On the Merciless, Relentless Pressing

A Short Story by Flint McGlaughlin

I hear a voice from the podium, "When trying to illustrate a concept with multiple images, relate the background and foreground of your thoughts to the background and foreground of the canvas. Think relative position and relative size." The voice interrupts my thoughts. It is my voice; I am teaching. Yet slowly, the voice fades...

Often I occupy the foreground of my mind in order to ruminate with the "background." I have little confidence in the accepted classification of conscious and sub-conscious phenomena. Nevertheless, I am aware of levels within the collection of activities that constitute the "presencing" of my "I-ness" (think David Hume). Moreover, I think there is a place in art for the background to say more than the foreground. Indeed this inverse approach bears experimentation. In some ways, William James achieved this in the dialogue of his characters. What they did not say was louder than (even contradicting) what they did say. (At MECLABS, I have occupied the world with the foreground of my research, but the more interesting message lies ever-so-faintly in the background). The best poetry speaks from the background, not the foreground. In music, proper attention is placed on the foreground, either the voice instrument or the direct message of the lyrics. But the more powerful compositions seep down deeper into the sub-soul of the listener (think Leonard Cohen). It took Kierkegaard nine pseudonyms and a lifetime of artful indirection laced with riffs (parables, even Socratic irony) to unsay his theo-philosophical position. Often debated, mostly misunderstood, his work as a whole was more of a Zen kōan than a doctrinal declaration. He lived as a poignant protest against despair, all the while bleeding ink. His background became indistinguishable from his foreground. This can happen when the angle of view becomes more obtuse. For some of us, age is not a foreshortening, not a linear regression, but rather an increasing acuteness of angle. This is happening to me. My foreground is recessing into my background, till at some point my whole perspective may collapse into itself. What shall I do?

Someone asks a question. I need to reply, but every word I marshal seems insufficient. I cannot fashion my meaning with propositions. So I reply with a feint, a near-answer with "surface" plausibility. This seems to satisfy the student. I feel a sudden twinge of sadness. For a moment I dissolve back into my inward reverie...

The most inscrutable of geniuses, the "anti-anti's," work directly from the background ignoring the foreground. They do so at the risk of their sanity. Nietzsche's true syphilis was a disease of the soul not the body. His background cannibalized his foreground. Such men can disguise their condition, if they try, but only for so long. We view their perspectives with a sort-of fascinated horror. And then, depending on our own bias (embedded within our background), we render judgment based on failed, but more or less plausible interpretations (compare Bertrand Russell's with Luc Ferry's perspective on Nietzsche). Of course "god is dead." Like a six-year old amusing himself with "Opposite Day," Nietzsche lived in the opposite. Wittgenstein found himself trapped between the

two perspectives, and Russell could not rescue him. When "perspicuous clarity" is not truly possible, change the definitions. And my God! Rousseau had moments – grand moments of lucid perspective as he viewed the world backwards from the canvas to the brush. But he too succumbed to the same insanity of "Opposite Day." Never mind the fact that his inversions propagated a revolution in France, and in an irony of ironies, his zealous anti-patriots imprinted Rousseau's background on their foreground.

My audience is laughing, apparently confusing irony with humor. I smile, joining the revelry, but while they are laughing at my quip, I am laughing at myself. My laughter is tinged with concern, even fear...

For me, the danger is not a reversal, but a sinking. Is it possible for one to become so absorbed in the background that the foreground diminishes beyond seeing. Horizons are lost, thus perspective is lost. Reality becomes tense-less, isolated, but placeless, separated from space-time or time-space. Can I, can anyone, escape from a place that is no longer a place? Honesty seems to flatten the canvas, pressing it into "dimensionlessness." One cannot escape with reversals. I do not try. Instead, I teach with what remains of the background, directing attention to the foreground, perhaps achieving a marginally useful literary trick, but only for so long. My canvas now is less than paper-thin – and yet, the "pressing" continues, merciless, relentless. Can I escape Opposite Day?

"Despite the necessary contrast, it is essential that you achieve a plausible congruence between all elements, even between background and foreground." I hear my voice again, but just ever so faintly.