

The Pursuit of Ignorance: The Challenging Figuration of Not Knowing

Tony Hoagland

*The end-virtue of humility comes only
after a long train of humiliations; and the
chief labor of humbling is the constant,
resourceful restoration of ignorance.*

—R.P. Blackmur

The greatest human intellectual achievement of the twentieth century was the discovery of how fucking clueless we human beings are. Or, no, not *clueless*, exactly, but let us say “vision-limited” or “insight-impaired” or “in the dark.” All our quantum mechanics, our frozen pizzas, our electric cars and nation states are just whistling in the dark. Most of our earthly success as a species is just evidence that we’ve been promoted above the actual level of our competence.

In the twentieth century we also came to understand that our relentless acquisition of “knowledge” and “information” does very little to decrease the degree of our ignorance. Paradoxically, education often serves only to increase our delusions of mastery—and that very confidence decreases our sensitivity to the presence of the unknowable.

Although this realization that we are in the dark creates an ache in the modern heart, it is also one of the most positive and powerful of insights. Potentially, it can inspire humility, caution, wonder, and respect for our profoundly limited grasp of the real. Every vision, we now know, has a periphery and beyond that there is, well, nobody knows: much, much more dark.

This revelation of our unknowingness also created (and creates) a great challenge for contemporary artists. Consider how difficult it is to make a concise image for *not-knowing*! How difficult it is to craft a statement that does not merely conceptualize, or smugly insinuate that the speaker has mastered the fact of her own non-understanding? Some of the greatest Modernist writers—Beckett and Eliot and Woolf—dedicated themselves to representing that remarkable aspect of the human condition: an artistic job that, on the one hand, must be executed with the subtlety of a hint; on the other, delivered with enough rude force to crack our default setting of sleep.

Happily, in fact, there have been many poetic successes in this slippery task of making real our existential confusion. The best of them constitute, for me, a

special and fascinating genre, and they could be assembled into an anthology: “Images of Ignorance.”

Dante’s opening lines to *The Inferno* are the most canonical of such testimonies. If our *Anthology of Ignorance* existed, his lines would open it: “Midway in life’s journey,” says Dante, “I woke to find myself in a dark wood.” In my anthology, however, our own Ralph Waldo Emerson would exceed him. In his essay “Experience,” Emerson, that rare man whose character united brilliance and a remarkable lack of egotism, pretty much nails it:

We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us which we seem to have ascended, and there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upwards and out of sight . . . Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir tree. All things swim and glitter.

Emerson’s image is a perfect distillation of what they used to call *the human condition*—and it does what good metaphors do, providing us with a concise visual correlative for what would otherwise be impossible to comprehend: our uncanny position in the middle of a life we don’t really understand. We are haunted and baffled by where we are in time, our lack of memory, and notionless as to where we are going; but Emerson’s image, and the sentence in which it is embedded, situates us lucidly without simplifying things in the slightest. It is so good it can make a reader genuinely dizzy.

An early poem by W.S. Merwin, “The Gods,” undertakes the challenge of representing human ignorance through a kind of parable:

My blind neighbor has required of me
A description of darkness.
And I begin I begin . . .

Tasked with the oddest of commissions, the speaker only gradually realizes that darkness is not describable to someone who lives solely inside it. In this way, the speaker realizes that he himself is blind and unable to describe his own condition. Linguistically, he discovers he does not possess a vocabulary with which to pick this thing up. The fumbling repetition, “I begin I begin,” with its eloquent inarticulateness, insinuates that he can barely begin this work—and could never finish. Such performances of language breakdown—and of the failure of words—have been one of the most reliable modernist tropes devised to signify the limit of human knowing. The inability to speak well serves as an emblem of standing on a precipice.

This—to come to the edge of the precipice, and stop, and look out from it, to bring the reader to the existential cusp, where speech fails—is a highly refined artistic act.

Here's how the Beat poet Lew Welch captured it, in a more sweetly instructional and plainspoken manner than Merwin or Emerson:

Step out onto the planet.
Draw a circle a hundred feet round.

Inside the circle are
300 things nobody understands, and, maybe
nobody's ever really seen.

How many can you find?

*

Tomas Tranströmer might be the greatest twentieth century poet of ignorance. The entire body of Tranströmer's work seems deeply, intently focused on exploring and articulating correlatives for being half-awake in the midst of mystery. Again and again, his poems remind us of the shadowed side of consciousness and life, the bottomless chasm under our own feet. One can visit any page in his work and find pungent and complex images for the presence of the invisible, and for the struggle within us between refusal and acceptance of our ignorance. A few lines from Tranströmer's poem "Nocturne" may illustrate:

I lie about to fall asleep. I see unknown images
and signs sketching themselves behind the eyelids
on the wall of the dark. In the slot between waking and dreaming
a large letter tries to get in without quite succeeding.

That letter, trying to squeeze through the mail delivery slot—What is it? What message does it contain? In Tranströmer's animistic and Jungian-inflected version of the world, there are strange forces at loose, both natural and supernatural—fog, trees, and houses—that reach out and prod us, trying to wake us to the collective, immersive mystery.

Tranströmer himself was a professional psychologist, and his descriptions of human ignorance shift their emphasis from the vocabulary of existential estrangement toward a more psychic and occult construct, in which consciousness

is itself a vast city, a compartmentalized metropolis we dwell in but know little about. It may be ours, but we are more strangers here than we think.

In “Streets in Shanghai,” Tranströmer describes the densely packed streets of that city, and the way the populace is as full of unconscious energies as the streets are of people:

At dawn the running crowds set our silent planet going.
Then the park fills with people. For each one eight faces polished like jade, for all
situations, to avoid mistakes.
For each one also the invisible face that reflects “something you don’t talk about.”
Something that emerges in tired moments and is as pungent as a sip of Viper schnapps,
with its long, scaly aftertaste . . .

One reason for the complex resonance of Tranströmer’s images is that they are drawn from different psychological models of selfhood. Anxious, self-protective, compartmentalized, dissembling—each human being has at least eight different faces, some of which are concealed and some of which are brought out to confront and deceive the world. The Freudian model is here, all right. But in a Tranströmer poem additional mystical forces are at work as well. The enigmatic concluding section of “Streets in Shanghai” makes human beings look like players in a kind of cosmic theater:

Behind each one walking here hovers a cross that wants to catch up to us, pass us,
join us.
Something that wants to sneak up on us from behind and cover our eyes
and whisper, “Guess who?”
We look happy out in the sun, while we bleed to death from wounds we know
nothing about.

What art Tranströmer displays at moments like this! His images for the unconscious character of our lives are both precise and mysterious, both spooky and playful; he knows that our collectively opaque condition is in some sense incurable; yet the poem’s closing declaration is a cry of compassion, wonder, distress, and understanding. One senses old ideologies wandering around in the existential dark, the lingering haunts of Christian and perhaps pagan realities. In Tranströmer’s world, human beings are often depicted as shallow, and possessed of only diminished vision, but the world we walk through is also inhabited by various kinds of intangible, powerful sentience: “Guess who?”

*

An essay on this topic could be long and analytical and learned. But when it comes to the topic of ignorance, it seems wise to be brief, and simply to say that we are always on the verge of falling asleep, always in need of a pinch to wake us to our actual condition.

It is the poet's charge to keep guessing about the nature of that condition, and about our own darkness and outlying territories. Recognizing our ignorance, we find richer hues of incomprehension—a feeling not to be conquered, but explored, and possibly extended. Perhaps the bravest and most useful poet of any time is the one who can locate and record her own urgent inner voice, that voice whispering *Stop. Wake up. Guess Who?*