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The Strangeness in the Strangeness

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- ‘You said you had had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible’ (‘Beast’, 309). Thus May Bartram recalls to John Marcher, protagonist of ‘The Beast in the Jungle’, the singular secret he’d disclosed to her ten years previously. No glimpse of this inner burden or its effect has been vouchsafed to anyone else. Indeed, the sole evidence of the secret is its imperceptibility. Marcher’s state of ‘perpetual suspense’ registers only negatively, as an absence of affect: ‘This was why he had such good – though possibly such rather colourless – manners’ (‘Beast’, 313).
- Later on in James’ tale, Marcher finds May, now fatally ill, awaiting him in her drawing room. It is early Spring, warm enough for the first time that year to sit without a fire. The air of ‘cold, meaningless cheer’ finds its echo in the eerie colourlessness of May’s skin, ‘[a]lmost as white as wax’ (‘Beast’, 324). This will be the setting for Marcher’s discovery that May is in possession of his secret’s terrible meaning.
- The absence of colour thus rhymes two apparently opposed scenarios: Marcher’s ignorance of the real content of his truth, and May’s intimacy with it. In its emptiness and its fullness alike, truth blanches experience, drains the colour from its face. How, he asks her helplessly, can his catastrophe have passed him by without his being aware of it? Her response: “[Y]our not being aware of it is the strangeness *in* the strangeness. It’s the wonder *of* the wonder” (‘Beast’, 330).
- The catastrophe’s strangeness is its inconspicuousness. It arrives in the guise of its own forgetting, visible only in the empty furrows of the skin: ‘The wrinkles and creases in our faces are the registration of the great passions, vices, insights that called on us; but we, the masters, were not at home’ (‘Image’, 245). Benjamin’s extrapolation of Proust finds an anticipatory echo in the dying May, ‘the marks and signs in her face as numerous and as fine as if they had been etched by a needle’ (‘Beast’, 324). For Marcher, this tracery mirrors at once his great passion and his absence at the moment of its calling. Passion occurs only as dispossession.
- ‘I believe, then, that infantile amnesia, which turns everyone’s childhood into something like a prehistoric epoch and conceals from him the beginnings of his own sexual life, is responsible for the fact that in general no importance is attached to childhood in the development of sexual life’ (‘Three Essays’, 176). Banished to the outside of psychic life, infantile sexuality has at once conditioned my history and erased itself from the records. This paradox is the very logic of catastrophe, as encapsulated in D. W. Winnicott’s elegantly simple formulation: ‘what is not yet experienced did nevertheless happen’ (‘Fear’, 91).
- Sexuality *happens* to the infant, breaks through its psychic skin, such that it cannot be assumed as a datum of experience, an event in her personal history. Its traumatic character is attested above all in the fact that no importance is attached to it. Blanchot: ‘The disaster is not of capital importance’ (‘Writing’, 2).
- Marcher’s hopeless search for the substance of his secret, ‘the lost stuff of consciousness’ (‘Beast’, 335), fails precisely because it misses this unimportance, the nullity of this lost stuff. “‘You know something that I don’t. You’ve shown me that before”’, he tells May, who responds, ‘with firmness’, “‘I’ve shown you, my dear, nothing”’ (‘Beast’, 326). Marcher’s appeal to the something May is withholding meets only with her insistence on nothing. He repeatedly and unwittingly attests to this void of and in knowledge himself. When May goes on to ask him, “‘Don’t you know –

now?"', he can only reply "'Now - ? [...] I know nothing'" ('Beast', 328). To her dying avowal that the catastrophe has passed he protests, "'Nothing for me is past; nothing *will* pass until I pass myself...'" ('Beast', 332). Marcher's 'knows nothing', May 'shows nothing': these claims harbour a radical duplicity; manifestly, they signify nothing as privation of something, the absence of a presence. Yet a different significance whispers in them, playing at the edges of Marcher's knowledge: that nothing is precisely the 'strangeness of the strangeness', all there is to be shown and known.

- But what has this nothing to do with sexuality? Do we not experience the sexual drive as a constant pressure, an unremitting affective and bodily presence? The 'principle of constancy' governing mental life, by which the organism seeks to maintain within itself the lowest and most even flow of drive¹ energy, only confirms this presence. It is a way of negotiating the drive's clamorous call, its 'demand for work' ('Drives', 122).
- There is, however, a principle older than constancy. Repression, Freud tells us in one of the metapsychological essays' most puzzlingly recondite passages, has two stages. The second, '*repression proper*', is 'actually an after-pressure' ('Repression', 148) – it assumes that the drive's demand has already been made, and responds accordingly. But this spirit of compromise is secondary to the spirit of refusal animating the preceding stage: '*primal repression*, a first phase of repression, which consists in the psychical (ideational) representative of the drive being denied entrance into the conscious' ('Repression', 148). Before it says 'yes, but...', the mind says 'no' to the drive's demand. In its primal state, it wants to know nothing of it.
- 'The nucleus of the *Ucs.* consists of drive representatives which seek to discharge their cathexis; that is to say it consists of wishful impulses' ('Unconscious', 186). This sentence from the third of the metapsychological essays further complicates this primal 'no'. For if the imperative of the unconscious is *discharge*, it is not simply the addressee of a no coming from outside itself; it carries this no within itself. Its ultimate aim is to not to establish a home in the mind, but on the contrary, to void itself, to burn itself out, leaving nothing behind.
- The theory of the death drive is the culmination of this ongoing interrogation into psychic primality. As Freud's extraordinary narrative of biological pre-history has it, life begins when some force 'of whose nature we can have no conception' insinuates itself into the inanimate. The resulting tension seeks immediately 'to cancel itself out. In this way, the first drive came into being: the drive to return to an inanimate state.' (*Beyond*, 38) The drive's first aim is its own extinction. It seeks not to establish but precisely to *discharge* itself. To the positive narcissism that seeks to extend, elaborate and aggrandize its own life is counterposed a negative narcissism whose tendency, in the words of André Green, is 'towards non-existence, anaesthesia, emptiness, the *blanc*' (*Life Narcissism*, 10).
- As Green's own work attests, French psychoanalysis has long been marked by its fascination for the drive's tendency to self-extinction. No more sustained meditation on this tendency is to be found than in the work of Piera Aulagnier. Aulagnier takes the singular theoretical step of positing a process prior to Freud's 'primary', in which the claims of the drives are submitted to the mind by means of their 'ideational representatives'. Aulagnier's primal ('originaire') process describes the topography of a psyche which knows nothing of such representatives or, indeed, of

¹ As many translators and commentators have pointed out, Strachey's translation of Freud's '*Trieb*' as 'instinct' is both inaccurate and misleading, conflating the internal psycho-somatic pressure peculiar to the human with the encoded self-preservative knowledge common to human and animal biology. Consequently, I have substituted the term 'drive' in every instance that the term 'instinct' appears in the English text.

representation itself. In the primal, any experience of the external world which disturbs the infant's illusion of a perfect complementarity between itself and its objects, which recalls to it the possibility that 'the psyche might find itself in a state of lack' (*Violence*, 28) becomes a focus of radical hate. The state of lack, in extending the task of life, runs counter to the drive's first imperative to 'return to an inanimate state'. This imperative is for Aulagnier, 'the major scandal of psychic functioning: [...] the original presence of a rejection of living in favour of the search for a state of quiescence, of *non-desire*, which remains the aim, unknown, but always at work, of desire' (*Violence*, 17).

- Marcher regards himself, 'in a greedy world, as decently – as, in fact, perhaps a little sublimely – unselfish' ('Beast', 313). He withdraws, so he believes, from the life of desire and its demands; to the common greed of and for the self, he counters his sublime disinterestedness. Put another way, he misrecognises non-desire as the other of desire. But as his story reveals, non-desire – in all its colourless indifference – might merely be desire's most devious guise. Blanchot: 'The absolute desiring [...] goes by way of "without desire"' (*Writing*, 113).
- The tendency to zero is thus not an exit but an expression – the original expression – of desire. Thus do desire and its negation ensnare one another. Jean Laplanche: 'The death drive is the very soul, the constitutive principle, of libidinal circulation' (*Life and Death*, 124).
- Non-desire masquerades as desire from the beginning of Marcher's relationship with May. Marcher has forgotten not only the circumstances of their previous encounter, but its most salient fact – the confiding of his secret. That he fails to recall this fact even when prompted leaves him 'even more surprised than ashamed' ('Beast', 307). The tempting question: what makes this singular event so forgettable?
- When May recalls the disclosure, she draws out above all the *passive* quality of Marcher's foreboding. The 'rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible' event would 'happen to you...perhaps overwhelm you.' Marcher concurs: '[I]t isn't anything I'm to *do*...' The thing is merely to be awaited, 'to see suddenly break out in my life; possibly destroying all further consciousness, possibly annihilating me' ('Beast', 309).
- Bound to him by this secret, May cannot forget Marcher. And yet Marcher forgets May, has 'lost the consciousness' ('Beast', 308) of having confided in her; it is as if in binding her to him, he unbinds himself from her, as if the secret that created their pact simultaneously dissolves it.
- The possibility of an erotic bond exists for them only as a self-conscious masquerade, a tactical screen for their mortal bond. Thus May assures Marcher of their secret's integrity: "'What saves us, you know, is that we answer so completely to so usual an appearance: that of the man and woman whose friendship has become such a daily habit, or almost, as to be at least indispensable'" ('Beast', 316). The mask of 'social simper' ('Beast', 315) behind which they hide conceals the radically passive basis of their bond. This couple do not couple, do not partake in Eros' drive towards 'ever larger unities' (*Beyond*, 43). Coolly contemptuous of their 'unintelligent' society and its commonplace assumptions about erotic life, they forsake the enlargements of the life drive for the depletions of the death drive. When May seals her doomed devotion with the promise to 'watch with you' ('Beast', 311), she implicitly forswears marriage to Marcher. For the latter, 'his obsession... was not a condition he could invite a woman to share' ('Beast', 313). In binding herself to Marcher, May unwittingly marries the very zero principle itself. Blanchot: 'the throes of the death drive are thefts from unity' (*Writing*, 46).

- The privileged figure of this passive waiting is, of course, the titular Beast, forever looming in the undergrowth, ready to ambush Marcher in one annihilatory leap. The features of this Beast are curiously indistinct, the topography of a fear without content: “‘I don’t focus it. I can’t name it. I only know I’m exposed”” (‘Beast’, 318).
- Marcher knows his fear only as an exposure, a helpless consignment to some nameless otherness. Exposure is the source of Marcher’s colourlessness, the drain on all possible creative and erotic investments. It is also an amplification of the original condition of infancy. As early as 1895, in his posthumously published *Entwurf*, the so-called ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’, he had pointed to helplessness as the necessary concomitant of the infant’s prematurity and consequent dependence on the care of others. This biological and mental helplessness will come to condition the human being’s later psycho-sexual life, modelling the primary forms of his erotic desire.
- This structural place of helplessness in psychic life is the basis of Jean Laplanche’s reorientation of psychoanalytic theory. For Laplanche, the infant’s biological helplessness is overlain by a kind of communicative helplessness, in the form of an excess of verbal and non-verbal ‘messages’ from the adult other, ‘swamping the child’s capacity for apprehension and mastery’ (‘Drive’, 126). This resistance to mastery is an effect not simply of the infant’s underdeveloped mental and communicative apparatus, but equally of the doubled content of the message itself. The vital functions of feeding and sheltering the baby are always overlain by the carers’ erotic investment in these activities. Thus does the sexual drive ‘lean on’ (Freud’s *Anlehnung*) the vital instinct (*Life and Death*, 15-18).
- It is this ‘excess of message’ that gives birth to the unconscious. The unconscious is formed from the residues of adult messages that have resisted apprehension or ‘translation’ by the infant, implanting themselves in the psyche as signifiers without referents, or ‘designified signifiers’ (‘Short Treatise’, 97). The unconscious element is not the referent of an external thing but, on the contrary, ‘the passage to the unconscious is correlative with a loss of referentiality’ (‘Short Treatise’, 90).
- Ordinarily, ‘[t]he message is partly translated and partly repressed’ (‘Short Treatise’, 94). In other words, it has a split destiny, one part tending towards signification, whereby *Sachsvorstellung*, Freud’s ‘thing-presentation’, becomes *Wortvorstellung* or ‘word-presentation’. The other part tends towards designification, and as such constitutes the source of the unconscious. But their translatable counterparts ensure that the unconscious remains a *differentiated* agency alongside the conscious, a part (albeit a conditioning one) rather than the whole, of mental life.
- Laplanche gives the name of ‘implantation’ to this split message, distinguishing it from *intromission* ‘its violent variant’: ‘While implantation allows the individual to take things up actively, at once translating and repressing, one must try to conceive of a process which blocks this, short-circuits the differentiation of the agencies in the process of their formation, and puts into the interior an element resistant to all metabolisation’ (‘Implantation’, 136).
- The intromitted message stays stubbornly at the level of thing-presentation or, in Laplanche’s ‘provocative mistranslation’ (‘Short Treatise’, 90), ‘thing-like presentation’. Voiding all attempts at translation or representation, it is the very matter of psychic catastrophe. We recall May’s response to Marcher’s bewildered inquiry: “‘Ah, your not being aware of it [...] your not being aware of it is the strangeness *in* the strangeness”” (‘Beast’, 330). Non-awareness is strangeness itself. The radically untranslatable message brooks

no awareness and no memory. The attempt to access it yields precisely the 'nothing' of Marcher's knowledge, the nothing that is all May can show him.

- The Beast's synonyms: 'the catastrophe' ('Beast', 310); 'the thing' ('Beast', 310); 'the great vagueness' ('Beast', 323). Marcher's repeated attempts to translate this insistent, thing-like internal message only ever throw him back on this void of meaning.
- Marcher's 'lost stuff of consciousness' is thus a misnomer, for the Beast has never been, and never will be, a presence to be lost. It passes unawares, consigned to an inaccessible prehistory before it can enter any history. *The thing is barred to experience, though it undoubtedly happens.*
- Marcher's Beast is consigned to an irremediable forgetfulness, 'disastrous' because 'without memory, the motionless retreat of what has not been treated – the immemorial, perhaps' (*Writing*, 3). Only the experienced event can be retrieved from forgetfulness. The Beast is outside any economy of remembering and forgetting.
- Writing of Proust's frenzied longing to recover his dreamworld of *correspondences*, in which all things and events appear 'opaquely similar', Benjamin identifies a symbol of this longing in a children's game: the unrolling of the stocking which, when rolled up, 'is a "bag" and a "present" at the same time. And just as children do not tire of quickly changing the bag and its contents into a third thing – namely a stocking – Proust could not get his fill of emptying the dummy, his self [...]' ('Image', 240). Delving into the stocking/self voids rather than yields its imagined content. And yet this voiding does not inhibit repetition, but on the contrary, compels it. Marcher endless search for the 'lost stuff' of experience cannot stop precisely because it turns up nothing.
- Invoking Blanchot's distinction, we might say that Marcher suffers less from 'lack of knowledge' than from 'un-knowledge'. 'Un-knowledge is not even knowledge of the lack but rather that which is hidden by knowledge and ignorance alike: the neutral, the un-manifest' (*Writing*, 63). Neutral: without quality or content, that which shows only as nothing. Marcher's ignorance cannot progress to knowledge because there is nothing for him to know. The disaster never offers itself to experience – on the contrary, 'it impoverishes all experience' (*Writing*, 51). It turns the present into an unrelieved waiting, the permanent abeyance of life and love.
- And of death too, as if in Marcher we could discern the great vagueness of Kafka's Hunter Gracchus. Having fallen into a ravine hunting a chamois, Gracchus remains eternally suspended between life and death. The worst of this malady is that it cannot be helped. Were the people to be commanded to help, they could only withdraw to their homes and beds: "'And there is sense in that, for nobody knows of me, and if anyone knew he would not know where I could be found, and if he knew where I could be found, he would not know how to deal with me, he would not know how to help me. The thought of helping me is an illness that has to be cured by taking to one's bed'" ('Hunter', 230). But doesn't the very fact of address – for Gracchus is speaking to the Burgomaster of Riva – contradict what he says? The Burgomaster hears and responds, and 'the thought of helping me' strikes even those who know nothing of him.
- This thought manifests no person, no place, no positive content, for it is the 'un-manifest' itself. Its thinker experiences it only as a depletion, an encounter with 'non-existence, anaesthesia, emptiness, the *blanc*'. It is the same appeal for help to which May Bartram cannot help responding, the disease that insinuates itself into her blood and blanches her skin. Gracchus'

disaster, writes Blanchot, 'is the mockery thrown on all humankind's great subterfuges, night, nothingness, silence' ('Reading Kafka', 7-8).

- Reproaching May with knowing something he doesn't, Marcher suggests, "'It's so bad that you're afraid I'll find out.'" To which May offers the disturbing assurance – "'You'll never find out'" ('Beast', 319). This assurance is frequently overlooked in readings of 'The Beast in the Jungle', which tend to assume that Marcher finally does find out. The face of the grieving man at the grave nearby May's signifies to Marcher his own life-long strangeness to all passions. The ravaged features of the stranger are the culmination of Marcher's 'exposure'; received rather than perceived, an affective blow that 'brushed him, jostled him, upset him, with the disrespect of chance, the insolence of an accident' ('Beast', 339). Marcher is dispossessed by the secret he sought to possess: illuminated by the light of the other's grief is 'the sounded void of his life... The fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance – he had emptied the cup to the lees; he had been the man of his time, *the man*, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened' ('Beast', 339).
- Marcher confronts the depletions of the death drive, undergoes *après coup* the desire that had only expressed itself in him as its own voiding and emptying. May, in other words, is right: Marcher never 'finds out', that is, never fills in the empty space of the enigma which haunts him.
- For Laplanche, the psychoanalytic process offers the analysand two modalities of transference: in the first, the 'benevolent hollow' of the analyst is 'filled in' with the unconscious imagos of the analysand's internalized objects. To this 'filled-in transference' is counterposed a 'hollowed-out transference', in which the hollow of the analyst receives '*another hollow*, the enigma of his [the analysand's] own...originary infantile situation' ('Transference', 229). The hollowed-out transference reveals the analysand to herself as conditioned by the fundamental enigma of alterity, as the addressee of a message always in excess of her capacity for mastery and translation. And it is in this 'opening of the dimension of alterity' ('Transference', 224) that psychoanalysis and art find their mutual echo.
- Is it not this very dimension that is opened up for Marcher by the ravaged face of the stranger? It discloses a knowledge, certainly, but one that hollows rather than fills, displacing the self from its own centre, illuminating only its radical exposure.
- The illumination of the stranger, in other words, exacerbates rather than relieves Marcher's 'un-knowledge', confirms the unwitting rightness of his plaintive declaration to May: '*Nothing*, for me, is past; nothing *will* pass...'
(*Beast*', 332). Not even the climactic perception of the Beast enables something to pass, for as it leaps, 'His eyes darkened – it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, on his face, on the tomb' (*Beast*', 340). Do we not hear mimed, in the staccato stutter of the sentence itself, the insuperable enigma of the Beast's alterity? Alterity breaks up the perception that would seize it, denying itself to the self's apprehension.
- The encounter with the Beast, then, has the structure of catastrophe itself: it occurs only as always already missed, just as Marcher can be finally bound to May only by the tomb that separates them.
- 'A woman has written a story that has a hurricane in it, and a hurricane usually promises to be interesting' ('Center', 35). Thus begins a story by Lydia Davis, not coincidentally a translator of Blanchot. The story's promise of interest is soon betrayed, for 'the hurricane threatens the city without actually striking it', depriving the story of a centre. This logic of promise and

betrayal recurs two further times: once in the story being written, in which a sick man fears he is being struck down for blaspheming, only to discover he is not dying; and once for the writer herself as, in the course of her researches into religion, she finds 'an unusual, religious sort of peace' ('Center', 39), which nonetheless fails to culminate in faith. Does this failure of the story to fulfil itself signify the absence of a centre? 'There may be no center because she is afraid to put any one of these elements in the center – the man, the religion, or the hurricane. Or – which is not the same thing – there is a center, but the center is empty, either because she has not yet found what belongs there, or because it is meant to be empty: there, but empty, in the same way that the man was sick but not dying, the hurricane approached but did not strike, and she had a religious calm but no faith' ('Center', 39-40).

- What does Davis' story enact but the possibility of a catastrophic itinerary for writing? Writing, that is, as a hollow in knowledge, a depletion of experience by the death drive, the message's incessant emptying of its own significance.
- The Beast bestows on Marcher a life deprived of life just as '[t]he word gives me the being, but...deprived of being' ('Right to Death', 322). The Beast, then as the very figure of the colourless void of writing.

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