

# Stop Making Sense

Neil Annett

October 2021

There is a rather beautiful, if uncelebrated, book by the Irish psychiatrist O'Connor Dury called *The Danger of Words*. Reading it for the first time, not long ago, I was struck by the following passage:

To see the garden the candles must be shaded.  
Now that is what philosophy does. It prevents us from being dazzled by what we know.  
It is a form of thinking which ends by saying, don't think—look.

Dury was a friend of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose influence is on open display here; it was not so much the novelty of the quote but the clarity of its expression that drew my attention. It occurred to me that works of art can be similarly preventive, and not simply because they are *made for* looking.

We often are 'dazzled by what we know'. Perhaps more often than not. The saying 'familiarity breeds contempt' has a double meaning: we may become contemptuous of what is familiar, but we may also, on the basis of what is familiar to us, project contempt onto what is *unfamiliar*. What we know, or think we know, has a tendency to impose itself on the whole of our thinking; every new experience is shaped by the same mould. The secret of a certain sort of philosophy, or of art (and not only these things), is to—very gently, often gradually—relieve us of this burden.

I don't intend to render this point much more perspicuous than Dury did. That would surely be contrary to its spirit. I only want to suggest that through sustained contact with certain kinds of things, ideas, or environments that are not, in themselves, directly revelatory, a different way of seeing things can come about. There is no suggestion here that Dury's metaphorical garden represents a suprasensible realm. That isn't what we are missing. What the garden stands in for is the part of reality (the greater part, it should be said) that eludes our attempts to describe, measure, and understand—not because it cannot enter into empirical experience, but because it escapes its attempted re-presentation in quantitative language.

W. V. O. Quine once observed that science enabled us to 'rise above our quality space'. In other words, while our experience does not accurately describe reality as it is independent of any observer, we can deductively map that reality and thus transcend our cognitive limits. The incidental benefits of this ingenuity can hardly be doubted. Nonetheless, the model we derive in this way should not be mistaken for the reality itself. The layperson can be forgiven for thinking that theories are facts, and that science trumps every other perspective on the universe. But theories are not facts. Some new observation can always be made that confounds the theory. Indeed, fallibility is virtually written into the modern constitution of science: in order to count as scientific, a theory must be such that it could be proven false.

The particular knowledge that Dury feared being dazzled by was given to him by his medical training, and what it threatened to obscure was the stubborn, messy heterogeneity of the patients he encountered. The hypotheticals of psychiatry could only be usefully superimposed on these individuals if it was remembered that they *were* hypotheticals: tentative, schematic, always capable of being mistaken, never fully accounting for the reality given in experience. The sense of predictability and control that science can give us is in some measure illusory and, for just that reason, dangerous if not handled with care. To peer into the garden, beyond the candle's flickering reflection, is an important corrective.

It is problematic that a pervasive mode of approaching art is to attempt to *understand* it. Modernity's overarching principle of rational organisation is as active in this sphere as anywhere else. But this is a rather cramped attitude. Interpreting a work of art is to repeat the error Dury warned against. It is *worse*, because there is no payoff, as there might appear to be in the case of science. Unless you count the calming illusion of having cracked a cipher—and then there is nothing much left. Just an artefact, an anthropological curio. I would suggest, however, that the great potential of art is precisely that it can, on occasion, resist being confined within a framework of rational meaning.

For a certain kind of artist, making a certain kind of art, a satisfactory outcome is something that can only ever be met with, not fabricated. 'Making' is just the process within which some sort of vindication or uneasy principle of equilibrium is encountered. I'm sympathetic to this mode of production. There are other, more programmatic, even rule-bound, ways to do it, and they are sometimes attractive. After all, not knowing at the outset what the criteria for success are (much less whether they can be met) is likely to induce a certain amount of angst. But objects made in this spirit are often better able to defy being determined. By flaunting their protean nature, they mock every effort at reduction. They remain awkward and unaccommodating, inspiring a vague sense of unease.

Don't think, they say – look.