Ego and the Moon

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I.

... for he saw
An image in the pool...
and found substance
In what was only shadow.

—Ovid, Metamorphoses (19-22)

The studio where Alejandro will be holding his workshop is on the second floor of a building I rarely enter. I try to walk with confidence but in truth don’t know where I’m going. I joggle a handle of a door that could be right, and the security guard, who has been eyeing me, asks what I’m looking for. I try to say, Studio 205, and he says, What? Speak up, and I say, “Studio 205.” “Oh,” he says, and points.

At the end of the hallway an argument sounds from behind the door. The woman isn’t speaking like a human, so I know they’re students rehearsing. I catch the thought slinking in the corners of my mind, verbalized in the echoing way the mind speaks, and I apprehend it, saying, And you, could you speak like a human when the words aren’t your own? My imagined interlocutor, always spoiling for a fight: I switch places; now I’m the owner of the ugly thought and the one being interrogated, and the smug grin of wit slides off the face of my mind. No, I respond, I couldn’t.

But I’ve been looking for 205 as this goes on, and now I’m there. I open the door, and the room is empty. Through man-high windows the street goes on, people reduced to their silent conversations on the sidewalk, widened into all the things they could be saying. I stand at the window, glad I’m looking down, glad New Yorkers don’t look up.

The door opens, and for a moment I am outside myself, seeing my mind’s construction of my body, framed in the window, wondering had I planned
this, am I enjoying the empty room and do I think I look cool, standing alone framed by glass. When I turn around I see Dominika entering with someone I presume to be Alejandro, and those thoughts become theirs.

Dominika’s words are draped as always in a Polish accent, but today they are softer than they sometimes are in the class where I am her student. She is not someone who is afraid of eye-contact in conversation, and she seems always to already know, is always waiting for you to arrive.

Alejandro’s accent lands somewhere in South America as he expresses his satisfaction with the space, testing the floorboards with his feet as though checking the temperature of a pool. His eyes, I think, will engulf the room: red-rimmed with travel, but above all gaping, rarely blinking, as though they possess some fragile ephemerality that could be lost in a moment.

People enter over the next five minutes, men and women, some my age and some older. Now in my black socks, which don’t match, I size them up. I am hoping to convince myself that not all of these people are actors. I am hoping that at least one of them will walk in, like I did, stony-faced to hide his vision of himself walking into the room like a fool in slacks. I catch myself again. It isn’t a race—as an eight-year-old boy told my eight-year-old self when, for some reason or another, I tried to walk faster than him down the second-grade hall to the bathroom; I was ashamed and broke the rules by running. Now, I tell myself, it isn’t a race.

The other people all enter smiling. In acting classes, I’ve heard, they tell you to smile when you enter an audition.

* * *

People think I don’t speak up. Here’s the truth of it: a threshold appears past which my voice won’t go. It is about three feet in front of me, and it makes people lean across the table and say, What? Some of them try to instruct me. One of them said, once, Speak up, and I leaned into the table. He said, Don’t lean into the table, just speak up.

I have a friend who used to try to make me sing. It wasn’t out of meanness; one night after a jar of whiskey I sang a verse of “Whiskey in the Jar” at top voice. I filled the room with an old song sung in every shower I’ve had, forgot my voice for “The merry month of May” and visions of an Irish countryside. He heard and, since I’ve been learning to play the guitar, he thought I might also like to sing but couldn’t. His pedagogy was: louder, up one octave so you have to be louder. One too many prods made me loud, but I wasn’t singing, and he gave up his best intentions.
I think I could sing given the right circumstances. But in a room quarter-full of people, one man learning to sing is shameful. Given a stage, I would have no compunctions, but it's something about making the living room that stage—I won't. I can't.

When I was a fat blond boy of eight or nine, sitting at the dinner table with my parents and my aunts and uncles, I tried to steal the show and got busted. I had long before intuited what makes things funny, and long before realized that to almost any audience, a funny child is a precocious one. The laugh that came from my saying something I should by no means have known to say was the ultimate goal: it meant I was sharp as they come, it meant that I was sure to say more funny things in the future and should be kept around, and it meant that I was older than my years. On this evening I was pushing the limits of my comedic abilities; before long I went beyond them. I remember standing on a chair and gesturing wildly, and I think my uncle, chuckling in his generous way, looked out of the corner of his eye at my mother's sister. I saw it, and so did my dad. “Why don't you go downstairs, Philly?” he said. I saw myself, standing on the chair, arms flailing, and I was ashamed.

I see myself often, still. It happens when I am reflected in the mirrors of other people’s eyes, and though I caution myself to consider the concavity of those mirrors, I always presume them flat, always presume what I see in them to be faithful. According to Jacques Lacan, it is in this moment of self-seeing that a child can become a subject, a conscious presence that mediates the chaos of desires that drives us all. The ego, the I, comes to be in this moment of self-consciousness, and it is through self-consciousness that we come to participate in the world (442).

What Lacan doesn’t say is that this mirror persists, that the process is itself reflexive: that participation conjures anew the image of oneself, that any doing is also a watching.

II.

And we realize this only at a point where they lapse
Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up
Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape.
—John Ashbery, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (198-200)

I am sweating in my thin shirt, walking like a crab across a hardwood floor, in synchrony with Alejandro and a few of the others in the workshop. Most of those assembled line the walls, watching. Nobody has been bidden to play, but some of us are playing. It began at the end of a break: a man and a
woman wordlessly initiated an actor’s game of mirrors, each on all fours, long-limbed and stretching, advancing as the other retreated with exact correlative movements. Each contorted, rolled without letting their bodies touch the floor, spidery, horizontal ballerinas, mimicking in smile and motion.

Alejandro has returned and is smiling. He joins them, and the few muffled conversations around the room are cut off. In the silence I join the game, too.

We’d begun with call and response, vocally and, in a subtle way, bodily—a game of repetitions. The songs were Haitian, and none of us, except perhaps Alejandro, knew what the songs were saying. We had no script, and our only recourse was to mimic sound. We were to be a chorus that did not overpower, working with each other and with Alejandro, a community of voices that filled the room. We were to move with each other, not dance or mimic, but act as particles in a wave.

Occasionally, Alejandro would hear an individual voice that strained, and he would fix it. He heard my voice strain and came to fix me. I was having trouble remembering the words, let alone singing them above a hum. Alejandro came over to me, still singing, and brought the other voices down with his hands. He called. I tried to respond, but my voice’s leash snapped it back after a few feet, and the words that rode on it were wrong. His next call boomed. Each of my responses went farther, but as he tried to help me build the syllables they all fell flat. The whole time his eyes engulfed, frustration nowhere on his face. I became again enraged, at him, at the language, for not leaving me be, and that rage burst forth—and filled the room with the completed phrase. He called again. My response filled the room. He called the other voices to meet us.

He turns to meet me again, now, as on the floor I begin to sweat, both of us lurching with extended arms in the same pattern. He turns to me and slows. I slow. If I watch a limb that’s beginning to move, he moves a different one, and I miss it. Soon I just look at his face, his unblinking eyes, that stasis. We move.

He works himself to standing, and I do too. We stand unmoving. He throws his arms in the air, and I do, late. His eyes light up and he smiles, but he isn’t mocking me. He does it again, and I do too. The next time he jumps as he does it, his entire body lax in the air, and I am too startled to do it too. He lands without a sound and looks at me, still smiling, as I stand sweating with my slacks rolled up. He motions, and I tense; when he jumps, he loosens, but when I do, I stay tense. He does it again, and as I learn, I ignore the fall. We fall into a rhythm of jumping and giving in to the air, jumping in one
direction then the other, jumping and landing again—and I jump as he stands unmoving.

“Do not anticipate!” he shouts, his first words since the break. He points at me as he turns to the rest of the room. They have not been jumping, I realize, just watching. He turns back to me. “I will not do what you expect me to do. Never! You cannot think. You cannot know me that way. You cannot watch and do as I do, you cannot think you know.”

The room bursts into his motion as he continues. I do not pause, I do not flush. I am too tired to see who looks at me with condemnation as I rejoin his motion and song, too tired to watch myself doing it. The song of which I am a part fills the moving room.

There are more Is than just the ego—there is an I that does and an I that watches. So it is according to Jerzy Grotowski, the Polish theater director who founded the Workcenter, the “laboratory” that is the root of what Alejandro was trying to show us. I went to Alejandro’s workshop because of the truth of that idea, and because the rest of what he says, he assures us, can only be understood by doing. To Grotowski, though, this divided I is not inevitable. That division is something to be recognized and reconciled, a constant inhibition to action. Ritual and war are, to him, of primary importance: these are contexts in which one must just do, contexts in which we have just done, by necessity, across cultures and traditions, forever (388).

For example, in Zen. In Zen in the Art of Archery, Eugen Herrigel takes up Zen archery as a counterpoint to his career as a professor of philosophy. Archery is one of several possible artistic, physical conduits to his real, spiritual aim: satori, enlightenment, “being non-being.” His reluctant master combats Herrigel’s academic mind with the guerilla tactics of paradox ridden on careful breath: inhale, the physical target is beside the point, a hit or miss has nothing to do with a “right shot”; exhale, “We master archers say: one shot—one life! What this means, you cannot yet understand” (30-31). When Herrigel begins to understand, when a “right shot” falls from him “like a ripe fruit,” it is because he has “remained . . . absolutely self-oblivious” (53). Herrigel gives himself over to the action, forgets that he is the subject of the verb shoot, and the shot falls.

There’s an image popular with Zen poets and swordsmen that goes something like this:

A mirror of water:
the white moon hangs, oblivious,
its image in every pool. *
The moon is never called to dance; it doesn’t have any arrows. The shot is not the point, and the dance is not the point. The moon does not need to be prodded to appear. It is as honest in the pool as it is in the sky, on earth as it is in Heaven, in body as it is in mind.

III.

_The thousand sordid images_

_Of which your soul was constituted._

—T. S. Eliot, “Preludes” (28-29)

We are all still singing, and we are moving, closer now to a whole. Some of the more experienced actors have left, I notice; they were the ones who were the most histrionic, moving like belly-dancers instead of wind-blown cloth, who fought silently for Alejandro’s attention and, failing that, left miffed. I notice myself noticing, but I don’t get mad. I ease myself back into focus.

Something is going wrong, and though I can’t name it, I am unsurprised when Alejandro slows his song and gathers us to him.

“This one,” he says, “this song, is harder.”

He pauses, and I think, I don’t know what he means after all. The song is not harder; it is among the simplest of the evening to remember, it is not as demanding vocally, and we are starting to get the hang of responding impulsively, it seems.

He continues: “So this may help. This is a song sung when the men are at war. The singer is singing to them. And you, you all need to—reach them.”

He looks around and nods. We nod, cautiously.

We begin again, and everything is much the same, because Alejandro’s voice has not changed with his revelation. And, since we are trying to mirror him, our voices don’t change, either.

Then, somewhere in the room, one voice changes. It carries somehow differently, as though through a window. It is not louder, it is not feigning some emotion or another voice. But it has changed. The next time we respond, another couple of voices have met the first one, followed it across the fields. Alejandro’s voice has not changed, but I begin to know that there is more in it than I had heard before—there is a patient, plodding sadness, an impulse to be heard and remembered, all tethered by the window frame and the brown walls of a room. And when I respond next my voice joins the chorus of this mutual call: we are enwrapped in a rapture absent; in the decanter
of that image I do not hear my voice apart from the rest. I do not think of the words as things recited: they are the only words to say. And although I do not know the language, an image appears behind the song. A woman is at the window, a woman who is not me but is not apart from me, and among the dulled brown of the walls she looks out the window and sings. I look out the window and sing, and our voice carries.

The song stops, the image darkens. Alejandro does not call because he has fallen to his knees. He is speaking English. He is saying:

The weight of the world
is love.
Under the burden
of solitude,
under the burden
of dissatisfaction . . .

And I am watching him, but am still moving; I am not speaking, but I am responding, still swayed with the cadence of his voice, as are the others. Alejandro's eyes are half shut as he speaks in quick breaths, supplicant to the ceiling and the sky beyond it. And when he says,

the skin trembles
in happiness
and the soul comes
joyful to the eye—

there is no need to imagine what is already itself an image: there is no making sense of what is just there, as sound, as half-remembered image, just as there is no need to make sense of the moon. When finally he says,

yes, yes,
that's what
I wanted,
I always wanted,
I always wanted,
to return
to the body
where I was born.**
I respond pre-verbally, with an understanding before and above words, with the chaos of thought that comes in shapes.

The poem ends. Alejandro does not move. Nobody does. And no one feels the need to clap.

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Alejandro had to trick us into receptivity. He had to trick me into singing, and he had to trick me into seeing the image behind the song. The master of Zen waits inside a paradox that has no room for us, demands that the intellectual ego turn away or be slain.

The ego demands that we recognize it as ourselves, as all of ourselves; it turns on the body and on the spirit to affirm itself as master. I means subject, but there are so many Is—in every mind, in other minds, and it may not be animist to say, in the moon. T. S. Eliot says in “The Waste Land,” “We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison / Only at nightfall” (413-15); put another way, the mind is a tower, and we are each high in ours, seeing ourselves in ours and the others in theirs, but rarely when we speak are we heard. We might call honesty an arrow, shot from one mind to another without mediation—we might call honesty something shared.

In songs there are images that land with the directness of an impulsive kiss, the primordial suddenness of an instinct realized. Through image, the same moon is in every pool: through image, the way the mind speaks, a thing can be shared. It’s the only honesty I know.

* This is my rendering of a theme, but c.f. for example D. T. Suzuki’s Zen and Japanese Culture, 116, 127, 148, 159, 162, 164.
** Allen Ginsberg, “Song,” 1-6, 60-3, 64-71.

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