursed down the side of the mountain and running the length of the valley below, carving a deep gully while transporting and gradually altering the appearance of the countless number of boulders it found in its way. His experienced eye begins to differentiate between boulders that were carried by the stream and smoothed by the long exposure to streaming water from those that

remained beyond the river's reach and thus subject to different natural forces. Some of these latter boulders have over the course of time come to assume truly fantastic shapes while belabored by the combined forces of wind, sand and sun. over the course of time . Some of the larger stones are precariously mounted atop other boulders, forming complex configurations of such arresting design that an innocent bystander happening upon the scene might for a moment imagine himself having entered an intergalactic sculpture garden.

This latter thought would be quite foreign to our geologist, who in the course of his workaday world is not given to such reveries. For him the shape and location of each boulder represents a kind of archive in which can be found the traces of all the material forces that over the course of the millennia have acted upon the individual boulders and on the landscape as a whole. His professional task consists in accurately reading this archive of material forces as a preamble to reconstructing the course of the natural development of the geological region. This task demands a manner of looking at natural phenomena that can at no time become confused with looking at sculpture. This becomes obvious when we realize how greatly differs the attitude of the geologist towards the stones he finds in the landscape from that of the lover of sculpture towards the stones he finds displayed in a sculpture garden. The difference between these two attitudes indicates at the same time the radical difference between the manner of observing inherent in the natural sciences from those we need to adopt in the arts, the humanities and the human sciences. The difference between these two approaches is important enough for us to linger over it for a few moments.

We have seen that the geologist treats the stones essentially as an archive of all the material forces that have acted upon it. Whatever he finds missing from the stones he seeks to account for in terms of the natural forces that have operated upon it. This natural process of transformation differs essentially from what takes place when a sculptor works creatively on a stone. In the first instance, the natural forces operating upon the stone are entirely identifiable with what is missing from the stones. This is the converse of what takes place when a sculptor removes marble from a block of stone in order to create a particular design. In both cases, that of the sculptor and that of the natural forces, part of the stone is removed and part is left. Yet we judge the action of the sculptor by what is left of the stone and the action of the natural forces only by what is changed and removed. The work of sculptor thus resembles the eroding action of wind, water and sunlight in so far as both modifies the shape of the stone, but with this difference that what the sculptor takes away continues to stand in an immediate and vital relationship to what remains.

Michelangelo taught us to see the activity of sculpting as a means to liberating, of making fully apparent, something that up to that point had remained hidden within the stone. The great gift of the sculptor is thus to see beyond the surfaces of stone and wood to perceive there a personal presence that the craft of sculpting is capable of inviting into a fuller manifestation of itself. Sculpting thus removes a veil to reveal a truth, it invites into our presence something or someone that up to that point had remained hidden from view. Sculpting provides thus, on the one hand, an effective natural force capable of altering the surface of the stone, but it is also at the same time a symbolic force that invites, greets and announces and that knocks on wood the way a visitor knocks on a door in the hope that his host may answer his call. The act of sculpting, of shaping a piece of stone or wood, integrates thus two very different activities, one of which imitates the physical action of a natural force as it interacts with a natural substance, while the other proceeds by way of the symbol calling a personal presence into being.

The first of these activities stands under the sign of the hand that takes hold of things, that is at ease in the natural world of physical forces, that can shape and fashion nature and natural things to conform to human requirements. It is the hand that can wrest from nature what we need and want.

But the second of these activities stands under the sign of the hand that greets, embraces and blesses and that invites an other into our presence. The hand that grasps and shapes confronts obstacles and stands under the sign of a struggle with nature; while the hand that greets and blesses operates under the aegis of a threshold which makes possible a meeting of persons.

The creative labor of the sculptor can thus be seen to reconcile two ontologically distinct ways of approaching the world into a single work of art. Appreciation of that work of art demands a similar reconciliation of a world of natural forces and of personal existence. Seeing the world from the perspective of natural science means to forego for the moment such a complex integration and reconciliation as is required by sculpture and to view the world as if it had been shaped exclusively by a working hand and had remained completely untouched by a hand capable of greeting, of welcoming and of saying farewell. In the perspective opened by the natural sciences there is no place for a personal appearance and there is therefore neither a place for a work of art.

We might recognize in this natural world outside the bonds of host and guest, in this barren landscape beyond good and evil, a first outline of Freud's concept of the unconscious. Such a terrain would as yet contain not a trace of a threshold and thus lack the absolute condition for the appearance of an other. Freud saw the unconscious indeed as a kind of primordial landscape stripped of all the deceptive and erotic masks of beckoning fertile valleys and beautiful bodies. Yet he did not reduce the unconscious to a mere field of natural forces and spoke pointedly and psychologically about human desires as representatives of physical forces. But just as there is no path that can lead from the corrosive forces of winds and water to the shaping hands of the sculpture so there is no plausible or discernible path leading from the material biochemical forces underlying human desires to their psychological representation within the unconscious.

### **The neutra res of the natural scientific perspective**

We must for the moment leave behind these psychological reflections if we are not to lose sight of our geologist, whose thoughts are at this moment far from psychoanalytic conundrums and intergalactic sculpture. As a natural scientist he has learned to see the physical world in terms of natural forces and his scientific task is that of reconstructing a natural history of materials and forces from which are excluded all questions concerning the mysteries of human consciousness. This does not mean that the geologist would deny that the natural events he observes are events he can only access via perception and cogitation and by the grace of language. He would not deny that a natural event achieves its particular coherence within a scientific perspective only by virtue of a human presence. But the geologist in the process of making his field observations is not contemplating the logic of mental constructs or of perceptual patterns. It is his sole task to remain within an attitude in which a geological landscape can become fully apparent.

When the geologist tries to reconstruct the natural events that have shaped the valley, he must practice a kind of history in which there is no direct reference to human subjectivity. He is thus precluded from constructing a narrative based on sentences such as "he did", "she hoped", "they decided" and he is required to adopt as his ruling

metaphor for agency the neuter third person singular pronoun "it". The geologist's account of natural events will thus necessarily take the form of "it rained", "it fell", "it formed", "it froze", "it melted", "it was pushed, etc."

There is, strictly speaking, no place in the physical universe of the geologist for a pseudo-personal agency such as is called forth by the personal pronoun "it". This "impersonal" pronoun announces something or someone that is neuter. What is "neuter" is literally that what is "neither one of two distinct possibilities". "Neutrae res" are originally things that are neither good nor evil. Applied to persons or creatures what is neuter pertains to those that are of neither sex. We should not think of what is "neuter" as necessarily diminished in some way, in the way that we way think of a "neutered" animal as deprived of sex or of a potentially harmful chemical or an enemy position as "neutralized", or made harmless, by some effective counter-action. An older and deeper layer of meaning attached to "*nutrae res*" or "neutral things" refers us to a condition that is prior, rather than posterior to, sexual or moral distinctions. From this older and mythic perspective, to be "neutral" means to be more than merely male or female and, correspondingly, to be sexed means in that context to be deprived of an original plenitude and unity. The Latin verb *secare*, from which our concept of sexuality derives, means originally: "to cut" "to amputate", "to wound", "to hurt", "to lance", "to castrate", "to divide". Within this light we become aware of the "neutral" landscape of natural science as not merely referring to a world stripped of all direct reference to subjectivity, as "deprived" of human presence, but also as a landscape that from a certain perspective may appear as "fuller", more desirable, even as more authentic and richer than a world in which the human presence is fully acknowledged and integrated. We see a parallel development in the story of Genesis where the first appearance of the ideas of "good" and "evil" occasions a "fall" away from the "neutrality" or plenitude of paradise and an entrance into a world of fateful choice between good and evil and of equally fateful divisions between the generations and the sexes with only the hope of temporary and provisional reconciliations.

The natural landscape surrounding the geologist is thus from one point of view barren, lacking in all that which welcomes human habitation. But from another perspective it presents itself as a promised virginal land prior to our fateful descend into history, as a neutral realm in which none of the original potentialities have as yet been actualized or played out. The landscape of natural science is thus on the one hand a harsh, "realistic" landscape that refuses human inhabitation. But at another level this landscape is capable of evoking in us a yearning for a kind of paradise where nothing as yet has been decided and where everything is thus still possible.

We should note in this context that Freud's colloquial "Es" designates a similar realm of neutrality beyond good and evil and beyond what eventually becomes actualized as feminine or masculine. This neutrality and plenitude of the German word for "it" has been compromised by Freud's translator Strachey's overly erudite, rendering of a plain and simple German "it" into a Latinized and learned "id". This slight of hand prevents us from making the necessary connection between Freud's fundamental concept and the older idea of what is neutral and thus prior to a definite time and place, prior to sexual differentiation and prior to the awareness of negation or death. We might add that this "Es" is also prior to the fall of Adam and Eve, prior to the division of Heaven and Earth, mankind and the divine, self and other, good and evil. There is humanity only there where there is self and other, man and woman, human being and divine being, man and animal, good and evil, "yes" and "no". There is humanity only there where a form of life reaches beyond

neutrality, beyond "it" and "Es" and unconsciousness in the direction of a post-paradisiacal life of consciousness, of judgment, of decision between what is true and false, beautiful and ugly. Such a life can be lived fully only from the perspective of being fallible, mortal, sexed and therefore incomplete.

The world of the natural sciences, where "it rains", "it snows", "it falls" is thus also a kind of paradise, a realm of plenitude, a new Garden of Eden. It evokes something we contemplate with a passion such as we find associated with religion and sexuality, both understood as passions that recognize our longing to return to absolute unity, undisturbed wholeness, holiness.

Such modern forms of rationality as geology, physics or biology represent for us not merely a world of hard, unbending natural reality that chasten the human spirit and teach it to live within its natural limits. These forms of rationality function on another level as ideal worlds that incarnate our deepest desires for a realm of being untroubled by difference, ignorant of separation, innocent of death and of loss. From the perspective of this mythic and ideal realm, life beyond the primordial neutrality of "it" is at the same time the difficult and incomplete life of "he" and "she", of one generation and of preceding and succeeding ones, of the separation between man and beast, of self and other, of mankind and the gods. From the perspective of this neutral paradise the step beyond neutrality is necessarily a painful one since it inexorably opens a new realm in which the other is destined to remain forever other and where the self can only maintain itself in a relationship to that which is other.

#### **The discovery of the grave.**

But let us continue with our "thought experiment" and return to the landscape in which the geologist is busy making his observations. Let us suppose that the geologist's eye, wearied perhaps from the exacting tasks, lingers for a moment over the landscape in different attitude and then becomes somehow irresistibly attracted to a distant, modest, pyramid shaped mound of stones. This mound appears at the head of a small rectangular clearing outlined in smaller stones in such a way that it stands out from the surroundings.

It is difficult to say what it is that at first attracted the geologists eye. Perhaps it was the regular shape of the small pyramid or perhaps the strange rectangular clearing, so oddly virginal in a landscape everywhere strewn with the debris of rock and gravel. Both of these features make this part of the landscape stand out from the rest because they both survive ultimately all attempts to dissolve their meaning into a calculus of natural forces.

This is not the same as saying that this particular part of the landscape would in any way be exempt from the laws of physics, or even that it would in any way constitute an exception to its rule. It can only mean that the condition of neutrality, of uniform, unexceptional natural reality has been broken through at this point and that a judgment has taken place there. What drew the eye of the geologist to this particular part of the neutral landscape was ultimately the fact that the condition of neutrality showed a breach there. It was this breach that announced that a decision had been made there, that something had been decided there in the sense that something had been "struck down" or had been "cut off" (*de--ceasum*) from the expanse of natural scientific neutrality to reveal another, a fully human, reality. The geologist's eye was drawn to a spot in the landscape that appeared forcibly de-neutered to him and therefore also strangely and irresistibly vivid and interesting.

This odd appearance in the even geological landscape makes the geologist close his notebook, makes him lean forward and sideways so as to see the new phenomenon from different angles. Finally, this strange occurrence in the landscape makes him stand up and approach the mound and the clearing for a closer look. This odd phenomenon alters his entire bodily stance, his manner of walking and standing as he approaches it. It radically transforms his manner of seeing and understanding so that what only a moment ago had given him the distinct impression of a kind of lunar landscape, now undergoes a visible transformation. This metamorphosis of his attitude occurs at the exact moment when the geologist begins to suspect that the little mound of boulders, at the head of the rectangular clearing, is an artifact, rather than a natural formation and that what at first may have looked like a natural formation is in fact, a human grave.

From that fateful moment onward the geologist's thinking enters into a very different kind of relationship to his surrounding world. His thinking of just a moment ago had followed the grammar of natural scientific narration, had been preoccupied by notions of physical causality, by a logic of natural forces and material interchanges that are internal to the world of "it". His thinking now enters a very different realm, structured by a subject and an object, by the verb of motive and desire and punctuated by a capital at the beginning and a period at the end. His perception and his thinking is now bounded on all sides by an ethical world of right and wrong, asexual world of "he" and "she", an aesthetic world of beauty and ugliness and a religious world of what is sacred and what is profane.

In concrete terms, his thoughts now turn to the possible identity of the person buried beneath these stones. Was he an earlier explorer who failed in his mission? Was he perhaps a hunter confused by a sandstorm or a banished leader from a distant tribe, or a survivor of some ancient massacre living his last days without food and water in this desert? An what became of his companion who prepared this grave?

These and similar reflections on the fate of an other have as their inevitable counterpart reflections on the fate of self. The geologist cannot escape being reminded of his own precarious situation, of his own exhaustion, his immense isolation and his diminishing supply of food and drink. His awareness of this grave and this death, even if later it would prove to have been a false perception, evokes at this time an other and this evocation is sufficient to break through the neutrality of the geological landscape and the monotony of the "it" of nature and to make appear a world in which a true conversation becomes possible.

We note thus that the shift from the contemplation of nature within the strictures of natural science to the contemplation of a human monument involves us in a temporal shift from a generic, a-historic and timeless time of "it", prior to "he" and "she", "self" and "other", to a time that, no matter how remote it may be from us in years, remains necessarily and inevitably contemporaneous with us. We are present to a grave marker in a way that we can never be present to the stone of geology or the H<sub>2</sub>O of chemistry.

We might ask ourselves whether the study of physical nature was not always, at least in part, motivated by a desire to understand the world prior to and apart from our human presence? And was this study not from the start fuelled by an impossible, because contradictory, human desire to inhabit a natural or a divine realm, that is, a realm from which human beings are forever and on principle excluded? And is not this neutral realm that we are able to think and to calculate, but that we cannot inhabit, in constant danger of being confused in the modern mind with an older and clearly religious image of paradise?

**Barrier and threshold; natural science and human science.**

We have seen thus far that the geologist's first awareness of another person in the form of a monument expels him from the neutral world of natural scientific preoccupations and propels him into a contemporaneous world in which he himself is present to another. Within this interpersonal circuit which connects his own situation to that of another, the geologist becomes aware of himself as tired, hungry, frail and mortal. Each aspect of the other's life and death bears thus relevance to, and evokes the life and death of the self.

Within the world of natural scientific facts and forces there is place neither for the self nor the other. The natural scientific world excludes on principle the world of inter-subjective which is the subject matter of the human sciences. This is not to say that a natural scientific perspective cannot reveal highly significant aspects of human life and love. It only means that perspective must rightfully and on principle exclude all manifestation of a personal presence within its disciplinary field of vision. That principled exclusion is what makes a natural scientific perspective a perspective rather than a total and complete vision of all that is. It is for this same reason that a natural scientific perspective necessarily and on principle include within itself a passage to another perspective within which a personal other can be truly encountered. This is to say that the natural scientific perspective on the world cannot maintain itself as such except by offering passage to another perspective which complements it and which makes its own existence possible. An ancient Greek saying declares that a human being considered entirely by himself and in the absence of any relationship to another human being, loses by that fact the essence of his humanity and thus ceases to be human. We could apply the same criterion to human perspectives and maintain that a completely isolated and therefore totalitarian perspective ceases by virtue of that fact to be a point of view upon the world and becomes instead a kind of blindness and madness.

As the geologist gets up to have a closer look at what he now thinks of as a grave, his every movement participates in this new understanding. He now no longer sojourns in a realm essentially structured on the principle of the barrier and has entered body and soul into a world essentially structured on the principle of the threshold. He consequently approaches the grave marker with a reticence that stands in stark contrast to his otherwise forthright and competent manner as a field geologist approaching some particular interesting feature of the landscape. His entire body now moves in a way that testifies to his mental and carnal understanding of the fact that he has entered a realm of thresholds and that he is approaching not merely some aspect of a natural scientific world, but one in which it becomes possible to perceive the domain of another. This domain cannot be approached and revealed in the manner in which earlier he has approached and revealed particular aspects of the geological world. We notice, for example, that when he reaches the grave site and kneels down besides the monument to inspect it at close range, he treats it as a threshold and remains careful not to infringe unduly upon its territory. He now studies these stones no longer as would a geologist, with an interest in their chemical composition and within the framework of an intellectual quest to make transparent the workings of nature. He approaches these stones now in the manner one approaches sign posts or letters, that is, as physical realities capable of revealing facets of the fate and identity of another. He behaves in all respects as if he were approaching a person, as if he were ready to introduce himself, or as if he were eager and ready to welcome and have news of the other.

His conduct may now be compared to that of someone who approaches for the first time the threshold of the house of someone unknown whom has

invited him to be his guest. We might follow in our imagination such a guest as he might cautiously move past the main gate of the house of his prospective host, enter the garden and follow the path leading towards the main entrance to the house. We might see him inspecting the front lawn, examine the rosebushes and the cherry trees while intermittently scanning features of the house with the same keen interest that the geologist now displays for the stones marking the grave. For the prospective guest the painted Victorian fence leading to the house of his host can be read as testimony to an orderly and prudent host. The well-tended rosebushes, the perfect green lawn, the clean mat laid out for the visitor in front of the main entrance all appear to speak congruently of the host as someone who loves order, enjoys the sight of a well tended garden, who attends to the details of life and possesses a sense of propriety.

Following such an "introduction" we might expect our visitor to be truly surprised to discover that his host turned out to be in fact a bleary-eyed drunk or someone without the slightest interest in gardening or someone completely insouciant about outward appearances or social conventions.

Both the geologist on his way to the grave and the visitor on his way to the house are looking in very similar ways at their surrounding world for clues as to the identity of the one they seek to meet. In both cases the material things that fall under their glance are awakened thereby from their slumber within a neutral, material world of natural forces and transform themselves into a kind of material adjectives that describe human qualities and aspects of characters inhabiting an intersubjective world. The various objects that meet their glance have become manifestations of a personal life and as such they are natural things that have been drawn within a cultural and personal sphere within which they now embody a personal presence. The fence, the rosebushes, the stones marking the grave, all have undergone a miraculous trans-substantiation from indifferent natural things to symbolic references that point to a cultural, intersubjective reality as their governing principle. The moment of this miraculous trans-substantiation from stone or wood to flesh, from mere material formations to incarnations of subjective presence, from mere matter to signs, occurs at the very moment when the geologist becomes transported from the uninhabited world of his natural scientific preoccupations to the inhabited cultural world of personal encounter. This moment of trans-substantiation also signals the moment of the geologist's transport from the cultural sphere of the natural sciences to that of the humanities and the human sciences. This moment should be understood as first and foremost a shift from a world essentially structured by opposition and governed by barriers or obstacles to one that finds its point of gravitation and its coherence around the principle of the threshold. This moment of transition is thus also necessarily a point of transport from a world of the natural sciences which reveals the natural world as a play of natural forces to a world within which it becomes possible to explore the relationship between host and guest which constitutes the founding relationship, not only of a fully human world, but also of the arts, the humanities and the human sciences that form part of it.

It is in this latter respect in particular that psychoanalysis continues to inspire human science thinking. Freud's thought becomes most fruitful and revealing when we explore it as situated around the fundamental metaphor of the threshold. It is this metaphor that rules the realm of inter-subjective, that structures conversations and that opens for us the fundamental human realm of host and guest. It is possible to understand Freud's profound re-orientation from physician to psychoanalyst as following in all respects the pattern of re-orientation

experienced by our imaginary geologist as he moves from studying a geological landscape to approaching a grave site.

### **Some further differences between the natural sciences and the human science**

It is now time to leave our geologist in his somewhat precarious and heroic position in the desert. We wish him a safe trip back to civilization and await his forthcoming cultural contributions, regardless of whether these will take the form a solution to a natural scientific conundrum or of an historical and personal account of the mysterious person whose burial place he has discovered. Both kinds of contributions are capable of enriching our cultural life together. We should, however, detain ourselves long enough to reflect in some further detail on the differences between the natural sciences, the sciences of "it rains", "it snows", "it freezes", and the human sciences of "he" and "she", of "we" and "they". We should note that a scientific quest, undertaken from the perspective of natural science, proceeds necessarily to oppose a natural barrier. Such a quest is successful to the extent that it is able to meet obstacles, solve riddles, cut Gordian knots and find its way out of mazes. The scientific quest is inherently epic; it is embodied in Oedipus on his way to Thebes, clearing the road of all obstacles by solving the riddle of the Sphinx. As Sophocles makes clear, however, this quest remains inherently ignorant of the most basic of human relationships. It is ultimately not the heroic quest for power and knowledge that leads Oedipus to the discovery of difference between self and other, between mother and wife, between one generation and the next, between man and god. It was only near the end of his life, after he had stumbled for years along the dusty rural paths of ancient Greece that the same Oedipus who already had cleared the broad road to kingship and swept his way to wealth and power, finally came into possession of the tragic wisdom that would illuminate the ages. That wisdom can perhaps best be summed up by saying that human existence remains deaf, dumb and blind as long as it has no other resources than wit and force and resolution with which to overcome the obstacles on the road of success, and that it needs additionally the pious virtue of cultivating human and divine thresholds.

Within the perspective of natural science we seek to clear the world of obstacles to our knowledge and remove all hindrance to a complete power over nature. We seek progress and proceed with the removal of obstacles at a pace that is consistent with our mental and physical resources and the power of our implements.

But the desire to meet the other in person, the plea for the manifestation of another cannot be answered from within the structure of a natural scientific quest. The call for another can neither be uttered nor answered from a position that remains essentially structured by an obstacle or a barrier and that appeals exclusively to our wit and strength.

We have maintained that a situation permitting an encounter between self and the other requires the structuring influence of a threshold. Our fundamental relationship to self and other can best be represented by a path that leads via a threshold from one house to another, or from one domain to another. This threshold differs from a mere obstacle in that it cannot be surmounted by the resources available to a single person. The threshold inevitably situates at least two persons in respect to each other in such a way that the one occupies the position of a guest, whose task it is to petition to be admitted, at the same time that the other occupies the corresponding position of a host, who heeds the call. This situation does not change essentially once the guest has been invited to cross his neighbor's threshold because the host remains a

host and the guest remains a guest and their relationship remains throughout governed by the covenant of the threshold. This threshold remains in effect throughout the duration of their visit. It can be shown to persist as a kind of screen between them that governs all their interactions and that surrounds every object the guest encounters in the house of his host. The guest thus handles the objects he uses there in the explicit awareness that these belong to and consequently speak of the life of his host. Each object remains thus surrounded by a threshold where the guest announces his presence and renews his plea for the manifestation of his host. Each photograph, each fork and plate and drinking glass constitutes thus a new situation structured by a threshold which calls host and guest anew into each other's presence. In so far as human science can be understood as a disciplinary terrain in which the self and the other can make their joint appearance, we must approach it as essentially structured by a threshold.

The path of inquiry into the workings of the natural world is that of Columbus sailing un-chartered waters to the very corners of the earth. It is essentially a glorious assault by daring, virtuosity and strength arrayed against the very obstacles that guard the unknown of the natural world. But the path of inquiry whose aim it is to witness the appearance of the other is necessarily a broken path that cannot be traveled as an heroic quest, nor traversed from only one direction. It meets on its way the threshold, understood as the productive and sacred limit between self and other, between host and guest, man and god. This productive and sacred limit is the primordial site where the guest asks for the manifestation of the host and where the host seeks to come in the presence of the guest. Neither seeks here conquest, both demand nothing beyond the truthful appearance of the other. This threshold is the place of origin of the primordial conversation which poses the question concerning the identity of the other in such a way that it cannot be separated from a revelation of the self. The threshold constitutes thus the primordial situation in which someone in the role of guest announces his presence at a threshold in the hope of rousing the presence of his host.

A human science, as distinct from a natural science of the species homo sapiens, is born on this threshold and it is sustained there, in the same way that natural science flows from, and is sustained by, the obstacles or barriers that limit our access to a world of natural forces.

If we inquire further into the nature of the obstacle that bars our absolute access to the realm of physical nature we recognize in it a fundamental aspect of human existence that denies us a completely self-evident and un-problematic access to the heart of the natural world. Elk and oak tree and butterfly all are "naturally" at home in nature without being required to make that specific kind of effort that we call work. They all occupy their respective places in nature by a natural right that forms part of their very being.

But our human presence within a realm of nature, insofar as it conforms to our basic needs, is bought by us at the price of continuous exertions in the form of a physical and intellectual labor that transform a merely natural space into a place fit for human habitation. Human dwelling demands the continuous expenditure of human effort. It requires the constant cultivation of all of our many gifts and talents and a slackening in our efforts to meet these requirements always threatens us with the loss of our place in the midst of nature.

We oppose and push back by means of mental and bodily exertions, by means of labor, the very barriers that an inhospitable nature puts in our way. This includes the process of practical problem solving that lies at the heart of the modern natural or physical sciences. Our calculations and our bodily strength form together as it were a phalanx

with which we press back the obstacles that a natural world places in our way

Thus we feel the resistance of the natural world not merely in our hunger and thirst, or in our illness and fatigue or in the threat of death. We also experience it in our failure to understand and master natural processes, in our defeat before a swift stream which permits us no passage, in our helplessness before a natural disaster, in our failure to cure illness and stave off death.

The manner in which we inhabit our world differs fundamentally both from the complete and perfect manner in which gods reign in their divine realms and from the completely unselfconscious way animals live in their natural habitat. The human world differs from celestial realms or natural habitats in that it cannot sustain itself without vigilant and constant maintenance in the form of physical and mental work. We stand apart from these more ideal worlds by a gulf which is the source of a profound and irremediable longing. We are neighbors to the world of nature and to that of the gods and our identity as human beings derives from the love we bear both. This love, like all love, both unites us to what we love and yet keeps us apart. Mortals and immortals, natural creatures and cultural creatures all are destined, like men and women, to go jointly their separate but complementary ways.

Our longing to find an ultimate and complete access to the heart of nature finds expression in mental and physical labor and this work sustained by longing has over time given rise to the natural sciences, to technology and industry. All the while laboring we dream of a permanent home of ultimate ease at the bosom of nature. We find excitement and satisfaction in solving the perplexing problems posed by nature because the solution to these problems carries with it the distant promise of a totally accessible and malleable world from which all obstacles have been removed, in which all difference between mankind and nature will have been resolved so that all our needs are spontaneously met by a nature completely won over.

By contrast, our longing for the presence of the gods, for the manifestation of the divine, founds and articulates a social world that is structured around a threshold and bounded by a relationship of host to guest. Our longing for an unselfconscious life at the heart of nature creates a cultural world of work in which the central metaphor is that of overcoming obstacles. But our longing for the ideal and divine worlds of the gods creates cultural worlds in which the symbol of the threshold stands central.

We must thus recognize a major division running through all our cultural activities such as these are now constituted, including those promoted by our various intellectual disciplines. On the one hand there are those that are organized according to the principle of work and a struggle with nature. These disciplines are joined under the emblem of the barrier and they incite us to overcome the natural resistance to human life on earth. On the other hand there are the arts, the religions, the humanities and the human sciences that are essentially governed by the desire for a mutual and personal manifestation of self and other and that stand under the aegis of a threshold. This threshold should be understood as an embodied plea for a mutual manifestation of self and other within a context of hospitality and within a social structure of host and guest.

### **Two fundamentally different approaches to the body and the landscape**

If we follow this logic it becomes thus possible to approach the human body from two contrasting but complementary cultural directions or perspective. It is first of all possible to approach the body under the

aegis of the barrier and from the perspective of a struggle with nature. This approach would give rise to the disciplines of biology and medicine where it is our aim to remove obstacles to health and longevity. In our contest with disease we pit all ingenuity, all manual and mental dexterity, all knowledge of physical and biological processes against a particular advancing threat to human life. The aim of this engagement is always to restore the ailing body to an untroubled life at the bosom of nature.

But it is also possible to approach the human body in a very different mode as announcing a particular embodied personal presence that evokes a threshold and that holds the promise of a fuller, completer, mutual revelation of self and other, of host and guest. In the latter case we proceed under the banner of the threshold and invoke the structuring power of a host and guest relationship.

These two fundamental approaches to the human world clearly reach beyond the realm of the human body proper. We have already characterized the world of the threshold as marked by a miraculous trans-substantiation whereby a natural and separate thing like a fence or a rosebush or any part of a landscape can be made to function like an adjective that forms part of a sentence describing or manifesting a person. We saw how a guest can approach a front lawn and a garden as so many adjectives describing in advance the host he hopes to meet. This trans-substantiation from a thing to a symbol, from a material natural object to an adjective forming part of a descriptive phrase, is entirely characteristic of this realm of cultural life centered on the relationship of host to guest. Within that realm the human body itself becomes expressive of a particular and concrete form of life that always transcends the bodily presence in which it is announced but in which it becomes never fully explicit. From the perspective of the threshold we read a repertoire of bodily stances and gestures in terms of a particular personal style and we approach a person's manner of standing, walking, sitting or speaking all as pointing to facets of that's person's presence. This is nor to say, however, that we would identify any particular, concrete movement or utterance as exhaustively or ultimately capturing the totality of a personal presence.

Within the world of the threshold we always move from one manner of personal revelation to another and from one particular meeting to a subsequent or previous one without privileging one particular encounter as an absolute and ultimate revelation of self and other. All revealing moments point ahead to possible future meetings and to re-interpretations of past ones, just as all revealing facets point necessarily to others for corroboration or contradiction. The summons of the threshold are truly infinite and the object of our devoted interest cannot ever be captured in any single glance or single moment.

It is of course always possible to turn one's back on the threshold and to break the covenant of host and guest and thereby to put a stop to all future revelations. But the quest for the other remains infinite as long as we do not turn away and as long as the covenant of the threshold binds us together as host and guest.

It is also possible to approach a landscape from the same two divergent but complementary perspectives of the barrier and the threshold. We may approach a landscape with the aim of establishing a farm, or with the intent of formulating an effective military strategy, or in the hope of finding interesting fossils or precious stones. In all these workaday approaches we proceed with the intent of finding solutions to problems and answers to practical problems. In these pursuits we find barriers that oppose our progress towards a desired goal and it is against these barriers that we exert our strength and test our resolve and seek an alliance with the natural sciences, with modern technology and modern industrial methods of production. In all these instances we seek to

rationalize our conflicts with nature in preparation for our eventual victory. And while we struggle against the natural barriers we find on our way we find inspiration in the ever receding promise of finding some day a perfect and absolute access to the very heart of nature. We may ask in what manner we might approach a landscape under the aegis of the threshold and thereby evoke it as a personal presence. We might think here of a Greek temple as a threshold from which issues the invitation for a festive mutual and personal manifestation in which both the throng of worshippers and their god are held together within the bonds of hospitality. The ritual of sacrifice takes here the form of a guest meal in which the struggle for existence is momentarily set aside to make place for a festive world in which both presence and sustenance are offered rather than won through labor or conquered through violence. We may point, in a slightly different vein, to the manner in which Paul Klee described his experience of the landscape. He told a friend that "he had felt many a time that while in the forest it was not really he who looked at the forest, but that some days it felt as if the trees were looking at him, were speaking to him and that he was there listening". He added his thought that "the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it. I expect to be inwardly submerged, even buried (by the presence of the landscape) and perhaps I paint in order to break out (of the situation of passive listening and seeing).

Klee presents the act of painting as a means by which he restores an ongoing personal dialogue that threatens to become one-sided and intrusive in the absence of an adequate response. Where the priest offers a sacrifice and where the poet tunes his lyre and begins his song, there the painter starts a sketch or begins to apply paint to the canvas as an urgent response to the call of the other. The threshold is inevitably a place where we hear that call and where we are moved to respond to the other. The threshold structures a dialogue that can take as many forms as a particular civilization has been able to master. It can take the form of the humanities, of literature, history and the arts. It can take the form of a human science that submits to the discipline of the threshold and becomes neighbor to the humanities. It can take the form of religious practice and of religious thought in which case the threshold is an altar, and the person who calls upon us and whom we answer is a divine being. Placed within this dialogical context it becomes clear that both the religious practices themselves, as well as the meditations, the arts, the music and the thought that flow from these, all have profound implications for a psychology and for a therapeutic practice that places itself under the banner of the threshold.

### **Tool and work of art**

The tool occupies a position within labor that the successful resolution of a problem or a successful theory occupies within the domain of the natural sciences.

We already have pointed out how our struggle with nature is motivated by the ideal of a total and unobstructed access to nature and how this ideal inspires our workaday life in general and natural scientific practices in particular. Such unobstructed total access to nature is already partly realized in the tools that we possess. A tool is a part of nature that has ceased to resist our will and that has formed a subordinate alliance with our body that is so complete that it has become a virtual part of that body. A walking stick, a pen, a screwdriver, all are parts of nature that have become quasi prolongations of our limbs. A pair of glasses, a microscope, a telephone are effective and seamless extensions of our powers of speech, of vision

and hearing. A microphone carries forward the sound of my voice without indicating a break between the limitations of my natural voice and the extended limits set by the new medium. What one hears in the back row of the auditorium is my voice, what I see through the microscope I see with my eyes. There exists neither gap nor obstacle between the schooled hand and the hammer, between the heart, mind and hands of the orchestral conductor and his baton.

This absolute conquest over distance and difference, so evident in our use of tools, is also manifest in natural scientific accounts of chemical, physical or biological processes. Such accounts, in order to be fully successful, must show neither gap nor missing link. It is precisely the task of the theorist in the natural sciences to eliminate all mysterious transitions and unaccountable metamorphoses. He must do away with all blind spots in his vision, all gaps in his understanding. Within the frame of the natural sciences such blind spots, such gaps and lacunae, make their appearance in the form of barriers that obstruct the road to an absolute and faultless intellectual possession. This model of description favors the timeless formula over a mere narrative account, because a formula makes reference neither to an irreducible point of beginning nor to an absolute endpoint. Unlike a true narrative, the formula makes no reference to an ontological difference; every moment within its purview is accorded the same ontological status as any other.

By contrast, all spoken narrative begins with a silence, with an inhaled breath, which evokes the mysterious and sacred moment of all beginnings and which, in turn, points to the birth of subjectivity. All written narrative begins with the appearance of a capital, understood here etymologically as reference to a head (*caput*, gen. *capitis*), and as an invocation of subjectivity. The moment of beginning is here completely unlike any other moment in the unfolding tale. Moreover, any spoken or written narrative necessarily makes reference to breathing and breathing spells in the form of lived or prescribed pauses. All narratives must have periods, understood as times and places of transition, of death and resurrection, in which something comes to an end and in which something else is announced as being born. Unlike the formula, a true narrative cannot exclude either the mystery of subjectivity, nor the mysteries of a beginning and an end that are implied in subjectivity. All sentences and all tales must, in order to have meaning, point beyond themselves to other rising and falling sentences and tales, from which they are separated by commas and periods. To infringe upon this limit between one sentence and another, to conquer the distance and difference between one narrative and the one that follows, means to have destroyed the very fiber of the narrative that links it to meaning. The punctuation of a simple sentence, whether spoken or written, inescapably repeats the mysteries of birth, of life, of breathing and of death. All phrases within a meaningful narrative end in a fathomless, mysterious silence in which one phrase drowns while another is being born and rises up out of it. The absolute law of festive, revealing speaking and reading is that we not infringe upon these silences, upon these strange places of succession between the generations of words and phrases which are our sources of meaning. If we respect these silences, if we adopt the perspective of the threshold in respect to them, we may attend the birth of another sentence or of another narrative. It is in this manner that in the realm of the festive the wounds of discontinuity are healed, not by making them disappear through labor, but by standing back from the breach so as to let it speak to us. It is in this manner that the festive heals the gap between one person and another, between one sentence or one narrative and another, by transforming that gap into a source of meaning.

As we have seen, the world of work and of natural science are marked by the emblem of the obstacle which rouses visions of a perfect continuity, an absolute unity, a complete incorporation, a faultless understanding. The removal of obstacles is in last instance always the overcoming of discontinuity and the conquest over difference.

But the festive world in which we meet the other is based on the principle of the threshold which keeps apart what it binds together under the terms of host and guest. This world's functional principle is precisely one of discontinuity, of difference and the appearance of the other. We can explore this world only by means of sentences that are duly punctuated by capitals, periods and commas, that is, by beginnings, endings and intervening pauses. Punctuation is a fundamental and constitutive principle of the festive world in which we encounter the other.

If we mark the tool as wholly characteristic of the realm of natural science and of workaday life we must look to the work of art as the characteristic accomplishment of the humanities and the festive realm. There where the tool speaks of the conquest over difference and distance and testifies to the delights of complete and seamless appropriation, there the work of art cultivates distance and difference by bringing these to fruition in meaning. The artfulness of art, the activity out of which it grows, and which it also induces in the viewer, is one of cultivation of thresholds. It approaches a missing link, a lack, a discontinuity while restraining the impulse to fill it, to make it disappear. The artfulness of art is transforming a lack into a source of meaning.

We may state as a general rule that within the realm of the festive, which includes the arts, the humanities and religion, a lack gives rise to a threshold which embodies a project of giving voice and face to that lack, while in the realm of quotidian secular labor a lack gives rise to a barrier which invites us to erase it without remainder.

There where the tool speaks of the conquest over nature, there the work of art speaks of the birth of meaning, of person-hood and of a freedom within which it becomes possible for a self to establish a personal relationship with an other.

Both these fundamental attitudes form a necessary and indissoluble part of the human condition. They are incarnate in our very hands as instruments that can reach out and come to grip with nature, and in hands that can embrace the other, can greet, caress and say farewell. They are also incarnate in the universal temporal succession of workdays and feast days, in days devoted mainly to the struggle with nature, and days devoted mainly to attending the personal appearance of the other and the self within a relationship of host and guest. They are evident in the exploration of a geological landscape, on the one hand, and in discovering and attending a grave, on the other. They manifest themselves in a working relationship with tools, on the one hand, and in the creation and appreciation of a piece of sculpture, on the other.

The respective places that each of these important worlds must occupy in our life is indicated, first of all, by the fact that neither world can maintain itself in the absence of the other. Labor, technology, natural science, industry all are the means by which we secure a material basis for our existence. No human society can survive without engaging in the struggle for existence. But neither can a society survive without periodically interrupting its workdays with days of celebration in which the struggle for existence comes to a halt to make room for the festive. Work that fails to be interrupted by the festive or the sacred, that is, by the personal manifestation of an other, can only trail off into exhaustion and oblivion. The essential role of the realm of the festive is that of punctuating the quotidian realm of the struggle for existence, so as to provide it with a beginning, a middle and an end. It

is this punctuation that provides the workaday world with the discontinuities, the capitals, comma's and periods that alone are capable of transforming "a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing" into a coherent cultural narrative capable of supporting a cultural, communal and personal life. The work of art and religion is emblematic of this process. All the activities and products of diligent work turn to naught without the redeeming grace of the world of the festive. The modern call for a human science or for a humanistic psychology grows out of this same fundamental realization that human reality cannot be fully appreciated or understood from the perspective of quotidian, natural scientific life alone. The manifestation of the other cannot be accomplished by a natural scientific program that seeks to overcome barriers and solve problems. Such a program can make valuable contributions to society but it can make these only by staying within the limits imposed by the punctuation of the festive. Only a psychology which recognizes the threshold as its guiding metaphor can help assess the damage done to our civilization by a relentlessly quotidian, secular dogmatism and, moreover, point out the ways that may lead in the direction of an healing appearance of the other.

### **Reference**

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