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Seeing Like a Girl

By Sandra Laugier

*I have also wanted to show here that childhood events, early and late, are already irreducibly intellectual, and that those events are already adventures. (Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, p. 461)*

Seeing Like a Child is an extraordinary book on ordinary life. It resonates with the voice of a child claiming her own relevance in the midst of unspeakable tragedy and sadness. I admire Clara Han's courage in finding this voice as well as the epistemological feat she has accomplished with it. For in her book it is not a question of seeing to from a distance, "with the eyes of a child" or of rediscovering as an adult the scenes and impressions of childhood. It is a question of *seeing as*, to use Wittgenstein's expression and method: seeing as a child, seeing oneself as a child. So beyond the story's intensity and precision of detail, it is indeed a philosophical method that is implemented in this narrative: a method based on ordinary language, an ordinary language mobilized to describe and relive an ordinary reality. I speak without hesitation of a philosophical method, like the one Veena Das provided to us in *Textures of the Ordinary* (2020): as Richard Rechtman reminds us in his wonderful preface, by listening to and singling out a single voice within a whole or collective, the book constitutes a reversal of the method of social science. What Clara does is to root her narrative *in* a child's experience, to define the ordinary world as the world of the child: to literally, as she says, "write from the inside of my childhood memories," which does not mean recounting these memories as an adult, but rather demonstrating at every minute how deeply they are inscribed in experience, in the body, in subjectivity.

Ordinary language and childhood

I would like first to address the *metaphysical* contribution of the book, the definition of the place of childhood in one's life. In reading Clara, I understood to what extent the definition and description of the ordinary was inseparable from a relationship to childhood, something that is quite clear in Wittgenstein, who begins the *Philosophical Investigations* with a childhood scene that is both uncanny and autobiographical: that of the young Augustine learning language in the midst of adults. Cavell notes "the pervasiveness and decisiveness of the figure of the child in the *Investigations*, determined by Wittgenstein's heading his book with Augustine's paragraph."

The *Investigations* is a work that begins with a scene of inheritance, the child's inheritance of language; it is an image of a culture as an inheritance, one that takes place, as is fundamental to Freud, in the conflict of voices and generations. The figure of the child is present in this portrait of civilization more prominently and decisively than in any other work of philosophy I think of (Cavell 1989: 113).

And obviously the child is at the core of the later Wittgenstein's vision of language. In both the *Philosophical Investigations* and the *Blue Book*, a "language game" is defined as a *childish* form of language, as well as a *primitive* one.

The study of language games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages (Wittgenstein 1958: 17).

A child uses such primitive forms of language when it learns to talk. Here the teaching of language is not explanation, but training. (Wittgenstein (1953)1968: § 5).

And in the famous passage about philosophy as the education of grownups from *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell's point is that we shouldn't give up on childhood:

In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups. It is as though it must seek perspective upon a natural fact which is all but inevitably misinterpreted – that at an early point in a life the normal body reaches its full strength and height (Cavell 1979: 125).

Cavell mentions the *Philosophical Investigations's* attention to childhood and the pervasive theme of the inheritance of language; the question, the anxiety, of whether one will convey sufficient instruction so that the c can go on.

There is a crucial understanding of ordinary language as being the child's language, as if we were always and forever *speaking as a child*, learning language.

In “learning language” you learn not merely what the names of things are, but what a name is; not merely what the form of expression is for expressing a wish, but what expressing a wish is; not merely what the word for “father” is, but what a father is; not merely what the word for “love” is, but what love is. In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the “forms of life” which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do (Cavell 1979: 177-178).

And Clara follows Cavell, adding that language learning happens through loss and attention to detail.

We see a child learning death through the very attention to detail: There is no grand narrative. There is no heroic gesture. Rather, the child is simply doing what he does, putting words and things together, learning what mother is, learning what father is, learning what brother is, through learning death and *this* loss (Han 2021: 13).

For Cavell and Han, childhood is approached not as a naïve state but as a deeply *skeptical* one (see for example in *Seeing* the scenes at the hospital after the mother's stroke). Cavell's autobiography evokes a childhood that is nostalgic, but both ordinary and tragic – in Cavell, it figures as a huge loneliness, which borders on iInvisibility in Clara Han, as loss, death, and care.

Cavell insists on the strangeness/uncanniness of the child's situation: “this condition of invisibility and voicelessness” is the basis and parable of the possibility and necessity of the education of humans, of making language mine, of finding my voice—hence the standing threat of not finding it, or not recognizing it, or of its n being acknowledged. This threat of skepticism in relation to childhood is not forgone, it is inherent to having a

I have also wanted to show here that childhood events, early and late, are already irreducibly intellectual (Cavell 2010: 461).

In *Little Did I Know* (Cavell) and in *Seeing*, individual voices are conquered out of a silent, muted childhood. T conversation with the voice of childhood is what makes it possible to define ordinary life, which is always dista and elusive, in this weaving of the tragic and the ordinary that Cavell and Emerson call *casual* and which unmistakably defines the tone of voice in both Veena's and Clara's work. For Cavell, to approach the unapproachable ordinary is to manage to return to the painful moments of childhood. Seeing as a child also becomes a way, a method, to approach reality – as if learning to speak again. This method is “to follow the childhood memory as a route into the child's world-in-the-making” (Han 2021: 5).

Reaching reality

It is essential to our understanding of language that it is spoken, *said*, by a human voice: this is what we mean by the idea of *ordinary* language and this ordinary language is, in *Seeing*, the exploration of reality. The *Investigations* resonates with voices, as is well known, but Cavell's point is that Wittgensteinian voices must be children's voices, usually considered unimportant. But children's voices matter.

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems to destroy everything interesting, all that is great and important (Wittgenstein (1953) 1968: §118)?

The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time (Emerson (1837) 2000: 57).

The descent into the ordinary, to borrow Veena Das's concept, is a powerful tool to get in touch with this discrete reality of everyday life. The discovery of childhood is the discovery of domestic life, of what is not deemed important. These are not personal memories. Clara Han gives us a fragment of her reality. The ordinary, the domestic, the everyday are akin to childhood – as that which is invisible, devalued, unimportant.

The theme of overcoming tragedy, isolation, and skepticism through attention to the small details of life is consistent throughout the book: the fact that precision of description and of detail are the only road to reality.

Weaving tragedy with attention to the details of life. This attention has a name: *care*. I cannot help recalling her that Carol Gilligan's discovery of care ethics came through listening to the voices of little girls, and in particular one, Amy. The revolution of the *different voice* occurs at the moment when Gilligan brings Amy's voice onto the scene. Gilligan writes that Amy's moral judgement is based on attention to all the facts of the situation and her conviction that "if somebody has something that would keep somebody alive, then it's not right not to give it to them" (Gilligan (1982)1993: 28). Where the ethics of justice sees a logical dilemma, Amy sees instead, in Gilligan's words:

a narrative of relationships that extends over time...a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through human connection rather than through systems of rules (Gilligan (1982)1993: 28).

Amy examines the question of responsibility in terms of the connection between care for others and care for oneself; in terms of attention to others and a clear vision of the world. Gilligan defines care by making Amy's voice heard – by seeing the world *like her*.

Reinventing care

To conclude, a few words about the approach to care that struck me in *Seeing like a child*. This book is obvious work of care, but it is filled with a deep ambivalence. Care is both everywhere and suffocating, like a curse.

Having borne the brunt of daily care of our mother as children, perhaps we learned that there is a lethality to full-blown care, a care that is also the very physicality of bearing and caring for children. This lethality is not adequately described in terms of a moralistic notion of "self-sacrifice" and it gets suppressed in the accounts of care as life-sustaining or as attentiveness. It's that the very labors of care can nourish the most threatening, most dark aspects of ourselves (Han 2021: 53).

And there is the very concrete matter of protecting others from the "lethality" of care:

I have always said that my siblings are the reason that I am sane. But I've also asked myself what can be exacted in the name of staying sane, like letting my sister bear the brunt of our father's care because she wants to protect me (Han 2021: 95).

I am deeply appreciative of this book's powerful contribution to the ethics of care, the realism of its account, and its attention to ambivalence. There is indeed both a darkness and a blindness in care.

Care is my attention to you that makes you human to me and makes me human to myself. Yet, I can see the darkness in care that my sister is pointing to in her criticism: that care itself can blind you to another's desires, making the other simply a mirror for oneself (Han 2021: 143).

The ultimate ambition of the book is to "tread the delicate lines of life and lethality in this care" (Han 2021: 143). The way in which care is taken up in the last chapter is at once extraordinary and ordinary, and incredibly touch – certainly an opening for redeeming or surviving the lethality of care. We see how Clara's daughter, Ella, manages to care for her grandfather, allowing him to "orient himself." We see the possibility of reinventing care and differentiating it from its moralistic version, of finding and seeing a way for the child to take care of the elder in a casual/playful way. So all these little girls—Ella, Amy, Clara—take us by the hand and guide us, to both demoralize and illuminate care, and once again to weave the texture of the ordinary.

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