

Life drawing and saying the Rosary:
The significance of repetition for embodied practice.

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Abstract

Repetition and ritual are shared aspects of two very different activities: life drawing and saying the Rosary. Both activities require entry into a quasi-meditative state which is facilitated through a disengagement from thought patterns and cognitive models that are valorised within Western culture, particularly within higher education. This text adopts a somatic approach to examining these phenomena, one that repudiates the dualistic Cartesian epistemological model that emphasises the separation of subject and object, to favour a situated, embodied, engaged, and concerned model. This paradigm, as Critchley (in the text) explains, is one whereby “[ones] being and that of the world are not distinguished for the most part.” Saying the Rosary and life drawing bring about states where the inherent isolation of Cartesian subject-object dualism yields to a radical situated-ness, characterised by “focused attention”, “open monitoring” and “automatic self-transcending.” In such states the quality of our epistemic engagement with the environment, as embodied, situated and engaged agents is greatly enriched.

Embodied Practice – Life-drawing – Situated Cognition – Repetition – Ritual

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing gown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

—*Introibo ad altare Dei.*

James Joyce¹.

In this text I will begin by reflecting on two formative personal experiences. I approach these with an understanding that I have subsequently arrived at, regarding the importance within artistic practice, specifically life drawing, of what might be described as ritual, and specifically ritual as it relates to repetition. I approach the idea of ritual here, from what has been described as a “somatic paradigm”². Kitts uses this term, in the context of performance studies to describe how “typically in ritual studies, bodily experience is treated in a way that “subordinates the somatic sphere of experience to the social and cultural”³. It can be argued that this tendency is general across a broad swathe of academic disciplines, including my

¹ James JOYCE *Ulysses*, (1922), Ware, Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2010, p. 3.

² Margo KITTS. Discursive, Iconic, and Somatic Perspectives on Ritual, *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 2017 pp. 11-26.

³ *Ibid.* p. 18.

own. However, we are currently living through a moment when the epistemic credit assigned to the somatic sphere has perhaps never been higher. Kitts suggests that:

The appeal of the somatic as a lens for understanding ritual is that, it can offer a platform for examining some peculiarities of religious experience, ... The somatic lens on ritual experience ... it is worthy of focus because it allows for discussion of shifts and augmentations in awareness ...¹.

Kitts also cautions us, regarding a “lingering trend” that sees “bodily perception not [as] primary but [as] constructed”². However, she points with optimism to a “defiant school of philosophy” founded in phenomenology and American pragmatism, “building” as she puts it “on foundations in Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu and Heidegger”, as well as Lakoff and Johnson, which regards “bodily experience ... [as] foundational for human imagination”³.

The argument presented in this text is built on these same philosophical foundations, reinforced by recent work at the interface of cognitive science and philosophy of mind. This anti-Cartesian pragmatist understanding of mind is outlined by van Gelder:

The Cartesian tradition is mistaken in supposing that the mind is an inner entity of any kind, whether mind-stuff, brain states, or whatever. Ontologically, mind is much more a matter of what we do within environmental and social possibilities and bounds. Twentieth-century anti-Cartesianism thus draws much of mind out, and in particular outside the skull⁴.

Such ideas are prominent in emerging theories of situated, enactive and embodied cognition.⁵

Ritual and Repetition

In his text ‘The Importance of Repetition: Ritual as a Support to Mind’⁶, Downey relates his grandmother’s ritual of saying the Rosary, he references in particular the repetitive structure of the prayer, whereby the Hail Mary is repeated either five or fifteen times.

Raised as I was, in the Roman Catholic religion in Ireland of the 1960s and 70s, Downey’s account chimed with my memory of reflecting on the communal saying of the Rosary at, for example, the country wakes of my grandparents, and this further recalled to mind my struggle

¹ Margo KITTS. *Discursive, Iconic, and Somatic Perspectives on Ritual*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Tim VAN GELDER, as cited in Philip ROBBINS & Murat AYDEDE, (Eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of situated cognition*. Cambridge University Press. 2018, p. 8.

⁵ Richard SHUSTERMAN, “Affective cognition: from pragmatism to somaesthetics”, *Intellectica*, 60(2), 2013, pp. 49-68.

⁶ Greg DOWNEY, The Importance of Repetition: Ritual as a Support to Mind, in Mitchell. In J. P., & Bull, M. (Eds.). *Ritual, performance and the senses*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 45-61.

at that time to understand the significance and centrality of repetition within these prayers. In addressing the meaning, significance and function of this specific form of ritualised repetitive prayer, Downey approaches his task from a “neuroanthropological perspective ... build[ing] upon theories of embodied cognition”¹. He suggests that this type of prayer is “better understood if we consider the limits of the human nervous system and how a practice like prayer might be used to reinforce, supplement, or even replace cognitive functions”.² His analysis is thereby informed by what he terms: “an enlarged reading of the cognitive science concept of the “extended mind””.³ My own research into drawing integrates such theories, encompassing similar conceptions of the embodied and extended mind in relation to situated cognition theory⁴.

Robbins and Aydede provide a useful description of the three principal component theses, of ‘situated cognition’, namely, the “embodiment thesis”, the “embedding thesis” and the “extension thesis”:

First, cognition depends not just on the brain but also on the body (the embodiment thesis). Second, cognitive activity routinely exploits structure in the natural and social environment (the embedding thesis). Third, the boundaries of cognition extend beyond the boundaries of individual organisms (the extension thesis)⁵.

Downey’s approach to his analysis resembles Kitts’ in that it is also founded in a somatic paradigm, encompassing situated, embodied, and extended theories of mind, which sees “intelligence [as] the product of an embodied brain entangled in the world”⁶. So that, as he puts it:

rather than focusing on logic, knowledge, or conscious reflection, ... diverse strains of what are now sometimes called “embodied cognition” focuses on how thought emerged from the brain in an organism faced with tasks such as coping, perceiving, acting, interacting, and learning⁷.

My approach here takes a very similar standpoint, which is ultimately indebted to Dewey, Heidegger and others in the philosophical traditions referred to by Kitts⁸.

¹ Greg DOWNEY, *The Importance of Repetition: Ritual as a Support to Mind*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Philip ROBBINS & Murat AYDEDE, (Eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of situated cognition*. Cambridge University Press. 2018

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ Greg DOWNEY, *The Importance of Repetition: Ritual as a Support to Mind*, in Mitchell, In J. P., & Bull, M. (Eds.). *Ritual, performance and the senses*. *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Margo KITTS. *Discursive, Iconic, and Somatic Perspectives on Ritual*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Furthermore – as with Kitts and Downey – this text examines the significance of repetition from the standpoint of embodied cognition, with particular regard to ritualistic aspects of practice, and specifically the practice of life-drawing.

The Life Room

In 1979 I passed from my Catholic secondary school to a very different institution; art school (The National College of Art and Design, Dublin). There I was introduced to a new repetitive practice, life drawing. Needless to say, I would not then have recognised, that the practice of drawing the naked human body could have had anything in common with repetitive prayer, such as the Rosary, yet reflection now convinces me otherwise. I recognised a meditative aspect to both practices. In the life room the ritualistic and rapid changes of the pose – from initial quick studies of four or five-minute duration – meant that one could not approach the task as one would, given the luxury of a longer timeframe. The constrictions of such time-limitation meant that rather than adopt a cerebral, rational approach to the problem of making the drawing, one was, of necessity, thrown back on a necessarily more embodied response that enforced automatic action – this fostered an approach based on habit, muscle memory and what I now see as the reinforcement of neurological pathways in the brain. Repetition and rhythm were noteworthy elements in that regard.

The routine of the life-drawing class went something like this; first five four-minute poses, followed by five ten minute poses, followed by five fifteen minute poses – following on like decades of the Rosary – the drawing teacher calling time, like a refrain, like the decades of the Rosary called by the leader of the prayers.

I have been teaching life drawing for many years and adopt a very similar approach. When deprived of the luxury of time and thereby the possibility of intellectualising the ‘problem’ of making a drawing, the student has little option but to take an embodied approach, even if initially such an approach seems foreign to them. This is reinforced, as outlined earlier, by the ritualised structure of the lesson; by the management of the duration of the poses, in that way a rhythm is created that is initially quick, then increasingly slower as the poses become longer in duration. This produces a situation whereby the drawing-action develops an automatic quality, which also has a meditative aspect. This is something life drawing shares with the Rosary prayers, with their routine and repetition, their embodied and automatic aspects. These were the same aspects of the prayer that perplexed me as a child. However, through the lens of life drawing, I can now better understand their significance. As Cahn and Polich recognise, such practices produce short term “states” which can ultimately become long term “traits”¹. Downey points out that:

Over the long term, repeated contemplative practice can have measurable effects on brain architecture and function, [...] neuroimaging and psychological studies suggest that

¹ B. Rael CAHN & John POLICH “Meditation states and traits: EEG, ERP, and neuroimaging studies”. *Psychological bulletin*, 132(2), 180-211, 2006, p. 181.

quietistic mental activity, especially repetitive thoughts or mental exercise, can have a measurable impact on our neural physiology and functioning ... Because the physiological effects of patterned thought so violate the Cartesian common sense, these discoveries have been greeted with widespread media and public fascination that the "mind" can affect the "brain"...¹.

Downey, suggests that prayer and “forms of personal religious ritual, such as meditation, recruit ... neurological systems”, and that there is “neurological evidence that meditation engages the parts of the brain responsible for attention”². I recognise this phenomenon in life drawing, which is, incidentally, another quietest practice. Indeed, I see the principle purpose of life drawing is the achievement of such heightened attention. If we learn anything meaningful through life drawing it is how to pay extreme attention to the model. I ask my students to give their attention to the model and not the drawing itself, the physical object, that, too, is a discipline. Such heightened attention is, it seems, also a feature of both prayer and meditation.

Downey recognises that his grandmother’s saying of the Rosary produced a meditative state. In that regard, he cites Travis and Shear who categorise – based on studies monitoring the brain – “three basic types of meditation” these are: “focused attention” (involving “voluntary control of attention and cognitive processes”), “open monitoring” (characterised by “dispassionate, non-evaluative awareness of ongoing experience”) and “automatic self-transcending”³.

Life drawing, as I see it, and indeed teach it, shares all of these characteristics; the enhancement of attention, dispassionate perception and transcendence which involves the abandonment of the ego, of the self as a subject, set over against an object – or environment.

In discussing the practice of drawing, according to this understanding; as a situated meditative engagement with the environment, I wrote the following in an earlier text:

In lending one's embodied, situated self to the process of drawing, there is a sense of absorption in a situation that transcends the objectivist analytical stance framed by Heidegger as 'presence-at-hand'. [...] By ceasing to be a mere observer the draftsman/woman becomes, in a holistic sense, part of an interaction. In the 'situated cognition' view, the person/environment relationship is thereby radically altered from the Cartesian

¹ Greg DOWNEY, The Importance of Repetition: Ritual as a Support to Mind, in Mitchell, In J. P., & Bull, M. (Eds.). *Ritual, performance and the senses. op. cit.*, p.53.

² B. Rael Cahn & John Polich “Meditation states and traits: EEG, ERP, and neuroimaging studies.” *Psychological bulletin*, 132(2), 2006, 180 –211 as cited in Greg DOWNEY *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³ Fred TRAVIS, & Jonathan SHEAR, Focused attention, open monitoring and automatic self-transcending: categories to organize meditations from Vedic, Buddhist and Chinese traditions. *Consciousness and cognition*, 19(4), 2010, (1110-1118). p.1113.

epistemological model's stance - with its emphasis on the separation of subject and object - to one characterized by holistic integration¹.

The role of ritualised repetition in the practice of life drawing, as I have outlined earlier, aids and indeed facilitates a radical state of situated-ness, to the point of oneness of the self with the environment, which involves a forgetting of the Cartesian model, of the objectivist, analytical self. All of which, facilitates a heightening of an embodied attention, along with an enhancement of perception.

Drawing Irises

The phenomenon outlined above is evident in John Berger's description of the process of making a drawing of some irises.

I'm drawing some irises which are growing against the south wall of a house. [...] I'm drawing with black ink, wash and spit, using my finger rather than a brush. [...] The drawn flowers look as though they're going to be half life-size. You lose your sense of time when drawing. You are so concentrated on scales of space. I've probably been drawing for about forty minutes, perhaps longer. [...] At first you question the model (the seven irises) in order to discover lines, shapes, tones that you can trace on the paper. The drawing accumulates the answers. ... At a certain moment – if you're lucky – the accumulation becomes an image – that's to say it stops being a heap of signs and becomes a presence. Uncouth, but a presence².

The intensity of the drawing process enhances and intensifies its embodied and situated aspects to a point where the draftsman often enters a 'zone', a meditative state, wherein the sense of the *drawing* subject and *drawn* object may appear to dissolve. This produces a kind of 'indwelling', in which the intensity of engagement is such that consciousness of time, for example, appears to melt away, just as is reported as happening with forms of meditation.

Transcendence

There are other aspects of life drawing that we might associate with meditation. I ask my students to leave their ego outside the door of the life room. The transcendence of the ego is an important aspect. This is related to is a transcendence of something else; a concern for the material outcome. I stress to my students that life drawing class is not primarily about the production of an artefact, a material object, something to give your aunt for her birthday. I tell them that if they worry too much about producing such an end product, they may miss the point.

¹ Tom McGUIRK, "Drawing and intellectualism: Contested paradigms of knowledge." *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 10(2), 2012, (217-231), p. 223-4

² John BERGER, *Bento's Sketchbook*. New York, NY, Pantheon Books, 2011, p.7.

That is one reason why it is more important to look at, pay attention to the model, the thing drawn and not at the drawing. It is the activity of drawing that is the crucial concern and not the product. In this way life drawing as I see it – and teach it – involves a refusal of a certain material aspect of the matter, or at least its suspension. Perhaps to reassure my students as much as anything else, I concede that drawings can be a by-product of the process, but the point of the exercise is not to produce an artefact as such. In this I am minded of the words of Paul Klee:

What is good is form-giving. What is bad is form. Form is the end, death. Form-giving is movement, action. Form-giving is life. These sentences constitute the gist of the elementary theory of creativity¹.

Klee's point, as I understand it, is that the finished drawing is always a dead thing, fixed like a moth on a pin, we conserve it, frame it, and place it on the wall, maybe in a museum – like some mounted trophy; the head of some unfortunate bison or wildebeest, a sad *memento-mori*. Whereas, as all hunters know, the real thrill is in the chase, in Klee's words, in "life", "action", "movement". The chase itself is *the* supreme moment of heightened awareness, "focused attention", "open monitoring" and "automatic self-transcending".

Life drawing is like that. If, as Klee puts it, form-giving is life, then drawing a living being is chasing what cannot ever be captured – the human body is always in movement, never static except in death – that is after all what chiefly distinguishes the dead.

In drawing the living body, we are what the artist Willem de Kooning called "slipping glimpsers" our quarry is always about to escape us. So the important thing is the activity, the looking and seeing, the learning to look, learning to see, achieving an intensity, best achieved through loss of self. Hunting has its rituals too, some of the oldest evidence of which include drawings. I am recalling the Lascaux caves, that place where drawing and ritual intersect.

Knowhow

Life drawing as such, or indeed any drawing from *the life*, has an epistemological dimension: it is a form of getting to know, of knowing something, or in the case of portraiture, someone. It is decidedly not the acquiring of propositional knowledge, a knowing *that*, to a great degree it involves a knowing *how*, in the way that riding a bike does. And as Michael Polanyi tells us, unless we achieve automatic self-transcendence we fall off our bike².

And this is another relevant point for our discussion. Knowledge, Dewey tells us, especially that knowledge we find in doing and making, cannot be treated as a commodity, conceived of as "something external, an accumulation of cognitions as one might store material

¹ Paul KLEE, *Notebooks, Volume 2: The nature of nature*. Jürg SPILLER (Ed.), New York: George Wittenborn, 1973, p. 269.

² Michael POLANYI, *Personal knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

commodities in a warehouse”. Here Dewey denies the conventional wisdom about knowledge, the idea that “truth exists ready-made somewhere”¹. Heidegger also has something to say about the commodification of truth. In *Being and Time* he employs a metaphor to question this commodification. He tells us that, “the perceiving of what is known is not a process of returning with one’s booty to the ‘cabinet’ of consciousness after one has gone out and grasped it”². He particularly objected to this notion, or analogy, of “grasping.” The attainment of knowledge through “open monitoring” (characterised by “dispassionate, non-evaluative awareness of ongoing experience”)³ chimes with Heidegger’s analysis that we gain knowledge through, circumspection, in other words, through a kind of caring engagement with things and our environment.

Heidegger was fond of this “cabinet of consciousness” metaphor. As Crichtley explains, the human being, understood as *Dasein*:

is not as a subject distinct from a world of objects, but ... an experience of opened-ness where my being and that of the world are not distinguished for the most part. I am completely fascinated and absorbed by my world, not cut off from it in some sort of "mind" or what Heidegger calls "the cabinet of consciousness"⁴.

Heidegger objected to the quotidian understanding of “knowing” as merely “being acquainted with something and its qualities,” by which, as he put it, we “master’ things.” However, as he sees it:

Such ‘knowledge’ seizes the being, ‘dominates’ it, [whereas] The character of essential knowing is different ... Essential knowing does not lord it over what it knows but is solicitous towards it⁵.

It is this latter kind of circumspect, ‘solicitous’ (meaning to be concerned with) – knowing “essential knowing,” that Heidegger recognises in art making and, above all, in drawing.

Heidegger sees the Cartesian stance; the ‘theoretical attitude’ – something characterised by Bourdieu as the “scholastic view” or disposition⁶ – as limiting, because, as Heidegger tells us, there is a ‘deficiency’ in knowledge when it is at a remove from the world – when it is

¹ John DEWEY, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. (1916), Los Angeles, CA: Indo-European Publishing, 2010, p. 225

² Martin HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*. (1927) (trans.) Macquarrie, John. and Robinson, Edward. Oxford: Blackwell. 1962. p. 89.

³ Fred TRAVIS, & Jonathan SHEAR, op. cit., p.1113.

⁴ Simon CRITCHLEY, “Being and Time, part 3: Being-in-the-world: how Heidegger turned Descartes upside down, so that we are, and only therefore think” in *The Guardian*. Mon 22 Jun 2009. Retrieved Mon 21 Jun 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jun/22/heidegger-religion-philosophy>

⁵ Martin HEIDEGGER, *Parmenides*, Andre. Schuwer & Richard Rojcewicz, (Trans.). Bloomington, IND: Indiana University Press. 1992, p. 3.

⁶ Pierre BOURDIEU, *Pascalian Meditations*. London and Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000.

divorced from, or “holds back” from “producing and manipulating and the like”. If, we look at “the Things” merely theoretically, we adopt an impoverished way of being in the world—we are merely “tarrying alongside”, concerned with mere representation: merely how things look¹.

Heidegger contrasts this attitude with the kind of knowing that truly belongs to *Dasein* or “being-in-the-world” which is a situated, engaged, concerned, and caring – and thereby a more authentic, mode of knowing.² That core Heideggerian concept; *Dasein* implies just such a stance, as Feenberg explains, “human beings, called ‘*Dasein*’ by Heidegger can only be understood as always already involved in a world ... The things of the world are revealed to *Dasein* as they are encountered in use ...”³.

Conclusion

We are more involved with, and in, the world when we are engaged in activities, whether mental or physical, that involve “focused attention”, “open monitoring” and “automatic self-transcending”, when our embodied minds are fully immersed in our environment, conceived of in situated and enactive cognition terms.

One of the strengths regarding life drawing and why some students enjoy it so much, is that it provides an escape from a sometimes oppressive, exclusively cerebral approach to problem-solving, that is based solely in analytical, propositional thought. The practice of life drawing replaces this with a more embodied, enactive and situated mode of engagement with the environment, an engagement, more precisely, with that little microcosm of the world that is the life room. The Cartesian stance, the scholastic disposition, the theoretical attitude, have in the past half century colonised art schools, just as they have for the past four centuries dominated almost all of higher education – only tiny islands still hold out.

This year, because of Covid19, it was necessary at the university where I teach, to slightly reduce the number of life drawing sessions per student, due to the smaller number of students we were able to facilitate in the life room for each session. I think some colleagues found it difficult to understand why this concerned me. I am sure they thought, isn't each class much like another, a repetition to some extent? But that, I thought, *is* the point.

¹ Martin HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*, op. cit., p. 88.

² Martin HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

³ Andrew FEENBERG, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The catastrophe and redemption of history*. Routledge, 2004, p. 2.