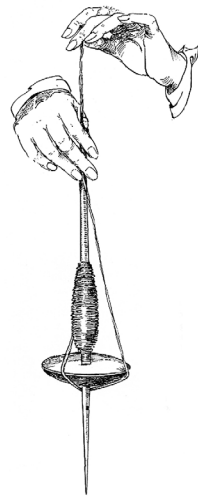


IMAGES OF PRECISION

A Phenomenology of the Precise

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*Knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world.*ⁱ

Italo Calvino

*There is no other knowledge than that of the particular.*ⁱⁱ

Louis Aragon

Prologue

Certain words conjure images. The images build up. If the images are good, they illuminate the word; something like a picture forms.

Each 'illumination' picks out some facets, leaves others in shadows. As a crystal glittering under circling lights, ever changing, so the word surrounded by its constellation of images – always renewed, never stable, with each turn revealing more.

It is in this way that I would like to summon a picture of a word. That word is the word 'precision'. It is one of those words that causes an eruption of images.

There is no argument as such. This is not what I want to do. Rather I am trying to pull together threads, to weave something loosely, somewhat in the manner that this is accomplished in the movies.

In the movies the technique of montage is used to 'make a point'. The technique works by the juxtaposition of images to create associations and contrasts. Links build up one on another, looping back on themselves, multiple threads of association can emerge and run parallel, contradictions are easily accommodated. The form is necessarily loose, made of fragments – a sequence of 'concrete-particulars'.

This is how I hope my images will function: as a kind of montage sequence. The subject emerges gradually and from multiple angles: a work of hints and clues.

So I have gathered together a collection of images about this word. Some are my own, some belong to others.

Here they are.

Images

Part 1

On an architect's drawing board, a white sheet of paper. A pencil's sharpened point touches the surface; it starts to move.

The brief descriptions I read in *A Dictionary of Ballet Terms* conjure little dancing figures in my mind that execute their clipped motions before vanishing in a swirl.

*With the right leg raised in front she throws the leg round to the side, rising onto the left toe, and whips the right foot in to the left knee as she begins to turn.*¹

In a room in the Museum of Modern Art in New York I stand before a drawing of a ruffled sea, meticulously crafted in minute pencil dots on paper. A work by Vija Celmins. Slight soft-focus from a distance, each tiny point swims into view as I approach.

A tapestry. A pattern of two repeated symbols, circles and vertical strikes, expands from top down: two paired circles at the pinnacle, each lower row with more circles, more strikes; the whole looking like a Christmas tree. The symbols record the quarter and half-hourly chimes of a church bell near the artist's studio - a record of the act of counting. It is a work by Aligiero Boetti. It was hand embroidered by his wife in 1974. Its title: *The Tree of Hours*. Every stitch in this dazzling fabric is like a particle of time. The whole cloth a vast field of instants, each delicately folded into the mesh for safekeeping. The lightness of the piece vanishes, and the sheer mass of seconds, minutes, and hours piled up seems a crushing weight: the air sags. Blink, and the heaviness dissipates, and all the little stitches shimmer and scintillate like shifting sands again.

*In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's dress... Flaubert saw the whole of the Sabara. For him, every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains.*²

I remember the light of New England. It was crystalline. Midday, at ninety degrees; brilliant white. Every ridge in the wood grain showing, all the gran-

ules in the concrete sidewalk glinting, each leaf in the tree glinting: a mass of jingling crystals. All was teeming, composed of countless particles.

*The dancer springs and throws her feet wide apart to either side or to front and back and closes on landing.*³

Around each brick in the wall, crisp shadows are drawn by the hard, bright, sunlight. Each brick is exactly delineated and the wall dissolves into its parts. Yet it has never appeared more whole, more one wall.

*The ray of sun suddenly entered the office... an extremely sharp, almost colourless blade of light that sliced the dark floor, quickening the old nails over which it passed.*⁴

A fingertip circles around the lip of a cut-glass bowl. A piercing note reverberates.

*The dancer turns steadily on the spot on one foot, moving the heel inch by inch.*⁵

Light that comes in shafts: through a crack in the mountains, or a break in the clouds.

The edge of a sliver of glass

*The shadows on the road were as still as if they had been put there with a stencil, with slanting pencils of sunlight.*⁶

In King's College, Cambridge, the great gothic chapel on one side, a secluded cloistered lawn. The tracery of the chapel's roof casts filigree shadows across the grass. In the lawn live tiny spiders, too small to see. The lawn is interlaced with threads that connect blade to blade: a vast mesh. The light of a low sun rakes the lawn, and the wind blows the blades of grass to and fro. Then tiny slivers of light, the slightest sparks, refract in the silk's transparency. The motion flashes catch in the corner of an eye. These miniscule

strands of light, collected in webs oriented across the sun's rays, dart back and forth across the length of the silken threads, like loose beads on a string tilted this way and that. The lawn sparkles. It resembles a green sea glittering in a hard, white light. And the ground seems to dissolve underfoot.

*With one leg raised, the dancer springs from the supporting leg, which rises to beat beneath the raised leg.*⁷

Wind ruffled, shivers pass over the surface of a lake in spring.

All over the body of Cerberus a slight texture of fine hair chiseled, the hairs following closely the rippling musculature. Bernini's *Rape of Proserpina*.

Goose pimples, prickling hairs, the ridges of scarified skin. Fine patterns of dots, blips, incised flicks and lines. The eye latches onto discreet points of intensity, skittering across the surface, tracing contours.

*The dancer appears to glide on her toes, picking them up minutely in quick succession.*⁸

Sea of sand glittering in the shimmering heat-haze of the desert air, mirror of rippling water sparkling madly in the midday light.

*A hop off one foot while the other is held in position.*⁹

In a glass of water a sugar cube, into a pool of grains, collapses.

An etching is prepared: the scratching tool cuts the dull, waxed skin of the metal plate; beneath, exposed, the copper sparkles.

Olympia reclines, around her throat wearing a black ribbon choker; against her skin a little pearl drop rests delicately in the suprasternal notch of her neck. Edouard Manet.

*The soaking, ice-cold absorbent cotton pressed into the insects lemurian head; the subsiding spasms of its body; the satisfying crackle produced by the pin penetrating the hard crust of its thorax; the careful insertion of the point of the pin in the cork bottomed groove of the spreading board.*¹⁰

Ranged along the sides of a barrel vaulted, top-lit gallery: countless plaster casts of classical sculpture. The Museo Gipsoteca of Antonio Canova. Everything, walls, ceiling, plinths, sculpture, is white – the dusty, just off-white of plaster. The light is bright, soft and white; the shadows diffuse and never more than grey. The room is cool. All the casts are bespeckled with little black points, the tips of iron studs inserted all over their plaster surfaces. The dots float in the whiteness of the atmosphere. They disrupt the evenness of space, the air itself seems to shiver.

*The atmosphere, like a flower, had closed its petals. And in the composition of space itself, a different interrelationship of something like planes had changed and fragmented the way that sounds, lights and colours use space.*¹¹

In the silent stillness, a dust mote suspended in a sunbeam

*Standing or dancing on the tips of her toes.*¹²

In my mind's eye this image recurs: a sheet of glass falls onto a steel grating above me; around me the smashed pieces fall in a glittering shower.

*I looked at a film of sand I had picked up on my hand, when I suddenly saw the exquisite beauty of every little grain of it; instead of being dull, I saw that each particle was made up on a perfect geometrical pattern, with sharp angles, from each of which a brilliant shaft of light was reflected, while each tiny crystal shone like a rainbow... The rays crossed and recrossed, making exquisite patterns.*¹³

Vermeer's brush performed the role of a sunbeam, catching on the sparkling edges of things.

*Prick your fingertips and use the blood for ink.*¹⁴

An illustration on papyrus of the Psychostasis. This is the judgment of souls in Egyptian myth, a central image in the Book of the Dead. The heart of the deceased is weighed. The god Anubis checks the measuring scales with a plumb line to ensure their symmetry. Also present are Thoth, who is inscribing the result in writing, and Maat, guarantor of precision. On one dish the heart, opposite a single feather – plucked for the purpose from Maat's headdress. This feather is shown placed in the dish on the very tip of its quill, perfectly upright. And balanced there it is still, two thousand years later.

*Throwing the right leg in front, the dancer springs forward off the left, and at the height of the jump turns her body sharply to the left, to face in the opposite direction, landing with the left leg raised in front of her.*¹⁵

A spinning top whirls on the table: the slightest wobble, then a rebalancing.

*Now and then, shed by a blossoming tree, a petal would come down, down, down, and with the odd feeling of seeing something neither worshipper nor casual spectator ought to see, one would manage to glimpse its reflection which swiftly – more swiftly than the petal fell – rose to meet it; and, for the fraction of a second, one feared that the trick would not work, that the blessed oil would not catch fire, that the reflection might miss and the petal float away alone, but every time the delicate union did take place, with the magic precision of a poet's word meeting halfway his, or a reader's, recollection.*¹⁶

A Mother's Duty, a work by Pieter de Hooch. A child rests her head, face buried, in her mother's lap, hands on her mother's knees supporting her forward leaning body. The mother bends over slightly, head tilted, gently going through her daughter's hair, meticulously picking out lice. In the sober interior they carry out their silent work in the light from a high window. Time slips quietly by unnoticed. As the mother picks out tiny points of white with the ends of her nails, so the artist, in white paint, picked out flecks of light with the tip of his brush: on the glazed tiles of the floor, on the glistening copper of a bed pan, on the knuckles and cuticles of the woman's hands, on the little beads on her daughter's dress. Nit-picking, it's a metaphor for painting.

*There is a special professional twist of the wrist immediately after the butterfly has been netted which is quite fetching.*¹⁷

The hands of angels in renaissance paintings. The careful gestures of those with instruments: little finger slightly lifted, head tilted; with thumb and forefinger plucking the strings of guitars; fingertips pressed on the air-holes of flutes, or poised above the air-holes.

*The movement they made as they drew the thread sideways and upwards with every stitch reminded me of things that were so far back in the past that I felt my heart sink at the thought of how little time remained.*¹⁸

Her needle punctures the fabric, she passes her hand around and draws it through from the other side, turning the needle in her fingers, pricks the next hole along the seam-line and threads the needle back up through it; as she pulls, the loop of loose thread gets gradually tighter, tighter, tighter, till with a final gentle tug, into a stitch, the little circle closes.

*The dancer throws the front leg forward and springs, immediately throwing the supporting leg forward as well, so that it rises as the other descends and then closes in front.*¹⁹

The glaze on a Chinese stoneware pot. It is subtle and filmy, in between matt and gloss, it has a slightly speckled appearance. Slight variations in its thickness, where it has pooled in the creases or slipped off the ridges of the crisp form, attest to its original liquid state. The body is opaque with just the slightest surface translucence. Brittle yet softened, the texture delicate as the interior of eggshell. It looks as if it would crumple like thick paper rather than smash like china.

*The raised, pointed foot of the working leg is lowered so that it pricks the floor and then rebounds upward.*²⁰

The unfurling of rose petals in time-lapse, the scattering of oil on water.

One cannot tell, before a glass of water, where the glass begins and the water ends. Where they touch, they seem to melt together. There is something intimate in the meeting of glass and water.

The closeness of the eye and the eyelid

*The various points that a butterfly successively occupies in space are various things which, to my astonished eyes, remain visible in space.*²¹

Fingers scrabbling for the broken fragments, sliced on the splintered pieces, and into the mess, glistening droplets, blood spatters.

*He went into the woods and did it with a razor, sitting in a ditch. A broken razor flinging them backward over his shoulder the same motion complete the jerked skein of blood backward not looping.*²²

Saint Francis receives the stigmata. Lines connect him to the crucified Christ hovering above: straight, thin lines, precisely edged, from wound to wound. Painted in scarlet against an equiluminant ground, the rays vibrate optically. They transfix the beholder's eye, as they pierce the saint's flesh.

*The dancer, who is standing on both feet, springs into the air and lands on one foot.*²³

The building is by Mies. Crown Hall. The handrails, the mullions, and transoms, are thin as cheese-wire steel. The touch of hard steel on naked glass, thrill of contact.

*I saw a glint of water and two masts, and a gull motionless in mid-air, like on an invisible wire between the masts.*²⁴

*One leg is extended behind the dancer with straight knee and pointed foot, the supporting leg either bent or straight. The body is held erect... the dancer leans down to the ground to form a line inclining downwards from the raised back foot to the outstretched hand.*²⁵

Part 2

Before me is a drawing. The drawing is the work of a student. It is a study in technique. It was drawn in 1944 at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). The tutor who set the exercise was Mies.

A few, meticulously ruled lines in black ink distributed across a sheet of just off-white Bristol board. The ink is absolutely black. It sits just on the surface making slight ridges, not absorbed, its edges sharp; at the ends of the lines no trails or blobs. The lines are of different lengths, at varying inclinations, crisscrossing, outlining no particular form, but composed together with the greatest care. The acute intersections describe myriad triangles. The lines vibrate; the page shivers with a static charge.

Drafting. The fine tip of an isograph pen held lightly but firmly against the side of a steel rule, sliding - ink glittering. The pen is sharp, it slices; ink flows. The sound it makes as it passes over the paper, like a sword sliding out of its sheath. Starts slow, gets faster. Time gathers in the spool of ink running, coagulating in seconds. The line drawn as one draws a thread out - pulled tense across the surface.

The movement of the hand and the arm perfectly coordinated: one smooth motion, wrist held still. The grip of the fingers nicely calculated: pen held just off perpendicular - cant it slightly in the direction of travel, say five degrees. The speed of the draw adjusted to the texture of the paper. Too slow and the line wobbles, the ink pools; too fast the line jumps and scratches. The posture of the drafter - muscles, tendons, ligaments all tensed, holding poise. Over the vertiginous depth of the white paper bending, back arched towards the point of the pen: the moment the tip touches the sheet, from then on trapeze.

Drawing is a high-wire act. The pleasure of drawing is the pleasure of the acrobat. On a tightrope, one leg askew, arms akimbo, on his toes poised, quite still. Till with daring he performs careful, graceful movements and sudden feats of balance, at the edge of space - on a line - dancing.

To fix a right angle in the whiteness of the page: take aim. The line drawn meets the tip of the second line already present, at ninety degrees, with point-perfect accuracy - an electric contact flash; spark of precision. This is line marksmanship.

Lines multiply and the surface tension rises. As around each fault in a crystal stresses gather, so around the inky inclusions in the whiteness of the paper a field of forces twists and stretches. Perfection is the point just before it shatters.

Composition is fragile, perfection brittle. To know when to add no more.

Just at the end the pen slows, the tension builds – suspense of the conclusion. Breath held for extra steadiness, the climax – the slight flick back to ensure exact finitude.

Epilogue

Perhaps I might unpick a few threads. Among the scenes that have just flitted past, certain images, certain juxtapositions and particular actions recurred. I do not want to explain each and every pattern that I see, but I might mention some thoughts that occur to me.

When I look at paintings, old paintings mostly, I have always taken an especial pleasure in inspecting the subjects' hands. Some appeared earlier, such as those of the angel players, or of the attentive mother de-lousing her daughter's hair. Others that now come to mind include those of Vermeer's careful lacemaker, or of Caravaggio's boy bitten by a lizard, or of the countless women who sit sewing in Dutch interiors. The gestures of these hands seem somehow all related, the movements they perform repeat: plucking; picking; pressing on a point with a fingertip, or recoiling from a point, pricked; the side to side of combing; the rhythmic up and down of sewing; the twisting of a spindle. In all these motions the subjects' concentration is focused on the delicate motions of their five finger-tips, in other words they are involved in a point. And most of these gestures associate with specific positions and movements that anyone who draws or paints will recognize. I think for instance of the touch of a fingerprint in ink, or the oscillations of pencil shading, or the twirl of the brush rolled between thumb and forefinger that winds a thin, plaited skein of paint across a surface. Such acts leave traces that in turn reveal to the beholder of the finished work the forces and gestures involved in its making.

Whenever I look at Vermeer's 'The Lacemaker', I always think of it as an allegory of the artist's own technique. Tracery of paint, the scarlet threads that spill out onto the tabletop, points and pricks of lights put there with the end of a single-hair brush, a painterly filigree, the girl bends intently over, positioning pins and weaving threads from little bobbins, brushwork. As the eyes follow the lines our gaze becomes entangled in the threads; we are drawn into the work.

A contemporary artist, Vija Celmins, whose scintillating pencil drawing of the sea appeared in the fourth fragment above, has spoken of her particular method:

*You can pin the drawing to the paper on the point. Each point is like a point of consciousness. So it's like a record of having been there.*²⁶

In this manner, Celmins relives the images she transcribes through each delicate touch of the sharpened lead on the paper. And she has stated explicitly that she expects her experience, mental and physical, to be relived

again, through these traces, by those who come before her drawings in the future.²⁷ As Nabakov pinned butterflies to the spreading board, so the artist pins little fragments of herself to the paper: the drawings, storehouses to survive a vast ocean of time. Here is the labour of the fear of death – Celmins will live on vicariously in the minds and bodies of her audience through this peculiar communion.

Those motions of the hands that have always fascinated me reveal themselves. They are the gestures of enchantment, the tantric motions of the sorcerer. They are evidence of that ancient metaphor that links together art, weaving, time, narrative, and spells. I said these movements fascinate me. The word is entwined in the language of magic and weaving: bewitched, ensnared, entranced, enchanted, spellbound. To fascinate means to cast a spell, to capture and hold still. But of course the pin killed the butterfly.

In a series of paintings produced in 1947, Jackson Pollock sought to paint like a shaman, to use his brush like a wand, to weave magic out of loops and flicks of paint. As T. J. Clark has pointed out, he expressed this clearly in the series of titles he selected for the work: *Magic Lantern*, *Enchanted Forest*, *Phosphorescence*, *Sea Change*, and *Full Fathom Five* – the last two quotes from Ariel's song in *The Tempest*. As Clark has suggested, these titles are

*meant to establish the basic tenor of the new body of work and encourage viewers to look at it through Ariel's eyes. Which is to say, look through the paintings' superficial roughness and materialism and see them as magic – spells or disguises of some sort, fanciful, filigree, made out of nothing.*²⁸

As the paint dances, Pollock dances. Entranced, we are captives in his finely woven, shimmering web. The web is neither exact nor accurate, as such, but it is precise. The precision is phenomenal. It is the precision of sensations, the precision of a magic touch. And what could require more precision than the dangerous art of sorcery? The fates must have needed all their skill to weave their coiling tapestry.

I will leave you with a final fragment that slipped through the net earlier, which I think, somehow, condenses into a single image much of what I have just been discussing. It has, therefore, always seemed to me a special emblem of the feeling of precision:

At her spinning wheel, Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger on the spindle tip.
For a thousand years protected by the thorns of roses.



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