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In Pursuit of Distance

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"Fall Break," abstract portrait, Hanna Wright

When is a secret no secret at all?

Magic — stage magic of the sort that makes elephants disappear — relies on the best efforts of the pyrotechnician and the orchestra and the lighting designer. There is pomp and there is circumstantial evidence of a good time. It's all quite earnest, quite plain in its intent to fool and beguile. And people need to make a living. I bless them as I pass.

Over here, now, beyond the drawbridge and the steel conifers, lies a subset of the trade called closeup magic, or table magic, or, most arcane of all, micromagic. Here, a pair of hands. A surface. A prop: Playing cards, or coins, perhaps. It hardly matters. The prop is a totem that ushers us into the dark place.

We see everything, or think we do. We understand nothing. It's all there, all in full view of the seeking eye, if only we knew how to look. What's hidden from us is our own expectation of a result.

The irony, of course, is that we're so proximally close to those hands, to that totem. There's no stage separating us. And yet we're kept at bay by a conundrum. The secret suddenly matters to us because we feel we should be able to unlock it.

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Some writers write because they can't talk. Or, rather, they'd prefer not to talk. Some write to discover what they mean and *if* they mean. Foucault said something like that.

Allow me to leave that name on the floor and drop a few more.

Orpheus went all the way to the Underworld to recover his beloved Euridice. That was a bad idea, and, like many bad ideas, unstoppable. Hades then gave Orpheus a good idea: Take your wife back with you, but don't look at her until you finish the journey. If you do, she'll be trapped in the Stygian realm forever.

Orpheus spent the rest of his days playing very sad songs on his lyre. Euridice was there, then she wasn't. Such are the politics of reuniting with one's desire by keeping one's back turned.

All art cheats. The honest cheat will tell you she's cheating and you'll love her for it anyway. She'll beckon you with songs of fire and longing, and when you arrive, she'll be someplace else. You'll have the wind on your face; you'll have the footprint in the sand.

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The language of signs and symbols — semiotics, as it's known west of my imaginary drawbridge — is a machine that examines itself as it hunts for systems of meaning. We construct the outside world with indices and glyphs, even as we use those same tools to demythologize "the real." As Roland Barthes might've said (and Orpheus probably did say), it's masks all the way down.

The nub here is that no matter how we try, there's a level of authenticity, of Platonic truth, if you will, that remains impenetrable. Words and images point to things, but they aren't things-in-themselves. So, right from the start, we must admit a certain kind of defeat.

Fortunately, the philosopher's defeat is the artist's triumph.

Let's fast-forward to a contemporary example. The Danish filmmaker Nicolas Winding Refn made a wonderfully odd and kinetic film in 2008 called *Bronson*. Tom Hardy plays Michael Peterson, a preternaturally violent convict who changes his name to Charles Bronson as he kicks, punches, and bites his way through Britain's penal system.

Refn intercuts these scenes of brutality with vaudevillian showmanship. Hardy appears in a spotlight sporting clown white makeup and a three-piece suit. He — the actor playing the character's character — tells us the good news. He's having a grand old time being a thug, a better time than we'll ever have, tap dancing in his shitty little cell. His tricks are in his fists and his fists are on our minds.

Camp is one of those rhetorical devices that sneaks up on you by yelling in your ear. Refn uses camp to define the terms of engagement with his film. You can approach the beast (please do), but you can never imprison him with explications.

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It might seem churlish to celebrate distance these days. But what is distance if not a form of strangeness? Harold Bloom was right when he traced a line between strangeness and aesthetic power, and, by extension, between our solitary encounters with art and our own perception of mortality. Advertising promises that we'll live forever; art withholds answers, which throws us back upon ourselves.

The realization that we're finite, that we carry the end within us, brings us closer to our thoughts. We enter the mystery as one person and we exit as someone else — or with something else.

That gift, the gift we purchase with our conscious surrender, is often hard-won. Let's not expect it to make us better people — kinder, more functional, more empathetic. That is not its purpose. The thing of value conferred by a poem or a novel or a piece of music is room within one's mind to consider itself and its relation to other minds. Room to question, and to see.

Foucault hoped that the author would disappear altogether into their text, freeing us to roam the empty spaces left behind like tourists picking through shells and cigarette butts along the Jersey Shore. Delivered of our obligation to prioritize intent, we create new channels and new connections. If there ever was an elephant to begin with, we aren't asked to recall it.

Anonymity is one thing, erasure something quite different. Work isn't assembled in a vacuum, after all. To pretend otherwise is to risk getting stuck in ideological echo chambers. Voices ping. Discourse devolves. The artist is exiled from the very landscapes they helped chart.

Still, Euridice was not made whole with grasping. What possible use is technique if not to shake us up, to turn us out, to defamiliarize life itself? The modest methods employed in this endeavor — all cousins of the satirical gaze — embrace separation and honor us as individual agents. We're roused from the cozy autocracy of branded feelings and sweaty herds, saved by turmoil.

We look. We guess. We don't understand. All that's left is to step forward and enjoy the trip.

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