

TAMEN:
ART / ARTE



ART

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The matter of closeness in relation to art raises a number of difficult questions. The larger group comprises epistemological, metaphysical and straight cognitive questions. Examples of such questions are: ‘How close is close?’; ‘What are the criteria for closeness?’; ‘Is «being close to X» synonymous with «getting X?»»; as well as Bertrand Russell’s famous distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, including his suggestion that acquaintance is more primary than description.

The matter of closeness also raises questions of value. Some are moral and political questions: is it permissible to be *very* close to art, until, as Jimmy Stewart puts it in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, «you can see the freckles»?¹ How are we to deal with, again in Stewart’s words, the «pretty private stuff going on out there»? Closeness is only occasionally a matter of privacy: but questions of privacy may help us put together a general picture of closeness.²

Our answers to these questions lead into a third group of problems, about whose nature I hesitate, and relative to which my own opin-

ions are more tentative: to what extent are the connections between closeness and importance, and between attention and value, natural? We seem to assume that love for a human being requires specific forms of attention to that human being, and a measure of proximity. Analogously, the notion that art is a worthy subject of study and admiration, that I shall not be disputing, has historically been accompanied by the putting forth of methodological rules of attention, and by the idea that admiration requires proximity. This said I have no interest in joining the bulging cohort of distant readers.³ Inversions of familiar pictures are of modest help.

Lastly, one meta-question will not be explicitly addressed here. «Do you suppose,» Jimmy Stewart asks Grace Kelly again in *Rear Window*, «it’s ethical to watch a man with binoculars, and a long-focus lens?» Grace Kelly curt response is: «I’m not much on rear window ethics.» The meta-question underlying what follows is, in the spirit of Jimmy Stewart, «Are we?» The answer implicitly provided therein is, in the spirit of Grace Kelly, «No.»

HOW CLOSE IS CLOSE?

A classic statement of this question is Horace’s, in his *Art of Poetry* (W. Jackson

Bate ed. & trans. *Criticism: the Major Texts*. NY: Harcourt, 1970, 361-5):

Poetry is like painting. One work will please you more if you stand close to it [*si propius stes*]; the other strikes more if you stand farther away [*si longius abstes*]. One shows more to advantage when seen in the shadow; another, unafraid of the sharp view of the critic, ought to be viewed in the light. One will please only once; the other, though looked at ten times, will continue to please.

The initial sentence is one of the most misunderstood analogies in the business. It has been taken by many to mean that poetry is in its nature like painting. This would be an ambitious claim. In fact, Horace seems to be meaning something unambitious. Poems are like pictures, he says, in that some poems will please you more if you stand close to them; whereas others will only please you if you stand farther away.

The outcome of Horace's unambitious position is simply that you cannot extract any normative content, namely concerning methodological procedures, from the fact that a poem is a poem. That a poem is a poem yields no proper way of looking at a poem. Of course that a tiger is a tiger, or an asteroid an asteroid, yields no proper way of looking at them either. Some poems, Horace says, will reward close attention, or attention from close quarters (which is not the same); whereas other poems will reward distance. This of course entails no suggestion as to the quality of the poems in either group. Horace's statement is one about pleasure, and pleasure can for him be produced in a number of different ways. For Horace, there is a likely, if unexamined, connection between the cause of pleasure and the fact of pleasure; but there is also a necessary connection between how we deal with a poem and the pleasure to be derived therefrom. Only if we deal with a poem in the right way will we derive pleasure from it.

The difficulty is that the way Horace puts his question does not allow us to answer *our* question. Indeed, the answer to 'How close is close?' is, for Horace, 'It depends.' And his answer to

'It depends of what?' is 'The particular poem.' Note however that Horace is not suggesting that particularity yields pleasure. Particularity is a jejune property of particular poems. Pleasure comes from knowing how to deal with the particular nature of a particular poem. The difficulty has precisely to do with this: how are we to have access to the particular nature of a particular poem, so that we can deal with it in the proper way?

This way of posing the difficulty suggests that the norms prescribing the right way of looking at a poem, or the right distance at which it should be looked, are part of the nature of the poem. This is nonsense, though not Horace's. The idea of having access to the nature of the poem is nebulous and unpractical. At any rate, it is perfectly possible to learn how to deal with a poem without having had access to its nature. In this respect, poems are like people. No moral intuition is required to guide our tentative interactions with our fellow human animals. A hedonist, in this respect like Horace, might use trial and error instead. He might try out different degrees of closeness in relation to a particular whose nature is unknown, and stop whenever he believes pleasure cannot be further maximized. This is not different from other activities such as focusing a lens manually, or straightening a picture on a wall. One might of course dispute Horace's hedonism; but that would be a different discussion.

Horace's point thus seems to be that there are no criteria for closeness, that is, for knowing how close is close. And, implicitly, that even if those criteria have to be derived from the particular poems (or the particular pictures), that is not done by having access to their nature. Were Horace to meet I. A. Richards, he would have been surprised by the way in which Richards seems to know that *every* poem «will please... more if you stand close to it.» Were he to meet Professor Moretti, he would be baffled by his insistence that only *si longius abstes* would you

understand anything about a poem. Horace's sensible rejoinder to the general topic «Closeness in Art» would be to recommend a distinction between cases when closeness is a good

thing and cases when it isn't. There is for him no general answer to the question 'How close is close?'

HOW FAR IS FAR?

Still, it seems a good idea to read books, and look at paintings, and listen to music. Why, however, is it a good idea to *read* a book? Suppose someone would say that for him pleasure only is maximized at the greatest possible distance from the cause of pleasure. Thus, he would continue in a Morettian vein, only when I do not read a poem may I enjoy it. This is a strange thing to say. It counters whatever minimal understanding we might have of pleasure; perhaps not necessarily the notion that pleasure is caused, but certainly the notion that the causes of pleasure are often external. What is odd is the belief that pleasure is mostly self-generated.

Consider the case of food, widely believed to be a source of pleasure. Somebody might claim to be able to generate foie-gras feelings: but not, plausibly, foie-gras nutrients. We might however say that whenever foie-gras pleasure is generated, foie-gras nutrients are absorbed. The problem with poems is that we lack a good analogy for the feeling/nutrient dichotomy: there is nothing nutrient-like entailed by poem-pleasure. So it would not do to say that unlike foie-gras, you cannot enjoy a poem as mere *cosa mentale*.

We could however argue that saying that you enjoyed a poem without having read it is like saying that you enjoyed Turkey without ever having been there. If I describe my Turkish ex-

perience and add that I have never been there someone might say that I am just lying; but the fact that I openly admit to never having been there appears to suggest that I am not lying, or trying to deceive anyone. One couldn't however be blamed for believing that my use of 'enjoying Turkey' would be very odd. In most circles, 'I have enjoyed Turkey very much' implies 'I have been to Turkey.' And 'I have enjoyed the poem X' implies 'I have read the poem X.' People read poems, enjoy poems, and claim that the cause of their enjoying those poems was that they had at some point read them.

However, given the Horatian principle, there is no a priori way of excluding the possibility of deriving pleasure from a poem (or a picture) *si longissimus abstes*, or even *si longissime abstes*. Recall that the point for Horace is that pleasure demands that we see some poems close by, and others farther away; that some poems «ought to be viewed in the light» and others ought not to be visible at all. So a second question, the reverse image of our initial Horatian question, arises: 'How far is too far?' As with the initial question, there is no Horatian answer to it. Nothing in Horace allows us to say that there are any limits to being far. A particular poem, for all we know, might be best read by not being read at all.

CLOSENESS AS OPPOSED TO WHAT?

The usual idea we have about art is predicated on the notion of some form of acquaintance with art. The word 'closeness' in this context

usually refers to a form of acquaintance. However, acquaintance remains a very vague notion. As we have just seen, it is notoriously hard to estab-

lish criteria for closeness, and certainly to derive them from any properties of art. The temptation to do so arises in the case of art perhaps because the study of art, and the teaching of art, has developed along with very sophisticated and detailed vocabularies for the properties of art.

And yet it might be argued that, despite the various difficulties characterized so far, we still need something like the notion of acquaintance in order to capture the specific connection we have with art. This is not necessarily, as we have also seen, acquaintance in the sense of having done something specific, like having been to Turkey, or having read a poem. Some see this primal kind of acquaintance as a physical spasm; others as an intuition, mental or even extrasensory. I have nothing to say about these theories, if that is what they are. Rather, what will interest me now is a third question: ‘Closeness as opposed to what?’

The canonical answer is here Bertrand Russell’s. In a well-known essay (Russell. 1910-11. «Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description». Revised version in *Mysticism and Logic*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1917, 152-167 [page numbers included in the text]) he contrasted ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ with ‘knowledge by description’. «I am *acquainted* with an object,» he wrote, «when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object.» (152) On the other hand, «I shall say that an object is ‘known by description’... when we know that there is one object, and no more, having a certain property; and it will generally be implied that we do not have knowledge of the same object by acquaintance.» (156) Bismarck, Russell suggests, might have been acquainted with himself. Somebody whom we describe as having met Bismarck, however,

would only have been acquainted with «certain sense-data which he connected... with Bismarck’s body.» (157). The rest of us would base our judgments about Bismarck on a «more or less vague mass of historical knowledge» (157), that is, on descriptions of Bismarck. For Russell, indeed, we only have acquaintance «with sense-data, with many universals, and possibly with ourselves, but not with physical objects or other minds.» (166). However, the constituents of knowledge by description «must all be objects with which the mind... is acquainted.» (167)

When we say that closeness to a poem matters we need not imply, wrongly in Russell’s view, that we are acquainted with a physical object. We might just claim that we are acquainted with a particular (that poem, regardless of what ‘that poem’ means, or sense-data which we relate to what we identify as the poem), or even with a universal (the concept poem). The difficulty is to determine a clear-cut distinction between acquaintance and description. However, we sometimes imagine situations where the distinction appears to be clear-cut, for instance when we contrast reading a poem with reading about that poem; when we contrast what we believe is a form of direct engagement with mediated forms of engagement. This contrast is often proffered with an epistemic hue, such as when we say that direct forms of engagement with poems are preferable to their mediated cousins. We often hear it said that those who have only read about poems know nothing about what a poem is like. And also that whatever writing about poems or art might be, it is always analyzable into forms of direct acquaintance (and so that literary history, or art criticism, are analyzable into sensory experiences of artworks).

DIFFICULTIES WITH CLOSENESS

Two difficulties arise: the first is our Horatian difficulty. If we forsake the idea there

are no in-principle limits to both closeness and distance, we also forsake the distinction be-

tween acquaintance and description, and so the distinction between being acquainted with sense-data and reasoning from sense-data. Indeed, it is conceivable that a modern equivalent of Horace (some very smart poet on a diet of Wilfrid Sellars) would claim that once we argue for the possibility of knowing a poem without having had any sensory impression of that poem, i.e., in Russell's idiolect, when we know it by description, acquaintance, what Sellars called «the given», becomes a mere optional feature of knowledge and indeed to a great extent a product of description.⁴

The second difficulty is of a different kind. Even if we were to concede the distinction between acquaintance and description, we would not necessarily be conceding either the reduction of description to acquaintance or, more importantly, the priority of knowledge by acquaintance relatively to knowledge by description. That you have been to Turkey does not necessarily mean that you «get» Turkey any more than if you haven't (assuming of course that there is such a thing as getting Turkey, or getting a poem or a person, which I would claim there is). Jimmy Stewart has seen what he believes is a large trunk containing his neighbor's dead wife. He lowers his binoculars. Grace Kelly, who originally did not believe him, now believes she has seen the same:

Let's start from the beginning again, Jeff. Tell me everything you saw — and what you think it means.

This is arguably one of the pivotal moments in the story; when the two main characters, who hadn't previously agreed about much, come to agree about something. A common, if metaphorical and misleading, way of putting it would be to say that they have now agreed that they have seen the same thing. The reason why this way of putting it is misleading is that it suggests that the cause of their agreement was a common senso-

ry impression, and so that acquaintance breeds consensus and probably truth as well.

That is not how Grace Kelly puts it. She puts it first by suggesting that they retell a story («let's start from the beginning again»); and then, by asking for a *report* of a sighting («tell me everything you saw»); and only then for a conjectural description of its meaning («and what you think it means»). Arguably, neither has seen the dead wife's body. They are thus inferentially assuming that such a body must be in the trunk. Perhaps they are agreeing on a description of what each of them has seen.

Seeing something is here, and for all practical purpose, something that is told, or something that has to be told. The telling cannot be quite told from the seeing. So what we might call a seeing is actually the report of a sighting. This is not an uncommon situation. When we see something very unusual, such as what seems to be the case with Grace Kelly, we might exchange notes with other sighters and say things like 'Are you seeing what I see?' The note-exchanging appears to ask for reports and corroborations of sensory experiences.

This however is not all that happens in the sequence. Grace Kelly asks Jimmy Stewart to tell her what *he* thinks their commonly-agreed report of a sighting means. So the fact that two people agree on one report concerning their respective sightings does not entail that either of them knows what they have seen. Two people might agree on a protocol report of a number of sightings say in Turkey. But they need not agree, and certainly not ipso facto, about what they have seen in Turkey; which is to say that even if they have seen the same sort of thing, one of them or both might not «get» it.

The point is reminiscent of our description of Horace's point concerning the lack of normative yield in a poem. *That* you have read a poem does not mean that you get it.⁵ That you *believe* you have seen your neighbor standing by his wife's corpse in a trunk does not mean that

you know what the protocol description «The salesman, sweating heavily, stand[ing] over a large, square trunk in the center of the room... stoutly bound by the heavy rope we previously saw him bring into the apartment» means. It is also in this sense that the meaning of a poem is not always what you believe is the case about the

poem. Grace Kelly believes meaning is not automatically given by acquaintance; that acquaintance is expressed in uncontroversial protocol descriptions; and she might even believe that acquaintance is not prior to, or more primary than, description.

SHOULD YOU GET CLOSE?

Even if we grant that people read books, and look at pictures, and go to Turkey in matter-of-course ways, we might want to ask whether they should. This kind of question makes perfect sense relative to many other activities where closeness seems to be involved, such as when we ask whether somebody should keep seeing somebody else, or whether somebody should keep spying on somebody else, or whether somebody should keep watching movies all night. However, reading books, looking at pictures, and listening to music are commonly thought to be inherently good; by this we mean not necessarily that the effects of doing these things are good, but that closeness to books, pictures and music is always rewarding in some way.

Rewarding, however, in what sense? Suppose someone holds a number of very simple, and largely true, assumptions about language, truth and intention, such as that we usually say what we mean and mean what we say, and say true things, and imagine others to be like us in this respect. Suppose also that that person feels no need for a theory of fiction, or pictorial representation, or poetic language (only a very small minority of people feels such needs; for most people, the usual assumptions about truth, intention, and other people are across-the-board and satisfactory.) Be that as it may, that person's reaction to a novel, a film, a poem, or even a painting, might be similar to Jimmy Stewart's: there is «pretty private stuff going on out there.»

Once we describe art in this way the should-question becomes very natural. We adopt a rear-window position and might ask ourselves whether there is anything wrong about such a position. Instruction in art appears in this respect to circumvent most questions dealing with such a position; it often is an evasion of the matter of closeness in art. Despite that, it always entails moral positions about rear-window positions. In our example, the rear-window position is very similar to the position of a spy; thus it is to be expected that the sorts of questions that are asked about spying would find their equivalent in art. 'Should you read novels?' becomes similar to 'should you want to know about other people's lives?' or 'should you want to know their thoughts?' There clearly is a connection between a world where most answers to should-questions are 'yes' and a world where the reading of novels is encouraged.

But there is a second sense of the should-question that is not necessarily an ethical one, or at least that is less evidently so. This is the sense in which one might ask if one should spend one's time examining very tiny details of a novel, a poem or a film. The word 'reading', to mention just one case, seems to have at least two different meanings. Outside contexts of instruction one does not usually refer to one's opinions of a book as readings. Only within such uncommon contexts is there an intimation of technical matters, whose aggregate you call reading in an uncommon sense. Such uncommon sense is puzzling to

the vast majority of readers. Only in contexts of instruction reading is an epistemic matter; in all other contexts, it is a matter of opinion.

It is not to be excluded that an epistemic understanding of reading might entail an epistemic understanding of closeness. For most readers you are close to the books you read in the trivial sense that when you are in Turkey you are close

to Turkey; so close indeed that you wouldn't dream of using the word 'close' (this is the sense in which it wouldn't make sense to say that you are close to yourself.) For the uncommon reader, however, there is the innuendo, if not always the theory, that closeness is not trivial, and perhaps also that it carries important benefits, cognitive and not, unavailable to the common reader.

CLOSENESS AND IMPORTANCE

Freud remarks that babies want to keep the important things close to them. He calls it «the function of judgment.» «Expressed in the language of the oldest... instinctual impulses», he adds, judgments have the form «I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.» (Sigmund Freud. 1925. «Die Verneinung». J. Strachey trans. «Negation». *Standard Edition*. 19:235-239, 237). Freud seems to be emphasizing a connection between closeness and importance, or, rather, suggesting that such a connection is natural or, as he puts it, «instinctual.» Even if we might dispute his idea of a language of the instincts, there is an obvious parallel between what he otherwise calls «introjection» and many common grown-up practices. Take people, and people who are important to us; it is common to want them at close distance. It is also common to pay close attention to them. An important part of the vocabulary for people's intentions, emotions, thoughts and plans was perhaps developed in relation to people who were important to those who developed it; another important part of that vocabulary was developed in relation to novels, plays, films and poems, through paying attention to the goings-about of important nonexistent people. Nonexistence is here not a predicate, or at least not a predicate that may detract from importance and, pace Russell, from acquaintance.

It is therefore not surprising that there is a connection between having technical vocabularies capable of the finest distinctions (syllepsis

and zeugma; implying and assuming; showing and alluding; reading and interpreting; absorption and introspection, imagination and *productive* imagination) and having places where those vocabularies were developed at some leisure. Those places are places where closeness seems to share quarters with importance; and where technical developments are seen as a consequence of that prolonged cohabitation.

The idea however won't do, and for a number of reasons. Anecdotal evidence appears to suggest that technical exploits can flourish, and do flourish, in contexts of instruction, regardless of any considerations of admiration and importance. A certain view of technique indeed suggests that it is best developed independent from any such considerations. Many a proverbial undergraduate has complained that the study of art, and the enforced closeness to art, has done much to extinguish whatever interest they might have had for it (it is perhaps also telling that graduate students no longer complain about these things.) Conversely, my interest and admiration for something or someone might not express itself into new ways of describing my objects of interest, let alone in any need for distinctions any finer than the familiar distinctions of the commoner ways of speaking.

Finally, and for Horatian reasons, there are cases where importance is characteristically expressed by what one could call modes of distance. These include not just the case of poems

that are best seen from afar, and also not just the case of people with whom we cannot both live with and without, but the many Cordelian cases where one cannot heave heart into mouth. There is thus the distinct possibility that, whereas the

technical emphasis on closeness has allowed for the present rear-window position in which we generally find ourselves in relation to art, we are still, as Grace Kelly suspected all along, not much on rear window ethics.

NOTES

- 1 All quotes from *Rear Window* in this essay refer to the [final draft](#) of the script (1953), by John Michael Hayes, based on a story by Cornell Woolrich. Alfred Hitchcock (dir.) *Rear Window*. Paramount Pictures. 1954.
- 2 The classic model for this is Ludwig Wittgenstein's so-called private language argument, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which one may see as a very critical description of 'being close to.'
- 3 See Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), for the tag; and his *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (London: Verso, 2007) and *Macroanalysis* (London: Verso, 2013) for attempted arguments. «Against close reading» has been used by Peter Rabinowitz, Roland Greene, and others.
- 4 The larger issue here is what John McDowell calls the «need to acknowledge that our rationality enters into the possibility of describing ourselves as accepting what our senses give us.» *Having the World in View*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009). 144.
- 5 Saint Augustine discusses the converse case in a similar spirit: the case of somebody who would «get» a text (i.e. the Bible) without having read it, and thus would have no need for it. See *On Christian Teaching [De doctrina christiana]* R.P.H. Green trans. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) I. 39.