

The Disembodiment of Motion

Jean Robert

The Pedestrian Condition

We have delved into the perceptual sediments of fifty years of car-related routines. Under that accumulated alluvium, we find the strata of pedestrian locomotion, with which, in the next chapter, we will contrast railroad journeys. Up to the epoch of the first iron ways, around 1830, everybody was a hiker or traveled in coaches at walking speed. Pedestrian was almost synonymous for “common man” and in many languages, “horse rider”—cavalier, Ritter, caballero, chevalier—was the first distinction from the common condition. Except for brief moments of gallop, the rider’s pace is twice or thrice faster than the walkers’. Let’s imagine that the speed of human locomotion today to be within the range of the velocities of walking and of riding a bicycle. Such a narrow spectrum of possible speeds would not allow for essential differences of perceptual modalities to occur. The bicycle and the horse enhance or exacerbate perceptions, but they do not break the circle of the pedestrian condition. The rider, or the cyclist are immersed in nature’s materiality, even if they pierce the wind faster than do pedestrians.

The pedestrian’s is a condition of immersion and embodiment. The walker meets the sites of nature with his legs, his nose, his ears and all the pores of his skin. For him, there are smelly places, others are remembered for their unique odor. Besides, places vary with the seasons and the hour of the day, constituting local “spimes” remembered by the walker’s body. The feeling of sweat in my armpits will always remind me of that fountain under a Jura pine where, on a summer afternoon, we

washed our skirts and let the sun dry our sweating chests. I can still name the friends who remember that place, that day.

Through all history, up to the modern epoch, the feet had defined the scale of inhabited places. The pedestrian condition, common to all, shaped common perceptions of natural sites and landscapes. The king, then, hardly traveled faster than his subjects and he perceived nature the way they did: by walking or riding in her. For the best and the worst, neighbors truly dwelled in the same place, and every place engendered its peculiar perceptions and representations of the close and the far, this and the other world. Every inhabited site was, as E.V. Walter writes, “a unity of experiences organizing the mutual (...) influence of all beings within it.”¹ It was a stage on which reigned a particular unity of place, time, and action. An intimate distance, which was felt in the legs, but was also evaluated in kinship or in intensity of friendship or enmity made every site distinct from the next and gave it, in Walter Benjamin’s words, its unique aura. Things, like places had, Benjamin writes, an aura of uniqueness: they were not reproducible. Except printed books, no object was an exact copy of another one, and even a book, in a given region, was generally unique, because the next copy was out of reach. In his essay on the village of Montaillou in the 13th century, Le Roy Ladurie speaks of the man who possessed an exemplar of Ovid’s “Art of Loving” and was well known because of it.

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

¹ Eugen Victor Walter, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment*, Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

experiences increased with the traveled 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 the 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 a horizon.

Far under the perceptual rubles of mechanized locomotion, we find a form of motion which does not fit our schedules, our maps, nor the internal arrow of those who believe that time is the cost of an operation whose benefit is the attainment of valuable locations. Any activity that puts ends at the service of predetermined goals, Aristotle calls a motion. He opposed motion 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 shaped by mechanical motion from those formed of actions and their always surprising revelation of worldly matters. For that, I have been inspired by the intuitions of two great phenomenologists.

Substantial Motion Versus the Vain Destiny of Fleeting Images

In his essay 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 revealing of things in their materiality in the presence of one's body. Substance less motion is nothing: it is but a 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 old philosophers who thought that motion is an actualization of substantial forms understood its nature differently—and perhaps more genuinely—than the modern scientists who draw its trajectories in coordinate space-time. For them, motion was an **actualization**, by which they meant the bringing into being of a potential existence. To see how right they were, we don't need to share their belief in predetermined and eternal potentialities or “forms.” It is sufficient to understand that motion — my body's and nature's — has the power to actualize existence into sensible beings by bringing them into my carnal presence. The walker's movements bring existence which were at best only potentially there —in thought or in memory — into the realm of his vision and in this the ancient philosophers were right: motion actualizes hitherto hidden possibilities of being.

It is by my movements that immobile objects facing me reveal their hidden face and become seizable. It is my motion which will reveal to 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.

Unlike modern scientists, who freeze motion in graphs, the medieval philosophers attempted to catch its actuality with words. They defined it as a *perfectio*, by which they meant the bringing forth of a substantial form and its completion. They recognized that the *via ad perfectionem* (the path to that perfection) could be studied as something different from the *perfectio* itself, but they resisted the temptation to take the path for the motion. They insisted that the essence of motion was actualization. Further, if I see “actualization” as the bringing into my presence of things hitherto only potentially existent for me, I come to understand that the medieval philosophers — the great Scholastics or “Schoolmen” — were also great walkers, for their philosophy fits the experience of him who knows nature by walking her.

Galileo studied abstract trajectories in space-time, not motion as that which brings potential existence into sensible being. A theory of motion centered on trajectories and framed in an aprioristic space-time necessarily concentrates on repeatability and predictability. On the contrary, motion, experienced in the act of its completion, is never quite predictable because one does not know which hidden aspect of being, which “substantial form” it is going to emerge into one’s presence.

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. A philosophy of walking is a philosophy of vision and, conversely, the philosophers who start their inquiry by asking “what is there, there?” used to be walkers: were not Aristotle and his students called “the ones who walk about,” the “Peripatetics”? Through the Middle Ages up to the beginning of modern times, philosophers who followed Aristotle’s example and commented on his works claimed that same name for themselves, signifying that walking is the complement of the philosopher’s vision. Did not Socrates himself initiate the dialogue with Phaedrus with the injunction: “Move forward”? They went out of the city, took a stroll, and while walking reflected on the spell letters cast on sensible being.

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 alphabet first engendered a realm which is open to the eye only. The man of letters sits behind a desk. While his eyes pore over the pages, he sometimes dreams that he’s left his body behind. What the mastery of the alphabet’s technique once allowed a well-trained minority —letting the eyes abandon the body — the technology of speed internalized into everybody’s perception.

Kinaesthesia

The walker’s space is a manifold of actual and potential body sensations: not only the hill

actually climbed is impressed as fatigue in the walker's calves or the rider's loins, but distances to be covered are also evaluated as potential sensations of effort. This sensation of movement or "kinaesthesia" (from Greek *kinein*, to move and *aesthesia*, sensation) is the impression, 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 —not just the eye — which was then the sensorium of motion. Nature's movements were challenges to man's actions and invitations for new gestures to be performed. This is how I understand the phenomenologists' intuition of the intentionality of nature. 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 wind's action on the dauntless walker or from the crumbling weight of earth underfoot. 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 specific 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 spurting from a deep underground spring, "for, in my own reverie, it is not infinity that I find in waters, but depth." Movements of water surging 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 (ibid. 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 spirals of invisible air that 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.” Nor could he, like da Vinci, become one with the whirls that shape the sky.

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 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. 159). Again and again he insisted that reality cannot be founded as a succession of images in human’s 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

existence 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 —used words which I now find too ambiguous, misleading. He 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 an object 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 searched for the conditions of a pristine vision, which for him were none 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 numb 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.

Synaesthesia

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. (op. cit. 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.

The synaesthetic perception of someone who evaluates what he sees through the touchstone of a walkable world is the ground of his intuitive judgments about “what there is” and the most solid guarantee for the truth of his assertions. Since modes of talking and action are historical, the grounds for intuitive judgement are also historical. Therefore, an epoch may reject judgments based on another epoch’s grounds. Yet, intuitive judgment founded in synaesthesia—the mutual carnal presence of my body and nature —is not substitutable by any speculative reason. Deprived of that ground, man is unable to make judgments about the truth of what he sees and hears. Does he see “what is there” or does he just stare at fleeting images? Vision, for him, becomes “an operation of thought” or a daydream. We do not “think sufficiently” to 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. (M-P, op. cit. p. 162)

So intuitive judgment—and its possibility—also rests on a proscription. 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 separates the vision of nature through a windshield — the “kinetic experience” — 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.

Instead of an immersion in invitations to gesticulatory responses, nature is now experienced as a landscape framed by a window. A strange type of mirroring between the body and its environment is so established: mediated by the windshield, it is experienced as an “inside-outside” relation. “Inside,” the traveler is trained to a new kind of limited kinaesthesia with an enclosed environment that reflects bodily needs and to which exuberant newcomers are eventually house-

trained by disapproving stares. “Outside,” the landscape, framed by the window, with only the eye still in contact, since the body’s training to immobility, the barrier of speed and perceptual buffers prevent the transportee from sensing nature’s motive injunctions in his-her legs or loins. While he sits quietly on a bench, in an apparently immobile interior, “outside” all is motion, but it is a motion that has lost its elementary powers. It is the flux of visual specters dancing on the window, as if the landscape were now constituted by a weightless ether.

Seeing Becomes “An Operation of Thought”

The ambiguity of speed —which can be experienced as a thrill or as unspeakable boredom, as the excitement of a departure from routines or as the most enslaving grind —lies in that dislocation of vision and bodily motion. In its “first-timeness,” the kinetic experience could be a kind of premonition of that “systematic disarrangement of all the senses” which, after Rimbaud, was seen as a possible door to poetry for it shook the ground of commonsense judgment. Yet it is a derangement or “*dérèglement*” only as long as it is experienced in a frame of pedestrian references. In that frame — as long as it holds and the body is not tamed — speed creates an illusory extension of the map of the “I can” and extends my motive projects. Then — as soon as I feel comfortable sitting still on my car seat —a chasm is introduced between motion and vision, but speed still maintains me in an interesting state of giddiness. As long as the traveler is a transported pedestrian, motion is still substantial. Then, while nature’s elementary angers seem more intense and colorful, the body surreptitiously recedes from their reach. When the chasm becomes the rule, the interesting “*dérèglement*” ceases and the windshield becomes the frontier of a new covenant: inside, the internal swarming of bodily stuffs under the skin; outside, the unbearable lightness of things in motion. Speed breaks the overlapping of the visible world with my motor projects.

When speed imbues the space situated beyond vehicular enclosures — the environment — with never-ending motion, motion becomes a disembodied flux of forms. Bodily exposure to mechanical speed —the “kinetic experience” —dramatizes formal aspects of nature, like tectonic lines, horological textures, and materializes geometries: straight lines, horizontal planes, intimations of sphericity beyond pedestrian horizons. The routinized experience of speed severs the imagination of matter from powers of judgment grounded in the overlapping of “what I see” with “what I can.” Like a dust cloud, stuff whose substantiality is not attested by intuitive judgments can stealthily cover the ground of synaesthetic perceptions and muddle judgments to come. It is then time to step out, extend your legs, and cleanse the eye of your feet from the cloud of dust.

If speed can extend its realm beyond all the limits of a pedestrian common sense, it becomes a reality-shaping experience. The ground of judgment is crushed, reality is molded in the new stuff. Taking Greek etymology seriously, I call it a *neo-plasm*, a newly-cast matter. Unless we watch out, it will proliferate and pollute all the interstices of whatever synaesthetic shelters we have managed to keep hold of. The neo-plasm is but a bad dream: it is matter in its absence, as only a numb, legless and handless no-body could possibly imagine it.

State College, 1989