

## *Blindness and Light*

### *Blindness and Punishment*

On whom is blinding practiced? Traditional thought contains many instances that share a text. The idea is given in the figure of Samson. In the traditional account, Samson is led away by Philistine soldiers as a result of Delilah's treachery. He is wanted for incendiary acts perpetrated on his enemies. Once he is in captivity, the first act against him—of vengeance and vindictiveness—is blinding. Blinding is an archaic form of punishment. A connection with the *lex talionis* is not accidental. Blinding is the image of retribution, an eye taken for an eye lost. In fact, acts of confinement mimic blinding. They deprive a victim of sight. Dungeon, grotto, tower cell, modern penitentiary all strive to limit the vision of a prisoner. Older forms, modeled on a subterranean cave, actually induce blindness without the act of enucleation. Blinding, the removal of the victim from the light, is repayment for what Roger Bacon called "mortal sin."

Samson is punished not without cause. What are the immediate effects of blinding? Being blind, he is confined. Being confined, he is returned to the confines of his own body. To move forward toward the world, he must stumble to find his way or be led. Action, even a simple act of locomotion, becomes possible only through contact. The idea of action at a distance is self-contradictory for him. Obstacles must be groped around, not effortlessly leapt over. They impress him with their solidity and strength, he who could once hurl boulders at his adversary from a distance of fifty yards. There is immediate payment for perception that is to the profit of action. Blindness returns Samson to the earth, where as a chthonic creature (like Polyphemus the Titan, blinded by Odysseus) he dwells in the cave of his being—no longer god or demigod whose vision traverses the desert in a single bound. No longer can he be raised to celestial heights, to dwell with angelic existence, by the

gift of sight. Samson returns to the ground he calls his own—with a question: How to move?

A brief look at blinding teaches why it has been held to be like an expulsion from grace. Blinded, the victim suffers an apparent loss of freedom of movement. To circumambulate the density of things requires a supreme effort. Movement exposes the blind's dependence on a visual impression of location and place, a helplessness and vulnerability in getting from here to there. The blind cease to inhabit a realm of the spatially separate. Things tyrannize and grow overbearing. They hover and loom over the way, threatening encroachment or suffocation. Touch becomes a solace, a primary source of reliability. In this shift, a proximity to things defines the blind. Their manner toward objects becomes reticent and intimate. Things must enter into tactility—an experience of nearness—in order to be known. No longer can the blind command knowledge by decree of separation, remaining physically apart from the known. To know, their flesh must feel the imprint of the world.

Returning to the story, we see how Samson's blinding confines him. The object world belongs to the Philistines (and they to it) while Samson is its slave. His movement, apart from being led by a sighted guide, consists in repetitive action. He performs forced labor, working a gristmill in an endless walk around the same path. He has lost more than his eyes. Becoming a dray, he has lost his humanity.

Blinding adds another factor to confinement: it reduces intelligence. The valuation, ascribed to tradition, is given in the parable of the blind leading the blind. "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matthew 15:14). In the image of Brueghel the Elder, the fall is all but inevitable. To be lacking in sight is to lack the acumen of avoiding paralysis, derailment, or catastrophe. The Gospel phrase itself is idiomatic for the lowest form of stupidity. To be without sight, led by someone else without sight, is to be dependent on another's thought—a moronic unreason. It is to be an unequal among equals, relinquishing one's responsibility for decision and action. It is to be vulnerable to the abuses of irresponsible leadership. Where independence of thought is the means by which freedom circulates in a democracy of democrats, blinding is undemocratic. As a political act, it throws its victim into a traditional—hieratic, monarchic, oligarchic—form of government.

There is a corollary to the traditional valuation. Blinding reveals the true measure of knowledge. To see things from afar and to navigate with respect to them is to exercise the knowing power. A person of

knowledge, hero or heroine, can journey ten thousand miles, avoid death-dealing collisions, and return home safely. One who knows from afar knows the future that looms over the next horizon. This is foresight. Conversely, to know only what is close to hand is to be simple-minded or shortsighted. Distance, a sense of separation, is a measuring stick of knowledge. Nothing is more apparent in the blind's ignorance of the ground—and our own, since the ground often is too close for us to get it into focus and is blurred, confused, and ambiguous. Contrasted with the clarity of an unimpeded line of sight, blind groping is of questionable value. Philosophical method is achieved by stepping back, thereby extending the world beyond our focus.

Once Samson is blinded; however, his thought undergoes a reevaluation. His enemies fail to observe a radical discovery of his, that blinding produces no diminution of knowledge. Blinded, Samson comes upon the value of opacity. He is able to hide and feign. Before, his sight, like ours, rendered him transparent. Others could read his intentions like an open text. Now blinded, he grows opaque, a soul in a narrow, dark cell. Therein, his physical strength, mark of his nature, is not diminished, only bounded by his limited circuit. Before, through sight, he could effect changes on objects great and small. His every deed, moreover, could be predicted and foreseen. Sightless, his great body itself comprises a circuit of his force. What he touches, he touches muscularly. In his intimacy, things are molded through respect or awe to the shape of his will. From outside, this might look like a weakening of a prodigious vitality, but it is not. His enemies suffer this confusion. Because of it, Samson is able to work a revenge of the blind. Samson gives us an icon of blind revenge.

Blind revenge is a double action. The blinded act to avenge a punishment. The blinded also act to avenge a peculiar valuation of blinding that the sighted hold. Although there are other cases of blindness in myth, none expresses vengeance as clearly as the story of Samson. Greek myth, to which I return in my conclusion, leaves revenge out of its numerous accounts. Orion the Hunter is blinded for raping Aurora, the Dawn, but eventually petitions his masters and is relieved of his affliction. Tiersias is blinded for revealing Hera's secret love affair, but he is compensated for the deficiency by a gift of second-sightedness. Even Oedipus, who unremittingly suffers his blindness, entertains no moment of revenge in his thought. He accepts punishment as just recompense for his errors. With Samson, however, once plunged into blindness, the discoveries of his state move him from docility to initia-

tive. Blindness has not humbled him. He will not accept that what he knows without seeing is less than what others know with sight. He will not accept an implication of ignorance. Blindness lends a proof the sighted never know. This is the doubled action of the blinded. Samson bends his mighty will in the direction of bringing the sighted into knowledge.

Besides, in the dark closure, Samson actuates capabilities absent in his sighted state. He who was reckless and impetuous is concentrated and contained. He who was accustomed to lash out is patient and all-suffering. There is a wariness that his slavemasters cannot see that leads slowly to cunning. Ignorance becomes an impenetrable mask. To others, he is a bumbling peasant fitting the role of a drudge. To himself, his desire for revenge nurtures dispositions his Homeric contemporary Odysseus is gifted with by birth. Blind Samson acquires wiliness, craft, deceptiveness, and constancy—becomes an Odysseus. With these virtues he works his vengeance. He bides his time. At the auspicious moment, he coaxes a slave boy to rest him against the main pillar of the house. His prodigious strength again revealed, he demonstrates the folly in equating blindness with ignorance. He gives proof that to believe with the eyes is to miss what cannot be seen. The act of collapsing the roof is expressive of the double action. By that act, he ends the enslavement of the blind and begins the ascension of another, more proximate way of knowing.

Gloucester has been brutally blinded. Regan, deceitful daughter of Lear, commanded it. Her royal ambitions overwhelm her compassion, if she ever had any. She dispatches Gloucester to his suffering, shouting, "Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell/His way to Dover" (*King Lear* III.vii). Gloucester exits with a single-minded intent, to get to Dover, to "a cliff, whose high and bending head/Looks fearfully in the confined deep" (IV.i). There he will end his sorrow and his life.

The machinery of Shakespeare's dramatics nowhere runs more cogently. Justice is meted out. Gloucester has been blinded because he accepted deceitful affections (from an illegitimate son) and rejected honest ones (from a legitimate son). He is Lear's double, though more transparent to himself. He suffers at the hands of uncompassionate children and is led to truth by his compassionate one. As Gloucester despondently observes, "I stumbled when I saw" (IV.i). Blinded, he must be led forward, like Oedipus, by the human love he disdained. No thought of revenge passes through his consciousness. Like Oedipus, he

goes docilely, self-absorbed, penitent, self-pitying. His will, what is left of it after Regan's treachery, is bent on self-destruction. Apparently, he accepts punishment, humiliation, and attributions of ignorance. No Samson of the spirit, he nevertheless faces an immediate problem of the body. If he walks, how is he to move in a world overdense with obstacles?

Yet to Dover he intends to go. And in this, he though hesitant, does not hesitate to seek help. Unlike Samson, he is not driven and so not driven to pierce the veil of ignorance bestowed on him. Gloucester is able to let himself be helped. Even if nobly born, he is ordinary, no archaic giant, but filled with doubt and distraction, like ourselves. His is not the hero's mold, like Hamlet's, who also was cast for revenge. Neither a Nordic nor a Hebraic giant, he calls to us more humanly. If he is no revolutionary like the one who wielded a jawbone of an ass, his quietness commands attention. Though history will not turn around him, his act is a question. How is he able to walk the way to Dover?

Gloucester has entered the labyrinth of blindness. There are no visible signs, except for the dead end, blind alley, or impasse. He feels ground under his feet and air around him, but an object-world has vanished. He could listen, if he had heart to, but strangely that is not an option. Touch, including the sensitive pressure against his skin, is his guide. But touch, foreign to him, is foreign to the way of Western man. It is barely more reliable than the sense of smell that Regan derides to him. Gloucester's movement is stop-and-go, stop-and-go. It is ever ready to respond to obstacles, both outer and inner. It stumbles, it lurches, it staggers. It is awkward and off-balance. There is no pause for relaxation and abandon. When he takes a step, it is because he has found an opening in the labyrinth and dared to enter in.

How can he walk? He dares to pick up the blind man's cane and go.

That he dares is because he holds the golden thread of an Ariade. Edgar, his son, disguised as Poor Tom, takes his hand and guides him through the labyrinth to Dover. Near the crest of the cliffs, below which Gloucester plans to meet the monster and be devoured, his guide stops him. With a noble lie, he prompts Gloucester to jump and lets the blind man's imagination do the rest. When Gloucester revives, he is freed from disquiet and able to resolve: "henceforth I'll bear/Affliction, till it do cry out itself,/Enough, enough, and die" (*King Lear* IV.vi). Gloucester can go because he is sufficiently undistracted to fol-

low the solitations of present awareness to walk. His movement is an unmediated act of concentration poised in response to an immediate need: to get to Dover. As soon as nothing is in the way, nothing else is required.

Gloucester's walk is not a question of narrow intellectual concern. It is a deep symbol of a present cultural crisis. We are being awakened to the blindness of our own affections. The ideas of progress, technology, and comfort have preoccupied us. Punishment also, perhaps, but likely more a form of self-punishment, arising from an ill-begotten trust in ordinary sight. We awaken, about to hurl ourselves from a high and precipitous cliff. Just prior to the millenium, we acknowledge the miscarriage of self-destructiveness. We awaken, finding ourselves alone with Gloucester's judgment: "Our means secure us, and our mere defects/Prove our commodities" (IV.i). The importance of responding to the question increases with each step. We lack a guide, unless we can recognize the child we disowned. There is only a walking stick, our hand on one end, the other end probing contact with the earth. It is a tremulous grip on the golden thread.

### *Descartes's Plot against the Sighted*

What does it take for the blind to walk the road? An important clue appears thirty-five years after the first performance of *King Lear* in 1606. Descartes, some time after his revolutionary *Meditations*, becomes intrigued with the problem of vision. Already, he has fit himself to the figure of an avenging hero, a Hamlet. Like Hamlet, he wants to destroy utterly the foundation of things and rebuild it according to a new measure:

the consequent need of making a clean sweep for once in my life and beginning again from the very foundations, if I would establish some secure and lasting result in science.<sup>1</sup>

His accomplishment is to be as great as that of another destroyer, Saturn. He would lift the earth from its orbit with his Archimedean lever and establish a new circuit around the sun. The old path is suspect in every detail. Tradition must be doubted if progress is to ensue. "We must read the works of the ancients," he confesses,

for it is an extraordinary advantage to have available the labours of so many men . . . There is, however, at the same time a great danger that perhaps some contagion of error, contracted from a too attentive reading of them, may stick to us against our will in spite of all precautions.<sup>2</sup>

Read the old books and then burn them. From the conflagration, a new intelligence will rise and take flight. Self-evident, individual, democratic, perceptive, it will take its place in heaven, along with the Eagle and the Swan of old. In the dawning age, even the fixed stars will be new. And if the stars, then everything else under the sun.

It is some years after the proclamation. While becoming intrigued with sight, Descartes adopts a role that requires a revenge—against views established by his philosophical fathers. In the play of text, dramatic necessity is king. All that Descartes calls his “work” moves ineluctably toward the chosen end. And if the play be the writing of a definitive work on vision, who could the instruments of vengeance, the sword and dagger, not also present? The evil genius of the *Dioptrics* is not its adaptation of Euclidean geometry—wedded to projective algebra—nor its pilfering of graveyards for anatomical data. It lies in the motive; in subtlety and subterfuge, that genius plots to overthrow by distortion and tortuous means. The *Dioptrics* is a work of revenge.

How does the machinery of the eye work? An innocence in the question camouflages the point of attack. Descartes secretly wears the uniform of objectivity while he revolts against traditional accounts of object perception. Their spiritual elitism revolts him. It consists in separating the sighted from the unsighted. Since God’s text, elitism argues, is light, the unsighted are without hope of salvation. Since they cannot see, they cannot be seen by divine agency. The sighted, on the other hand, represent the chosen ones, capable of perceiving the visible world and reading the text by which a suprahuman presence reveals itself. Because the sighted alone are agents of moral perfection, the world is bereft of a basis for democracy. For there to be a democratic order to knowing and perceiving, there can be no epistemologically chosen, no noetic hierarchy. Elitism of all kinds must be rooted out and destroyed.

Revenge dislocates intention, diverting it to underground channels where it learns the practice of deceit. Descartes’s anti-elitism profits from its subterranean detour. It adroitly attacks that which it appears to support and supports that which it appears to attack. That way, it

remains perennially poised for counterattack when tradition stiffens its back. As a case in point, Descartes spends ample time attacking the way intention is traditionally inflected into a mechanics of sight. The butt of argument lies in a denial of "soul" as the agent of sight. "You see," he says, "that sensation does not require that the soul should contemplate any images resembling the objects of sensation."<sup>3</sup> This means that the receptivity of the eye is no higher than that of a windowpane. It assists an impression, not by conscious participation, but by necessities of its nature. The ploy is to offer a mechanics of physiology in place of an ethics of awareness. Elements "by the strength of the disturbance that occurs at the points of origin of the optic nerve-fibers in the brain" compose the perceived impression.<sup>4</sup> Within the process, awareness is a redundancy, an unneeded echo, an aftershock, an "epiphenomenon."

The apparent focus of revolt is against consciousness. That places Descartes among the "new breed" who advocate automatism and habit over attention and initiative. To flaunt his affiliation, Descartes adduces further evidence that the eye is a transfer station. It passively receives a force from outside and passively transmits it to a central processing station. There, recognition, perception, and identification are educed, correctly or not. To this end, Descartes notes that

if you observe that people hit in the eye think they see a great number of fiery flashes in front of them, in spite of shutting their eyes or being in a dark place; this sensation can be ascribed only to the force of the blow, which sets the optic nerve-fibers in motion as a strong light would do.<sup>5</sup>

Time and again, he empties the eye of special intelligence and leaves it a dutiful machine. The eye does not bodily participate in the impression and add its own light to the incoming illumination, as tradition once had it. Descartes undercuts this view:

As regards position . . . , our knowledge of it does not depend on any image, nor on any action proceeding from the body, but merely on how the minute points of origin of the nerves are situated in the brain.<sup>6</sup>

Like Hamlet's, moreover, Descartes's skill is subtle and duplicitous. As with guerilla tactics, the apparent locus of attack is diversionary. Descartes attacks what he wishes to defend and defends what he



wants to annihilate. When done, he deploys an account of sight that poses as a tasteful advance of traditional work in the field. It is in fact an act of Odyssean cunning, a Trojan horse that unsuspecting workers will appropriate, to their dismay. The *Dioptrics* seems to advance a project that began with Euclid and Ptolemy and passed through Alhazen and Al-kindī to Kepler. When inspected more closely, however, it is a text that renders sight, insofar as it belongs to the body, unthinking and unthoughtful, degenerate and blinded. It is an account that empties sight of its function—of relating humanity to the unseen cosmos—and fills it with objects, commodities, bibelots, bric-a-brac, trinkets, and other worthless things. Where the eye once felt gratitude for resting on the sights of heaven, sight, in Descartes's version, now serves its master as a clock does, without affection or awareness.

I have not yet shown the means, but it is testimony to his genius that Descartes accomplishes his end. Great reversals—making the lower the higher, and the higher the lower—occur. After him, sight becomes blindness, and blindness, sight. No longer is blindness a “darkened” vision, a sight with the lighting rubbed out. Henceforward, vision is enlightened blindness, a deprivation of sight with light added in. Sight in fact becomes an addition that is a subtraction, a step backward that is constantly trying to make up for its fundamental lack—the blindness that is its core. Sight becomes anxiety, grasping, a nervous reaching beyond for what is no longer there, a something wrapped around a void that no beauty or truth can erase. Sight becomes our flaw, a symbol of the fault of humanity. Was not Oedipus redeemed through his blindness? To see, we must be blinded.

Yet this is no ending suited to a vengeful tale. That other remaker of tradition, Hamlet, rewrote his own death warrant while on a sea voyage, and Rozenkranz and Guildenstern were killed instead. He had time for other grand reversals, including a metanoia, before revenge cost him his life. That revenge against revenge, that dropping of the avenging hammer, showed him through the portal to a compassionate vision. Whether Descartes ever comes to know an understanding heart is a question beyond the text. Like Hamlet's, however, Descartes's intelligence is devious, determined, and distracted. He camouflages his impulse in order to seize the power of sight and overthrow it in its inadvertency. Like with Hamlet, his ineffectual reason in the end betrays his purpose, leaving his original project broken and in ruins. Yet there is a little more to Descartes's tale than this. It is the small addition that I mean to dwell on. For as Descartes dons his disguise, he makes a dis-

covery that radically revalues his world. His discovery is of an element so insignificant that it is continually lost, yet his discovery is so monumental that it shakes the revolutionary ground he stands on, overthrowing both insurrectionist and establishmentarian alike. This incomparable discovery is still hidden from us in the same way it was for Descartes. It is hidden in the undoing of ego consciousness. I speak of Descartes's unheralded discovery of the stop.

### *Descartes's Revenge*

In the drama, Hamlet's motive of revenge makes an early appearance. His father's ghost disturbs the peace of the night watch and the minds of men who sleep. Horatio first bears witness to it. The initial move that brings resolve to Hamlet is a swift one. That this initiation itself falls under question is part of Hamlet's greatness. From *Hamlet* to the *Dioptrics* is a few short steps. Looking to the *Dioptrics*, in Descartes also, we are quickly met with a motive of revenge under cover of night—though the dramatic element is suitably muted, even subterranean. Themes of darkness, blindness, and absence of sight, coming at the opening of a treatise on vision, might alert us to the author's hidden agenda. If they do not, we may at least question the choice of such a method of approach. To understand the phenomenon of sight by studying the blind is an idea as outrageous as studying corpses to understand the phenomenon of life. That is precisely what Descartes the physician does in his anatomy.

Listen.

It has doubtless some time happened that you were walking across difficult country by night without a torch and had to use a stick to guide yourself; and you may then have noticed that you felt, by means of the stick, the objects in your neighborhood, and that you could even distinguish the presence of trees, stones, sand, water, grass, mud, etc. True, without long practice this kind of sensation is rather confused and dim; but if you take men born blind, who have made use of such sensations all their life, you will find they feel things with such perfect exactness that one might almost say that they see with their hands, or that their stick

is the organ of a sixth sense, given to them to make up for the lack of sight.<sup>7</sup>

The program apparently accomplishes in one fell swoop Descartes's radical revision of (read, *revolt against*) tradition. It makes blindness the primordial condition. In support of the claim, blindness is our state *in utero*. We enter the world, after an initial journey down the birth canal, with eyelids tightly drawn over our organs of seeing. Blindness henceforth becomes the archaic situation by which study is compelled to orient itself when determining who we might be and where we might be going. To accomplish his end, Descartes must to put on the cloak of blindness and move on.

It is a condition of extreme constraint. Blindness's impediments are real and enormous. They include lack of discrimination, dimness, vagueness, obscurity, confusion, and animal sensation. Movement of any kind meets resistance. From place to place "across difficult country," movement, as we saw with Samson, throws a traveler back onto the field of immediacies. What is directly in front of me? How do I navigate toward and around it? What threatens to destabilize my motion? On what ground do I stand? For a blind traveler, the route across appears only at the very moment of stepping onto it. It preexists on no map, plan, or chart. A traveler must pay close attention to proximities and contiguities. One is not free to participate in the play of intellect, imagination, or the higher mental powers. Success depends on a single condition: one remains a slave to the demands of navigation.

In the context of a study of vision, to try on blindness is a tactic of disorientation and dislocation. The sighted enter into another world, of the unseen obstacle and hidden barrier, a dark encounter that is costly. Their apparatus of locomotion meets traps, quagmires, sandpits, and mudholes. It gets entangled in the very act it seeks to accomplish. Compare the world of the sighted. Sight removes all impediments. Once they are visible, the pitfalls that lay hidden in the distance of the world become harmless. Danger announces itself before the wayfarer becomes bodily ensnared in it. Separation buffers the threat of object density. It gives the luxury of deliberative reason, to choose between alternatives prior to meeting them. Sight discloses visual space that, to all appearances, is spaciousness itself. By enveloping everything, it allows that which it contains to stand apart, one thing from the other. When *with* but *apart from* the contents of space, the sighted run less risk

of collision, unexpected turn, or catastrophe. To be able to see before stepping: that is the blessing of sight.

Descartes hopes to displace the sighted by plunging them—following him—into blindness, but a small surprise of great magnitude awaits him. He dons the cloak of philosophical blinding and stumbles ahead, “walking across difficult country.” He falls, gets up, loses himself, falls again, is hurt, and gets up again, paralyzed by confusion. Though driven by impractical and impracticable demands, he nonetheless heeds the call of practical reason. There is need for a guide where none apparently exists. In the momentary return to his humanness, Descartes stops, bends down, and picks up a stick. Henceforth, he in his blinded state will have use of the blind man’s cane.

This is a great moment, a moment of true discovery. A giant breakthrough, it ends a paralysis of the blind and opens them to movement in the human journey. The blind no longer need be fixed in place nor give over slavishly to a seeing eye, to be led from place to place. They are instrumented with a new dignity that overcomes handicap and constriction. They are handed skillful means to seek and uncover the things of the world. Stick or cane equips them for movement essential to full humanness. Cane swings from side to side until stopped by an object. In that stop, the blind attain full perception. Through perception, Descartes grants them the power of locomotion. The stop of the cane resurrects the blind from the abyss and sets them on the road to Dover.

An unforeseen and unforeseeable reversal occurs. In the stop comes a reversal of revenge and an end to blinding. In the stop, the blind find direction, continuance, and hope. Vengefulness itself is an unknown god, bearing an unknowable gift. It is a gift too magnanimous for Descartes to acknowledge. About the gift, he remains forever mute. The gift? It is the gift of poise.

Poise is a balanced concentration immediately prior to action. It is the a priori of a self-aware act. Poise itself is an action, but one of a wholly different kind. It differs from ordinary undertakings in point of origination, intention, quality of attention, rhythm, and reason. Poise is the response of awareness to the call of a situation. Dancer, athlete, player, and performer—as well as we ordinary agents—all embody poise. Poise becomes attentive to the needs of what is in front of the actor, and so becomes poised. Poise is ever fresh in its ability to answer to the forms addressing it. In its continually renewed sensitivity, it is

unlike its apparent siblings—control, steadiness, and firmness of intent. Poise has flexibility. It stretches, bends, adapts, and accommodates while the others remain fixed. Thus, poise is friable. It does not break or shatter in the face of a rapidly evolving confrontation. Poise is fluidity of response.

Fluency in response announces the advent of a new factor—or perhaps an old factor hidden within the springs of ordinary action. On closer examination, poise is a radical break with an ongoing, unpoised mode of doing things. Before poise can reveal itself, a tension that is the psychophysical milieu of accomplishment must ease. Tension obscures poise or banishes it to the ideational realm, where it becomes the idea of relaxation or relief. Tension is a context. Its primary subtext is that of trying to figure out, plan, and engineer outcomes. The subtext is Cartesian (and pre-cartesian) rationality working away in its blindness to the needs of the actual situation, afraid of failure, doubting its own methods, and racing to prove its self-worth as time runs out. The subtext is cluttered with overabundant information and impoverished by an absence of real facts. It is frenetic, overworked, disquieted, and imbalanced. Within a context of tension, little chance exists that a call of the actual situation will be heard.

We must not conceive of poise growing out of a moment of tension as a flower grows from a stalk. All evidence suggests that poise is not a natural outgrowth of a process that begins in distraction, preoccupation, and insensitivity. From that context, only hyperactivity and disharmony result. The dancer's jump is too rigidly placed, the athlete's application of strength is poorly timed to coincide with his shot, the actress's lines sound mechanical or inappropriate to the occasion. Or, in more ordinary circumstances, we miss our chance to get through the revolving door without mishap, to step on the escalator, to hit the platform running as we disembark from a moving train. Bad timing is the mark of unpoised action. In fact, to act without poise is always to act "out of synch," to miss opportunities to meet that which the time offers, and, so, to tempt fate. It is to collide with the shifting door rather than to pass through into the flow of action. About this, I will say more.

Poise is no natural outcome of distraction. We may, therefore, deduce that a transition to poise brings closure to the context of preoccupation and despair. One comes to an end, the other opens. Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesura, a discontinuity. The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other. It is

neither poised nor unpoised, yet moves both ways. It is this space that is the primary subject of my interest. It is the stop.

There is a moment in which personal or cultural history stands before two diverging pathways. One leads to a repetition of the known, the tried and true, the old, the established. It is safe, secure, and stale. The other finds a renewed importance in the unknown, the uncharted, the new, the dark and dangerous. Unfettered by accepted categories of thought, it might be immediately hidden away from view, out of fear or repugnance. The moment I speak of is not choice in the sense of deliberative reason but an action that choice itself stands on. That action is awareness. Awareness confronts the line between engaging in or becoming disengaged by what follows. Awareness is an addition that multiplies distinction. With respect to action, it brings a moment of supreme importance. The stop is the time of awareness.

The stop hides in a most hidden place. This is a place that is both near and obvious. As if being of the same polarity, our habits impel the gaze toward what is distant and complicated. To gaze is in fact to look far off, toward the unapproachable, the not-at-hand. It is a look of dissatisfaction, peering behind, around, in back of, rather than directly at what is in front. It is an averted look. The habit is of ignoring the call of the personal, cultural, and human. It runs very deep.

Western thought early developed an aversion to the stop, because to stop is, among other things, to confront the aversion. Not to stop, to race through a context cluttered with priority and instrumental means, means to abhor a vacuum, a gap, a hiatus. Such abhorrence has been a driving force behind thinking since classical times. In its customary fashion, thought codified its aversion into a universal law in order to secure more protection against the stop. That what lurks might hold up a mirror to the self and its fears and desires is a repugnant possibility. Under scrutiny, thought would face its subtext from which it flees—the fact of avoidance. The stop reveals habits of escape of intellectualism.

Greek thought, the first mask archaic experience puts on, offers a good example of how the stop is barred from thought. In both Plato and Aristotle, the circle represents perfect movement. In Aristotle's expression, the perfection of circular movement lies in its continuous and uniform (= ceaseless) motion around a point. Such motion is celestial, embodied in heavenly bodies that revolve in their orbits. A circle is thus heaven transposed into the human realm. The lengthy astronomi-

cal exposition of circular movement, until Kepler's discovery of the elliptical orbit, attempted to preserve perfection in the face of recalcitrant facts (such as the eccentricities in planetary motion). As above, so below. If heavenly orbits remain circles, then their earthly correspondents also must exhibit unceasing, uniform motion. Departure from circularity must demonstrate an incompleteness, a nonbeing, a not-yetness. All terrestrial motion that is noncircular indicates a lack or absence. All that fails to fit the agenda of circularity is ruled void. The stop is opposite to uniform, ceaseless motion. Hence, it is excluded from the text of motion.

Yet the stop is ubiquitous. The stop is evident in each and every earthbound action we experience: shoveling, hammering, opening a door, using a pen, eating, driving, running, lifting, skating, swimming. All involve a joint. There is a hinge around which events pivot. An initial impetus to movement runs its course and is followed by a new impetus leading to a new movement. All earthly movement is a deviation from perfect continuity in that it stops, begins again, stops again, hesitates, recovers, moves on, stumbles, falls down, gets up, crawls ahead, trots, gets sidetracked, lopes along, slips, gets up again, and so on, to the end of its drama. All motion approaches unimpeded, effortless motion as a line approaches an asymptote—in perfect mental (= celestial) space. In the space of phenomena, all motion is imperfect.

The text of the daily round is intellectually reinterpreted in order to avoid disclosure of the stop. The function of the rational automatism is precisely here. The attention is repeatedly, ceaselessly, and unknowingly given over to an onrushing stream of associative thought. Habits, dreams, assurances, secret fears, cherished beliefs, and hopeless infatuations—together with their objects—are therein perpetually revalidated. At no time is notice taken of a gap between two thoughts. The smooth rational function annihilates the pause by which real and unreal come under question. An endless automatic movement of thought obscures the stop.

What is ceaselessly perfected is a history of erasure. What is ceaselessly erased is a space between one occasion and the next. What is responsible for erasure is an unchecked, automatic movement of one thought following another following another. The virtual movement of the automatism replaces a real arrest between ending and opening, between death and birth. As long as there is no stop, there is no time. This is the secret to thought's immortality.

*Descartes's Stop*

The stop hides behind a facade of unimpeded, effortless motion. The appeal of Aristotle's circular orbit lies in the perpetuation of concealment. Although many correspondences to circularity exist, for my purposes it is important to study one, that of vision. Once the eye is opened, sight continues ceaselessly and without apparent effort to renew itself. It leaps instantaneously across the valley to the mountain on the opposite side. Sight does not stop even as the scene undergoes slow or rapid change, from night to day, from lightning flash to dark of storm. It continues uniformly and without apparent gaps. It neither hesitates nor falters nor stutters nor stumbles regardless of a resistance it meets in its object. Once the eye opens, sight, the noble sense, is the very perfection of perpetual motion.

In the modern era, verification of sight's perfection was given at about the same time as Kepler discovered the imperfection of the celestial sphere. Kepler removed perfect circular movement from the heavens. As a compensatory adjustment, at least equally important, visual perspective in the graphic arts happened on the scene. Once discovered (or rediscovered) by Brunelleschi, perspective—the precursor to Descartes's own projective geometry—was a representation of perfected (= unimpeded) vision. The eye's visual power extends outward without surcease, never coming to the end of the visual field even when most distant corners of the cosmos become visible. Perspective in the visual arts is a vehicle for ceaseless, effortless vision. Its projection of an infinity, a dimension of depth and distance that is strictly illusory, expresses an ideal, not a real motion. A horizon, infinitely distant, seems to be the natural call toward which an unimpeded line of sight travels. The practical proof that sight is able to move to infinity is in fact deceptive. Horizon, line of sight, and projected infinite all belong to the same subtext that is perspective. The infinity perceived is the one contrived by the rules of perspective.

The greatness of the discovery of visual perspective may be measured in its effectiveness to conceal. Any momentary arrest in the movement of the eye in relation to spatial contour has been rendered invisible. Perspective, after all, is an illusion, and the magnitude of an illusion lies in what it protects. The greatest illusions conceal what is nearest and most obvious, the subject taken in by illusion. To stop is to become aware of the awareness in its subjectivity and objectivity. The invisible guidelines a perspective artist erases allow the eye to travel without



stop. The stop thus hides the one who waits hidden in unchecked movement.

Let me return to Descartes. His traveler has set out to study sight, the noblest of senses, and the subject of perspective, but suffers from a bad case of night blindness. Relying on what is only a privation, he stumbles across rough turf. By a stroke of genius, provoked by necessities, he picks up a stick. When he walks again, he walks guided by the stop.

In the arrest, perception is altered. It sharpens and is subject to finer discriminations. From this position, Descartes notices another movement, more primal than that of the halting, lurching pitch of his body. It occurs, mediated by a stick—the blind man's cane—*within* his body, within the fleshy folds that by means of a hand grab on to one end of the stick. It reveals a something the eye does not. Descartes struggles to comprehend. He compares the event to the disclosure of sight. It is like sight in being able to distinguish one thing from another. It is like sight in allowing one to navigate around the obstacles of the way. It is like sight in being used to perceive, conceive, imagine, and opine. But it is not sight. It is another mode of perception.

Also, it is unsightly, almost beggarly, how this other perception proceeds—in several ways. It cannot be confused with sight, because it is start-and-stop in its action. Its rhythmic movement bespeaks a meeting of resistance with effort. Unlike sight, the unnamed perception belongs to a text of effort. It makes no instantaneous leap to celestial bodies. If one looks closely, though, the stick differentiates neighborhood objects, it is more keenly sensitized to that which is other than any thing in the milieu. It perceives an undifferentiated background from which objects arise (when disturbed by the tip of the stick) and to which they return (when tip passes over). It perceives nonobjectively.

There is another important way in which the other mode of perception is not to be confused with sight. It eschews life in ignorance of the stop. It can no more avoid the stop than it can provide material for its own perception. The blind person's cane comes back, over and again, to the arrest, the gap in perfect motion, the hinge between one event and the next, and there finds poise. Poise is its way to initiate movement to contact what is. Contact defines the path of the blind.

The blind are unable to escape the unavoidable. Therein lies effort and the fruit of effort. They were thought cursed by a deficiency. Instead, it is their blessing. To return to the theme of revenge, the

springs of Descartes's plot derive in part from the purity of the blind. Through revenge, Descartes engineers a series of startling reversals. Blindness ceases to be God's punishment for sin and becomes a reward for meekness and service. The blind, unlike the sighted, are truthful. The sighted, unlike the blind, are prone to oversight, lying, escapism, and withdrawal. To have a seeing eye is to be damned. To turn a blind eye is to open oneself to a heaven on earth.

Yet the blind must work. It is no Eden they inhabit. They must earn each and every perception, and when they go slack, they fall quickly into a ditch. They are proletarians of awareness. The object of desire is never guaranteed them in the way that sight fixes an object, holds its position in space, and lets the seer approach to grasp it. The blind find it necessary to work against rigidity, fixation, and conceptualization. The blind must grow mistrustful of stagnation if they are to survive. It is their relentless but secret pursuit of movement that makes them despicable to the sighted. It is their acceptance of imperfect movement that renders them outcasts. They are hated because of their ceaseless probing and questioning of their immediate position. They are objects of hate because they remind us of our forgetfulness.

It is consistent with Descartes's strategy that he downplays the work of perception. His aim, it must be remembered, is to present a plausible, attractive, but false view of how sight works. In a convoluted manner, he strives after the downfall of spiritual elitism and the rise of a new age of intellectualism. Thus he writes:

True, without long practice this kind of sensation is rather confused and dim; but if you take men born blind, who have made use of such sensations all their life, you will find they feel things with such perfect exactness that one might almost say that they see with their hands, or that their stick is the organ of a sixth sense, given to them to make up for the lack of sight.<sup>8</sup>

The blind become upright by virtue of an ennobling practice. They practice in order to perceive. Blind perception takes on the yoke of practice. It is a yoke the sighted will never willingly wear. They will not willingly relinquish the ease and security by which they maneuver about the world. For that ease is a protection. Their embrace of security is prompted by a fear the uncertainty masks.

Fear, moreover, is another mask. It is as near as the light switch. Turn off the lights. Bring sight to a stop, and attention is returned to another, forgotten movement. Turn from the object world, from the known, the clear, the distinct. An undifferentiated sensation appears "dim and confused" to an unpracticed perceiver. Confusion habitually provokes reactive emotions, notably fear. The reactive configuration stands as an obstacle to a moment of poise. It is what must be met to become responsive to the needs of the situation. Poise results from a return to a state of global sensation after letting drop what stands in the way. Poise is an abandon that revitalizes. It is the space of a breath.

Herein lies the work of awareness so much despised by the sighted. It is a work of return to the habitat of an unsighted perception. The return is to an organic, archaic level of experience. It is a return from a constructional, conceptual mind that predominates in the daily round. The return involves dwelling in the body as awareness while face-to-face with entrenched impulses to take flight. It is a practice in the sense of remaining unperfected, never unceasing, always needing to begin anew. Its imperfection is why the blind man stumbles.

### *The Disanalogy*

Remember that Descartes has an ulterior motive when he recommends that we

conceive of the light in a 'luminous' body as being simply a certain very rapid and lively movement or activity, transmitted to our eyes through air and other transparent bodies, just as the movement or resistance of the bodies a blind man encounters is transmitted to his hand through his stick.<sup>9</sup>

Though he seeks revenge, the plot falls short of his final object. The ways in which it misfires I will examine below. Its misdirection, however, does not stem from a lack of planning. Descartes's strategies for success are impeccable. Instead, he fails because of what lies beyond his control, the discovery of the stop. Its force, the force of novelty, breaks the forward momentum of his project and leaves him needing to regroup.