

Hand in Hand

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Abstract

The fifth planet was very strange. It was the smallest of all. There was just enough room on it to house a street lamp and a lamplighter. The little prince was not able to reach any explanation of the use of a street lamp and a lamplighter, somewhere in the heavens, on a planet which had no people, and not one house.

But he said to himself, nevertheless:

“It may well be that this man is absurd. But he is not so absurd as the king, the conceited man, the businessman, and the tippler. For at least his work has some meaning. When he lights his street lamp, it is as if he brought one more star to life, or one flower. When he puts out his lamp, he sends the flower, or the star, to sleep. That is a beautiful occupation. And since it is beautiful, it is truly useful.” (de Saint-Exupery, 1946/1994, pp.49-50)

When you follow the threads and lines of text that follow this one, you will get involved in a story about ‘gloves’, those common commodities that we use to make the world in which we live a little more comfortable for us. The text is one of the paths that we follow to pay attention to them, to make them lively and to visualise their beauty and value beyond instrumentality and functionality as covers for our hands. The text is meant to be part of the intricate world in which the gloves dwell together with us and it hopefully suggests and conveys as much as it registers and describes. Within the space created by the text we articulate and clarify some issues that would otherwise remain mute, but at the same time we also try to keep some crucial issues implicit or covered. The text is a partner for us, as much as the gloves themselves are. Both of them, and we of course too, need the other, one another.

KEYWORDS: -

I

the morning felt very cold
she kept her pace high
and the outside world at a distance
as she wandered through thoughts
looking for warmth inside
nevertheless she sensed her
a poignant presence

on her way back
a couple of hours later
she met her again
in exactly the same place
alone on a bench
was she forgotten?
or left behind ?

this time she slowed her pace
and stopped
then she started to move closer
step by step
slowly and heedful
as if she did not want to scare her
delicate and fragile as she seemed to be
coarse, colourful too,
and ... elegant.

II

she did not recognise the glove as a garment
meant to cover and protect from the cold
she saw a lost soul
longing to be found
waiting to be taken by the hand
desiring to be touched and caressed
was it because she recognised herself in the glove that she was so attracted to her?

III

gently and very delicately she took the beautiful glove in her hand
she caressed the wool
her touch was soft and thoughtful
a touch betraying care and concern

without noticing it, she started to slip her fingers inside
hesitant at first
but the invitation seemed irresistible
It is the first time that I do this she whispered
with a mixture of fascination and anxiety in her voice
I am entering a private place

a strong sensation of intimacy overtook her
she was trespassing
intruding in a space sensed by only one before her
the thought of touching another woman's skin inside made her shiver
her hand became another
unknown and absent

IV

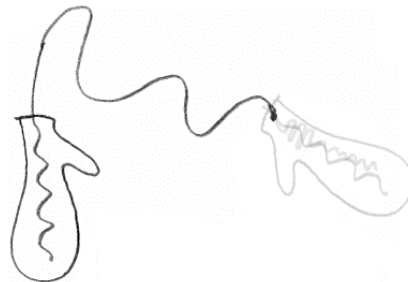
a glove ought not to be alone she thought
she belongs to
together
it is one from two
a couple
inseparable
where is her partner?
how would she feel?
lost too ... for sure
she felt the pain of separation as if it was hers
but to whom does she belong she wondered?
to an absent hand or to an absent glove?
or to both?

A lonely glove, alone on a bench. She was lost by someone and is a loss to someone; ... she is separated from the life she lived, thorn out of it... by inadvertence, forgetfulness... by a wilful decision to separate from her, or ... to get rid of her?
The intricate relation she lived in is interrupted, ... the threads are ruptured, and her loneliness tears all life out of her, transforms her into a disposable, into waste, trash ... waiting to be thrown away ... expelled from our lives ... removed:

It is not so much by the things that each day are manufactured, sold, bought that you can measure Leonia's opulence, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new.

So you begin to wonder if Leonia's true passion is really, as to say, the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing itself of a recurrent impurity. The fact is that street cleaners are welcomed like angels, and their task of removing the residue of yesterday's existence is surrounded by a respectful silence, like a ritual that inspires devotion, perhaps only because once things have been cast off nobody wants to have to think about them further. (Calvino, 1974/1997, p. 102)

The recurring encounters with the lonely gloves made her see images of something else, it presented her with images of connection, separation and loss. They brought back memories of the pain caused by broken bonds and the urge, her personal need, to relate, to make relations or re-make dissolved one's. The gloves, left behind for whatever reason in the city streets, parks, bars, corridors of schools, on the seats of busses and so many other places, made her aware that what we call 'commodities' also have a life, that they deserve a life with us and implicitly express a need to be taken care of and to be cared for.



You walk for days among trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognised that thing as the sign of another thing: a print in the sand indicates the tiger's passage; a marsh announces a vein of water; the hibiscus flower, the end of winter. All the rest is silent and interchangeable; trees and stones are only what they are. (Calvino, 1974/1997, p. 11)

Objects. The artist kept finding lost gloves. They were single and therefore useless. She began to collect them and join them into pairs, forming new pairs; male and female, expensive and cheap, brand named ones or hand-knitted. Thanks to that, they acquired a new life and began to function in new relationships. The word 'pair' can refer both to objects and people who are somehow connected. Who says that they have to be identical?



Malgorzata Markiewicz, HIAP, Cable Factory, Helsinki, Finland 2006

There was nothing very remarkable about the gloves, but she recognised them and they seemed to reach out for her and invite her into their unknown worlds and the lives they had lived. The day of the encounter was just one amongst many others, but one that marked a moment in a continuum of events. A moment of increased visibility that has been registered, fixed, placed under the spotlight of attention and that turned them from an undefined and unrecognised bunch of stuff, waiting to be thrown away, into individuals.

And for me, it was the encounter with this sustained and intense attitude of careful and caring attention for the 'unremarkable' that seemed to make me see what I did not see before. An involvement with the everyday things that surround us but often remain unnoticed, although they are part of our world and shape it with their presence. Things that get animated by plain and simple engagement with them, the ordinary things, no... the 'infra-ordinary' as George Perec so eloquently names and describes it:

What really happens, what we live, the rest, all the rest, where is it?

What happens every day and returns each day, the banal, the day to day, the evident, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the usual, how to give an account of this, how to interrogate it, how to describe it?

Interrogate the usual. But precisely, we are used to it.

We don't question it, it does not interrogate us, it does not seem to cause problems, and we live without thinking about it, as if it did not convey questions or answers, as if it was not bearing any information. It is not conditioning anymore, it is anaesthesia. We sleep our lives in lethargy without dreams.

*But where is it, our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?
How to talk of these common things, or rather, how to track them down, how to drive them from their
cover, how to free them from the cover under which they are hidden, how to give them a meaning, a
language and make them talk finally of what is, of who we are? (Perec, 1989, pp. 11-12)*

Gloves ... so banal, so everyday ... just a piece of cloth meant to protect the hands of their owners. Her work with the lost ones, encountered during a previous stay in Helsinki slowly faded away in the dusk of memory. It seemed to deserve no more value and attention than the infra-ordinary things it took care of.

And maybe that is how it ought to be we wondered together: is a glove not just an instrument that we use for our own sake? Something that is only worthwhile as long as it carries out the task it was made for? Something invisible as long as it carries out the job it was made for and gets noticed only at the moment that it does not manage to serve us anymore? A moment followed by another inexorable one, when we throw them away?

Maybe we can have another try I told her, because there is something about them, something undeniably forceful, although implicit or maybe plainly hidden. Something to search for. What is it that you see in and through them, I asked her? When you encountered them, what did you feel that I apparently do/did not when I walked around in the city? Can you make me feel what you feel? Can you take me by the hand and lead me into that wonderful world that you share with them? Yes, she answered without a hint of hesitation in her voice, we cant try that. And that is what we did, we took the chance ...

V

to walk hand in hand
two hands
two gloves
in unison
united by a firm enfolding grip
comforting and warm
he felt her hand move inside her glove
her fingers playing in the enclosed space between hand palms
an intimate place shaped and united by hands
and still divided
by the touching skins of gloves
two rooms in one room
two united by threads
woven ... interlaced

... The interlacing of our mutual awareness and experience of the things that we were previously unaware of, or maybe did not pay attention to, or could not articulate, became our unspoken aim, alongside with a wish to become 'street cleaners' who want to 'think further' about them, ... who want to take care of 'them' and 'their' lives. We tried to invigorate our attention, to activate our senses in order to find them, ... those who are waiting. They are there, one just has to look, and one just has to be willing to see, because ...

We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily within arm's reach. To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it. ... We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things

and ourselves. (Berger, 1972, pp. 8-9).

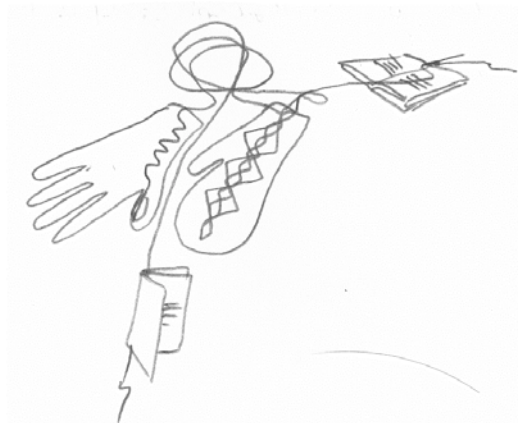
It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight. (Berger, 1972, p. 7).

We picked them up to take them in, to embrace them rather than to throw them out. By caring for them we also care for their lost one's, the one's to whom they were unified before the separation and who, from now on, have to continue by themselves. But we take care of ourselves too, because the responsibility that we take for them makes us ask what they need rather than the other way around, when we are focused on our own desires. Activating that relation makes them more intelligible and sensible for us, more real. It is an exercise in trying to engage with them both from a reflective distance as within empathic experience, from the ideas we can have about them as well as from our bodily exchanges with them as physical objects:

...For us truly to experience something it has to enter into and alter us, and there must be something in us which specifically responds to it as unique. ... Understanding, then is not a discursive explanatory process, but a moment of connection, in which we see through our experience - an aperçu or insight.

All seeing is 'seeing as'; not that a cognition is added to perception, but that each act of seeing, in the sense of allowing something to 'presence' for us, is in itself necessarily an act of understanding. ... Theory, in this sense, according to Goethe, is not systematised abstraction after the fact, and separate from experience, but vision that sees something in its context (the 'making of associations') and sees through it ... 'My thinking is not separate from objects'. (Iain McGilchrist, 2009, pp. 359-360, using different sources referring to J.W. von Goethe).

The gloves are 'presences' and they embody a life already lived, one that is legible in their skins through the traces, stains, damages and repairs marked in them. It is obvious that we do not know these (hi)stories, but we can sense them, and imagine them. We can remember and make up the lives they lived, tell their stories and compose future ones. The dissolution of the old bonds gives way to new couples that are not constituted by bringing together two mirrored look-alikes, but by two individuals with their personal character, expression, form, feelings, ... and wrinkles. It is paradoxical, but a consequence of the act of re-coupling gloves is that in the new intricate relation their individuality becomes more pronounced.



Lifelines mutually connect both to one another as well as with chronicles of their encounters, of their intimacies, concerns, sadnesses, embraces, happiness, doubts and possibly much more. They were lost and lonely but now they are re-united with another body, ... and other stories, ... to be written and re-written continuously, for ever-unfinished and incomplete ... shards and particles connected by a multitude of visible and invisible enlaced threads ... woven in fabric and traced on paper ... connecting thought and touch.

gloves become hands
hands over hands
hand in hand

Małgorzata Markiewicz and Thierry Berlemont
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