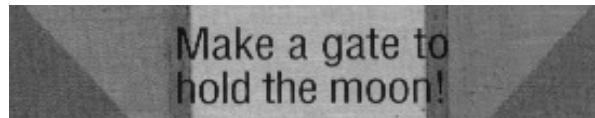


WILLIAM PENSINGER

William Pensinger was one of the presenters at the first Baltimore seminar-dialogue in 1997. Together with his wife, Cong Huyen Ton Nu Nha Trang, a Vietnamese scholar and poet, he authored one of the most remarkable ‘novels’ of our time: *The Moon of Hoa Binh* (see the web site www.peaknet.org/webpages/autopoy/index.html). In this novel, he makes an intensive investigation into the reality experienced in earlier ‘animistic’ cultures, exploring as he goes the recent history of Vietnam, the nature of art in the twentieth century, quantum mechanics on the macroscale, and many radical issues such as ‘multi-value’ and ‘identity-transparency’. Working in military intelligence during the Vietnamese war and later learning the traditional art of Japanese landscape gardening he became acutely aware of the radically different world view of early Asiatic cultures and its relevance to many conceptual-perceptual breakthroughs in the west at the turn of the century. He is one of the few people to understand and embrace Bennett’s concept of three kinds of time and his insight into multi-value is an independent addition to Bennett’s systematics.. His characters reflect his insights into identity-transparency, set in vivid reconstructions of life in Vietnam. He includes some detailed observations from his experiments with ‘walking meditation’ that are some of the most profound reflections on ‘self-remembering’ to be found anywhere. We urge all our readers to read his book (obtainable through the web site given above). This short essay was written for our newsletter.



OBJECT AND SUBJECT

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In traditional Asian cultures, directions -- left and right -- were referenced from the point of view of the implicitly animistic object, not that of the subject viewing the object. A Westerner receiving directions involving landmarks would generally take a series of wrong turns. Likewise, perhaps, regarding directions relative to realms of the spirit— because the notions of identity diverge so decisively: identity transparency in old East, individual identity in post-Renaissance West. Difficulties in comprehending this difference are compounded because identity transparency is not a particular state of the subject, as the Westerner accustomed to inanimate objects instinctively supposes, but a state of the {object : subject :: subject : object} occasion in undivided gestalt.

“Everything becomes confused and blended into one. The state of everything is essentially precarious. Their aspect is elusive and affords no hold for us to seize. This curious vision of the Universe explains some beliefs which otherwise would be hardly conceivable. Each individuality being very badly defined, its limits are wavering, extensible. They do not confine within the individual himself, but overlap

him and encroach on his surroundings. Under these conditions, it is as difficult to discern the individual from the group to which he belongs as to discern him from everything that touches him or reminds of himself. With these concepts, we may understand that the Universe must appear as an inextricable entanglement of reciprocal influences where persons and things, in a perpetual state of instability, become confused together while borrowing mutually their qualities.”

These words, describing the state of identity transparency characteristic of peasant animism, were written in 1912 by the French anthropologist, Giran, (*MAGIE ET RELIGION ANNAMITES*, Paris: Challamel) and translated into English during the 1960s by Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Khac Kham. While today, there is much concern about subject being regarded as object—sex object, laborer as commodity fetish, whatever—in the past, object was often regarded as subject. Object as subject has been denigrated by social psychology by anthropology, as “contagion” as “participation mystique”: the primitive mind, via psychological projection, transfers its own subjective contents onto the object—and then perceives those contents in transference as if actual attributes of the object. Indeed, inability to distinguish between the subjective and object is treated as the hallmark of primitive mind and some psychoses. Even Buddhism negatively so regards, as this concatenation of object and subject is considered the root of all suffering: attachment. High culture always demeans animism. We say subject and object, rather than object and subject, for “good” reason. But is object and subject object as subject or object in subject?

The Germans were once an animistic people, and this history is reflected in their language. *Einfuhlung*, empathy, is low-grade contagion low-grade participation mystique: to empathize is to identify with subjective attributes perceived as residing in an object of perception: object as subject in empathic resonance—the identification is just not allowed to get out of hand. *Umwelt*, own-world, is a different thing a different state altogether—all to gather. Awareness of threat, rather than resonance, is the context within which to map parameters of ones own-world, ones *Umwelt*. Fear of death is dread, dread of losing the attributes of being: being for the self, self-being, being itself. But so often we humans are willing to set aside fear of death at the prospect of denial, denial of what we have eaten, psychologically eaten: the beloved, the fatherland, the cherished belief, the motherland, the cause, the revered shibboleth. Threat to these—even their mere verbal abuse—is received as denial of the actual attributes of being itself, as assault on the being of oneself, as existential denial. Fright. Flight. Fight. We experience a little death, we simultaneously are willing to risk the big death, when what we have identified with the self is subject to denial: object in subject. The own-world is a world of objects introjected, objects brought into the subject, consumed as fetish as theater as totem as building me-opposed-to-them. My own-world as me. Objectification of the subject, rather than subjectification of the object. Instead of theater beneath the skirt (sex object: she stoops to conquer), the stage strutting and fretting within the thespian (existential subject: he eats to fight). Subject and object, object and subject: which is which?

On the outskirts of Bangkok there is an old house, a house made of teak in Thai style with multiple levels, multiple terraces, many roofs, separate structures interconnected by ramps of the inner garden hanging pomelo and papaya and plum and persimmon, durian, mango and milk-breast fruit. Near the door to the highest sleeping pavilion is a large pierced carving—3 by 4 meters—forming the frontal wall. One will walk past this layered cut-out relief dozens of times, momentarily stopping perhaps, registering only a confusion of abstractions, an entanglement of all shapes blended into one,

wavering, precarious, a collection of aspects elusive and affording no hold, until suddenly—object as subject!—the image appears in awareness: A giant cicada superimposed upon a farmer squatting on a rice paddy dike, whose knees and thighs are the shoulders and torsos of two straining water buffalo surging forward at the viewing subject out of a valley of rice rimmed in circling hills stitched of bristling undergrowth. But the figures will not remain resolved! They become confused together borrowing mutually their qualities, appearing as an inextricable entanglement of reciprocal influences, persons and things in a perpetual state of instability confused together borrowing mutually their qualities, confused together, confused until suddenly—object in subject!—reappears the confusion of abstractions, all shapes blended into one, wavering, precarious, a collection of aspects: {object : subject :: subject : object, object : subject :: subject : object . . . n}.