Perspective as a Metaphysics of Knowledge and Power, and Literature as Its Other

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In working on the ideas and materials from which this article grew, I have begun to appreciate the connections between my study of the tensions and debates abounding in early modernity and my other and more recent research interest: transformative learning and critical thinking. As I research transformative learning and critical thinking, I am recognizing that perspective is, in at least two ways, a productive topic. First, as an example of the modern drive toward the calculated management of space, perspective is a technique we take for granted as valid and beneficial. Secondly, transformative learning and critical thinking require overcoming the assumption that there is always a single, optimally correct, *perspective* from which to consider any situation. Like the rest of us, students chronically mistake themselves for transcendent subjects. So, what I will say today looks forward to connecting my interests in the seventeenth century, in teaching the seventeenth century, and in fostering transformative learning and critical thinking in general.

In the ocularcentric culture that has dominated modernity, visual perspective is an implicit metaphysics of knowledge and power. The definitive gaze, both detached and dominant, seemingly constituted by unitary perspective, was explicitly linked to power by Giovanni Battista della Porta, in 1589: "One must watch the phenomena with the eyes of a lynx so that, when observation is complete, one can begin to manipulate them" (Quoted in Crary 36-7). As the modern scopic regime was taking form, then, in the midst of widespread and intensifying meditation on the implications of perspective and other optical technologies, della Porta said explicitly that the modern gaze is an aggressive, predatory gaze. David Spurr has linked perspective with the rhetoric of empire, pointing out that a trope central to modernity is a heroic figure's commanding view over a territory to be conquered and mapped. According to Spurr, this trope is ubiquitous in early modern travel and conquest literature (15). Postmodernist sociologist Zygmunt Bauman says that the project of modernity has been to impose on the world a level of logic and lucidity that only maps can actually achieve (47). In an earlier article, I used the phrase "conquistador cognition" to evoke the epistemological and imperial ideal of penetrating and knowing completely the kind of abstract, uniform space that can be represented—indeed, constituted—by maps (56). Perspective is permitted by the

application of mathematical calculation to the representation of space. In order to be calculable, space must be conceived as uniform. There is no allowance for inconvenient irruptions of the irregular and unpredictable.

Another important early modern commentator on perspective is Roland Fréart, Sieur de Chambray. In 1662, Fréart associated perspective with right order, asserting that it is "l'art de voir les choses par la raison." Here, he echoes Descartes's contention that *res extensa*, physical space, is to be seen clearly and mastered by *res cogitans*, "pure" mind. Perspective seems to be vision without the distorting effect of the body. Descartes is appropriately regarded as the principal exponent of clarity as the defining quality of real knowledge and he recommended the substitution of mental "vision" for the less dependable physical faculty of sight. Descartes's method depends on what Dalia Judovitz calls "mathematical schematism," which is permitted to seem adequate only by excluding what is not calculable (64). The paradoxical, hypocritical, or delusional fusion of della Porta's lynx and the rational, disinterested, uninvolved transcendent subject of Cartesian epistemology is at the heart of the long modern debate about vision, truth, and power.

From the proliferation of *témoins cachés* in seventeenth-century literature and drama, to Laura Mulvey's seminal work on voyeurism, Linda Williams' analysis of the pornographic gaze, and Paul Virilio's study of the *logistics* of perception, the predatory eye of the lynx has been shown to stare through the impassive mask of the "objective" truth-seeker. What we moderns complacently call objectivity is a manifestation of Augustine's *concupiscencia ocularum*. Evelyn Fox Keller, in "The Paradox of Scientific Subjectivity," gives an excellent account of the relationship between the theory and the technique of visual perspective and the modern myth of objectivity (313-31). The literary works I will survey here make it clear that the Real is present in and before any deployment of putatively "rational" visual technique or technology.

Plans for sovereign self-fashioning and imperialistic world-making involve repression of others' bodies and desires and, in an important sense, of the would-be sovereigns' own desires, emotions, and bodies. Among others, Judovitz ties this conceptual or ideological transcendentalism to the development of perspective as a representational technique. This technique makes the vision of a subject, who is seemingly located outside the representation, the apparent source of that representation's spatial organization (67). Given the identification of material nature and human emotion as female, such a subject is, by definition, male or masculine. Such subjectivity is threatened by femaleness. Woman is excluded and feared as an external threat. She and the femininity in men are also repressed and thus feared as an *internal* threat.

One of the most informative examples of using perspective to create an impression of stability and superior lucidity is Richelieu's arrangement of his own *salle de théâtre* so as to make his own seat the *perspectiva legitima*, or perfect point of view. Timothy Murray has an excellent passage on *perspectiva legitima* (*Legitimation*, 133 ff). This

structural arrangement made the Cardinal the embodiment of an ideal order of vision, and therefore of a "legitimate," appropriate power. The perspectival structure implied that Richelieu himself was both the source and the meaning of the spectacle. At the same time, his position was one of detachment. Like *deus absconditus*, the hidden god, the Cardinal controlled without being involved. Versailles, another and greater theatre of power, was a brilliantly conceived technology of surveillance and control, maximizing the visibility of its residents and displaying long, unobstructed vistas emphasizing calm power over and penetration of space and, according to Slavoj Zizek, constituting a denial of the Real (119). Versailles is intended to pass for a triumph of the conceptualized over the Real, but, in fact, it is a technology of power, and the exercise of power is always motivated. Also relevant here is Jean-Baptiste Colbert's plan for a rational spatial integration of the French nation-state (Harvey 247). Colbert's *vision* of centralized state power was dependent on the cold, abstract rationality of maps, as well as on the production and instrumental use of other forms of representation. The establishment, in 1666, of the French Academy of Sciences and the commissioning of Jean Dominique Cassini to produce a comprehensive map of France were key elements of Colbert's strategy (Harvey 249).

I will attempt to show here that Zizek's Real, which I understand to be difference, desire, motive, irregularity, and all else that belies the assumption of lucid vision and perfect control, is constantly reinstated in several seventeenth-century works. Bauman supports Zizek's point about Modernity's hostility to the Real, asserting that modernity has conducted a long war of attrition against contingency (Tester 136). The invention and increasing use of optical devices seemed to many to make vision more objective, thereby giving credibility to Descartes's distinction between bodily sight and epistemological vision. However, the use of an optical device, just as much as the use of the eyes, is always motivated.

In Racine's *Britannicus*, Néron first discovers the erotic pleasure of power when he, a hidden witness and manipulator, watches the helpless, half-dressed Junie being brought by force into his domain: "Excité d'un désir curieux,/ Cette nuit je l'ai vue arriver en ces lieux,/ Triste, levant au ciel ses yeux mouillés de larmes,/ Qui brillait au travers des flambeaux et des armes. . . ." (1.2). This proto-Sadean vision of Junie, taken from his rival and surrounded by his armed troops, becomes for Néron a fetishized image of his power in the service of his desire. The Emperor has inherited this pleasure in being the hidden witness from his mother, Agrippine, who, in Act I, scene 1, has spoken of her own pleasure in being the unseen manipulator behind the imperial throne. Later in the play, Néron will enjoy a refined version of this voyeur's delectation when he forces Junie to deny her love for Britannicus while Néron watches and listens. Della Porta's lynx could hardly be better embodied than by Néron and his mother. *Curieux* is the perfect adjective to describe this scopic lust; it evokes the desire to know, detachment, surveillance, and aggression. As Martin Jay has it, modern epistemology released human curiosity from constraint, making it aggressively self-confident. Néron

and Agrippine literally represent the modern Sovereign Eye, which Jay and others associate with perspective. Néron's abusive effort to exercise absolute power over Junie gives rise to resistance on her part, and his failure here presages his ultimate fate.

Robert N. Watson has made a very useful point for my purpose. The identification of nature as female, along with the ambition to penetrate, control, and manipulate nature, makes woman and her supposed secrets the symbol of the ultimate Object of epistemological desire. In early modern literature and drama, the craving for unmediated knowledge in any form often expressed itself as a desire to penetrate the secret represented by woman. Junie is the object of a completely unrestrained *curiosité*. Her escape from Néron's desire and his power requires that she flee into the permanent invisibility provided by the temple of Vesta.

The ideal of seeing without being seen and controlling without being involved or entangled is common to both absolute monarchy and modern, scientistic epistemology, and it is comically embodied by several of Molière's types. In *L'école des femmes*, Arnolphe is another example of the desire to know and control a woman. Arnolphe's *méthode* for creating the perfect, predictably faithful wife requires that he isolate his charge/victim/wife from the desiring gazes of all others and that he resort to espionage to enforce his power. The house where Arnolphe keeps Agnès, after having her reduced to near idiocy by a convent education, is intended to function as a panopticon, as a space completely penetrated and filled by his desire for control. Unfortunately for Arnolphe, the servants whom he has chosen as his domestic spies are both stupid and venal. This combination makes them, like all human beings, imperfect optical devices, and Arnolphe's panopticon is neither impenetrable to others nor transparent to him. From the beginning of the play, Arnolphe has believed it is possible for him to be a privileged spectator, an uninvolved witness of the marital disasters of others and the perfectly lucid, fully informed master of his own marital destiny. Pierre Force makes the critical point that, despite its illusory detachment, vision is a matter of exchange. Arnolphe cannot be just a spectator; he is entangled in the drama. Moreover, his method is an expression of his desire and it entails particular behavior on his part, and behavior always has consequences. Thanks to his method, Arnolphe winds up financing the play of whose jokes he is the butt.

In one especially delicious episode, Arnolphe imitates Néron, ordering Agnès to drive her *amoureux* away while he, Arnolphe, watches and listens. The stone that Agnès dutifully throws at Horace has a love note attached. Agnès, whose own desire has been awakened, thus uses the prescribed gesture to express that desire, demonstrating all at once her ability to deceive Arnolphe's vision and the facts that his isolating her has made her more vulnerable, that his method is self-defeating because it ignores or represses more than it can account for, and that power always engenders resistance. If Arnolphe's method for knowing and controlling a woman is analogous to Descartes's method for knowing and controlling nature, then both are failures for analogous reasons. The factor most sadly ignored by Arnolphe's method is his own desire. He

winds up admitting that he loves Agnès, but he never considers trying to be lovable. Moreover, Watson's point about nature and woman seems to be supported by the epithets Arnolphe hurls at Agnès: "animal", and "serpent," for example (5.4).

Speaking of woman and nature, Alceste, in *Le Misanthrope*, compares Célimène's alleged perfidy to "le déchaînement de toute la nature" (4.2) after he has read the letter given to him by Arsinoé. The latter has tempted Alceste to ignore the motives and ambiguities involved in any social communication by offering him a "pleine lumière" on Célimène. This offer comes after Alceste has said that he is interested only in evidence "qu'avec clarté l'on peut me faire voir" (3.5). Arsinoé will enable him to be, in effect, a hidden witness, a privileged viewer, thereby giving him knowledge of Célimène and power over her. Having read the letter—and text is often associated with the kind of comprehensive, definitive knowledge postulated by modern epistemology—Alceste acts as if he has penetrated a shameful secret and thus gained unquestionable, legitimate power over Célimène. What Alceste ignores here, and what Philinte and Eliante try to remind him of, is the necessity of interpretation: "Avez-vous, pour le croire, un juste fondement?" asks Eliante (4.2), and Philinte warns that "Une lettre peut bien tromper par l'apparence. . . ." (4.2). Interpretation, of course, requires empathy and interaction, and Alceste, like the other panopticists we have looked at, categorically rejects the ambiguity, restraint, and moderation that go along with accepting ambiguity and relativity. Perhaps most critically, he ignores the role his own motives play in his perception. "Je cherchais le malheur qu'ont rencontré mes yeux" (4.3) he admits, revealingly. Peggy Phelan has it that the widespread belief in the possibility of complete understanding has committed us, however unwittingly, to a conventional narrative of betrayal, disappointment, and rage (174). Alceste's reaction to the failure of his effort to know and control Célimène could not be described better. The certainty of negativity is better, from his point of view, than the precariousness of hope and exchange.

Perhaps the woman in seventeenth-century literature most relentlessly objectified by predatory gazes and most spied upon by hidden witnesses is the Princesse de Clèves. Interestingly, that novel also includes a jealous male character, who resorts to spying and chooses to believe the worst rather than interpret the report he receives from his spy. Madame de Lafayette prepares her readers to appreciate what will be the situation of her main character by framing it with a description of a Court dominated by the desire to penetrate others' secrets in order to gain power over them. Knowledge is power at the Court, and love is inseparable from ambition. The future Princesse arrives at Court having received an education from her mother that is most charitably described as paradoxical: she has been taught to distrust men and to love virtue, but her virtue is intended to make her an even more desirable object than her wealth and social status would have made her. She learns that it is disgraceful to be an example of a generalization about women and love, but her value as an exception is relevant only in the context of a society that pressures her toward being typical. She is, from the beginning, highly visible to people who want to manipulate her. Men watch and pursue

her. They compete for her favor. Because she is new at Court, everyone's *curiosité* is focused on her. The lynx is ever on the prowl around her. Madame de Lafayette's emphasis on the Real—on motives, lies, dissembling, and ambiguity—in her novel is as strong as that of any dramatist.

The erotic pleasure and the power of the hidden witness are explored thoroughly by Madame de Lafayette. She also echoes Racine by connecting this power and pleasure with triumph over a male rival as well as with a privileged, knowing view of a woman. The Prince de Nemours first takes symbolic, fetishistic possession of the Princesse by stealing a portrait of her that belongs to her husband. In that episode, there is an exchange and complicity between him and her, since she sees what he has done. Later, however, Nemours sees and hears the Princesse several times while she says and does things that she says and does *only* because she believes there is no witness. Nemours's desire for power over her drives him to pursue her into the privacy and, she believes, the invisibility that she has chosen as her escape from the predatory gaze of the courtiers.

The fact that the Princesse, after her definitive departure from the Court, spends one half of each year in a "maison religieuse" (395) is one of several reasons to link her with Agnès, whom Arnolphe threatens to send back to a convent, and with Junie, who flees to join the vestal virgins. To me, the most interesting of these reasons is that the grief that causes the death of Monsieur de Clèves is a result of his spying on his wife. In this, he resembles Arnolphe, for whom panoptical control is an obsession. Arnolphe speaks of recruiting spies all over the neighborhood. Monsieur de Clèves also reminds us of Alceste, who believes dubious evidence of Célimène's perfidy, evidence given to him by a kind of spy, and who thereby finds the unhappiness *he has sought*. Again, the themes I have tried to elucidate are combined: Monsieur de Clèves exemplifies desire for knowledge and power, specifically of and over a woman; the disastrousness of his belief that truth can be separated from the responsibility to interpret is exacerbated by his dependence on a spy; his intolerance of ambiguity causes him to rush to the negative conclusion; his acceptance as definitively true of an inevitably incomplete representation of his wife causes his death.

So, a number of seventeenth-century dramatic and literary works contribute to the debate over the emerging modern trend toward a more aggressive conception of knowledge as an instrument of power. In what Michel de Certeau has called the age of representation (*Heterologies*180) and Phillip Sherrard terms the epoch of abstraction (49), the myths of rational vision and detached subjectivity are undermined by these works, which refuse to ignore the Real. Bauman's idea that literature often serves as the *other* of modernity, as ironic, irreverent counter-culture to the technological-scientific culture of modernity, the culture of passion for order, neat divisions, and taut discipline (Tester 18), certainly applies to the seventeenth-century works I have looked at here.

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