

Jean Robert

The pedestrian condition

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The pedestrian condition

Pedestrian locomotion is not the abolishing of distances. It is the bodily experience of the intimate distance between unique places and moments. The hiker's tales enhance and sometimes exaggerate the estranging particularities of the far regions into which he ventured. Pilgrims had their most noticeable adventures in the most remote places they had visited, as if the intensity of their experiences increased with the travelled distance. Walking is not a disembodied motion relating an abstract distance to an abstract time. It is not an arrow between an origin and a destination, but an action that can shape its goals realizing them. It is not a scheduled forecast about my body's location within one hour or one day, but an unpredictable event. The world's center is always under the walker's feet. To him who walks about, nature does not reveal herself as a mere sequence of images, but as an *oikos* of heavy and smelly substances limited by an horizon. Far under the perceptual rubles of mechanized transportation, we find a form of locomotion which does not fit the schedules, the maps or the internal arrow of whom who considers that time is the cost of an operation whose benefit is the attainment of valuable locations.

Any activity that tends toward a perfection or a "goal," Aristotle calls a motion. He opposed motion toward a predetermined goal to action, an activity which, like playing, sets its own goals and reveals the world in always new and unexpected ways. We have to contrast the perceptual habits gained in mechanical locomotion with a form of movement which was both an action and an always surprising revelation of this world's stuffs. I found inspiration in the works of two great phenomenologists.

Substantial motion versus the vain destiny of fleeting images

In his essays on the imagination of matter, Bachelard establishes a distinction between movements that entail "an essential destiny that endlessly changes the substance of the being," and "the vain destiny of fleeting images and a never-ending dream." (Water and Dreams, p. 6) Motion either brings forth the substantial essence of moving stuffs, or it is a vain succession of immaterial images. True movement always reveals something of the substantial depths of the visible world. The experience of motion is essentially the bringing of things into the presence of one's body in the revelation of their materiality. Substanceless, motion is nothing; it can be construed as a vain succession of weightless images. Bodiless, motion is a dream. It is not enough to say that motion is always motion of something: its true nature lies in the acts which, from the depths of substance, bring the materiality of the world into our incarnated presence. The walker's movements bring existents which were at best only potentially there -- in thought or in memory -- into the realm of his vision. It is by my movements that immobile objects facing me reveal their hidden face and become seizable. It is my motion which will reveal me things presently behind the horizon.

Conversely, nature seizes us in her motions. The world is an experience of seizure. In the sense of that double grasping, a doctrine of motion that would start from these powers of reciprocal revelation would be a "haptology": a science of the mutually palpable presence of the world and the body. Yet, the

actuality of this seizure is, in itself, inexpressible through words, for we can only speak of motions that have happened and make guesses about their continuation.

In spite of all their merits, the physico-mathematical theories of motion that fix its trajectory in space-time miss this "haptologic" dimension. To regain a pristine conception of motion as the mutual seizure of the body and things, we must attempt to conceive it without our usual *a priori*'s of space and time, as an experience that precedes, and not follows any reference to rods and clocks. Before it could possibly be scheduled and mapped, perhaps before the conceptual invention of space and time, motion was the modality of our vision. Schedules, trajectories and space-time coordinates are means to catch, not the unseizable "haptologic" moment of motion, but its dead trace once it has passed away and to make that trace available to the eye as "trajectory." Trajectories are the pastness of motion, not its unspeakable present.

The "space" and "time" of actual motion, experienced in the flesh, is not the metric space-time of mathematics and physics. Embodied movement engenders its own "spime," which is why it is so radically different from the motion of a mechanical contraption in the lab. Walking is a moving experience which, only by an abuse of language, can be dealt with in the terms applied to mechanical locomotion. The act of walking is the complement to the act of seeing. As Gibson has shown, seeing is an ecological act: it opens up an *oikos* to be seized, smelled, tasted, heard and seen while walking.

The walker sees nature with his feet as well as by walking her with the feet of his eye: even in the darkest night, a special fatigue in the ankle allows him to "see" the steepness of a path. At dawn, he who wants to climb a mountain prepares himself by evaluating and feeling "in the calf of the eye" the distance to be covered.

The walker's space is a manifold of actual and potential body sensations: not only the hill actually climbed is mirrored as fatigue in the walker's calves or the rider's loins, but distances to be covered are evaluated as potential sensations of effort. This sensation of movement is the reflection, in the walker's flesh, of nature's motive injunctions. As long as man was a pedestrian or horse rider, the perceived movement of things could be echoed in his entire body which was then, with all his senses -- not just the eye -- the sensorium of motion. Nature's movements were challenges to man's actions and claims for new gestures to be performed. When man could experience nature's motions by being immersed in them and responding with his own movements, every particular motion bore the coloration of a particular element: violent water, through which the swimmer escapes using all his muscles was radically different from the volutes of fire, from the wind's action on the dauntless walker or from the crumbling weight of earth. In a pedestrian world, nature's challenges are always embodied in material elements.

The perception of things in motion is, following Bachelard, strengthened by the knowledge of the depth of a particular element. This element, for him, was water. Water gave his imagination of matter its "fundamental color." For he was born "in a section of Champagne noted for its streams, its rivers, and its valleys -- in Vallage, so called because it has so many valleys." Thus, his preferred image for substantial motion was flowing water. He never saw water as the ocean's surface, which evokes an infinite

extension, but as the stream of rivers or the flow surging from a deep underground spring, "for, in my own reverie, it is not infinity that I find in waters, but depth." Waters from the depths are, for Bachelard, the carriers of remembrance. They first remind him of Vallage, where "matter" is never abstract -- tasteless, colorless, devoid of tactile qualities -- but always embodied in sensible stuffs.

But the region we call home is less expanse than matter; it is granite or soil, wind or dryness, water or light. It is in it that we materialize our reveries, through it that our dream seizes upon its true substance. From it we solicit our fundamental color. Dreaming by the river, I dedicated my imagination to water, to clear, green water, the water that makes the meadows green. I cannot sit aside a stream without falling into a profound reverie, without picturing my youthful happiness.... It does not have to be the stream at home, water from home. The nameless waters know all of my secrets. The same memory flows from all fountains. (Water and Dreams, p. 8)

"Dreaming by the river," letting water give him its "fundamental color," Bachelard made of flowing water a metaphor for motion. Readers of his other works might find my statement too exclusive and object that he recognized that each one of the elements earth, water, air and fire called for its specific imagination of substantial movement. He dedicated another book to the imagination of air and even gave it the subtitle "Essay on the imagination of motion." Bachelard, however, remained exterior to the invisible air volutes which shape and sustain the spectacle of the vault of the heavens. He was not a wind hero, a dauntless walker who, like Nietzsche "bends forward in the face of the wind, against the wind," whose walking stick "pierces the hurricane, makes holes in the earth, thrusts through the wind."

The movement which brings water from the depths to the visible surface allowed Bachelard to understand motion as an epiphany of the materiality of the world. What, for the sake of references to come I will call "substantial motion" (motion that brings forth the substantiality of things), Bachelard understood in accordance with the movements of the flesh it induces or demands (ibid., p.159). Again and again, he insisted that reality cannot be founded as a succession of images in the eye. I bring nature into my sensible presence by the movements of my flesh, and, in her motions, she responds by her active presence. "I see" means that my movements actualize as visible the potential existents which nature brings forth from her depths. Between nature -- which Aristotle defined as a "principle of motion and change" (Physics 200b) -- and my body there takes place an interplay of mutual challenges and responses through which both establish their carnal presence. It would be as silly to claim that nature is "an image in my eye" or "a representation in my mind" as to say that I am a dream of nature.

To address that carnal presence in a mutual activity, Bachelard -- who wrote fifty years ago -- spoke of "man's labor," the objects' "coefficient of adversity," our "offenses" and the elements' "anger". He wrote:

... as soon as we begin to distinguish - as I have tried to do by considering the composition of water and earth - every matter in accordance with the human labor it induces or demands, we shall not be long in understanding that reality can never be well founded in men's eyes until human activity is sufficiently and intelligently aggressive. Then all the objects of the world receive their true coefficient of aggressivity.

And:

We will bring Schopenhauer's insight to its conclusion; we shall compute the sum of intellectual representation and clear will from The world as Will and Representation in a formula: The world is my provocation. I understand the world because I surprise it with my incisive forces, with my directed forces, in the rightful hierarchy of my offenses, which are like embodiments of my joyous anger, my ever-victorious, ever-conquering anger. Insofar as he is a source of energy, a being is an a priori anger. (op. cit. p. 159, 160)

We should not misread these lines as allusions to the offenses of homo industrialis or to the threats of climatic catastrophe. Bachelard searched for strong words to express the mutual claims of carnal presence of body and nature. His "labor" is my effort in walking, his "provocations" are my dauntless steps into the wind. An object's "coefficient of adversity" is the resistance felt in my flesh when it opposes my "incisive force": for example, the experience of lifting rocks to build a stone wall. My joyous anger corresponds to the anger of the elements, embodied in motions of earth, violent water, wind and fire. Bachelard was in search of the conditions of a pristine vision, which for him were no other than the conditions of the world's material reality and of my carnal presence in and to it. If, hearing his words, we cannot help thinking of our industrial offenses and our frozen anguish, it is because we have understood that we live in an epoch capable of limitless provocations but insensible to nature's elementary angers. Our aggressions are disembodied, our angers mindless. Nature's flesh has been peeled away. Like heavily loaded clouds before the storm, the elements keep a threatening silence. Bachelard died before pollution and ecological disasters manifested nature's obvious response to our industrial offenses; and therefore he is at risk of being misunderstood.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding that the body "is an intertwining of vision and movement" echoes and completes Bachelard's intuitions. Substantial motion, which Bachelard called nature's elementary "anger," responds to my "provocations" -- my claims of carnal presence -- and elicits my "labors." Nature's angers, which reveal her deep, elementary materiality and my labors are the two complementary sides of the same being. In The Primacy of Perception, Merleau-Ponty articulates the complementarity of these two sides :

In principle, all my changes of place figure in a corner of my landscape; they are recorded on the map of the visible. Everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the "I can." Each of the two maps is complete. The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being. (The Primacy of Perception, p.162)

The "map of the visible" intimately coincides with the realm of my motor projects. What I see cannot be disembedded from what I can reach, seize, taste, smell, hear. No ideal "image" can be abstracted from these powers and their challenge by nature's moves. It is only by a kind of ellipsis that one can say that the senses "overlap" in a joint action, for they were never severed in the first place. In this joint perception, or synaesthesia, things are present before any analytical reduction of their

perception to "sensorial data": eyes eavesdrop, words enlighten, feet see and the nose touches the body's aura.

We do not "think sufficiently" of the complementarity of "the map of the visible" with the realm of the "I can":

This extraordinary overlapping, which we never think about sufficiently, forbids us to conceive of vision as an operation of thought that would set up before the mind a picture or a representation of the world, a world of immanence and of ideality. (op. cit. p. 162)

The breach of that overlapping opens the door to a picture of nature, sets up before the mind "a representation of the world, a world of immanence and ideality." Nature's destiny becomes the vain fate of "fleeting images and a never-ending dream" (Bachelard) and Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the word "image" generally refers to "a copy, a second thing" (op. cit. p. 164). The world becomes a self-referent copy.

We can now understand what radically puts the vision of nature through a windshield -- the "kinetic experience" -- apart from the experience of walking. Our projects of vehicular displacements -- let's call them our "automotive dreams" -- do not match nature's substantial movements nor do they elicit her elementary angers. The old map of the "I can" is replaced by the map of "what I have in the tank." The act of seeing ceases to be the complement of the act of walking. Frozen by the windshield glance, nature becomes a neutral environment. It thus becomes clear that the essence of the kinetic experience is not the quantitative intensity of speed but the qualitative dislocation of the two sides of being which the walker knows as one. Speed produces a bipartite division of the flesh of perceived nature into, on one side, a quasi immaterial environment manifest as sequences of fleeting images and, on the other, a body enclosed behind shields and screens.