Chapter Three

The Fly’s Eye: The Composite Self

As Anthony Wood laments in An Instance of the Fingerpost, Iain Pears’s novel about the philosophical revolution in seventeenth-century Oxford, “[T]he infallible philosophical method seems inadequate when it comes to problems in which motion derives from people rather than dead matter.” Even in the twenty-first century, we are more accurate predicting the orbits of comets than predicting the motions of human individuals. Why the difficulty? If people are people just as apples are apples, why should the “infallible philosophical method seem inadequate” for explaining “motion deriving from people rather than dead matter”? And what about that word “seems”—is it ever possible to overcome that inadequacy and if so, how?

For Aphra Behn and writers with her preoccupations, the problem lay in the idea of the self. “Dead matter” has a certain integrity, stability, and predictability, but the self does not. Behn’s narratives use point of view to expose both the instability of the self and the dangers of building on a false notion of selfhood. The problem of the unstable, unreliable self attracted other philosophers and other novelists as well, thinkers and writers with other questions and solutions. Among them was Jane Barker. Barker’s narratives both recognize the impossibility of explaining, in Pears’ terms, human motion and propose a solution for the limited ability to establish knowledge inhering to any individual self. Using frame narratives, Barker’s narrators show that the self is capable of self-knowledge but not complete or fully accurate knowledge of others; for that, an individual must collect insight from a variety of unreliable sources to extract what is useful and synthesize it into something approximating—and only approximating—knowledge. Nesting one view of the world within another, Barker’s Galesia trilogy accepts the fallibility of the self but proposes a remedy in the aggregation of fallible selves. Just as the fly’s eye provides a view of the world, incomplete but the best the fly can do, so frame narrative offers a composite view of human nature that is both incomplete but the best that any single self can achieve.

Barker’s narratives draw on a strain of thought in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century natural philosophy that recognized the
problems of the perceiving individual and addressed the need to remedy the flaws of perception and intellect bedeviling human beings. While there could be no doubt of a phenomenon—the bird in the air pump died, the comet appeared, the young man whispered sweet nothings, the young woman blushed—just what everyone perceived in the course of its happening was not inevitably exactly the same. Similarly, making knowledge from that data was an internal problem, a problem with and within the self, because the intellect was also fallible. For many English natural philosophers as well as their friends on the Continent, the solution to such problems was the group. Whatever the individual endeavor of the self might be, its discoveries could not be considered knowledge until corroborated by the community, until validated by a group of “modest witnesses.” Knowledge of the event would therefore be comprised not of a single fact, but of an amalgamation of perceptions combined to make a fact. For experimental philosophers, “solutions to the problem of knowledge are embedded within practical solutions to the problem of social order,” Steven Shapin and Simon Shaffer point out in *Leviathan and the Air Pump*; knowledge has “consensual foundations.”

Joseph Glanvill asks in *Scepsis Scientifica*, “For if we were yet arriv’d to certain and infallible Accounts in Nature, from whom might we more reasonably expect them then from a Number of Men, whom, their impartial Search, wary procedure, deep Sagacity, twisted Endeavours, ample Fortunes, and all other advantages, have rendered infinitely more likely to have succeeded in those Enquiries[?]” The group, a combination of flawed minds and flawed perceiving organs, contributed to the making or recognizing of knowledge by dint of number, that is, of probability. Even if the substance did not feel as cold to me as it did to you, we agree that it was cold. Add in George and Gracie’s perceptions of cold, and now we have knowledge. Modest witness + modest witness + modest witness = knowledge. As Donna Haraway points out, building an epistemology on the notion of a group of modest witnesses is as much a constitutive act as creating an epistemology built on the idea of a single “modest witness.”

Although scholars and critics have often focused on the “modest witness” as an individual, in fact the role of the individual was in tension with the role of the group. Peter Dear notes that part of the Royal Society’s success lay in its aggregating force, with the effect that the “cooperative investigation of nature both shaped and was made possible by the new forms of natural knowledge.” Shapin and Shaffer’s analysis of Robert Boyle’s conflict with Thomas Hobbes exposes how much Boyle’s epistemology depended on group consensus, and