Chapman University Chapman University Digital Commons

English Faculty Articles and Research

English

2016

The Taboo of Experience

Brian Glaser Chapman University, bglaser@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/english_articles

Part of the <u>American Literature Commons</u>, and the <u>Literature in English</u>, <u>North America Commons</u>

Recommended Citation

Glaser, Brian. "The Taboo of Experience." Pennsylvania Literary Journal 8.1 (2016): 49-60.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

The Taboo of Experience

Comments

This lyric essay was originally published in *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, published by Anaphora Literary Press, in 2016. Print issues are available at Amazon, as well as by subscription at the Anaphora Literary Press website. Submissions welcome.

Copyright

Anna Faktorovich

PENNSYLVANIA LITERARY JOURNAL VOLUME VIII, ISSUE I SPRING 2016

REVIEWS OF ACADEMIC BOOKS AND JOURNALS



Anna Faktorovich, PhD, Editor



Pennsylvania Literary Journal Volume VIII, Issue 1: Spring 2016

REVIEWS OF ACADEMIC BOOKS AND JOURNALS

Anna Faktorovich

ANAPHORA LITERARY PRESS AUGUSTA, GEORGIA



BRIAN GLASER

The Taboo of Experience

Abstract

A lyric essay discussing Henry James and cosmopolitanism from the perspective of a scholar visiting a German university.

One

There is a scene in Henry James's novel *The American* that fascinates me. I recognize myself in it but I cannot say how— or rather I cannot say which of the explanations that have occurred to me I accept, and it seems likely to me that there are explanations I have not discovered yet.

Christopher Newman, an American who has moved to Paris, has proposed to Claire de Cintré. She has accepted his proposal and then been convinced by her mother and her elder brother not to marry him. They describe him as an unacceptably "commercial person." Newman has travelled to the deathbed of Claire's other brother, Valentin, who has been shot near the heart in a duel. Valentin has been an advocate for Newman, and he responds to his mother's and brother's interference this way:

Then Valentin turned back again and found a certain force to press Newman's arm.
"It's very bad—very bad. When my people—when my race—come to that, it is time for me to withdraw. I believe in my sister; she will explain.

Excuse her. If she can't—if she can't, forgive her. She has suffered. For the others it is very bad—very bad. You take it very hard?
No, it's a shame to make you say so."
He closed his eyes and again there was a silence. Newman felt almost awed; he had evoked a more solemn spirit than he had expected. Presently Valentin looked at him again, removing his hand from his arm. "I apologise," he said. "Do you understand? Here on my death-bed. I apologize for my mother. For my brother. For the ancient house of Bellegarde. Voilà!" he added softly. (340)

Two

Winfried Fluck writes:

Aesthetic reception can be described ...
as a process of imaginary transfer between the reader
and the text, and this transfer itself shares
many elements of an intersubjectively conceptualized
process of recognition. This interaction may be described
as a dialogue between two narratives:
the narrative of the text and the narrative
of the reader. Its result is a subject position of nonidentity:
a double positioning in which we can be both ourselves
and somebody else at the same time.
In reading we move back and forth between
the two positions, and the recognition provided in,
and through, the act of reading is not tied exclusively
to either one of these positions.
It is the result of text and reader interacting. (60)

These interactions between reader and text are vital and sometimes unruly—
there is something of the personal, the confidential that cannot be kept away from them.
In her discussion of recognition in *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski writes, "In a mobile interplay of exteriority and interiority,

something that exists outside of me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am" (25). No form of experience can be extirpated from a discourse that so values and validates a unique response.

Three

It is only on a repeated reading— I teach this text most years—that this passage has become fascinating to me. So there may be some sense of the poignancy of dramatic irony at work. Valentin only dimly senses and Newman has no idea that the mother and brother—the Marquise and the Marquis have years earlier poisoned Valentin's father. "Do you understand?" Valentin asks. Only the returning reader, the invisible presence in the scene for whom all is foreknown, recognizes the depth to which this apology is appropriate and inadequate. The returning reader enters the scene as the more fitting auditor of the apology. It is knowledge without power.

Four

In "Thinking America," Herwig Friedl, a German intellectual with whom I apprenticed as a junior professor in Duesseldorf, draws on Heidegger's concept of a *Geschick*, a "dispensation of being," to gloss the ideas of Emerson and Dewey. They have heard "the *call* or address of Being in and as America" and Emerson, consequently, is the thinker of "the first post-metaphysical approach to thinking ever to occur" (132). In this account of the dispensation of America, two contradictory beliefs are held simultaneously. One is this:

The radical evasiveness of Being—
as thought by these two American thinkers—
necessitates unforeseeable and therefore contingent differences

because they so deeply respond to the basic feature of their vision: the absence of persistent identity in Being. (152)

The second commitment can be put more concisely. He calls it the "ontological necessity to let real difference be" (155).

The other is real, but identity is illusory.

So letting the other be means honoring the necessary falsifications of the mind, its distortion of the ceaseless flux of Being.

Only in the acknowledged other can Being be experienced as stable, though—it seems—always falsely.

Which perhaps we must keep secret from ourselves.

Five

My father was a Jesuit for twenty years. He received a doctorate in moral theology from a seminary in Frankfurt, where he lived for seven years. He taught me a few German phrases in my childhood.

He is in the hospital after a heart attack brought on by congestive heart failure, and he is in septic shock and will die soon. It has all been said—my love for him, my cherished memory of a happy walk with only him on a vacation in Virginia, my reassurances. I have called him beautiful and stroked his white hair across his cool forehead.

A great sense of sadness and gratitude wells up in me as I stand at his bedside. Tearfully I say, "Words are poor." Laboring for breath, his eyes almost closed, in a weak voice, he says, "Theologians' words are poor."

Six

Critics are in disagreement about the severity of James' anti-Semitism.
Jonathan Freedman has helpfully reviewed the controversy.
Maxwell Geismar sees the references to Jews in *The American Scene* to be deeply xenophobic.
Ross Posnock argues that James is not anti-Semitic at all; he "generates from the Jew a new model of subjectivity" (63).

Freedman takes a middle path, calling James' anti-Semitism real but "trivial." He offers one quote from *The American Scene*: "It was as if we had been thus ... at the bottom of some vast shallow aquarium in which innumerable fish, of over-developed proboscis, were to bump together, for ever, amid heaped spoils of the sea" (64).

When I was in high school in California
I learned a gesture from my classmates
on the basketball team.
To signify that someone was cheap—
the term was to be a Heeb—
they would bend their arms at the elbows
and place their fists just above the nose.
I had moved from a less bigoted though less diverse
part of the country: Michigan.
I was shocked by the callousness of their racism.
We had all read the diary of Anne Frank in eighth grade.

Seven

In an article on friendship in the Renaissance and classical world of Europe, James Helgeson offers this quote from Aristotle:

When we wish to see our own face, we do so by looking in the mirror, in the same way when we wish to know ourselves we can obtain that knowledge by looking at our friend. For the friend is, as we assert, a second self (17). A friendship can bring not only self-knowledge but also a change of identity, of being. Valentin has found someone to whom he can apologize for his family, for the "ancient house of Bellegarde." He can identify with Newman's American innocence of European classism.

With his apology he can internalize this innocence, and become more like his friend than he has yet dared to be.

Newman responds to his apology with silence:
"Newman for all answer took his hand and pressed it with a world of kindness" (340).

Perhaps he recognizes the way in which Valentin, on his deathbed, has become freer, the way his apology is spoken not for Newman but for himself, a discovery of the power of this relationship with a foreigner for him.

Eight

"A world of kindness."

It is James' description of a silent gesture.

But it is the closest that Newman comes to being a cosmopolitan, to leaving to the side his national identity and acting as an agent of a global community.

This freedom, too, is made possible by his friendship with a foreigner.

Cosmopolitanism is perhaps particularly tricky, difficult for an American. Here is the British scholar Berthold Schoene on the state of the matter:

Notably, both globalization and cosmopolitanisation have been apprehended as glib euphemisms for Americanisation. As Timothy Brennan alerts us, the sudden increase in the expression of well-intentioned cosmopolitan sentiments everywhere deserves careful intellectual scrutiny.

In Brennan's view the practitioners of what he calls 'cosmo-theory' cultivate far too optimistic a stance

towards the allegedly 'new' post-Cold War world order, blinding themselves to their own corporate instrumentality in providing convenient rhetorical cover for economic as well as cultural oppression and exploitation. Cosmopolitanism, as Brennan sees it, is invariably the carrier of 'a veiled Americanism.' (10)

Does an American become a cosmopolitan in a different way than a European?

Nine

A recurring criticism of Christopher Newman is that he thinks his fortune can buy him anything. He famously describes his hope to find a wife as a search for "the best article in the market" (71). He sees himself as the social equal of anyone.

The philosopher Robert Pippin has written a book about James. His argument is that many of James' American protagonists have an "unavoidable aspiration to a historically different life, a free life, a freedom inevitably and necessarily cooperative and somehow challenged, lacking for the agents, if not properly mutual" (58). This describes not Newman but Valentin. His apology for his family to Newman is an attempt to realize this mutuality.

Ten

There is a special challenge in German cosmopolitanism to metabolize the anti-Americanism that seeps into even this passage from Ulrich Beck's *Cosmopolitan Vision*:

Whoever asks from a cosmopolitan perspective what fuelled the global protest against the war in Iraq in many major cities across the world finds an answer in cosmopolitan empathy. The protests were driven by what one might call the 'globalization of emotion' (5-6).

This is quite plausible. He follows with this:

Everyone knows that the twentieth century witnessed an incredible refinement of weapons systems and we have learnt that the killing and dying continued unabated long after the peace treaties were signed (6).

Also true. As is, in its way, this:

And once television images of war and its victims are broadcast all over the world it becomes clear that violence in one corner of the globe incites the readiness to resort to violence in many others, so that the resulting military chain reactions can easily spin out of control (6).

The implausible phrase to me is "out of control." Who is in control of the state of the world? I am reminded here of Zizek's analysis of the structural role of the Jew in anti-Semitic political fantasy—the Jew is the element of the system which corrupts it from within, and without which it would function happily.

Eleven

In his discussion of Heidegger's anti-Americanism in "Thinking America," Friedl calls him a "European provincial" and declares that his prejudice "reveals the obvious, namely, that his opinions are infinitely less interesting than his thinking" (133).

Can there be an infinite distance between two points? Perhaps the impossibility of this measurement is meant to acknowledge the instability of the distinction between opinions and thinking?

Twelve

Probably there is nothing to be said on the subject of Heidegger and the Holocaust that hasn't already been said.

Yet each generation will have to work out for itself the terms of its thinking on this subject.

It's my understanding that Heidegger thought human beings a distinctive species—
that was the idea of *Dasein*.
Humans ask the question of their own being in a unique way.
That's why I find it particularly puzzling that in one of his few references to the Holocaust,
Heidegger said, "Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps" (Fontenay, 236). His interest in this comment was, we are told, in the corruptions of modern technology.
But the comparison must have been deliberately disarming, disappointing.

Friedl writes that in "Emerson thinking America, there is no human nature" (149). This presents us with an Emerson who is similar to the Heidegger of Deep Ecology, one who radically democratizes the creaturely world so that there is no preferred status for the human.

Thirteen

I was struggling to understand the effects of the Holocaust on philosophy, well into my second year living in Germany, when I taught with Professor Friedl a course on experimental poetics. In an early seminar session, he left behind his discourse in English and summarized his understanding of Heidegger: "Jedes Seiende ist ein Vollzug."

In the broken German that possessed me then, trying for a time not to think of the Holocaust, I heard this in a literal English: each being is a full train.

All deaths are, whatever else they might be, metaphors for the thinker's particular death—that is the nature of human beings. So in my broodings on the Holocaust

I came to hate metaphor, its inevitable insinuation into our thinking. I was haunted by language's inability to be strictly literal.

Fourteen

And there was this, also in the seminar, in a reading from the beginning of Dewey's *Art as Experience*, where he is quoting Coleridge:

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, not by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of the journey itself (3-4).

The irony of the phrase, the simultaneity of innocence in the author and shattering grief in the reader, committed as I was to post-metaphysical thinking, helped to drive me insane.

What makes humans special in a post-metaphysical culture? What makes Jews special in such a culture?

Fifteen

Metaphor's rebellion against the literal is a paradigm for each person's rebellion against his or her name. We want to be more than our names. One path of a life story is the repeated *agon* with the name, that by which one is known by others, that by which one will be known after death. And it is a rebellion against the source of one's name.

Sixteen

"What you do exceptionally well is to break questions open," Friedl said to me after one of the first seminars we taught jointly, making a gesture with his fingers opening out and displaying his palms.

My name is *Glaser*—glassmaker in German.

Some weeks later we were discussing Wallace Stevens' poem "Anecdote of the Jar." It goes like this:

I placed a jar in Tennessee, And round it was, upon a hill. It made the slovenly wilderness Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it, And sprawled around, no longer wild. The jar was round upon the ground And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere. The jar was gray and bare. It did not give of bird or bush, Like nothing else in Tennessee. (76)

Friedl drew a comparison with Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." "What does slovenly mean?" one student asked. Friedl gave a German term which I don't recall. "I looked it up," I said. "Its root is *sloef...*"

Seventeen

I suppose what I have learned in writing this essay is that there cannot be a complete severance between national identity and cosmopolitan identity. The relation is dialectical. It is appropriate, even necessary, to speak of German cosmopolitanism, Japanese cosmopolitanism, Guatemalan cosmopolitanism, American cosmopolitanism. Each citizen leaves behind his or her national identity in a particular way.

And the scene of pardon between Valentin and Newman is a dramatization of a scene that I can live through in order to conceive of myself as participating in the project of cosmopolitanism. To follow the Emersonian path of self-trust would be to identify with both Valentin and Newman and manage this scene inwardly.

But to whom do I apologise? To you.

References

- Beck, Ulrich. *Cosmopolitan Vision*. Trans. Ciaran Cronin. Maldin, Mass.: Polity, 2006. Print.
- De Fontenay, Elisabeth. "'In Its Essence the Same Thing." *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust*. Eds. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg. New Jersey: Humanities Press. 236-45. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *On Cosmpolitanism and Forgiveness*. Trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2005. Print.
- Felski, Rita. Uses of Literature. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. Print.
- Fluck, Winfried. "Reading for Recognition." *New Literary History* 44.1 (2013): 45-67. Print.
- Freedman, Jonathan. "Henry James and the Discourses of Antisemitism." *Between 'Race' and Culture*. Ed. Bryan Cheyette. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. 62-83. Print.
- Friedl, Herwig. "Thinking America: Emerson and Dewey." *Negotiations of America's National Identity*. Eds. Roland Hagenbüchle and Josef Raab. Tübingen: Stauffenberg Verlag, 2000. 131-157. Print.
- Helgeson, James. "'Alter Ego,' Identification, and Histories of the Self." *Nottingham French Studies* 47.3 (2008): 13-23. Print.
- James, Henry. *The American*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981. Print.
- Pippin, Robert. Henry James and Modern Moral Life. Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.
- Schoene, Berthold. *The Cosmopolitan Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. Print.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Vantage Books, 1982. Print.