

I'm Not There

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Perhaps, like me, you have a propensity to collect books without quite knowing why. Over the years I have piled up books by and about, say, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hannah Arendt, George Santayana, Philip Roth, Ad Reinhardt, Philip Guston, Franz Rosenzweig, Penelope Fitzgerald, Thomas Bernhard – and not only not read them, but have no desire to do so. I have kept busy working on other things. And for a decade or two at a time, these texts simply gather dust on my shelves. But then, inevitably, I am drawn to these nearly forgotten volumes and, strangely, they prove pivotal to a new project: I recall, for instance, that Santayana ascended, literally, from the obscurity of a low shelf to earn a chapter in my book on William and Henry James. Wittgenstein made an analogous, if more circuitous, journey from the shadows, waiting untouched, until five years ago when I kept a long-held inner vow to read another languishing tome, one that had stared me down so often it had acquired an aura of intimidation: Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*. It was indeed intimidating, but also inspiring: that experience opened the door to more Cavell – and to deeper engagements with Emerson – and to Wittgenstein, who has joined the sage of Concord as a central figure in my current project on writers, artists, and philosophers who renounce their careers.

The peculiarities of this manner of book buying – the absence of full consciousness and the long gap between acquisition and reading – puts me in mind

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of Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library." He starts with the premise that "every passion borders on the chaotic," and finds that the passion of the book collector unleashes a "chaos of memories," where in each purchase "chance" and "fate" seem to jostle against each other. Benjamin speaks of his library as the "accustomed confusion of these books. For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order."¹ For decades, the "chaos" of my own book collecting was a form of "disorder" that blurred agency and intuition, chance and fate. And though this "disorder" helped shape my intellectual life, it had been masked by habit and so escaped my reflective notice. That is, until a recent encounter with a passage from Nietzsche helped shed light. But before that, something else intervened to nudge me to interrogate my habit.

Around 2002, when I decided to write a book on Philip Roth, I had at hand most of his novels, having dutifully acquired them over the years and, true to form, remained largely indifferent to reading them. As I burrowed into Roth's oeuvre, however, I grew aware of his close friendship with the painter Philip Guston, a relationship that became basic to my understanding of what I began calling Roth's aesthetics of immaturity. That understanding was built on what was also at hand: my pile of monographs and articles on Guston. No longer inert objects but palpable presences, this patient stack of Roth and Guston had undergone a transformation that now struck me as more than a serendipitous accident.

For the first time, I wondered what was going on: how did I explain my thoughtless buying and deferred reading; what game was my unconscious playing? It seemed to be busy working subliminally (as if behind my mind's back?), replacing deliberate effort with intuition or instinct

in order to quicken receptivity, keeping me in a period of prolonged incubation, as I filled my shelves in advance of my conscious turn to works that would prove crucial. Was it a professorial enactment of what Emerson called *abandonment*: the "one thing which we seek with insatiable desire" is to "forget ourselves . . . to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle." This famous passage – from the final paragraph of the exhilarating "Circles" – had always been a personal favorite and a pedagogical touchstone of my lectures. But who knew I was *living* it?²

The possibility that I was indeed living my own bookish version of abandonment, that I had unwittingly – hence appropriately – been drawing Emersonian circles, apparently for decades, received sharp confirmation last year. Teaching a seminar on Emerson and his avid admirer Nietzsche, I encountered a passage from the latter's autobiography, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, section nine of the chapter "Why I Am So Clever." This, at last, crystallized matters. With brazen perversity, Nietzsche replaces the venerable motto "know thyself" (now a "recipe for ruin") with "self-misunderstanding," and describes his own self-becoming as a miracle of self-forgetting. He begins by declaring, "At this point the real answer to the question, *how one becomes what one is*, can no longer be avoided." The question "presupposes" that "one must not have the faintest notion *what one is*." From this perspective, "even the *blunders* of life – the temporary side paths and wrong turnings . . . have their own meaning and value," as if Nietzsche acknowledges that one's self-estrangement awakens one from the tunnel vision that plagues the certain knower.

What Nietzsche portrays in *Ecce Homo* is the coming to being of the most "innocent" of selves, that is, one free of ressen-

timement and full of “irresponsibility” – a lightness gained from relinquishing the guilt instilled by religion and other institutions of control. Knowledge is warded off, permitting the “surface of consciousness” to be kept clear of any of the “great” imperatives, desires, words, attitudes: all that would burden one with responsibility and goals and make one a man of knowledge. The grand words represent “so many dangers that the instinct comes too soon to ‘understand’ itself” and will be clogged with meaning. Keeping consciousness clear thus allows the eventual organizing powers to grow in the dark as it were, “deep down” in the depths. A self with the capacity to reevaluate values requires an especially intricate psychic development – “contrary capacities” must be cultivated – and must be carefully protected from awareness of the “secret labor” of the instincts. Nietzsche tells us how he thrived as a stranger to himself:

Considered in this way, my life is simply wonderful. . . . I have never even suspected what was growing within me – and one day all my capacities, suddenly ripe, *leaped forth* in their ultimate perfection. I cannot remember having taken any trouble – no trace of *struggle* can be demonstrated in my life, I am the opposite of a heroic nature. “Willing” something, “striving” for something, envisaging a “purpose,” a “wish” – I know none of this from experience. At this moment I still look upon my future . . . as upon calm seas: there is no ripple of desire. I do not want in the least that anything should become different than it is; I myself do not want to become different. . . . But that is how I have always lived. I had no wishes. A man over forty-four who can say he never strove for *honors*, for *women*, for *money*! Thus it happened, for example, that one day I was a university professor – no such idea had ever entered my mind, for I was barely twenty-four years old.³

In “Why I Am So Clever,” Nietzsche depicts himself as a version of his character Zarathustra, the human being redeemed from the spirit of revenge and a herald of the *Übermensch*. Of course, on one level this self-portrait projects a grandiose aristocratic fantasy of immaculate effortlessness. This is the Nietzsche who, for generations, has intoxicated the undergraduate aesthete, who has inspired far less dangerous Leopolds and Loebis. Those 1920s rich boys, precocious law students at the University of Chicago, drunk on Nietzsche, kidnapped and murdered a boy, stylizing themselves as *Übermensches*. Their lawyer, Clarence Darrow, described his clients as victims of Nietzsche’s ideas. Beneath his cynical opportunism, Darrow had a point, if not an exculpatory argument. Hitchcock portrayed the duo, thinly veiled, in the film *Rope* (1948), where Nietzsche’s name is bandied about.

Yet the self-portrait also deflates grandiosity by making manifest the self-overcoming that Nietzsche prizes – when we experience the impersonality of ourselves rather than affirming our familiar sense of identity. This impersonality – we are “strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves,” as he says at the start of the preface to *The Genealogy of Morals* – is a salutary rebuke to the fantasy dear to the Western male psyche: the sovereign individual as self-knowing master of experience. “‘Willing’ something, ‘striving’ for something, envisaging a ‘purpose,’ a ‘wish’ – I know none of this from experience.” Renouncing the deliberative self who formulates a plan of life (John Stuart Mill’s notion) and renouncing “know thyself” (and its correlative “to thine own self be true,” as foolish Polonius put it), Nietzsche challenges us to bear *not* knowing, to live without *why*. To let instinct speak opens us to new and hidden energies in the self, beyond the reach of rational cognition, that are normally blocked in the act of self-

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There* reflection. Nietzsche, in sum, loosens the hold of the Cartesian cogito, which makes the *knowing* subject foundational.

He shares this philosophic anti-intellectualism (the proposition that all experience is a mode of knowing) with, among others, his beloved Emerson and his contemporary William James (whose theory of emotion insists on the primacy of the body: we are afraid because we tremble, rather than the commonsense opposite) and, later, Wittgenstein (who says that when one acts with “comfortable” certainty, one is to be regarded as a “creature in a primitive state”; and when one follows rules, one does so blindly).⁴ For these figures, as for John Dewey, mind is embodied and experience is not a “knowledge affair,” but rather is where things are suffered and endured, are *had*, before cognized. Though James alone among this group is tempted to dispense with concepts and “fall back on raw un verbalized life,” he also acknowledges: “both theoretically and practically this power of framing abstract concepts is one of the sublimest of our human prerogatives.”⁵

But concepts are merely practical, a means to an end, insists James, a view that tallies with Emerson, who remarks that “in all unbalanced minds, the classification is idolized, passes for the end” (277), and with Nietzsche, who grants the saving power of our projected arrangements, our conceptual grids, but at the same time urges that we grasp them as man-made, necessary fictions, artifice whose function is to serve as equipment for living. Concepts are not to be “idolized,” as they are by philosophers who, in their terror of change and movement, seek to arrest becoming. Instead, concepts are tools to be used to impose meaning upon the innocent fatality of destiny.⁶

The passage from “Why I Am So Clever” hit home, for it made sense of my own

self-opacity. The passage also made me feel rather heady, as if I were now licensed to consecrate my blind book buying on the altar of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, Amazon unbound. My temptation to self-transport seemed not wholly inappropriate when I reflected that, as the Emerson-Nietzsche seminar revealed on more than one occasion, Emerson’s praise of whim, intuition, and insouciance seems at times to intoxicate Nietzsche and inspire him to new heights of rhetorical audacity.

After the revelation afforded by *Ecce Homo*, I revisited Emerson’s “Intellect” to see if it too extolled the virtues of self-forgetting. Not only did the essay offer more shocks of recognition, but its discomfiting thesis – that “we have little control of our thoughts” thanks to “the superiority of the spontaneous or intuitive principle over the arithmetical or logical” – contained seeds that flower in *Ecce Homo*’s portrayal of how Nietzsche became what he is (*Essays and Lectures*, 419). “Intellect,” too, made explicit what I had unwittingly lived: that intuition is a “taking-in-stride” that has a “complex temporality,” since in Emerson’s version of intuition “the mind does not immediately intuit what it has taken-in-stride. His idea of intuition – and hence its strangeness – is counterintuitive,” as literary scholar Branka Arsic has shown in her subtle reading of this essay in her book *On Leaving*.⁷ “Long prior to the age of reflection,” says Emerson, “is the thinking of the mind. Out of darkness, it came insensibly into the marvelous light of to-day” (*Essays and Lectures*, 418). This lag between thinking and reflection occurs, notes Arsic, because “perceptions affect one another in the intellect without the mind knowing anything about it” (*On Leaving*, 155). This explains why Emerson, responding to his rhetorical question “What is the hardest task in the world?” answers: “To think.”

This dramatically reverses the Cartesian cogito, remarks Arsic: here “‘I’ is what ‘cannot’ think, what is not entrusted with the power to think” (*On Leaving*, 160). Logic is not absent in us, notes Emerson, but is “virtual and latent” within the “intuitive principle”: logic is the “procession or proportionate unfolding of the intuition; but its virtue is as silent method; the moment it would appear as propositions, and have a separate value, it is worthless” (*Essays and Lectures*, 419).

What makes thinking so hard, why deferral is as if built into it, is the incorrigibility of our will; it doesn’t control our power of thought:

What am I? What has my will done to make me that I am? Nothing. I have been floated into this thought, this hour, this connection of events, by secret currents of might and mind, and my ingenuity and wilfulness have not thwarted, have not aided to an appreciable degree. . . . Our truth of thought is therefore vitiated as much by too violent direction given by our will, as by too great negligence. We do not determine what we will think. We only open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see. We have little control of our thoughts. (*Essays and Lectures*, 418 – 420)

Intellect grows spontaneously; “without effort,” some image, word, or fact imprints itself on the mind and that adherence gradually germinates, unfolding “like the vegetable bud.” “You have first an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge, as the plant has root, bud and fruit. Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason. It is vain to hurry it. By trusting it to the end, it shall ripen into truth, and you shall know why you believe” (419).

Nietzsche and Emerson’s shared suspicion of the will to self-knowledge and

their shared trust in instinct also precipitated my turn to another volume that had spent decades untended on my shelf: Michael Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*. When earlier I described my prereflective literary habits as amounting to a prolonged period of “incubation,” I borrowed this word from Polanyi; his book, never read, long owned, had survived multiple moves, its crammed, poorly printed pages now made all the more uninviting by thin yellowing paper and a cracking paperback spine. Over the years, lured by its title and some of its headings – “The Art of Knowing,” “Intellectual Passions,” and “The Tacit Component” – I would periodically rescue the book from my chronic negligence, taking it up in a burst of enthusiasm, only to set it aside, my impulse rebuked (still too much science, I rationalized, and besides, the print was a trial and the pages loose). But in the wake of my Nietzschean and Emersonian induced epiphanies, the moment of *Personal Knowledge* had arrived. I was ready at last for its central point: “we feel our way to success . . . without specifically knowing how we do it”; this tacit dimension (the title of a better known Polanyi volume) is “an immense mental domain” acquired by an “effort which went beyond the hitherto assured capacity of some person making it. . . . It relied on an act of groping which originally passed the understanding of its agent and of which he has ever since remained only subsidiarily aware, as part of a complex achievement.”⁸

Here was a “meta” moment so prized by English professors: a work that celebrated “groping” knowledge – unspecifiable, ineffable, unempirical – mirrored the very groping I had long been (tacitly) practicing, most recently when I plucked *Personal Knowledge* from (my) seeming oblivion at a propitious moment. “Trust the instinct to the end, though you can render no reason. It is vain to hurry it,” Emerson had

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said. Trust in feeling one's way forward informally, in the absence of conscious action, typifies the *incubation* period of discovery (one of four levels, according to Henri Poincaré; and Polanyi tells us that it follows *preparation* and precedes *illumination* and *verification* [121]). During incubation, nothing happens on the level of consciousness or behavior, even as we are preoccupied unconsciously: "the fact that our intellectual strivings make effective progress during a period of Incubation without any effort on our part is in line with the latent character of all knowledge" (129).

The magnum opus of a distinguished Hungarian chemist who abandoned science for philosophy, politics, and economics, *Personal Knowledge* (1958) has always lived in the shadows of the famous work it anticipates, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). As Polanyi's most recent biographer remarks, most people first know of Polanyi from Kuhn's remark in *Structure* commending his notion of "tacit knowledge."⁹ Polanyi's work, which joined Kuhn's as foundational for the new field – the social construction of science – argued for an alternative to the positivist model of scientific inquiry as unalloyed objectivity and rational deliberation. "True discovery is not a strictly logical performance" but requires "plunges" and "leaps" across logical gaps (*Personal Knowledge*, 123). "Tearing away the paper screen of graphs, equations, and computations, I have tried to lay bare the inarticulate manifestations of intelligence by which we know things in a purely personal manner." Neither subjective nor objective but transcending their opposition, personal knowledge in

science is not made but discovered, and as such it claims to establish contact with reality beyond the clues on which it relies. It commits us, passionately and far beyond our comprehension, to a vision of reality. Of this responsibility we cannot divest

ourselves by setting up objective criteria of verifiability. . . . For we live in it as in the garment of our skin. Like love, to which it is akin, this commitment is a "shirt of flame," blazing with passion and, also like love, consumed by devotion to a universal demand. Such is the true sense of the objectivity in science. (64)

Science joins art and mysticism in breaking "through the screen of objectivity," drawing on "our pre-conceptual capacities of contemplative vision," capacities shared, he repeatedly shows, by infants and chimpanzees (199).

Like James and Dewey, Polanyi wants to rescue experience from those observers and instrumentalists who, "guided by experience . . . pass through experience without experiencing it *in itself*": what keeps us aloof from things, their sound, sight, smell, and touch is the very "conceptual framework by which we observe and manipulate things." But "contemplation dissolves the screen, stops our movement through experience and pours us straight into experience; we cease to handle things and become immersed in them" (197). Because we start constructing frameworks as infants, the experience of contemplation tends to be precarious and brief, won in the teeth of the confining and indispensable presence of established concepts. Scientific discovery demolishes one accepted framework to construct another, more rigorous one, but that act of revision and discovery "bursts the bounds of disciplined thought in an intense if transient moment of heuristic vision . . . overwhelmed by its own passionate activity" (196).

This turbulence of creative freedom that defies, if for a moment, the "bounds of disciplined thought," recalls Kant's depiction of genius as a force of originality indifferent to rules; hence the genius "does not himself know how the ideas for

it have entered into his head, nor has he it in his power to invent the like at pleasure, or methodically, and to communicate the same to others in such precepts as would enable them to produce similar products.”¹⁰ Genius dwells in the tacit dimension. Visual artists, immersed in the hands-on interplay with paint and canvas, are often evasive or reticent regarding requests to stand back and explain the meaning of their art. But they are rich in tacit knowing, in intuition, that makes them “willing to follow what the materials in hand seemed to want to do,” notes the art historian Richard Shiff, who quotes the abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman: “‘How it went, that’s how it was.’”¹¹

Newman’s eloquently laconic remark adapted surrealism’s automatism for his own purposes, as if in his work of the 1940s, says Shiff, “he did little more than allow his lines and colors to fall into place, the places they wanted.” Shiff continues: “Newman’s ‘how it went’ avoided the preconceived formulas of geometric abstraction along with those of conventional figure painting, landscape and still life. To some extent, he infantilized himself, lending an animistic spirit and motivation to inanimate entities and material stuff” (68). His verbal shrug and appeal to the artifact itself as the mute arbiter of questions are defensive strategies to protect the workings of the tacit and intuitive from the demands for explanation and classification. Describing Barnett Newman’s artistic breakthrough – *Onement I*, created in 1948 – Shiff says, “it created him rather than the other way around. By no means a product of his intended action, the painting, he claimed, changed his life.” Newman “yielded control to his painting. It was an intuitive act of faith in the midst of his early doubts” (76).

When an artist such as Newman permits the quality of anonymity to come

forward, letting the work rather than maker take the lead, he allows the object to speak for itself. Some creators in effect adopt anonymity as a way to help deflect the rampant American media pressure to turn them into celebrities and their work into commodities. Remember, for instance, how Bob Dylan during early and mid-1960s press conferences stymied journalists by refusing to explain what his songs meant or what politics they recommended, leaving his surrealist collages of imagery and his more directly folk or protest works equally mysterious. Dylan’s insouciant vagueness communicated his contempt for the crassness of a literal-minded press corps, and was witty homage to the elite high modernist stance of deliberate opacity in the face of public scrutiny. That stance became prominent with Rimbaud, an early hero of Dylan’s. “*Je est un autre*,” is Rimbaud’s signature declaration. Todd Haynes’s brilliant Dylan film, *I’m Not There*, which presents multiple incarnations of the singer, deftly nods to this modernist move by aligning Dylan in his Rimbaud persona to the press conference evasions.

Before Rimbaud, who quit writing at age twenty-one, poetry had to make sense. That imperative of meaning vanished with Rimbaud’s breakthrough to radical linguistic autonomy. When T. S. Eliot mocks meaning as what the poet provides the reader while going about his work, the way the burglar offers the guard dog a bit of meat to distract him, he implicitly affirms Rimbaud’s priorities. Dylan himself resented, he said in *Chronicles*, the way his “lyrics had been extrapolated, their meanings subverted into polemics,” rather than regarded as embedded within “songs that floated in a luminous haze.”¹² This last phrase, insisting on respect for poetic presence – the refusal of clarity – merits context: “I really was never any more than what I was – a folk musician

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who gazed into the gray mist with tear-blinded eyes and made up songs that floated in a luminous haze" (116). Dylan's sentence neatly enacts his slipperiness: what begins with the simple sincerity of a tautology of self-identity turns out to be a feint, suddenly swaddled in the hazy "gray mist" of symbolist imagery.

William Faulkner had famously perfected the mask of evasion a few years before Dylan. When questioned in graduate seminars at the University of Virginia (sessions that became canonical when published) about, say, *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner opined: you would have to ask Quentin (referring to his novel's main character). An effort to honor and preserve art's mystery, its aura, seems shyly to lurk in Dylan's and Faulkner's advertisements of ignorance. Both men heightened their own mystery by swathing their early history in elaborate legends: Faulkner claimed he was a fighter pilot, Dylan says he ran away with the circus. Beginning with his borrowed name, Dylan has crafted mask upon mask; indeed, "his refusal to be known" is a "passion that has shaped his work," as Ellen Willis once wrote.¹³ He has also refused to be a knower.

It is tempting to write off the artist's public performance of estrangement before his own creations as a quintessentially American pose that pledges allegiance to our most enduring native tradition: anti-intellectualism. But if we turn anti-intellectualism from the familiar philistine sense to a less familiar one—philosophical anti-intellectualism—we are more accurate. Not only does this preference for anonymity protect art's aura. But the deadpan inscrutability of Dylan, the Southern gentleman misdirection of Faulkner, the monosyllabic tautology of Newman's "How it went, that's how it was," also enact artists' refusal to enthrone

themselves as transcendental knowers in sovereign control. Such lofty intellectualism has always been the enemy of one prominent strand of high modernism. Recall, again, T. S. Eliot, who wants an aesthetic that fuses back together what has been torn asunder: thought and feeling, the intellectual and emotional. Eliot sought to end the "dissociation of sensibility" that he believed had occurred in the seventeenth century (his phrase of 1921 took on a life of its own despite being subjected to withering historical critique in ensuing decades), and his colleague Ezra Pound warns us "go in fear of abstractions," part of his doctrine of imagism. Pound's friend William Carlos Williams insists: "no ideas, but in things." Even that seemingly most aloof formalist, Henry James, spoke in his final preface of the bruising imperative of intimacy: "I get down into the arena and do my best to live and breathe and rub shoulders and converse with the persons engaged . . . the deeply involved and immersed and more or less bleeding participants"—his characters. Any act less intimate will allow "the muffled majesty of authorship" to "reign"—an "irresponsibility" to be avoided.¹⁴

As if reacting against the modernist passion for sensuous particularity and immersion, postmodern theory tends to be skeptical of the unmediated in any form, be it body or nature. Making unrelenting war on the natural, theory reduces the self to an ideologically constructed identity. One result is that theory inadvertently reinstates the gap between nature and culture, body and mind, emotion and reason, and leaves feeling—or any immediate experience or sensation—under suspicion as hopelessly naive. Forms of intellectualism pervade postmodern theory: for instance, the belief in the ubiquity of textualism (Derrida), rhetoric and figurality (De Man), and interpretation

(Fish). Whereas literature, as De Man famously wrote, is the “only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression,” the practitioners of visual art tended to embrace the fallacy of the unmediated in their relish of the violence of sensation.¹⁵ In his famous interviews with David Sylvester, Francis Bacon speaks repeatedly of painting as an effort to record “one’s own feelings . . . as closely to one’s own nervous system as one possibly can.”¹⁶ In effect, it was a job of art theorists to tidy up the artist’s naive belief in the power of the visceral, which was grounded in engagement with obdurately palpable materials.

But postmodernism’s programmatic “suspicion over claims of naivete” has produced a counter-response, one that Richard Shiff articulates in *Doubt*: “Claims for the ubiquitous efficacy of cultural forces may be creating a more pernicious mythology than speculation on the putatively absolute value of aesthetic immediacy and naturalness” (127). Shiff’s doubt about postmodern orthodoxy leaves him “hanging”: it “does not entail being convinced of the real existence of the natural self that certain artists may be continuing to seek as a liberating alternative to culture”; rather, “our doubt merely indicates how deeply dissatisfying it is to believe that there can be no natural self and no physical existence at all – no source of sensation that might escape the generalizing sameness of our various cultural identities” (127).

Tired of “feeling pressured by the critical indoctrination” that trains us to “all too readily expose the superficiality, the constructed spectacle, the mirage of sensation,” to “distrust our feelings more than to trust them,”¹⁷ Shiff asks: “To what degree are we . . . willing to trust and act on feeling, especially when no theory supports it?” (*Doubt*, 25). He urges us to “stop conflating the history of the criticism

and theory of art with the history of making art” (131). The former depends on a “fantasy world of the general and conceptual” that “can only lead away from the sensory world of the specific and the real” (51). Though theory encouraged him to be “extraordinarily wary of many of the claims of the modern artists,” Shiff now tries to resist his own distrust. In his effort to keep faith in feeling, he enlists Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge*. When asked in an interview “what is worth caring about,” Shiff responds that we need to understand “our cultural hunger for experience that escapes conceptualization.”¹⁸

This hunger is deep in the American romantic grain. Emerson called the hunger *abandonment*, and his greatest reader, Nietzsche, alerted me last year that I, too, had this hunger. For decades I had been feeding it in my own acts of biblio-abandonment, my intuitive book buying, the urge “to do something without knowing how or why; in short, to draw a new circle.”

Another circle: concurrent with the writing of this essay, I am teaching my favorite novel, Henry James’s *The Ambassadors*, which I have done many times since my first try in 1981. The simultaneity makes me see that its protagonist, Lambert Strether, is James’s great tribute to “personal knowledge” and to Emersonian abandonment. Strether’s “very gropings,” writes James in his preface, “would figure among his most interesting motions” (12) since, not unlike Polanyi’s “groping,” they are guided by no plan or project: he is deferring and soon flouting his ambassadorial duties for perambulations in Paris (“wherever one paused in Paris the imagination reacted before one could stop it” [81]) that involve him in prolonged acts of abandonment and circle-drawing, acts that come to delight in proportion as they baffle him. For what he has managed to abandon is the tyranny

of explanation: “his heart always sank when the clouds of explanation gathered. His highest ingenuity was in keeping the sky of life clear of them. Whether or no he had a grand idea of the lucid, he held that nothing ever was in fact – for any one else – explained” (114).

Falling in love with both Chad (whom he has pledged to haul back from Paris to Woollett, Massachusetts, to run the family business) and Chad’s enchanting Parisian mistress, Marie de Vionnet, Strether is “letting himself go . . . diving deep.” At lunch alone with Marie he feels the “warm spring air” begin to “throb,” his senses liberated not least because he has dispensed with “explanations”: “it was at

present as if he had either soared above or sunk below them – he couldn’t tell which. . . . How could he wish it to be lucid for others, for any one, that he, for the hour, saw reasons enough in the mere way the bright clean ordered water-side life came in at the open window” (220). Soaring or sinking, not sure which, Strether is immersed in the “tacit,” whose etymology is “to be silent” or grow dumb. He is, to borrow Polanyi’s words, being poured straight into experience, “overwhelmed” by “passionate activity.” “I’m incredible. I’m fantastic and ridiculous – I don’t explain myself even *to myself*,” he jauntily exclaims near the end of the novel (355). “I’m Not There,” indeed.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 60.
- ² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (1841; New York: Library of America, 1983), 414. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically within the text.
- ³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals & Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (1908; New York: Random House, 1967), 253 – 255. Used by permission of Random House, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.
- ⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper, 1972), 62, para. 475.
- ⁵ William James, *Writings, 1902 – 1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 755, 728.
- ⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt (1889; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 18 – 19. The debate about concepts and intuition remains a live philosophical issue; a recent incarnation of it sets John McDowell against Herbert Dreyfus. Arguing against the “myth of the pervasiveness of the mental” that he ascribes to McDowell, Dreyfus stresses the “absorbed coping and acting in flow” that is found in the behavior of infants, animals, and experts. McDowell, in turn, shows that Dreyfus subscribes to “the myth of the mind as detached” and urges “an integrated conception of ourselves as animals, and – what comes with that – beings whose life is pervasively bodily, but of a distinctively rational kind.” Their essays, with responses by others, are collected in *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, ed. Joseph Schear (New York: Routledge, 2013), 54, 15, 56.
- ⁷ Branka Arsic, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 154. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically within the text.
- ⁸ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 62 – 64. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically within the text.
- ⁹ Mary Jo Nye, *Michael Polanyi and His Generation: Origins of the Social Construction of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xii.

- ¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (1790; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137. Ross
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- ¹¹ Richard Shiff, *Doubt* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 68. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically within the text.
- ¹² Bob Dylan, *Chronicles* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 120, 116. Subsequent citation noted parenthetically within the text.
- ¹³ Ellen Willis, *Beginning to See the Light* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 4.
- ¹⁴ Henry James, *Novels, 1903 – 1911* (New York: Library of America, 2010), 434. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically within the text.
- ¹⁵ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 17.
- ¹⁶ David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 43.
- ¹⁷ Richard Shiff, “On *Between Sense and De Kooning*,” *The Montréal Review* (online magazine), September 2011, <http://www.themontrealreview.com/2009/Between-sense-and-de-Kooning-by-Richard-Shiff.php>.
- ¹⁸ Richard Shiff, “An Interview with Katy Siegel,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2008.