

Bachelard, Corners and Rabbits

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard pays special attention to the corners scattered throughout a house. Corners are important because he sees them as places where a different sort of being is to be found to the areas taken up with the daily routines of the everyday. Bachelard remarks that corners are places of withdrawal, a quality that makes them different to the available space of the world beyond. Along with this spatial withdrawal there is a withdrawal into the self and it is this that makes corners into places of solitude (there are never crowds in a corner) where peace and the imaginative faculties are able to flourish.

(Note – from here on Bachelard's corner may be occasionally referred to as the ideal corner. I've done this to avoid the repetition of using just one name.)

(Note – the full table of 'corner being' is: Solitude, immobility, Peaceful, Meditative, Day Dreaming, Withdrawal, Silence and Hiding.)

In his portrayal of 'life' in the corner Bachelard paints a picture of meditative serenity where there are few, or no, impediments to the life of the mind. The world passes by without noticing the corners. Implicit in his corners, but hardly mentioned, is their pervasive feeling of safety. Not just physical safety but 'havens' where one can daydream in sheltered security. But if we bring Bachelard's corners into contact with corners drawn from 'real-life' then their safety is not so reliable. Bachelard's corners provide no physical safety for the dreamer and are open to violation from the world beyond. The safety of 'real-corners' is often quite limited, something recognised with such phrases as 'trapped', 'being cornered', or 'having one's back to the wall', all of which are responses to attacks some kind. Violence is present even if it sits on the margins of Bachelard's ideal corner. Because of the withdrawal into the self, and the inwardness that is a consequence of being absorbed by the corner, it has its back turned against the space that stretches out into the realm of the practical. Sight, indeed the visual dimension as a whole, is absent from Bachelard's description of what occurs in the ideal corner. Seeing is an important component of the imagination particularly when cornered. I want to place the ideal corner into a 'real' situation- albeit in the form of a memory-that allows for meditative daydreaming and where the presence of windows might appear to break with the ideal corner. But windows are not spaces of unimpeded transparency; they can present surfaces conducive to the movements of the imagination.

In the spirit of Bachelard I want to float away from where I am now and travel back in time to a place that is far away. Not surprisingly, this move from an ideal corner to weighty Anglo-Saxon empiricism will impart a different sense of reality to that of the 'smoky' one of Bachelard.

As a child I spent a great deal of time in my grandparents house, a house that had many inviting corners. Most of the corners allowed for a degree of concealment from those engaged in the daily household activities. My favourite corner was in my grandparents bedroom on the second floor. The bedroom was visited only rarely during the day and so resembled a sort of eddy separating it from the space beyond. The most attractive feature of the bedroom was a cushioned window seat situated in a corner of the room and which allowed for an angled view of the surrounding fields. It was a corner within a corner, a place approximating to the ideal corner where solitude, stillness, and silence were to be had. From the window seat I could look down on to the garden and see the vegetables planted into neat rows. My favourite season was winter when only the most hardy remained. Others had been eaten as their turn came around. Through the window on my left I could see the church towers of the surrounding villages. On some days the haze would be so dense that the church towers seemed to be on the point of disappearing. My first visit of the day was like opening the page of a book. Were the towers visible? If they weren't where had they gone? Daydreaming. Musing. Imagining. To sit in the corner seat meant I could let my imagination wander in this domestic version of a Bachelard corner.

Running parallel to the garden was a small field given over to growing wheat/corn. From my windowsill corner I had a clear view of the events that were to unfold during this most memorable of days. The wheat was ready to be harvested. First to arrive were a gang of twenty, or more, farm hands. Next was a peculiar piece of very noisy machinery drawn by a horse. Once it began to move through the wheat it's function became evident. It scythed through the wheat/corn and at the same time bound 'stooks' were ejected from the rear. It was quickly evident why there were so many men following behind the reaper. Their job was to gather together three to four of the bound bundles and stack them into stands that would be collected later.

I left my windowsill for the rest of the day. It was late afternoon when I heard the first gunshot. I rushed to the window seat to see what was happening. The corn had been reduced to a narrow strip that ran down the centre of the field.

The farm labourers were placed around the edge of the field each carrying a shotgun. As the harvester reduced the area to be cut the strip of corn grew ever more narrow. The last of the rabbits that had been hiding in the corn started to bolt out into the open. The shotguns banged away and very few rabbits made it to the long grass at the edge of the field. I was near enough to see the slaughter that ensued. There were a variety of deaths. Some rabbits would leap in the air when hit; others would disintegrate under the force of the shot. The wounded would limp towards the long grass but few would make it to safety, most were killed by the nearest Farm hand. When there were no more rabbits to kill the men gathered around the harvester to discuss how the day had gone and drink beer. Gradually they left the field, each carrying their share of the kill.

The appearance, as a memory, of the events of that day lead me to reflect on questions that were not immediately connected with what I had seen. I was a child – about 5 – when the day happened, so childhood was surely an important part of my attempt to understand how the various pieces were joined together. It may be that the corner itself took the form of proto-memories, a kind fluid architecture that rearranged itself on entering my consciousness.

Whatever the reason I began to wonder about that moment we become aware of power and politics and how they differed from one another. At this point I had no idea that the memory of the killing and my intellectual concerns about power were part of a structure of cruelty that I too had been a part. (Sorry about the pretentious label. I will come up with a better one.)

The first power is Political Power which lay outside the window corner and was the province of the domestic rhythms of the house, such as meal times, that would override whatever imaginative journey I might be engaged in. Political power is always part of an institution whose modus operandi is to work towards creating a unifying order. You become part of political power by obeying it.

The second form of power differentiates rather than unifies and so is suited to the solitary occupant of a windowsill corner. It transforms the gentle reveries of this ideal corner into a place where cruelty can show itself. It is one that brings together the killing and my place in my windowsill corner. It is a power that is creative rather than coercive. It is a power that draws together the sight of animal blood and guts with the killers and the observer to complete the structure of cruelty mentioned earlier. But what is it that can be seen?

What we see is a bloody slaughter at the hands of the farm labourers. It lasted for about an hour and when it had finished blood covered the hands and clothes of the farm labourers. What I've called a structure of cruelty is close to the endless killings that the Marquis de Sade describes in his mad books. He argued that the weak, the innocent and the virtuous were an incitement to the powerful to initiate violence. De Sade brings the two poles of cruelty together, arguing that the presence of an indifferent witness to such destruction completed the scenario of cruelty. Rather than the infliction of physical cruelty there is the indifferent observation of it. Power had placed me in such a way that I was able to watch the killing from a secure place, a place that rendered me indifferent to the events in the field. My memory had registered neither horror nor delight, neither curiosity nor flight. Power had placed me in such a way that I was able to watch the killing in a safe place. Surely the power that constructs a neutral 'window' to witness cruelty is one of the most common forms of cruelty to be found in the 20th century.

In a recent review of the film *Blonde* the author asked that if one were watching a film that was 'cheap and nasty' would one be marked by something that was also cheap and nasty? Had I been marked by witnessing the cruelty inflicted on the rabbits? In some way drawn into the death of the rabbits? It maybe like being in the *presence* of cruelty rather than behaving in a cruel manner. Being in the presence of cruelty does not lead to an individual becoming cruel. It is more an *Introduction* to cruelty in general, a stain that is absorbed as part of our being, a door, or an echo. It hadn't been for the surfacing of the questions about childhood and power I would have probably progressed no further. The twining of a rabbit slaughter with the atrocities of the twentieth century surely demeans all those individuals murdered by one lunatic after another. But reverence for the dead is not the same as trying to understand the fate of all those who have perished inside what I've called, rather pretentiously, the structure of cruelty. So dreadful has the history of Europe in the 20th century been, so all pervasive has this history of mass murder been that a measure of the pretentious may be the only way of understanding what has happened when observation and killing, indifference, drama and bloodshed come together as they did in the killing of the rabbits.