

The Fringe-Nucleus Interface of Consciousness: Relevance to the Integrated Phenomenal Experience Elicited by Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Parallels are drawn between sensorial consciousness, using visual consciousness as an exemplification, and the phenomenal experience of poetry. William James' distinction between the nucleus and fringe elements of consciousness, as extended by Bruce Mangan, is used as a framework that naturally lends itself to the identification of homologies with poetics.

Key Words: consciousness, fringe, nucleus, interface, phenomenal experience, poetry.

William James brilliantly dissected the “fringe” from the “nucleus” of consciousness. Although these specific terms have been emphasized and adopted by others who have analyzed his work in more recent years, they have risen to prominence, so I will use the same designations here. These dual concepts form the basis for fundamental analogies that can be discovered between poetry as an integrated phenomenal experience and the workings of consciousness in general. Obviously “consciousness,” and especially phenomenological consciousness, is a charged topic for which no completely embraced theory exists even if many floodlights from different academic, philosophical, and scientific quarters have provided tantalizing glimpses of the beast. A review of those theories, and the attendant controversy, strays far beyond the borders of this paper, in which I will focus, primarily, on William James' enduring subjective insights into consciousness, which have been recently amplified and extended by Bruce Mangan (2007). An examination of the relevance of these brilliant intuitions to literature, and poetry in particular, directly invites mention of some of the observations made by the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, whose quotes are woven into this essay. Obviously, the evocative potency of expertly wrought poetry often subtends several human senses, so the analogies I draw are limited to principles rather than discrete organic elements underlying the neuroscience of visual perception.

What is a “nucleus” and what, precisely, is a “fringe”? By way of example, one might consider, as an instantiation of a nucleus, the grainy, ovoid, nebulously delimited patch of reflected light scored by the whorled grain of lacquered wood belonging to the table from which this light projects to my fovea at a given moment as the raw material for a percept at the nucleus of my conscious visual attention. Purists might complain of an apparent conflation between consciousness and attention here, but let's stay the course here for a moment. Although my central gaze is chiefly tethered to this blotch of light and cannot

appreciate a table clearly in its entirety, I understand perfectly well that this is, indeed, a table for several reasons. I know that I set my laptop upon a table about 2 hours ago, that the “imperfectly” perceived black keyboard of my laptop, with its inscrutable characters (that I could easily confirm to be the alphabet had I the inclination to shift my glance), is only about 6 inches away from the patch of light, and that I hear the unprocessed din of numerous patrons at similar tables in the coffee shop in which I am writing. All of this contextual information, albeit sketchy, lends certitude to the fundamental nature of the nucleus I am focused upon, the blotch of light. The interface between the “contextual fringe,” a penumbra of sorts, and the reified nucleus at its center, is crucial to my interpretation of this visual experience.

Bruce Mangan has recently provided an overview of James’ distinction between nucleus and fringe with a twist, focusing heavily on the fringe-nucleus interface. It will be argued that Bruce Mangan’s conception of the functional relevance of the “fringe-nucleus interface” can be profitably extended to the sequential interpretation of the concatenation of images, qualia, and qualia-laden mental constructs one encounters during the reading of a poem, each of which transiently assumes the character of a nucleus and then fringe element, uniting in a contextual manner to produce an overall cognitive, experiential, and affective portrait that is carried away from the poem, and that is, in fact, all that is left of it as a unified whole when the volume of poetry is closed. I recognize that the visual fringe-nucleus is instantaneous, and that I am smearing the nucleus-fringe example I provided above over a more extended period of time, invoking memory in the genesis of the “feel of the poem.” This is not, however, a careless misapplication of James’ philosophy. As Bruce Mangan observes, William James recognized that there is a “shadowy scheme of the ‘form’ of an opera play, or book, which remains in our minds and on which we pass judgment when the actual thing is gone” (James, 1890). I seek here to add lineaments to the face of that “shadowy scheme,” and expose its roots in recollected qualia and qualia-laden mental constructs evoked, often in a liminal or subliminal way, by the parade of linked images and metaphors of a poem. Poetry, or a certain brand of poetry at least, is uniquely poised to leave a durable shadowy scheme impregnated with affect and a specific feeling in a manner that technical prose simply cannot.

What inhabits the nucleus of visual consciousness? An amalgam of color, contour, apparent texture, and, perhaps, other attributes (or “qualia”) of visual experience, but this nucleus is not an island, of course. Its membrane is porous, allowing permeation by adjacent if indirectly and hazily sensed visual experience, and that context suffuses the nucleus and its environs with meaning and/or identity as a higher-level qualia-laden mental construct. An example of this has already been presented. Beyond this intermixture within the same sensory realm, concomitant affiliated sensations, either auditory or olfactory for example, even if half-appreciated, color the nucleus with meaning, assisting in speciation through a process of heteromodal integration that yields a unified phenomenal experience. Each of the component qualia belonging to that experience, particularly those at the nucleus of conscious attention, and the integrated mental construct of which these qualia form are part, are filled with unique, if partially apprehended associative resonances and affective load. Merleau-Ponty was keenly aware of this when he wrote “. . . this red under my eyes is not . . . a pellicle of being without thickness . . . (It is a) punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of

rooftops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the revolution, certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar, it is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops, and advocate generals . . .” (from *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis 1968). By extension, then, a red velvet dress is charged with personal relevance – and the way that relevance *feels* – that cannot be perfectly replicated in another being. I have never been to Madagascar. Nor do I have access to the other fugitive associations that may have eluded Merleau-Ponty when he wrote those lines.

Bruce Mangan adroitly summarizes the essence of the relationship between nucleus and fringe. According to Mangan, William James’ fringe represents an abstract distillate of context that imparts an added layer of meaning or “rightness” to the nucleus. He states: “. . . the fringe stands between nonconscious and focal conscious processing, using a few wisps of experience to radically *condense* or *summarize* nonconscious information of extreme complexity,” and goes on to describe two fringe experiences he dubs “rightness” and “wrongness,” which “signal (to) consciousness the degree to which nonconscious processing has determined that a given nucleus does or does not fit its appropriate context” (Mangan, 2007). This is the “interface function” of the fringe rightly stressed by Mangan, and it may be localized to the dominion of the right cerebral hemisphere in Ian McGilchrist’s synthesis of human cognition, prior to the left hemisphere’s interrogation and verbal dressing of that which has been perceived (McGilchrist, 2010).

What has this to do with poetry? A poem is populated by nuclei that may or may not bear narrative connection. These consist of palpable images and qualia-laden constructs yoked by startling verbs. Phrases, in essence, that synthesize new meaning for the reader through the fresh use of metaphorical language and other poetic devices. These nuclei are strung together, but do not remain wholly discrete. Their invisible fringe forces each act promiscuously among them. Those nuclei that have passed, and which are relegated to the fringe, continue to influence the nucleus of the moment, casting, as it were, a limelight upon it. And, in truth, this influence is bidirectional. This is true of both narrative poetry and the current “dissociative” poetry so in vogue at this time, which has been described as a “vertiginous” brand of poetry meant to question the very struts that support perceived reality (Hoagland, 2010). Ironically, in doing so, it affords a reasonable glimpse of the only reality there can ever be: that which is internally experienced, even if, at times, vertiginously.

There is a difference, of course, between this *selectively recollected fringe* that bleeds its meaning into the transfixed nucleus of the moment in the midst of reading a poem, consisting, as it does of slightly moldering or transmuted nuclei that have passed, and the “*visual fringe*,” present contemporaneously with the nucleus of visual consciousness – a fringe, by contrast, that may never have been fully digested, yet is, still, summarized as context.

While words are mutable and, frequently, ambiguous signs that must be interpreted, meaning also fills the hollows, the invisible communions between words. Realization of the seething life that resides in these interstices is not new, and derives, I would contend, from the same “fringe-nucleus” forces described above. The fringe exerts a type of hegemonic rule over the

nucleus. In 1952, Merleau-Ponty famously observed that “as far as language is concerned . . . the sense appears only at the intersection of and, as it were, in the interval between words.” I write, for example, the phrase “savage metal.” What, precisely does this conjure up in the mind? Nothing that is completely definable, although many lucid – even if dimly perceived or simply “felt” – images involuntarily flit across the stage of consciousness: the sword, for example but, even more particularly, the rapacity of the man whose hand wields it. Or maybe it is the cold, blind terror of a steely blade evoking images of wolf-pack hysteria, madness and genocide. The interpretations are rife and reader-driven. And for each reader, an amalgam of images of variable potency produces a sense that did not exist until it was called forth by that phrase. The imaginings are not merely visual, of course. Upon reading the words, the net of each intellect dredges the lake of personal experience, producing a singular resonance within. Personal meaning is poured into the spaces between the words. The relation each word bears to another, its orientation, the sense that bleeds from one word to another, can never be perfectly recapitulated – either inter-individually or intra-individually over time.

The considerations above have implications for the theory of deconstructionism. Cultural context is not enough to understand a text as it was written. But does this matter? Each individual consciousness forms its own species. And, fittingly, the same relational balance, the same contextual coloring and cross-coloring that imbues written language with the sole meaning it has for a given reader at a given time, mimics the contextual essence of vision, in which, for example, the isolated reflection of ocher light that arrows from the undulant surfaces of wavelets in a bay are perceived in a lone rightness made possible only by the feebly perceived fringe– the summarized sea and littoral, the deepening dark above - by which this nucleus of visual consciousness is specifically enshrouded for a given individual.

The fluid fringe-nucleus interface, pregnant with contextual relevance defining the rightness of what we think we perceive, bears a striking analogy to the relations between words that have been read. The present is smeared over milliseconds during which the prior images and sensations the text hortatively calls up are blended with and define the subsequent “nuclei” on which the eye alights. And the character of these images, the way in which they seep into each other, can be realized only once. This is the beauty of poetry. Like the fabulous beauty of an alabaster face belonging to a young woman dying of consumption in the nineteenth century, the brevity of her existence, the only existence of its exact kind, adds poignancy to that beauty. Just so, the experiential flash of well-wrought poetry is made more luminous by the knowledge that the words will never again scintillate in the same way in the mind of another. Language and consciousness are brethren – the face and the obverse of the same coin. We gaze at a pear in a dish. The surface of that pear at the nucleus of our conscious attention takes on its “pear-ness at that moment,” its quiddity, from the manner in which it intercalates with its context, even if the latter is only nebulously perceived in the fringe of consciousness. That instantaneous impression conveys a singular meaning that may be laden with affective content. The nuclei, the images and metaphors that trace the contour of a poem, follow the same rules; they behave for us in an identical way.

In the prospectus submitted by Merleau-Ponty to the Collège de France in support of his candidacy, he writes that “the spoken phrase is understood only if the hearer, following the

‘verbal chain,’ goes beyond each of its links in the direction that they all designate together.” It might be said, however, that, in the domain of written or spoken poetry in its most evocative and phenomenologically rich forms and, perhaps even more so, in its experimental habilitment, the vector that defines this directional force may shift polarity from reader to reader in ways that do not obey authorial intent. I will not enter upon the terrain of the debate that has centered on that “intent” and what it may mean, but it can be argued that some of the most durable poetic masterpieces owe no small part of their fortune to the limitless interpretation they have engendered. Perhaps the mutable and nuanced meanings of a given poem, its continual intersubjective reinvention, are what guard most against perishability. The nuclei carefully beaded on the narrative (or dissociative) string of the poem, the dynamic interplay among them tinged by the prism through which the unique reader takes in the lines, create internal realities that form a nexus with those of the writer and other readers. These realities partially overlap but cannot be identical in view of the proliferation of new “heterotypal” fringe-nucleus scaffolds erected by the readers of each subsequent generation. Thus, one poem begets many, influenced by culture, intersubjectivity, and the store of personal experience upon which all associative resonances hinge. No poem is immortal but some, a relative few, may have an infinite number of lives.

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