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Suspense is Believing: The Reality of Ben Jonson's The Alchemist

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“Seeing is believing, but feeling’s the naked truth”.

(John Ray, in *The Home Book of Quotation*)

Jonson’s *The Alchemist* is a very particular kind of play when it comes to suspense. The notion itself is commonplace, that plots set up representations of incomplete actions moving toward some form of completion, and that in the process they evoke a quality of emotional excitement in the reader concerning that relation of events, one that, if it is well managed, excludes all other interests by concentrating the entirety of our conscious attention upon the Gestalt of the play-world in the making. But that is a rather large definition of the term, for suspense has traditionally been reserved for feelings about characters and their destinies, and typically for liked characters who find themselves not only in danger, but in circumstances with diminishing prospects which alone can incite within readers or spectators a quality of empathetic alarm both for the characters and for themselves. There are reasons to debate whether suspense can be accounted for experientially in any other terms. That is what makes Jonson’s play special, for while few would contest that the play is suspenseful in its overall effect, it

is less obvious why it is so in the absence of any characters upon whom we might be inclined to expend our sincerest well-wishing.

To be sure, from the very outset of the play there is alarm, a brilliant Homeric opening in the form of an argument in progress, as at the beginning of the *Iliad*. One of two men holds a flask of some biting liquid as protection from a beating. The other then threatens public exposure of the charlatan but is dissuaded from such a course by his own lack of public credit. Something important is at stake, as a third party, a woman, does her best to referee, placate, and threaten. The exchange calls for all of our orientational acumen, for only by the clues supplied *in medias res* are we equipped to infer who these people are and the terms of their differences. By the end of the scene, we are able to determine that one man is a professional con man adept at imposing his jargon on the unwary, but otherwise without a place of permanent residence, the other is a household servant who sells his master's goods on the side for extra cash, cheats at card games, and now serves as the front man in the cheating game, while the woman is a common prostitute whom these two share between them at night by the drawing of straws. Together they are involved in an elaborate scheme to dupe as many conies as they can by offering the illusory powers and riches promised by the alchemical arts, while within the hierarchy of their micro-society the two men vie for the position of alpha male. The power struggle that risks destroying their fraternity remains unresolved, simmering in the background as they turn their animosity temporarily into a contest to outperform each other in fleecing their victims. That quality of social action and concern persists throughout the play. We watch with fascination as scene follows scene in an incremental representation of the aberrations of human greed and ambition, and as a trio of tricksters seeks to control the centrifugal energies of the expanding group of dupes and sceptics. Something about this opening transaction has made us care, and care emotionally, if suspenseful attention is part of the response. Arguably, we do not adopt any of these characters as a moral centre with claims upon our empathy, but we do speculate intensely upon the probabilities of their respective situations and their prospects for success or failure in purely computational terms both formal and social.

The nature of suspense in relation to such an action would seem self-evident, but in fact raises many difficult questions. Suspense is emotion-like because it constitutes the limbic component of attention invested in narratives. Thus it has its origins in the so-called paleomammalian or middle brain. This matters,

because while it is accessed and triggered by—and provides excitatory support to—the cognitive events of consciousness, it does not belong, as a response system, to the cerebral cortex. Yet it is a feature of the phylogenetic, species-wide brain that constantly invigilates and interprets the environment established by story-telling in parallel to the emotional support aroused by the narratives of perceptual consciousness in the form of attention and absorption. But there are mysteries pertaining to the phenomenon, namely what suspense is as an emotional state, in what mode it reads external stimuli, and precisely what conditions are responsible for its arousal.

In relation to the topic of this collection, Colin McGinn, in his cogent and persuasive book, *Mindsight: Image, Dream, Meaning* explains in cognitive-philosophical terms why human consciousness is constituted of two inassimilable modes of thought: percept and image. The former is driven by stimuli from the world we call real, namely that which enters by our senses, and which pertains propositionally to things epistemologically demonstrable, while the latter is volitionally driven in the form of imaginative reconstructions, projections, and fantasies, or involuntarily driven by dreams. His point is simple yet heavily laden with repercussions. Our species has profited immeasurably from capacities both to perceive and to imagine, but only if they are modally sealed off from each other. We always know the origins of our thoughts, whether they derive from percepts or from images. Confusion between them would diminish our fitness to nil; taking image for percept is tantamount to hallucination. For that reason, we are never deceived by the fictionality of fiction. A mind driven by images may see inwardly but never believes. But aestheticians face a difficult question in describing how much that fact colours the evaluation of fictional worlds as social representations, for much criticism depends upon the constancy of that meta-awareness, namely that the imaginative is always mere artifice. Inversely, however, the attention fastened to these as images in the form of suspense gains this limbic support from mental faculties unable to distinguish between percepts and images. That which is imaginative in origin is as apt to arouse the emotions as that which is perceptual.

As Aristotle pointed out, the cathartic component of story-telling achieves its ends not only by accessing the limbic system, but by shaping those emotions in its own image as a representation of social circumstances. The emotions, in a sense, have no power to resist, despite the fact that no real persons are in peril. But the mind has not been tricked. Vital to the success of provisional scenario

spinning is that those imaginary drafts of future courses of action enjoy the “gut-feeling” evaluations provided by the emotional responses they arouse. Emotions cannot be imaginary; we cannot even imagine what such emotions would be like, and there is no adaptive reason why they ever would have evolved.¹ Thus, if suspense is the emotional component of concerned attention, then its mode of reading the environment is always real. By extension, if the object of suspense is constructed in social terms within the narrative, then, to the limbic system, the social representations of narratives are real, and the emotional brain believes in them entirely.

At this juncture we could chop logic over what it is to believe, and whether something as propositional as belief pertains to the emotions. But as a system of response to the environment, the limbic brain reads percept and image in identically serious ways—a legacy of the genetically confirmed fitness of our Pleistocene ancestors. What is more, through the phenomenon of suspense, the emotionality of fiction, according to Victor Nell (p. 50), is the source of our principal pleasure in reading. We enjoy literature because our emotions believe, and because they sustain our interest in things they deem vital to our well-being. Seeing through the emotions is always believing, and the principal stumbling block to the absolute fictionalizing of imaginative experiences.

Jonson’s play opens with the fictive simulation of an argument, offering data of a computational kind. We seek to calibrate social relationships, motivations, hidden interests, indeed all that we can discover about who these people are. We are curious animals, easily drawn into the social imbroglios of other members of our species, even in imagined forms. These are sufficient to arouse fixed attention and suspense. Because there can be no emotionality without commensurate objects of excitement, that suspense emotionalizes the reading experience. Concomitantly, we must acquiesce to the reality imposed by our emotional brains and their independent readings of the environment.

Obstacles to this argument lie with the nature of the emotions themselves. Suspense is adaptive. It keeps the mind focused on the things that matter in cause-and-effect sequences. Evolutionary “just-so” stories are easy to invent, such as the adaptive benefits of remembering the presence of dangerous animals in the environment, even when they are out of sight. The invisible lion may become a

1 Walton, pp. 100ff., proposed such a theory, namely that the emotions aroused by fiction are themselves part of the fiction, but the design of the human brain does not allow for the existence of such a capacity.

mere image, but the heart is justifiably still pounding. This is a reminder that the classic theory of emotions pertains to the immediate preparation for resistance to or escape from instinctually perceived sources of danger. Suspense as an emotion must therefore pertain only to the tooth-and-claw phases of experience, and can be adapted to fiction only when those same fears are alerted, as in films with stalkers or man-eating sharks. But through such studies as Paul E. Griffiths' *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories*, we can now leave behind the half-dozen fixed, universal mind-numbing emotions to concentrate on the excitable dispositions aroused by all manner of circumstances from meeting an old friend to discovering a strange insect in the backyard. His argument holds that there is a vast array of "higher cognitive emotions"—those which are triggered by the processes of thought, and particularly those arising from our interest in the intentions and moods of others. Such compulsions lead to spying, gossiping, and elaborate speculations upon character in order to complete the *Gestalt* of personhood. Those experiences are equally emotionally saturated. We are also ludic in our interests, and as intently willing to be entertained by the cavortings of others as to be edified, not to forget the lessons by analogy that may prove beneficial to our personal prospects. Distinctions are difficult to draw. But such an approach to the emotional components of the conscious life among percepts and images permits an altogether different approach to the problem of suspense.

What remains is a sorting-out of the categories of stimuli provided by narrative that are apt to arouse this response. We can temporarily overlook the eternal paradox that the emotions pay attention because they believe and thereby taint their objects with the significance of belief. We can also leave behind the adrenalin-powered responses aroused by fear and empathy. We can also, for the nonce, put aside the proposition that fictive representations are of interest to us only to the extent that they function analogously to reality in some vital sense. But if these matters no longer pertain to the suspense elements elicited by *The Alchemist*, does Jonson's play direct us exclusively to the higher cognitive emotions and their readings both aesthetic and social? In a primary sense, the narrative arts are suspenseful by dint of their temporal fragmentation and cumulative completion. Jonson was a master of the compound plot, the parts sustained in their incomplete states in anticipation of a magical synchronized denouement. A great deal of theorizing could be expended upon the epistemic calibrations in relation to comfort levels of knowledge and waning interest pertaining to aesthetic forms. In an equally primary sense, suspense is aroused by nearly any representation of the social, concerning

which the first level of emotional investment is in the forward-moving search for information about that society's conditions and actors. This principal is at the very centre of Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, in which he outlines how readers participate actively in the actualization of imaginary worlds because of what writers do not say about circumstances and outcomes (p. 168). It is precisely these epistemic shortfalls that provide the incentive to move forward in pursuit of explanation, knowledge, and final things. Roman Ingarden studies similar matters under the aegis of the "indeterminacies" in the text. Suspense, within these analyses, becomes part of the aesthetic response in the form of an "unsatisfied hunger which appears when and only when we have already been excited by a quality but have not yet succeeded in beholding it in direct intuition so that we can be intoxicated with it" (p. 191). Such indeterminacies come down to those which impel all acts of communication. Even the micro-exchanges between characters arouse in us strong feelings, as they endeavour to gather information from each other while concealing their intentions to control and manipulate their interlocutors. These are the speech acts of characters struggling to maintain their edge in competitive social environments—the new playing fields of survival for modern humankind. In short, suspense is the attention sustained by the social emotions associated with the compulsive epistemic drives through which we read the social environment.

Nevertheless, the naming of those emotions will be challenging simply because they orient themselves within moving social concerns. Moreover, the hermeneutic interference from the logic of the emotions at their speciated base always threatens to return. What is there about the threats to the well-being of the society constructed within the play that alert our survival-oriented feelings, unless the future of that society is somehow made to matter to us as though it were our own? The alternative is always to cling to the epistemic interests generated by cognitive disorientation in the creation of social simulacra and the reader's quest for orientation and resolution, but this somehow falls short of why our primal emotions scan the horizons of our worlds, both perceptual and fictive. This brings us back to the vexing question of why we should have limbic concern for character or society in Jonson's play, and whether we read with urgency to the enhancement of our own social advantages.

Space allows for only two suggestions among many possible: the psychology of trickery and the social economy of cheating. They are, of course, interrelated. The argument so far has called for the emotionality of suspense no longer as a

modified form of fight or flight emergency, but as the excitement arising from the epistemic shortfalls created by incomplete data concerning intentional states and the definition of communities. These emotional colourations are attached to operations that are both propositional and computational. The mind that, for its own orientational well-being, struggles to reduce to cognitive order the data received from a complex and mystifying environment is sustained by limbic support. Yet there remains the paradox of suspense as systemic excitement over incomplete forms and as a social interpreter. Narratives including *The Alchemist* are not only potential forms seeking actualization but social representations seeking evaluation. Suspense pertains to both. This ambiguity is clearly seen in the plans of the confidence schemers. Subtle and Face have mastered both the vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of their victims and the means to dupe them by playing to their deepest desires, whether modest, epicurean, or hypocritical. Their arts consist of creating wish-fulfilling futures for their clients, from whom they would receive present profits before their victims discover their losses. Better yet, they would blame those losses, as often as they might, upon the victims themselves, or fate, or accidents ostensibly beyond their control. Thus, each emboxed episode consists of an intended scenario, fully preconceived and in keeping with the characters of the victims, whereby they collaborate in their own demises. The trick thus represents an idea, a micro-plot, a self-actualizing scenario, a social transaction, an act of treachery, a witty creation, an exercise in contingency management, and a vehicle of comic and social justice. It engages our interest along this complex continuum as a simple form seeking completion and as a social contest of wits and survival strategies. The suspense aroused pertains variously to forms, indeterminacies, the detection of intentional states, epistemic jags, social contest and knavery, and, in a sense, failed strategies for survival. We take an excitable interest in these things presumably on the basis of their alignment with reality as social possibilities. Yet if priorities were to be assigned, we might find difficulties in explaining the emotional content of the trick without expressing some theory of what it would be like to be the plot's knave or the plot's fool. Arguably, however, we side with neither, and thus find ourselves once again in the camp of aesthetic suspense attached to the completion of literary forms. But there are other perspectives.

Altruism would appear to be remote to the interests of this play, and yet it was the advantages of human social reciprocity partially built into the genome, of which altruism is the highest expression, that sent Robert Trivers in search of

the basic ethics of community—namely the self-interestedness of calculated co-operation among our ancestors. The argument follows that much of our cerebral advancement as a species may be the result of a kind of cognitive race to keep track of all the social permutations of human co-operation, half co-operation, cheating, and the attendant emotions serving as guarantors of honest dealing through which we buy membership. The plasticity of mind was further developed by sham emotions, which in turn necessitated refined emotion detectors, and more subtle forms of cheating, and ever more subtle forms of information sharing to contain the cheaters.² Such a history has left us equipped with psyches having not only a flair for spotting slackers but a gift for dissimulation that works to our own advantage, coupled with a conscience that urges limits in light of the cost of lost reputation. We scan the social world through this value system, both perceptually and provisionally through the imagination.

Reading *The Alchemist* entails a complete exercise in the scoring of cheaters and the repercussions of their deeds on their society. Arguably, suspense is aroused in these precise terms. We approach defined communities, no matter how amoral, with a residual sense of the reciprocity upon which relations of trust are built, including all of the tolerable slippages that may breed suspicion but not exclusion. Much space might be devoted to an elaboration of this innate sense of advantage and disadvantage through group dynamics that orients much of our invigilation of the social world. In short, we are inveterate score-keepers of bluffers and rogues, as well as co-operators and sharers. The activity is compulsive, primal, itself social, as information is spread among the trusted concerning perceived cheaters. Above all, we take pride in our abilities to interpret the intentional states of others and to master the finest nuances of social credits and debts. This quality of attention is clearly supported by limbic colouring and takes on overtones of fitness-strategizing and survival. In this regard, no projected society could be better conceived to test and train our acumen than that of *The Alchemist*. The opening of Act Three is a subtle case in point, for Tribulation and Ananias are not cheaters and owe nothing to the society of the play, but come to it with expectations that Subtle will keep his word in projecting to the benefit of the brethren and their cause. At the same time, they are antisocially absorbed in their cult and for that reason suffer in near-silence the barbs of Subtle's derision. Yet curiously,

2 For a more complete account of this psycho-evolutionary “arms race”, see Pinker’s discussion of Robert Trivers, along with the work of Leda Cosmides and John Tooby (Pinker, pp. 401-7). See also Cosmides and Tooby.

their purpose is to gain legitimacy and credit in the society at large, which they plan to purchase with their new-found wealth, thereby suggesting the corruptibility of all those in power beyond the confines of the play-world. The economy of cheating extends itself in many directions at once and the score-keeping grows exponentially. In short, the world of the play is a micro-community characterized by misplaced trust, expectation, and asymmetrical relations for which we must do the bookkeeping. Moreover, as Pinker notes, “since hypocrisy is easiest to expose when people compare notes, the search for trustworthiness makes us avid consumers of gossip” (p. 405). That was the “subversive” voice to this upside-down society seeking to be heard. Surly was to have been the inaugurator of the movement and the potential maker of moral reversals, but was himself given to vanities and bamboozled into silence. Only at the play’s end is the gossip cycle completed, although ineffectually, as the dupes return in chorus to hammer at the door. Analytical investigations of the design and execution of the trick and the scorekeeping that pertains to reciprocal social relations are two of the cognitive activities potentially set in motion by the play that might command limbic investment because both, as provisional drafts of possible conduct, pertain to epistemic drives and to survival strategies.

The paradox of the reading brain is that, while it always recognizes the fictionality of its imaginative stories, it processes them with the same emotional systems that survey and respond to the real world. And because the limbic response system is always a believer, treating all stimuli as percepts, fictional creations are constantly coloured by the concerns and urgencies of real environments. The paradox of Jonson’s play is that its artifice is omnipresent to the computational mind, but that, in eliciting the attentional features of limbic involvement, even this imaginative draft of a putative community in contemporary London achieves at least the emotional support of absorption. Insofar as emotions are a way of reading the world largely independent of our cognitive faculties, even this play involves the reader in the belief states furnished by limbic surveillance, giving the play whatever urgency the emotions deem to be present. That input seems considerable to the extent suspense applies to the play—that felt investment in knowing how things finish according to the logic of the emotions themselves. And if belief alone is all that matters to the emotions, we may well ask what the emotions deem of such great urgency in this play as to make their investment. The working premise is that our emotional brain is not interested in things below its arousal thresholds. Yet this mental “point of view” interprets widely by

treating images as real. Thus, to the emotional brain, even the replication of an argument—that most classic form of speech act—is worth the arousal. From word to intentional states of characters to tricks to interwoven stories to final resolution, the limbic system is a willing believer, and in believing gives these simulations the colour of felt reality. All along we may read *The Alchemist* from the top down as one of the finest worms of Jonson's superlative brain, but our own generic brains continue to read from the bottom up, scanning the Jonsonian world for what is important to its instinctual concerns. To a large extent, the computational mind can borrow upon that system to sustain its concentration upon problems, puzzles, and other incomplete or kinetic forms where satisfaction follows effort plotted over time. But Jonson's play is also a social representation. Thus, while we are presumably not emotionally concerned with the rising and falling fortunes of the protagonists *per se*, except as representative players within an economy of cooperation and cheating, we are vitally concerned with the mechanics and evaluations of that computational economy, perhaps because what we learn about those exchanges through provisional practice may be essential to our future well-being. Therein may lay the link between the higher cognitive emotions and the survivalist orientation of the basic emotions culturally fortified through the narrative arts.

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