

Reading 27 October-2 November 2013

A Week of Reading from . . .

William Eaton, *Zeteo* Executive Editor

27 October 2013: Brecht

When this feature, one of my favorite parts of *Zeteo*, was getting under way, I suggested to my colleagues:

Imagine you were strolling down Fifth Avenue or through Central Park and were taking pictures of people and scenes that caught your eye, or that you were remarking on them. It's the same thing here (with Zeteo is Reading). We are strolling through the world of writing, of words, and taking and remarking on phrases, descriptions, sayings, etc., that have caught our eyes.

Yesterday evening my stroll, with my son, took me to New York's Public Theater to see the **current production of Brecht's *A Good Person of Szechuan***. This is not the place to say more than that this proved to be one of the greatest nights of theater that I, an avid theatergoer, have had the great good fortune to enjoy. Hats off to Bertolt Brecht, to the Director Lear DeBessonet; to Melanie Joseph and her **Foundry Theatre**, which first staged the production; to the lead actor (the good person) Taylor Mac; to the other actors, including David Turner and Clifton Duncan; to the Composer and Musical Director César Alvarez; to the musicians Eric Farber, Ben Simon, Sammy Tunis and Lorenzo Wolff; to . . . I'll stop there.

As for words remarked upon, this is more a play for seeing than for quoting, but there are these excerpts from near the end (and from a translation. The Waterseller asks the three gods if they might be less demanding of human beings, if there might be "somewhat fewer rules."

"As for instance?" asks one of the gods.

"As for instance that only good will be required instead of love, or . . ."

"But that would be even more difficult, unhappy one."

"Or fairness instead of justice."

"But that would mean more work!"

"Then just propriety instead of honor."

"But, don't you see, that would mean *more* work, not less, you skeptic!"

(Tired, they wander on.)

28 October 2013: Madame Bovary

In 1857, Ernest Pinard prosecuted for licentiousness first Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and then Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. Flaubert and Baudelaire have proved to be on the winning side, and history has not been kind to either Pinard or to his arguments in these cases. A French friend, however, recently pointed out to me that the text of case against *Madame Bovary* offers a comprehensive and accurate (and anti-Realist) reading of the novel. A student could do worse than to first read Pinard's overview (or *Réquisitoire*) before tackling the novel itself. (Click for the [French text](#) offered online by la Bibliothèque Municipale de Lisieux.)

After describing the book in detail, Pinard concludes that the book is immoral "not because it paints the passions: hatred, vengeance, love," but because there is no one in the book who does or can condemn the immoral behavior. (I found myself reminded of a criticism my mother used to have of bleak movies: she could take the bleakness if and only if there was one good character to make the contrast, to offer reason to hope.)

From a [translation of Pinard's *Réquisitoire*](#) offered online, and without a translator's name, by Project Gutenberg:

Should it be in the name of conjugal honor that the book be condemned? No, for conjugal honor is represented here by a devoted husband who, after the death of his wife, meets Rodolphe and seeks to find upon the face of the lover the features of the woman he loved. . . . Should it be in the name of public opinion? No, for public opinion is personified in a grotesque being, in the Homais apothecary Will you condemn it in the name of religious sentiment? No, for this sentiment you see personified in the curate Bournisien, a priest as grotesque as the apothecary, believing only in physical suffering, never in moral, and little more than a materialist.

A little earlier in his speech Pinard has said:

Without doubt Madame Bovary died of poison; she suffered much, it is true; but she died at her own time and in her own way, not because she had committed adultery but because she wished to; she died in all the prestige of her youth and beauty; she died after having two lovers, leaving a husband who loved her, who adored her, who found Rodolphe's portrait, his letters and Leon's, who read the letters of a woman twice an adulteress,

and who, after that, loved her still more, even on the other side of the tomb.

We might say that Pinard helps us focus in on why *Madame Bovary* quickly became and has long remained a great favorite of women readers. It should also be noted that the French government's prosecutions of both this novel and of Baudelaire's book of poems immediately helped to increase the critical reputations and the sales of these works. But I would let Pinard and his anonymous translator(s) have the *almost* last words. In complaining of Flaubert's and of Realism's lack of restraint in depicting the passions and the corruption of human beings, Pinard, well in the spirit of Flaubert's novel proposes: "L'art sans règle n'est plus l'art ; c'est comme une femme qui quitterait tout vêtement." Art without rules is not art. It is like a woman who eschews clothing. Might one be tempted, for example, to say something similar of poetry without a metrical pattern or rhyme scheme?

29 October 2013: Machiavelli

For this can be said about the generality of men: that they are ungrateful, fickle, dissembling, anxious to flee danger, and covetous of gain. So long as you promote their advantage, they are all yours, . . . and will offer you their blood, their goods, their lives, and their children when the need for these is remote. When the need arises, however, they will turn against you.

Famous and indeed wise words from Machiavelli. What he ignores is that the generality of men (and women) do not think that *they* are ungrateful, dissembling, covetous, etc., and I now find myself curious to read about what Machiavelli thought of himself? Usually it is an other who holds the negative qualities, while we keep the positive ones for ourselves.

Credit

Machiavelli's words were encountered in an excellent overview of his work by Stewart Patrick (a Senior Fellow of the [Council on Foreign Relations](#)): "[Machiavelli: Still Shocking after Five Centuries](#)," *The National Interest*, September 25, 2013. *The National Interest* is published by The Center for the National Interest a Washington, D.C.-based public policy think tank originally called the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom.

30 October 2013: Touching Each Other's Surfaces

I am a latecomer to J. Paul Hunter's *Norton Introduction to Poetry*. It seems to be a very successful textbook; my copy is the sixth edition, and I think they're now on the ninth. Hunter's discussions of poetry may not have that much to offer students, but the collection of poetry on offer is wonderful and does poetry proud. For various reasons—to include the fact that for *Zeteo's* Fall 2013 issue I am working on an essay about other

forms of science, besides the standard one—one of the poems I was drawn to was [Carol Jane Bangs's "Touching Each Other's Surfaces"](#):

Skin meeting skin, we want to think
we know each other scientifically;
we want to believe
it is objective knowledge
gives this conviction of intimacy,
makes us say it feels so right.
That mole below your shoulder blade,
the soft hair over my thighs—
we examine our bodies with the precision
known only to lovers or surgeons,
all those whose profession is explication,
who have to believe their own words.
and yet, having memorized each turning,
each place where bone strains or bends,
each hollow, each hair, each failure of form,
we still encounter that stubborn wall,
that barrier which hides an infinite vastness
the most sincere gesture can't find.

Nor does emotion take us further
than the shared heat of bodies
aware of themselves,
the flattery of multiple desires.
We rest in each other's arms unexplained
by these currents of feeling rushing past
like ripples over a pool of water
whose substance never changes,
reflecting each wave, each ribboned crossing,
without being really moved.
We search each other's eyes so long
beyond our own reflections,
finding only the black centers,
the immeasurable interior we'll
never reach with candle,
never plumb with love.
Perhaps it is just this ignorance,
this absence of certainty, lack of clear view,
more than anything, brings us together,
draws us into and through each other
to the unknown inside us all,
that gray space from which
what we know of ourselves
emerges briefly, casts a transient

shadow across the earth
and learns to believe in itself just enough
to believe in some one else.

31 October 2013: Five Brief Readings for Halloween

In 1871, a very good year, the city distributed close to \$43,000 in public relief to 19,107 individuals. Four years later, in the depths of the troubles, the city stopped relief entirely. Private charities soon exhausted their funds, but the wealthy mayor adamantly declared that public works "belong to other countries, not ours." The commissioner of charities and correction could not have been more plain. Better a few should "test the minimum rate at which existence can be preserved" than to allow poverty to lose its terror. (Thomas Kessner, *Capital City: New York City and the Men Behind America's Rise to Economic Dominance, 1860-1900*)

The first world we find outside is, in part, a repository for the terror inside us, an elsewhere for those desires and objects that bring unpleasure. . . . [The] world we make outside is the . . . the place, or one of the places, where we put the objects and desires we wish did not belong to us. To be at home in the world we need to keep it inhospitable. (Adam Phillips, "First Hates: Phobias in Theory," in *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*)

Under German rule, the concentration camps and the death factories operated under different principles. A sentence to the concentration camp Belsen was one thing, a transport to the death factory Belzec something else. The first meant hunger and labor, but also the likelihood of survival; the second meant immediate and certain death by asphyxiation. This, ironically, is why people remember Belsen and forget Belzec. (Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*)

Courage has gone out of our race. Perhaps we never really had it. The terror of society, which is the basis of morals, the terror of God, which is the secret of religion—these are the two things that govern us. (Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

. . . when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about (T.S. Eliot, "East Coker")

1 November: Hedgehog Parenting

The Hedgehog Review has just sent me their fall issue, which is devoted to one of my favorite subjects: parenting. The whole issue looks great. The theme of what might be considered the lead piece, Carl Desportes Bowman's " Holding Them Closer," is as follows:

The quest for long-term connection with children has taken central stage. Parenting is still about formation, but its overriding concern has pivoted from formation to connection. One has only to consider parents' responses to the statement "I hope to be best friends with my children when they are grown" to know something new is happening at home. Almost three-quarters of today's parents of school-age children (72 percent) agree that they eventually want to be their children's best friends; only 17 percent disagree. The successful formation and launching of children still matters; it is just that parents don't want to launch them very far.

Carl Desportes Bowman is both Project Director of the Culture of American Families Project and the Director of Survey Research at *Hedgehog's* parent institution: the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia.

2 November: The Ideal (An Ideal)

It has been a pleasure to go back to W.T. Jones, *The Medieval Mind*, one of the volumes of his History of Western Philosophy series (Harcourt, Brace & World; the text seems to have been first published in 1952). Among other things, the pleasure of the reading has led me to wonder if such textbooks are not wasted on the young. It is after struggling with at least some of the original works, and with other aspects of life, that a reader can appreciate such a good synthesis. From the first chapter, on "The New Religious Orientation" (prior to the Middle Ages):

This sense of the common fatherhood of God led Jesus to emphasize the essential quality of all men—or rather, of all Jews, for there is little evidence that Jesus thought of teaching or having a message for any but his fellow Jews.

Plato and Aristotle would not have understood this point of view. The idea of the Greek moralists was exceptionally rich—the full and all-round development of a complete personality. But they thought this possible only for a small elite, even among Greeks. The basic moral problem for them was therefore a problem of selection: how, out of the mass of humanity, to find those capable of this kind of development.

In comparison with the Greek ideal, Jesus' view was, qualitatively speaking, narrow and limited—but it had two great advantages: It was genuinely altruistic and outgoing, and it was truly democratic. The good it envisaged was equally open to all. [The problem became] how to combine Greek insight into quality with the Christian emphasis on equality—how to create opportunity for all, rather than how to select the fortunate few.

With best wishes for the weeks of reading, and of living, ahead.