

An Aesthetics and Ecology of Presence

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This essay examines models of direct perception in the literature and philosophy of the long eighteenth century. These models run counter to the dominant theory of perception during the period, which emphasizes the internal representation of distant objects. I focus on works of poetry, philosophy, and fiction that put their reader up close to a world at hand and explore a physical surround from the perspective of a moving body. My examples draw from the loco-descriptive poetry of Dyer and Thomson, the aesthetics of Kames and Hogarth, the anti-representational epistemology of Thomas Reid, and the letters and fiction of Laurence Sterne.

This essay explores some connections between theories of perception and varieties of literary form in the long eighteenth century. My goal will be to trace the development of what I shall call an anti-representational model of perceptual experience during the period, a model that considers perceiving to be an active process – more on the pattern of touch than vision – and that proposes that what the senses do is make the world available rather than hold it at a skeptical remove. The anti-representational view, I’m going to suggest, is a dissident line or counter-current within the eighteenth century’s dominant theory of perception. On the dominant account, ideas or impressions provide an internal picture of an external object or event or state of affairs. “The thing we see is in one place,” writes Hobbes in high-representational mode, “the appearance in another” (14). I’m going to begin with this theory of perceptual representation (the dominant theory) and then turn to works of poetry, philosophy, or fiction that propose that what minds or works of art do is not so much represent things as make them present to us, or that concentrate on the process rather than the product of perception. My examples of the dissident line will be from the loco-descriptive poetry of John Dyer and James Thomson, Thomas Reid’s commonsense philosophy, and a few moments from Laurence Sterne. My interest in these examples will be to explore how perception could be understood as direct contact with external objects: as an aesthetics of presence, in other words. With its emphasis on skilled action and its embrace of naiveté, I shall intermittently suggest, the eighteenth-century aesthetics of presence has some bearing on our current critical mood, with respect both to surface reading and to speculative realisms close to home in the humanities and ecological or embodied theories of perception further afield in the cognitive

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sciences.¹ So I conceive of this project as one of historical recovery as well as one of bringing the past to bear on some features of our present.

The Representational Stance

Empiricism is famous for saying that knowledge derives from the senses, but what do the senses actually show us, and how should their relation to the world be conceived? The question emerges across the period, in the manner eventually of a debate: is our sensory apprehension of the world direct, reaching out to objects and entities themselves, or roundabout, mediated by internal images of external things? This is again from Hobbes, choosing the second option at something like the dawn of empiricism and materialism alike. “Concerning the thoughts of man,” he writes in the first sentence of *Leviathan*’s first chapter, “they are every one a representation or appearance of a quality or accident of a body without us; which is commonly called an object” (14). The point for Hobbes is that in coming up with our best theories of mental life we ought not to confuse the pictures in our head for the objects they represent. When external bodies “presseth the organ proper to each sense,” they create an internal motion whose “appearance to us is fancy” (14). Perceptual experience thus moves through a kind of filter, with motion on the one side producing an image on the other. “Sense in all cases, is nothing else, but original fancy,” Hobbes says, “caused by the pressure, that is, by the motion, of external things upon our Eyes, Ears, and other organs thereunto ordained” (14). Fancy is original here because it occurs at the moment of perception, not in a later instance of reverie. To fancy is simply to experience by way of the internal picture Hobbes calls a “phantasm” what is already in one’s midst.

So although Hobbes insists that perception should be understood in physical terms, as a motion that joins internal fancy to an external world, he also maintains that one’s engagement with this world is always at a distance, always tarrying after its images. “The object is one thing,” he says, “the image or fancy another” (14). Many that followed shared this oscillation between worldly engagement and perceptual seclusion. Consider Locke’s celebrated likening of vision to a camera obscura: “Methinks the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without; Would the pictures in such a room but stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would very much resemble the mind of man, in reference to all Objects of sight and our ideas of them” (2.12.17). Would the pictures in a camera obscura remain in place they would resemble the settled ideas in a person’s head. And they would do so because the understanding stands in view of ideas that both represent things and acquire a kind of stability. Or to put matters in reverse, vision furnishes the mind with ideas that shape what we see. Experience tells me that one red voluminous object is an apple, another a tomato; and, after each idea is hung in place, I don’t have to guess which is which every time I step into a garden. Viewed either way, however, our senses don’t so much reach to objects themselves as bring ideas of objects to mind. Summing up the conventional wisdom some forty years later, Hume writes in the *Treatise* that “’tis universally allow’d by philosophers, and besides is pretty obvious of itself that nothing is really ever present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion” (2.1.6). Or, as he clarifies in the *Enquiry*, “the slightest philosophy teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through

which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object” (2.12.9). Our experience is of the solid world but this world shows up on a screen, as “fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent” (2.12.9).

Toward a Theory of Direct Perception

On the representational view, our perceptual acquaintance is never quite with the ultimate nature of things. A science of perception therefore should tell some sort of causal story about external objects and events and the experiences we have of them. This was true for the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theories of Hobbes and Locke (or Boyle and Newton) as it is also true at least for the mainstream cognitive science of today. David Marr’s groundbreaking study *Vision* (1982), for example, begins with the observation that “if we are capable of knowing what is where in the world, our brains must somehow be capable of *representing* this information,” and so concludes that “the study of vision therefore must include not only the study of how to extract from images the various aspects of the world that are useful to us, but also an inquiry into the nature of the internal representations by which we capture this information and thus make it available as a basis for decisions about our thoughts and actions” (3). The question for Marr as for Hume is how does an organism build a rich three-dimensional set of images that corresponds in some fashion to invariant features of the physical surround. Representation in either case is understood to be a structural relation between acts or entities of the mind and properties or features of the world.

In recent years, however, the representational stance has come under pressure from active, embodied, or haptic theories of perception, themselves a lineal descendent, I want to argue, of some eighteenth-century views of the mind and the senses. On the ecological theory of J. J. Gibson, for example, perception is not an event in the brain but an achievement of the whole animal. Vision should be understood, he said, as an “exploration in time, not a photographic process of image registration and image transmission,” as a style of tactile engagement rather than optical remove (“A Theory of Direct Visual Perception” 218). This account has been important for subsequent criticism of neural reductionism – the dominant approach to the mind today – because it puts the perceiver in touch with an environment instead of focusing on the internal, enabling conditions for perceiving something. The idea is to conceive of perceiving with respect to a creature in motion rather than a single point and to think of what is perceived with respect to potentials for action or dwelling rather than objects in space.² “Instead of thinking of perception as a passage from inside to outside, from in here to out there,” writes Alva Noë, a contemporary philosopher and cognitive scientist in the tradition of Gibson, we need to account for how “[w]e ourselves (whole persons) undertake our perceptual consciousness of the world in, with, and in relation to the places where we find ourselves” (*Varieties of Presence* 5). The argument for direct perception and the insistence on ecological analysis go together. “The world shows up for us in experience,” Noë says, “because we know how to make contact with it” (2). And we know how to make to contact with it because we know how to use our bodies. Perception is a kind of skilled attunement to what the world affords, done by creatures whose eyes or whose paws move as so.³

I am going to argue now that this idea of making contact with objects and environments in our midst – and in particular the notion that perceptual acquaintance employs a kind of everyday skill or homely style – emerges over the course of the eighteenth

century in contrast to the idea that we ought to worry about whether our perceptions accurately capture the precise features of things. I am also going to argue that literary writing plays an important role in getting this account off the ground. What I am calling the eighteenth-century aesthetics of presence emerged in part as a way to address a problem faced by the representational view. The problem went something like this: If visual perception moves on a line from the eye to the object then how does one perceive the distance between here and there? All one should see is the point at the end of the line, and yet we experience visual space in three dimensions. How is this so? George Berkeley begins his 1709 *Essay Towards A New Theory of Vision* with just this conundrum. "It is," he writes, "agreed by all that Distance of itself and immediately cannot be seen," and that is because "Distance being a Line directed end-wise to the eye, it projects only one point in the Fund of the Eye, which point remains invariably the same whether the Distance be longer or shorter" (2). These sentences would prove to be very important. Our supposed inability actually to see distance – its existence only on a line directed endwise – formed the problem of depth perception for much of the eighteenth century. On Berkeley's influential account, the space between one point and another is not so much seen as inferred, calculated by means of "an act of Judgment grounded on Experience than of Sense" (2). When we handle or bump into something we form "ideas of touch," whereas when we view something we form "ideas of sight." And when we perceive the distance between one thing and another – and so experience the world in three dimensions – we calculate unawares the distance of each from our hands (15). The house across the way looks to be smaller than the tree in between, but since I have touched both a house and a tree at some point I know things appear that way because the one is behind the other. So while "'Tis plain that Distance is in it's [*sic*] own nature imperceptible," we are able to experience depth and curvature and full surround by abstracting from tactile experience an idea of where something must reside if it appears to be of a certain size (6). Berkeley's new theory conceives of visual perception as indirect and inferential, a product of internal calculations. At the same time, it relies upon the immediate grasping of things by the fingers. After all, he says, we would never understand where anything is located, here or far away, without coming into contact with "the Objects that environ us, in proportion as they are adapted to benefit, or injure our own Bodies" (64). The legacy of Berkeley's argument, we might say, is double, as he understands vision alone to move on a line through empty geometrical space and seeing at large to be wound up in ecologies of action and dwelling.

For literary scholars, this legacy is probably most familiar in Addison's notion of sight as "a delicate and diffusive kind of touch," one that "spreads it self over an infinite Multitude of Bodies, comprehends the largest Figures, and brings into our reach some of the most remote Parts of the Universe" (*Spectator* no. 411; vol. 4: 536). This sentence is from the first of the *Spectator* papers on the pleasures of the imagination, a series ostensibly designed to popularize Locke's representational view that sense "furnishes the imagination with its ideas" (no. 411; vol. 4: 536). Addison's notion of tactile vision is and is not a metaphor, however, and to that degree does and does not live up to this view. Sight brings into our reach things we could never actually touch and yet also turns and responds to what it encounters. In keeping with each, the papers that follow toggle between an account of vision that operates at a length beyond the fingers and one that likens seeing to drawing everything close. The papers on beauty tend to set tableaux at a linear distance whereas those on the "new or uncommon" or "novel" emphasize mobile gradation. Often associated with later ideas of the picturesque,

Addison's category of the "novel" might be considered instead as an aesthetic of measured distance.⁴ We delight in scenes that are "perpetually shifting, and entertaining the sight every moment with something that is new," he says, with "such Objects as are ever in Motion, and sliding away from beneath the Eye of the Beholder" (no. 412; vol. 4: 544). We delight in these acts because they turn or adjust as we to get closer to the grain, as the line from one object to another bends, rises, or descends along the surface of the earth. Addison's tactile vision is in this way distinct from Berkeley's. Whereas Berkeley says that depth perception combines ideas of sight with those of touch, Addison says that seeing is a form of touching. For Berkeley, sight and touch pick out different features of an object then combined in the internal representation box. For Addison, at least in some of his moods, sight is touch-like because it picks out features we might access with our fingers: one thing beneath another, the rise and fall of the ground, the backward curve of a figure.

Touching Ground

For some writers after Addison, the project was to make visible the distance between one place and another by filling in and presenting space rather than drawing it on an intangible set of coordinates, by seeing along a receding surface or curved gradient, for example, or a through a translucent covering or along an occluding edge. Among those concerned with this filling-in, none are more relevant for my current purposes than authors of loco-descriptive poetry, preoccupied as they were with varied matters of the earth's surface, with the sliding from vale to tree to hill to sheep to fruit and so on. The "curious eye" of Dyer's *Grongar Hill* (1726), for example, strays "over mead, and over wood, / From house to house, from hill to hill," seeing on its way (among other things) "the gloomy pine, poplar blue / The yellow beech, the sable yew" until "wandering" beyond the "purple grove," it pauses for a moment on the walls of Dinavawr castle:

Deep are his feet in Towy's flood,
His sides are cloth'd with waving wood,
And ancient towers crown his brow
That cast an awful look below,
Whose ragged walls the ivy creeps
And with her arms from falling keeps. (*Poetical Works*, lines 1, 59–60,
63–64, 69–74)

Responding to these lines almost fifty years later, William Gilpin would complain in *Observations on the River Wye* that Dyer had botched the perspective: "his distances . . . are all in a confusion," Gilpin writes, "and indeed it is not so easy to separate them from his foregrounds . . . His castle, instead of being marked with still fainter colours than the purple-grove is touched with all the strength of a foreground: you see the very ivy creeping upon its walls" (60–61). Gilpin's complaint notes a dramatic foreshortening: ivy-covered walls have the clarity of something etched and immediate, not a hazy prospect. This perspective is botched, however, only on the assumption that the poem intends to reproduce one vista from a place that does not move, rather than wind its way along the ground to walls whose presence are etched by the partial occlusion of ivy. On this reading, Dyer does not so much fail to render one-point perspective in the manner of a landscape painting as compose a kind of anti-ekphrasis, a moving

perspective that cannot be rendered on a picture plane. Understood in this latter sense, the peculiar touching that Gilpin observes marks a transient end point turned on a rough tetrameter line: a winding and dropping that arrives at a misplaced presence, with trunks of ivy and the walls beneath them shifting into the foreground.⁵

Gilpin understands the recession along a surface and the covering of one surface by another as separate ways of seeing distance, where Dyer seems to think of recession and occlusion together, as a motion across and then coming close to an engaged world. The attempt in either case is to use the descriptive mode to see along a gradient, both over the ground and behind what is in front of you. James Thomson makes perhaps an even more interesting case because his poetry was once understood to be committed to abstract geometrical space, lines projected endwise, and distanced, incurious viewing. This is the reading one associates most readily with John Barrell, who, writing in the heyday of the hermeneutics of suspicion (the 1970s), seemed unwilling to conceive of Thomson's landscape aesthetics as anything other than a ruse: "Thomson is able to see the landscape, not as something in which he is involved, and which is all round him, but as something detached from him, *over there*: his eye may wander over the view, but his own position is fixed, and from his viewpoint he can organize the landscape into the system of parallel bands and flat perspectives by which only he can comprehend what he sees" (21). Much of recent *Seasons* criticism has endeavored to unsettle Barrell's powerful reading and to locate in the poem models of perception and action that bring in closer proximity the viewer to the viewed. Kevis Goodman, for example, has focused on moments in the poem in which Thomson's "microscopic eye" brings to the surface a teeming world of vegetable life otherwise unseen (38–56), while Heather Keenleyside has looked at Thomson's "use of personification to associate the instability of persons and things" with an ethics and ethos of patience that leaves "moving and being moved [as] impossible to parse" (449). Whereas Barrell understands Thomson to "create a space between the landscape and the viewer" (21), Goodman and Keenleyside understand him to bring the two together. In the language of so-called surface reading, we might say that this is the way we read Thomson now. We are more inclined to see Thomson involved in his world than to look for moments of detachment or ownership. For my part, this inclination will be noticeable as a focus on Thomson's naiveté. This is Thomson's speaker lingering over items strewn between one place and another. This is distance perceived directly, Berkeley's empty space filled in.

And how does this happen? Thomson's eye moves along the surface of crowded space, so even air teams with bugs, dust, and droplets, each reflecting color or shade along its wing or edge. Summer insects "people the blaze" on a kind of up and down, for example, swarming from winter's repose to land on moving streams or passing "through green-wood glade" to feed on fresh leaves.⁶ The episode ends when the insects come up against a striking background, passing over and landing on a pail set at close distance:

...Some to the house,
 The fold, and dairy, hungry, bend their flight;
 Sip round the pail, or taste the curdling cheese:
 Oft, inadvertent, from the milky stream
 They meet their fate; or, weltering in the bowl,
 With powerless wings around them wrapt, expire. (*Su* 260–65)

With minimal visual cues, the lines etch the flying, landing, and dying of insects on liquid. The insects glide on a crooked thread to the bowl (and its lip) as milk streams nearby and cheese curdles at bottom. Like the flight they describe, the lines bend on a kind of metrical warp, lifting from the trochaic “oft” across the subordinated “weltering” and wrapping before getting to the delayed “expire.” Thomson’s writing out of perceptual presence so takes an overall shape. The bowl, speck, and milk come into view as one surface passes on top of another, as gauzy wings move over an opaque pail or a milky stream pours beneath a whirling speck.⁷

This simple example shows one method by which the poem attends to objects at a middle distance, not (again) as points on a grid but as features of an ecology that change with the position from which they are held. In this way, the perception of something solid – the filling in of distance – depends both on the layout of what is seen and the motion of who is seeing: the array in which a bowl placed just so will sheer off when a glance from just here moves to just there. This is so, I think, even in the poem’s more static-seeming still lifes, the “fruit empurpled deep” of autumn, for example, that

Presents the downy peach, the shining plum
With a fine bluish mist of animals
Clouded, the ruddy nectarine, and dark
Beneath his ample leaf the luscious fig. (*A* 675–79)

Writing about the seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes that animate and lie behind these lines, Svetlana Alpers has described how they “encourage the mind to dwell on perceiving as a process [by featuring the] experience of an object as coming into its own, distinguishing itself from other things, taking shape” (27). Understood in this fashion, Thomson’s still life makes the perceptual object less familiar, by describing how fruit takes shape from behind something one sees through or around. Apart from the merely “ruddy nectarine,” each piece seems to stretch distance along an occluding surface or partial cover: a passing membrane of down or mist or leaf that brings the skin so close to ours. The fine blue of the animal shapes that cloud the skin of the plum, for example, brings the shine to a presence crowding out the quiet nectarine. The skin of the peach and the plum and the rind of the fig pop out because they form a curved background to a filmy covering and the eye like a finger must pass from the one to land on the other.⁸

Seeing and Skill

In lines like these, Thomson seems to move from one middling-size object to another, dropping a line of sight along the gradient and so responding after a fashion to Berkeley’s question about distance while providing an example of Addison’s diffusive kind of touch. By the middle decades of the eighteenth century such ideas of perception as direct contact became more explicitly formulated in works of theory, often in stated contrast to ideas of perception as a relation between an internal image and an external entity. For the duration of his long career, for example, Thomas Reid’s central preoccupation was to overturn the notion – common to empiricists from Locke to Hume – that “external things must be perceived by means of images of them in the mind” (Reid, *Inquiry* 74). These are his words from *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764). He elaborates on them there in lively and unabashed

terms: “that we can have no conception of any thing, unless there is some impression or sense or idea in our minds which resembles it, is indeed an opinion in general very well received among philosophers but it is neither self evident nor hath it been clearly proved: and therefore it [is] more reasonable to call in question this doctrine than to discard the material world, and by that means expose philosophy to the ridicule of all men, who will not offer up common sense as a sacrifice to metaphysics” (75). As Reid understands the representational theory of Locke and Hume, the notion that one perceives objects through a filter of ideas leads inevitably to a skepticism about whether these objects really exist. The goal then is to use the ordinary assumption that we access the world directly as a standard for thinking about perception and to assert that any challenge to this notion of access violates common sense. The means of achieving this goal in turn is to reject the language of mental imagery as a needlessly recondite picture of the everyday habits of viewing and acting. Whereas Locke and Hume found the need to come up with a separate panoply of mental states – impressions, ideas, senses, images, and the like – Reid will admit only of our having “natural signs” which automatically and with no interference fasten experience to its objects. Unlike mental representations, natural signs bear no similarity to the world; they are simply part of it. “They pass through the mind instantaneously and serve only to introduce the notion and belief of external things, which by our constitution are connected with them” (63). So on Reid’s view we are caught up in the world in the sense that there is only a slim distance between the sign we possess and the signified we inhabit. “Natural signs” go unnoticed in our experience as “the mind passes immediately to the thing signified without making the least reflection on the sign, or observing that there ever was such a thing” (63).

With respect to sight, this “immediate passing” allows one actually to see what is between one place and another. According to Reid’s dense and difficult account of what he calls “the geometry of the visibles,” depth perception happens because vision projects on the surface of a sphere, not on a flat plain.⁹ Sight tilts on a curve, Reid says, because it fastens to objects receding on a bent gradient. The formal theory of perceptual presence, that is, lagged behind its literary antecedents as it conceived of vision as a kind of touch and presented depth as curvature or occlusion among middle-sized objects. What is common to both is the notion that if one is averse to a posture of detachment – in ordinary or aesthetic acts of perception – then one must also be averse to a theory of internal representations. The act of standing in relation to an image for both means that one is somehow not participating in what that image represents. Dyer and Thomson raise this objection, naively as it were, in order to put the beholder of beautiful works of art or beautiful pieces of nature in a place to recreate them in time: not the image of the finished whole concerns them but the various strands by which it is made. Reid asks his reader simply to trust her naive judgments about the encountered and lived world. The worry here (again) is that a representational theory leads to skepticism, and so on his view to disaster. We abide with the “sun, moon, stars and earth, [with] vegetable and animal bodies” themselves, not with their ideas or images (67). The world goes on without our having any account of it, Reid says, so we might just do our best to trust what we see and feel.

The charge is perhaps most curious when it is made with respect to the prototypically mental property of color, which Reid says is a property of bodies themselves: “By color, all men, who have not been tutored by modern philosophy, understand not a sensation of the mind, which can have no existence when it is not perceived, but a quality or modification of bodies, which continues to be the same, whether it is seen or not. The

scarlet-rose, which is before me, is still a scarlet-rose when I shut my eyes, and was so at midnight when no eye saw it" (85). Reid was nearly alone among eighteenth-century theorists in holding that color was a mind-independent and enduring feature of the bodies it colors.¹⁰ As elsewhere, he would have us accept our relation to the sun, the moon, and stars, to vegetable and animal bodies, to red and to blue rather than throw that relation into doubt. In this respect, Reid's direct realism is an important if unacknowledged antecedent to the speculative realism on offer, for example, by Graham Harman's headline grabbing "object oriented ontology," which also argues, contra "the widespread empiricist view that the supposed objects of experience are nothing but bundles of qualities," that colors "are bonded to the thing to which they belong," while advocating for a naive approach to the encountered world (11). Reid might stand as a background to the current mood, in this manner, but he also might draw attention to the strange way that speculative realism understands objects to retreat from us and from each other. In contrast to such retreat, Reid's valuation of the naive and the ordinary would shrink the distance between our perceptual acts and the "earth, which we inhabit," the "country, friends and relations, which we enjoy," and the "land, houses, and moveables, which we possess" (18). And it would do so by conceiving of perception as a kind of motor skill, secured by the well-designed "fabric of the human body" (113). Vision, for example, is "skillfully and regularly performed" by "a system of unconnected muscles conspiring [as] wonderfully in their various actions" as "excellent musicians in a concert" or "a company of expert players in a theatrical performance" or "good dancers in a country dance" (113).

Apostrophe and Dwelling

Perception is direct on this view because we are adept at using our bodies to bring the world – the earth, our friends, and dwelling – within reach. One word for this skill is the ability to achieve what Henry Home, Lord Kames called "presence," both "ideal" and "real," in his 1762 *Elements of Criticism* – the "laying open [of] things existing and passing around us" – and much of the dissident line that I've been attempting to reconstruct aims to consider and realize something like presence in aesthetic and perceptual acts (1: 66). For Kames, the achievement of presence was one purpose of figural language. Apostrophe, for example, aims "to bestow a momentary presence upon a sensible being who is absent" (2: 554–55). When this figure joins with personification, he adds, it aims to bestow presence and sentience at once, so "things inanimate" may qualify "for listening to a passionate expostulation" (2: 555). For my purposes, momentary presence describes the formal and figural way of bringing something to hand, the reaching out to things just past one's fingers so they may be brought into view. Momentary presence is by its nature fleeting and, as it is set out in the examples we've seen, requires one's skill and handiwork. The pail of milk and the bunch of fruit are not over there; they are right here. And they are right here because they are the subject of apostrophe's momentary presence, one that shows up for a creature with a certain kind of body and a certain kind of motility. The loco-descriptive poets understood this because they were working through the ecology of perception on the ground, or (again) naively. I have argued that this naiveté extends to the idea that the world shows up as present, not as a mental representation, and that presence is something achieved through a kind of skill. I'll turn now in the final pages of this essay to some versions of presence in a few moments from Sterne. The first is from an early

letter that Sterne wrote to Elizabeth Lumley before they were married, the rest from *Sentimental Journey*. Lumley was apparently about to leave her family's country house:

Thou sayest thou wilt quit the place with regret – I think so too – Does not something uneasy mingle with the very reflection of leaving it? It is like parting with an old friend, whose temper and company one has long been acquainted with. – I think I see you looking twenty times a day at the house – almost counting every brick and pane of glass, and telling them at the same time with a sigh, you are going to leave them – Oh happy modification of matter! They will remain insensible of thy loss. – But how wilt thou be able to part with thy garden? – The recollection of so many pleasing walks must have endeared it to you. The trees, the shrubs, the flowers, which thou reared with thy own hands – will they not droop and fade away sooner upon thy departure – Who will be the successor to nurse them in thy absence. – Thou wilt leave thy name upon the myrtle-tree. – If trees, and shrubs, and flowers could compose an elegy, I should expect a very plaintive one upon this subject. (Sterne, *Works of Laurence Sterne* 7: 9)

The letter is one of only a few that Sterne kept from the period (the 1740s), and it is clear that he continued to think through its contents over the course of his career. For my current purposes, the letter is remarkable for its use of figure to entwine its recipient in the fold of a built and natural environment. Lumley is at home in the world, or rather the home – its walls and windows, walks and gardens – *is* her world made present to mind. Seeing is like touching is like gardening. Seen this way, the apostrophe and personification provide a kind of linguistic shape and poignancy to the familiar acquaintance she has with the house and the gardens. “The apostrophizing poet,” writes Jonathan Culler (a twentieth-century Lord Kames of sorts), “identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces” (139).¹¹ In this case, the brick and the glass and the flower, the shrubs and trees are present as available to Lumley, just as she is present as available to them (or at least to the shrubs and flowers; the brick and glass are insensible after all). Each mourns the other. Each mourns the other in anticipation of the other's no longer being available. Each is present to the other as a living thing.

The kind of presence sketched by the trope, as Sterne writes about it, stems from the tactile know-how Lumley brings to gardening, as if to see the world beyond the end of one's fingers one must actually reach out to touch it. The latter point will become clearer years later when Sterne returns to and embellishes this understanding of presence in that most tactile of all eighteenth-century novels, *Sentimental Journey* – that novel of handholding and pulse taking. He returns in fact to the very myrtle tree upon which Lumley wrote her name and does the same. Arriving at Calais, Yorick contrasts his sense of worldly entanglement with the jaundiced and inward view of those unresponsive to travel. The world is all barren “only to him who will not cultivate the fruits that it offers,” he says, and then declares while clapping his hands, “was I in a desert, I would find out wherewith in it to call forth my affections . . . I would fasten them upon some sweet myrtle, or seek some melancholy cypress to connect myself to – I would court their shade, and greet them kindly for their protection – I would cut my name upon them, and swear they were the loveliest trees throughout the desert: if their leaves wither'd, I would teach myself to mourn, and when they rejoiced, I would rejoice along with them” (*Sentimental Journey* 28). Once again personification traces a line of contact between the ends of one's fingers and the places one inhabits and in so inhabiting perceives. The novel simply removes the letter's earlier and more

explicit references to Lumley's skilled handiwork while retaining the feel of acquaintance and the work of the trope to bring the world within reach.

The episodes in which objects and persons and animals are found to be in reach in *Sentimental Journey* are of course many, and I'm not going to detail them here. No eighteenth-century novel (again) is more concerned with touch. I would turn instead to a passage that clarifies that this putting of touch into the foreground makes a point about vision in particular and perception at large. This is Yorick soon after he arrives in Paris:

I own my first sensations, as soon as I was left solitary and alone in my own chamber in the hotel, were far from being so flattering as I had prefigured them. I walked up gravely to the window in my dusty black coat, and looking through the glass saw all the world in yellow, blue and green, running at the ring of pleasure . . . Alas poor Yorick! cried I, what art thou doing here? On the very first onset of all this glittering clatter, thou art reduced to an atom – seek – seek some winding alley with a tourniquet at the end of it . . . there thou mayest solace thy soul in concourse sweet with some kind grisset of a barber's wife, and get into such coteries! (47)

In her preface to the 1927 Oxford edition of *Sentimental Journey*, Virginia Woolf cited this passage (and this passage alone) as the quintessence of what she calls Sterne's "pure poetry" (82). It is easy to see why. We are asked to consider Yorick gazing out his window onto the busy street below and to follow or adopt the rushing scene of color that saturates his visual field: a dusty black coaxes yellow and blue to combine into green. But we are asked also to consider the structural layout of the scene. Once the line of sight passes over the coat, it remains fixed at the window looking out at the street, while Yorick remains "solitary *and* alone" in the room. The hotel fills out Locke's metaphor of the camera obscura, in other words, as light from the street projects an image in a closed chamber, but it does so to some critical effect. In this respect, Sterne echoes no one more than Reid who also took aim at just this metaphor. "Locke's doctrine of ideas," Reid says, "alleges, without any manifest proof, that every man shut in, as it were, in a *camera obscura* perceives nothing outside but only the images or ideas of things depicted in his own *camera*" (*Philosophical Orations* 61). For Sterne as for Reid the account of vision as a screening of images in a dark room puts too much emphasis on detachment and pictorial representation. The world does not project to a point.

As it is presented in the novel, perception is a kind of ability and a kind of technique, not the sitting in a darkened room so much as a walking about a crowded city or a reaching out to plants and stones. Sterne shows this technique in scenes of making the world present by bringing it to hand or seeing it with one's fingers. He also elicits this technique in skill of his own, using his own craft to show how objects are made present to whoever beholds them. This turn from the skeptical to the naive might stand as the common thread among my disparate writers. As I've intimated from time to time, I also think it sheds some light on our current naiveté – our more accepting interest in objects and surfaces and forms. We really do see things directly, Reid said. The world outstrips what is in our head. Just look. But know too, and this might be the lesson from the eighteenth-century techniques of presence, how much skill there is in seeing what lies between here and there, as Berkeley said, or turning a beautiful leaf to its side, as Dyer and Thomson wrote, or finally, for everyone reading, simply engaging works in the way that we do. There is a lot to see, and there is a lot to lose.

Notes

1. On the literary critical end, the texts here are well known: Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's chart-topping "Surface Reading: An Introduction," along with the essays on description and suspicion that have appeared largely in *NLH* (by Rita Felski and Heather Love, for example), and finally the turn to ontology in so-called "speculative realism," especially object oriented ontology. On the philosophical and cognitive end, the terrain is perhaps less familiar to humanists, but covers the broadly enactive, embodied, and extended theories of mind of recent years. See, for example, Noë, *Action in Perception*, and Hutto and Myin, *Radical Enactivism: Basic Minds without Content*.
2. See Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. The category of "dwelling" (of intermittent importance to this essay) descends from Heidegger (*wohnen*), especially the "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" chapter from *Poetry, Language, Thought*.
3. See the influential theory of affordances in Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (127–43). An affordance is a feature of the environment as it shows up for a certain body with a certain motility: a chair affords sitting if you have legs that bend in a specific way; a tree affords dwelling for a squirrel if has an opening of a particular depth, and so on. It is, as Gibson says, subjective and objective and yet neither.
4. See, for example, Paulson, *The Beautiful, Novel, and Strange*.
5. On the one-point perspective in eighteenth-century painting and aesthetics, see de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. For a Renaissance background, see Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective*.
6. James Thomson, *Summer*, in *The Seasons* (lines 253, 255). Further citation is to this edition (based on the 1746 edition), and noted in parenthesis, with the seasons abbreviated to *Su*, *A*, and so on.
7. For an account of such "kinetic occlusion" in the realist novel, see Elaine Scarry's beautiful and brilliant *Dreaming by the Book* (10–31). Scarry considers such occlusion to be "reproducing the deep structure of perception" itself and so, like Gibson and Noë, descends from the dissident line I am locating in the eighteenth century (9).
8. For a discussion of *The Rape of the Lock* as a kind of still life, see Jonathan Lamb's *The Things Things Say* (98–125).
9. See Reid, *Inquiry* (103–11). Reid has been understood by some to have here anticipated non-Euclidian geometry. See, for example, Daniels, *Thomas Reid's Inquiry: The Geometry of the Visibles and the Case for Realism* (1–24).
10. The empiricist theory of color as a secondary quality moves from Boyle to Newton to Locke. Here is Addison summing up the conventional wisdom: "I have here supposed that my Reader is acquainted with that great Modern Discovery, which is at present universally acknowledged by all the Enquirers into Natural Philosophy: Namely, that Light and Colours, as apprehended by the Imagination, are only Ideas in the Mind, and not Qualities that have any Existence in Matter" (no. 413, vol. 4: 552). Reid quotes and criticizes this sentence in particular.
11. Culler's further point that apostrophe is "a sign of a fiction that knows its own fictive nature" runs counter to the point I'm trying to make, however (146).

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