

Section

1

A STRANGE LOVE

1

NAMING AND SEEING

The first Franklin Expedition engages in a grand attempt to rename the entire North. There is a deep connection between English masculinity and the activity of naming. This activity of English naming is different from the activity of Tetsot'ine seeing. The English men of the first Franklin Expedition were never able to see the land they came to. We know that, in the end, they were quite literally reduced to blindness by cold and starvation. This blindness was there from the beginning and is made fully manifest later.

In this chapter, I would like to explore the conflict between naming and seeing by concentrating on the emerging relationship between Keskarrah, the Tetsot'ine shaman, and Robert Hood, an officer and sketcher on the Franklin Expedition, and on Hood's slowly learning to see the image that Keskarrah sees. Then I will draw on the theoretical work of Kaja Silverman (2000) to reflect on the difference between naming and seeing, or, in her terms, the difference between the word and the image.



Keskarrah, who greets the English as they arrive, laughs when he encounters John Franklin, the leader of the English Expedition, who explains to him that the English had come here for their benefit. In their discovery excursion to the North the English did not take notice of the snowshoes given to them and were not aware of the Tetsot'ine who supported them. The English were hell-bent on traveling North to "discover" a passage through the northern ice. Keskarrah responds incredulously: "The lake and river ice thundered cold at them the whole year they were carried to us.... Again and again. How much more did These English have to be told?" (Wiebe 1994, 15) For Keskarrah, any telling of this sort comes in the form of seeing; the English men were not able to tell the danger because they could not see the signs of danger in front of them. They were too busy in their quest to name the land. In Keskarrah's view, the image comes before speaking and the word.

It seems that the English men "had heard only their own telling, as told to themselves." (15) This speaks to a particular form of psychic closure on the part of the English sailors, an inability to open a space of care for the Being of things to reveal themselves in image and story. Even though Keskarrah has heard stories of the English, now that they have arrived, they are 'impossible to forget." (17) Before, the Tetsot'ine only needed to think of their people, their land, and their life as it had been for a long time. Now "a fireball smashed through the sky: crash! – here are Whites!" (17) With the Whites, "the world is always on fire with something else." (17) When the Whites arrived at the edge of the water the paddlers in the canoe made "a great, driving sound." (17) Their enormous canoe "rams ashore." (18) The canoes stand "erect, motionless." (19) We witness here a peculiar presence of the English phallus, attempting to assert its power, covering over its own lack.

When Franklin, the leader of the English Expedition, steps ashore, Birdseye, the wife of Keskarrah, says to her husband: "Look." (18) Keskarrah looks carefully, but does not speak. Greenstockings, his daughter, expects her father to say something, because he "understands much." (19) Keskarrah, however, says nothing. Even at the council circle that has been convened with the White leader, Keskarrah says nothing, allowing Big Foot to speak, who the Whites think is the Tetsot'ine "chief."

Instead of speaking, Keskarrah begins to draw. He draws "a very small picture of the land." (19) And he says, "if These English

are to know anything, you will have to name it.” (19) Keskarrah then proceeds to give precise names to the possible river routes the English can take to move north. Keskarrah’s recourse to drawing rather than speaking means that, for the Tetsot’ine, vision is given priority.

This emphasis on vision is repeated when Keskarrah, Birdseye, and Greenstockings first meet Robert Hood, an officer and sketcher on the Expedition. Keskarrah asks Birdseye: “What is it you see?” Birdseye sees the “younger one ... the last, the thin one.” (20) He is “a slender, wind-broken tree, walking.” (20) He is “nothing ... only bone.” (21) Keskarrah thinks that may just be his skin, which looks sodden. Birdseye replies that it isn’t just the skin, it’s the bones: “like the Snowman.” (21) If he is the Snowman then surely bad weather follows. Who is the Snowman, what is his story? His is “a story of a stranger, of danger, coming and going.” (21)

Greenstockings is fascinated by the thin skin of Hood. Later, “she will discover that his skin is not at all hard, and that his hair ... is crinkled light brown, not black and hard and straight.” (21) At that moment, a new connection is asserted, the connection between seeing and touching. Greenstockings will “pull her hand all around his head, as if with her fingers in his he could draw his face into a circle.” (21) She understands “that he is making a picture of his name with her hand around his face, *hood*.” (22) This is all very strange to her. She wonders what her mother has seen and what her father has touched, “when if ever, it has been possible for his fingers to find such skin under them.” (22) To see and touch such difference. And on the basis of her seeing and her touching of this strange creature, she will try to say his name, Hood: “she will try to shape her lips into a puckered, protruding ‘O’ like his and puff air at him, ‘ooo...ooo...’” (22) Even though Hood tries, “he will never be able to say her name at all, not even the middle of it as she can his.” (22)

The rest of the Whites will not even try to say her Tetsot’ine name. This is because they do not have the ability to name something that has been grounded in the experience of seeing and touching. The English try to “name every lake and river with whatever sound slips from their mouths.” (22) Yet, without the long-standing material experience of the land gained through seeing and touching this is difficult: “it is truly difficult for a few men who glance at it once to name an entire country.” (22)

This attitude of the English extends to “the racket and unending busyness of guns.” (23) It seems that the lure of “guns and powder”

has captured the Tetsot'ine men as well. Keskarrah hates the guns, they scream, "Listen: I'M HERE!" (23) This sound of guns is analogous to the activity of English naming, a presence that announces itself so insistently, in such a demanding way, so different from a quiet, patient response. The English shoot at the deer in the river indiscriminately "instead of floating in tiny canoes on the silent water and spearing fast." (23)

For the Tetsot'ine "every place already was its true and exact name." (24) Birdseye and Keskarrah "knew the land, each name a story complete in their heads." (24) The names which are stories are tied to seeing. Keskarrah could see. He could see "in the shape and turn of an eddy, the broken brush at the last edge of the trees, the rocks of every place he waited for caribou." (24) And Birdseye has walked everywhere, demonstrating that there is an intimate connection between seeing and walking. The People see and walk and then name and tell stories, "the way any Tetsot'ine must if they would live the life of this land." (24)

Keskarrah draws the places he knows "through his fingers from behind his eyes onto the ground, which is where all land already lies fully and complete, though hidden." (24) Or he will draw on birch-bark using dead embers from the fire, "because the seeds and roots of trees are always in the land, and the seed and root of fire live eternally within trees. Names are waiting to be breathed out again, quietly, into the air." (25) Names come from the body and the earth. Keskarrah explains that "just making a sound can mean... nothing." Rather, "it is for us to look. Perhaps we will recognize how everything alive is already within everything else." (25)



Kaja Silverman, in *World Spectators*, can help us make sense of the priority given to seeing by the Tetsot'ine. In this work, Silverman extends her proposal, initiated in earlier works, that the visual image has priority over other forms of representation.

Silverman claims that appearance is not primarily a linguistic disclosure, but "insistently visual." (3) Yet, vision has been denigrated in the Western tradition, a tradition that grounds the English masculinity of the Expedition and their activity of naming. Silverman begins to articulate a different perspective by turning to Lacan, who argues that the source of production for visual forms is a mysterious nonentity, *das Ding*, the "impossible nonobject of desire." (15) This is itself a

departure from Freud: we are not oriented then toward an original love object; rather, the object “becomes an object only in its absence” through “retroactive symbolization.” (16)

Silverman believes that this attempt to understand the activity whereby things appear in vision is aided by a turn to Heidegger. To care and release a creature into its Being we need to make sense of it in its visual diversity. Heidegger’s problem, though, according to Silverman, is that he articulates Being in non-psychic terms. Yet, while Lacan emphasizes the psyche, the problem is that his emphasis on a psychic void overlooks the movement toward the world through care. Maybe bringing Heidegger and Lacan together will help.

Silverman claims that the disclosure of objects requires the experience of loss. This experience of loss gives rise to a desire to symbolize what we have lost. Lacan’s perspective is that the lost object is a non object, *das Ding*. This means that the orientation is to the loss of Being, not to the loss of the original love object. For Silverman, this emphasis on loss has an important consequence: “[It] opens the way toward something many of us have long dreamed of: an a-oedipal or even anti-oedipal psychoanalysis.” (40)

Yet, according to Silverman, Lacan is not interested in going in that direction; for Lacan, the loss of Being must be repeated through castration in the Oedipus complex. Silverman agrees that the experience of loss must be repeated, because the non-object cannot connect us to the world of things. This connection is performed by the representatives of the non-object which we love when we lose Being. She claims that we lose then love, not love then lose. If the latter prevailed, then the only path to desire would be to recoup our first loves.

There is a problem here, though. Silverman has already indicated dissatisfaction with Lacan’s account of the original void: nothing cannot connect us to something. The turn to Heidegger has convinced her that, rather than there being an original void, there is an original mode of care which directs desire toward the world of things. This mode of care is intimately connected to the maternal, the original love of the mother. And if care is maternal, our return to origins is a return to the original love of the mother which connects us to the world. Perhaps we do not lose then love, but love and lose at the same time, where love and loss are inseparable; we cannot understand one without the other.

These considerations will be important as we proceed, because we will see later that both Hood and Greenstockings experience a

return to origins. What is the nature of this return and how is it connected to the relationship between seeing and naming, and seeing and touching? And how is this return connected to the experience of love and loss?

Silverman's argument concerning the centrality of the visual image begins by showing how Lacan transforms the sign from the Saussurian heritage. For Lacan, perceptual signifiers precede verbal signifiers, looking precedes speaking, and the image precedes the word. Moreover, it is only in perceptual signifiers that things become affectively present. This occurs in the transference which begins linguistically – we address our words to the other and they return to us as signifiers. Yet, according to Silverman, the transference is a general social event, a theatrical event. Those who hear the actor's speech are not listeners, but spectators. Through speech they see something. And thus saying becomes showing, a visual affirmation.

Silverman grounds the argument for the libidinal production of images in Freud. It is in the displacement of kinship that libidinal speech becomes possible. This is not an abstract process. We speak libidinally by producing images, not abstract notations. Silverman claims that “[t]he basic drive in the human subject is the urge to see more than what has been seen before.” (78) The psyche is therefore established as an optical device with the analogy drawn between psyche and camera. This analogy goes back to Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. For Freud, perceptual stimulus only becomes conscious when it coalesces with a memory from the unconscious. These memories have a force of attraction in their struggle to achieve perceptual form.

Silverman believes that this perspective of Freud, articulated in his early work, leads to a unique understanding of the pleasure principle, different from the one usually attributed to Freud. The pleasure principle is not oriented toward reducing excitation, but increasing it. There are two sources of stimulation, one from the external world, and the other from unconscious memory. As they coalesce, there is not a discharge of excitation, but a displacement from memory to external perception. In fact, there is a pleasure in not being satisfied, in giving oneself over to displacement. The pleasure principle is thus “the enabling force behind a particular kind of looking.” (92) According to Silverman, Freud's position points to numerous scopic possibilities, which are, in effect, possibilities of showing. Here, there is pleasure in reviving an earlier memory by linking it to a new external perception in the present.

This pleasure is grounded in the thing-presentation and not the word-presentation. The linguistic signifier, or word-presentation, is closed to affective transfers. On the other hand, the perceptual signifier, or thing-presentation, is open to affective transfers. The word-presentation is linked to the preconscious-conscious system. The preconscious binds the unconscious memory by linking it to a linguistic signifier. This inhibits the transfer of affective energy and curtails the pathways where energy might go. The thing-presentation is open to libidinal transfer. In Silverman's reading of Freud, the unconscious forms around an ideational representation that is primarily repressed. The force of the drive then occurs with the force of this primary repression. The primarily repressed term then places a second term in its place. And the second prevents the first from entering the preconscious. For Silverman, the primarily repressed thing-presentation realizes itself by allowing another thing-presentation to take its place. This generates a constant displacement that keeps desire moving. It also involves an anti-cathexis. The preconscious anti-cathexis attempts to reduce excitation by connecting thing-presentation to word-presentation. On the other hand, the unconscious anti-cathexis creates excitation by facilitating the transfer of energy from original to secondary thing-presentation.

Silverman's reflections help us to make better sense of the conflict between Tetsot'ine seeing and English naming. Keskarrah's emphasis on seeing the land is one that draws on unconscious desire in the ability to return to the source of all representation, the non-object of desire. And the non-object, if grounded in the care of the maternal, can reveal the things of the world in a visual diversity of forms. To see is also to love, to see from the standpoint of love. In contrast, English naming remains fixed in the conscious ego, which attempts to master the world of things. Thus, English naming removes itself from a movement back to the non-object of desire and a movement back to the ground of maternal care. The result for the English word that names is a narrowing of affect to the controlling stance of the ego and an inability to see the things of the world in their visual diversity. It also represents an inability to love and experience love.

