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You Are the Phenomenology

IMAGINE THAT YOU'RE an insatiable reader—poetry, fiction, philosophy, plays, history, noir, CNF, DIY, cookbooks, travelogues, comic books, blogs, clickbait scrolling ad infinitum. Reading for you is no mere habit and, on some level, not even a proper activity, but a kind of experiential osmosis that positions language as primary and generative in the world to which it refers. You've always been struck by the elegance of that paradox, its call for exploration. One by-product of reading this way is that you've acquired a prodigious vocabulary. That's natural enough (and can't be helped), but another dire consequence that appeared somewhere in the osmotic flux is your desire to focus and channel it all toward some aesthetic end. Therein lies the first gauntlet.

Beyond that, it gets worse. Over the many years of your less abstracted moods, you've become aware of the alchemical effect that language can have on otherwise normal social situations. And this makes you think back on the times you've laughed too loudly, flirted too earnestly, or consigned yourself to brazen silences, the family all around and shooting looks over the holiday roast as you stare into your little well of gravy. However, after a stint of writing and reflection, you do find that you'd like to share your outlook with a friend, someone who's both similar and dissimilar to you, and this makes sense, feels right, since you've always envisioned the whole literary enterprise to be, at bottom, a collaborative enterprise, one that fosters a palpable boon in our understanding of what it means to be human. This, but also a vast, interpretive mire with countless systems of semantic ambiguity whose very purpose seem to be, at times, the enforcement of some totalizing Ambiguity that brooks no definitive claims, no true resting places. So—this, in light of that—there you are, now, ready to listen and be listened to. It's an afternoon in mid-October. Brisk with a bit of tooth. You entered the café through a side door and quickly surveyed the room. You found your way to the back, made your salutations, shed your coat, and settled into the corner booth. Your interlocutor begins.

She is a classically trained singer and she speaks with a singer's reserve, one that knows and fears the strain of full-throatedness. She wears a green scarf patterned with gilt parrots. It is easy and safe to look at, but you can't just stare at her collarbone and expect to set a tone of candor and sensitivity. You must look up, at her. You must make eye contact—essential and intricate, concrete and wildly suggestive, the most exacting of all listening skills. Furthermore, your eye contact must be deployed in discrete intervals, and these intervals need to be tailored to your specific interlocutor, the gravity of the subjects under discussion, the nature of your relationship with said interlocutor, the circumstances of the meeting, the time of day, the temperature, the barometric pressure, the kind of week she seems to be having, the kind of week you seem to be having, and please be apprised that all of these variables are chain-linked and coordinated, which means none of them can be calculated before the conversation takes the shape of its unique moment, which means you're going to have to be optically nimble and vigilant and precise if you want what you've always thought of as your *listening practice* to shine through in a way that makes your interlocutor feel completely at ease and unsuspecting of the terrible demands that listening places on you and, frankly, anyone who's mindful of it. So, try to act natural. Sit straight but don't be stiff. Nod your head but not continuously—you're not a guidance counselor. Don't cross your arms against your chest—that expresses doubt, mistrust—and don't rest your folded hands against your belly—that's smug and creepy and paternal. Best to keep your hands on the table. Palms down, of course. If you've got grit under your fingernails, make soft fists. If not, you can let your fingers stretch out a bit, but loosely and with a curve at the knuckle. Keep them still but not statuesque, and don't fuss with the sugar packets.

Now your interlocutor has finished talking. Her face is slightly flushed, her eyes bluer than before, and her elbows are on the table with one hand supporting her chin. You have been good, you can see it for yourself—she turns to you in a pose of quiet relief and gives a half smile. Her green scarf nearly glows. It is your turn to speak. Imagine, now, that your interlocutor is an exquisite listener, the one from whom you absorbed, without even trying (at least at first), all the best attributes of your listening practice, and the one from whom, you must admit, you still have much to learn. The silent ball is in her court, and so you must begin. Of course you can't just say any rote thing that comes to mind in order to observe her listening prowess and further hone your own practice. You have to reciprocate, you

want to reciprocate, and in order to do that, you have to give yourself fully to the speaking act, the one that will convince your interlocutor of the comfort and vulnerability that she has engendered in you, the one that will engender in her those intangible listening responses that you have yet to learn. But, again, make it natural or else it won't work. Not only will it (the conversation) not work, but its breakdown will introduce a rupture in the otherwise seamless, symbiotic rapport that you've both enjoyed, on and off, for years. Now, in the intervening moments that feel impossibly dilated, you find that you don't have an appropriate response to or segue from your interlocutor's speech act, which was compelling and honest and emotionally rich—so much so that it now seems to retreat into its own hermetic bastion, a kind of set piece that wants nothing more than to be acknowledged from a respectful distance. And this is no surprise—after all, your interlocutor is also a superlative orator, one who can modulate between public and private discourses and, more importantly, one who understands that in order to do the work of good listening, one must have something of significant scope and clarity to latch onto, that one simply cannot exercise the entire complex of gestures, looks, and body language on the topic of celebrity divorces or unseasonable weather. So you begin. It's a tentative maundering at first, but your interlocutor is patient. She is aware of her own towering presence and the difficulty of each sea-level beginning. Slowly the scale is laid, the blueprint is drawn, and your words start to amass and careen and conjoin within their centrifugal focus. You are watching her watch you. She blinks almost when you blink. She chuckles spontaneously. You both nod for a refill of coffee, and in this, even your silences agree. The sentences come easily now, fluidly, and you start to experience a kind of insular hearing whereby your words pass through a filter that is so deft and responsive that it doesn't feel like a filter at all. It feels like some ideal replica of you, thinking and talking outside of itself but also from deeply within. You can hear what you say before you say it. You can hear your own voice translating itself into itself. It is going well, isn't it. Yes, it is, she says in a look that holds you for an extra second, not quite erotic though it's hard to imagine a half measure, and that's what makes it perfect. Yes, it is going well.

But now, just when you've settled into the warmth of her reception, you begin to hear a glitch in the dark machinery of your own speech, and this glitch appears in its outermost mechanism—the fact that you yourself are also an external listener of the things you say. What you've been saying amounts to a diatribe against familial duty, which, once

you've heard its outward form, you realize is just a conceptually souped-up lament against your older brother for snapping on you last July and later refusing to apologize. Granted, the causal chain leading up to that event is rife with subtext and interpretive blind spots that are themselves delicate and involuted, but let's face it: it's all tediously familiar to pretty much anyone who has active sibling relationships into adulthood. Somewhere along the way, your post-filter-not-yet-external voice has shifted gears or direction or you're not sure what, but it's no longer refining and pacing your own speech act; no, it now seems to imbue the words with a mild sneer, an ironic twang, barely noticeable at first, but you can feel it accelerating and you start to panic at the thought that your internal filter, which just a minute ago seemed a humble and apt servant, has somehow remapped its own circuitry and now threatens to undermine not just your interlocutor's nascent belief that *things are indeed going very well* (as her right hand tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and she dragged her fingertips lightly along her neck, so lightly that you could feel your pinkie ghosting its response along the lip of the creamer), but also your own long-standing conviction that language is the great arbiter of the world, and by harnessing it, we can perform our histories, actuate our futures, and finally concede that so much of the rest is not ours to navigate. Language as the one and the many, the first and the last, the very presence we live through—here but also distantly, like the mirage of water on a summer highway. Is its vanishing the same for everyone, you've often wondered, or is each person subject to a singular distance? No doubt you've met many people and some of them also work their language like a chisel struck by the mallet of their will, but you also get the feeling that some people (maybe even a lot of people) use their presence to assert not just the unimpeachable sharpness of their chisel's edge, but the apparent rectitude of their character for having merely uttered the words. This is to say: a lot of people stake their language to a site of moral power and then coyly invite you to stop by and make yourself at home as if their insignia weren't emblazoned on every wall and threshold.

You know you've met these people, and you know others have met them too. Maybe with even greater aversion. (Over the years, you've come to believe that education is, in its broadest sense, the granting of permission to speak your will and to offer presence, without the fear of being rendered invisible. Not a corpus of knowledge, not a skill set, and certainly not a license to grandstand or pontificate, but a steady belief in the legitimacy of one's identity. You've come to realize that this is *your*

site of power—the one you’ve coveted and valorized, the one whose precincts have, in return, sheltered and galvanized you, and even now, as the internal voice transmutes into an externalizing self, you can feel another stake thrust into the ground, no matter if the ground now feels as though it’s turning to sand. This is the sinking feeling you feel—the awareness that some presences may inevitably negate others, that negation is surely the worst aggression one can inflict on another, that every chisel defaces before it creates. Nonetheless, you can’t deny that you are proud of your pedigreed education, not for the velvet on your doctoral robes or the perks of your alumni credit card, but because it took quite a bit of rerouting and recalibration for any of that to appear among your possible horizons, and the fact that you accomplished this first, formative task says more about you than any transcript ever will. This is a thought you like to think, and in a few cavalier moments, you’ve actually spoken it aloud. You’re not proud of those moments, though you can’t say you wholly regret them either.) You can now feel your face taking color, you feel the opposite of invisible, and so you pause, catch the server’s attention, and order an iced tea. Moments later, it arrives having already sweated through the glass.

And so, no, not *maybe*—the more you think about it—but *probably*: those who wield language from a site of moral power are very probably met by others with greater aversion than you yourself have shown. Or, now, as you think harder and closer and come to the real crux of things, you-can-absolutely-bet-your-ass-on-it with much greater aversion. And so the likelihood that you are less repulsed by these people than others are—does this make you one of them, regardless of the site to which you pledge your allegiance? No, you think, that’s a bit presumptuous, self-flagellating, there are some logical steps missing there, etc., but might it not mean that you are inclined toward using language in this way, as a kind of lexical producer? Or is this unpleasant solidarity yet more evidence for your savvy as a lexical consumer—that your empathy is capacious enough to include those whom you consider dangerous and manipulative bloviators of public opinion? Maybe. But, then again, to even begin to think *your empathy is capacious enough*—doesn’t that smack of a narcissistic posturing that would preclude any sincere attempt to absorb the world from someone else’s less grandiloquent station? Perhaps the obvious conclusion is to cut out the prolix bullshit and just talk about stuff in a way that (A) others can readily apprehend and (B) doesn’t make you sound like the aloof, self-satisfied intellectual that you are dead-set

against. To state the big questions in simplest terms— isn't that the goal? And yet, a deep-seated part of you—the same part that urged you toward a liberal-arts education and an ecumenical worldview and a masochistic work ethic and the embrace of all things strange and mundane—this part senses that many issues have no denominator that is truly common to all parties involved. This part of you knows that the aforementioned Ambiguity of words and the structures they create is often irreducible, and while we may agree that this is axiomatic, the way of the world, not much doing there, etc., we still have the Herculean task of reconciling the innumerable lenses through which people perceive the world around them and inject their presence within it. And so, after much attentive listening, if your interlocutor now says that a rectangle defines some situation that you've always considered octagonal (so to speak), what's the use of debating how it fits into the larger, mosaic whole? Can we even assume that such a whole exists when the foundation often appears not just in rubble, but in multiform rubble? If the whole is merely the sum of contiguous experience, if each of us is confined to some half-swept corner of isolated consciousness—*where the dogs go on with their doggy life*, where the chance that any two thought-vectors meet head-on is roughly equivalent to the odds that two randomly chosen cars will arrive at the same remote crossroads at exactly the same day and hour and instance of their lifetime trajectories—then what was the point of all that unquenchable reading?

You've now spoken at length, and it is very hard to map an emotional hierarchy in the things you've said, never mind trace the desultory path between those things. And yet you can't shake the feeling that your internal filter has done right, that this is how things *are*, that your inability to encapsulate even the minor trials of everyday life says something crucial about the experience of language and what it really means to be present with others. Not to mention what it says about your so-called site of power. Your server brings the bill on a metal dish. He has drawn a smiley face at the bottom and discreetly covered the total with two peppermints. You now feel clear and cleared, and you begin to wonder if there is such a thing as transparency that is pure enough to render one invisible and hypervisible at the same time, a polestar that offers opposite roads out of the wilderness—both begin on mossy escarpments that descend into forest, both wend through shade flowers and waving boughs, both are mottled in the light and dark patches they've passed through when they open, at last, as all things must open, on the same native valley. You look

up, as if through trees, and find that your interlocutor is staring right at you, unblinking. You have never seen her in this face. It is taut at the edges, tinged with gray, and there's a vague contortion to it, not discernible in any one feature but there all the same—a synthetic quality that soaks through her expression as if she were wearing a mask, or as if she were a palimpsest, or as if she had lived and died long ago and been undertaken and very carefully arranged. The mark of your valley is wiped clean off the map. Here, your hands regain their clamminess. Your undershirt sticks to your back. Some realities never leave the body. They are distorted, subsumed, and they are yours alone. How to speak to them, as they are. How to bridge them, when they themselves are the bridging. She does not say, and you cannot think how she would. The parrots on her scarf have alighted and will not turn away.

Your interlocutor stands up and excuses herself to the restroom, palms pressing the sides of her skirt. You watch her weave through the tightly arranged tables, and for the first time, you notice that the café is loud and bustling and indifferent. She knocks on the restroom door, disappears inside, and you are now alone in a throng of silverware and water glasses. You wonder why it is so, why it must be so. Then you wonder why the thought had never occurred, until now, that although you have seen wild animals along the highway, in a drought summer, making their cautious approach, bemused at the streaks of fatal cars that race toward latter distances, distance being itself the promise of more—perhaps you were wrong when you thought they had come to cross over. Perhaps this is the mirage they had sought. You can see them there in great masses, crowding the hot asphalt, predator and prey alike, stoic and noble. And perhaps, as if cued by some invisible conductor, something miraculous will happen: the animals will bow their heads together, and they will drink.