On the Unexpected

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1

When she was 11, Emily Dickinson sent the following letter to a friend: "My Plants grow beautifully — you know that elegant old Rooster that Austin thought so much of — the others fight him and killed him — answer this letter as soon as you can." Like many of Dickinson's best lines, these are breathtaking both in the shifts of subject, and how they fissure the ground beneath them, giving us an unexpectedly deep view, and into darkness (and with a sense of humor). Without wishing or being able to imitate Dickinson, I would like, nonetheless, to take her 11-year-old phrases as a model for how some essays could be

constructed. They would begin almost anywhere, with a mundane observation, which then opens out onto some aspect of our predicament—e.g. of our mortality or of the challenges of being a social animal—and closes with the emotional response (which would always be a desire for connection, for love?).

I take this to be a rough model, both in the sense that I am not ready to carve her in stone and in the sense that I am not interested in following this model slavishly, but rather approximately, in fits and starts. And, meanwhile, I have the sense that I am still caught up in my not dissimilar, but hardly new, Montaignais or Montaigbakhtinian ways.

2

Having heard of my admiration for Paolo Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* ("The Great Beauty"), a woman of my acquaintance rented the DVD and proposed that we watch it together. Midway through the viewing it became clear that she did care for the movie at all, and indeed it was not long before she was asleep. The next day she remarked that the movie had no "tension."

This was not the first time I had heard such a reaction. There are those who say that nothing happens in the film, and in **notes comparing *La grande bellezza* with *The Lady Vanishes***, I responded in one way to this charge—Can nothing be happening in a movie that includes the death of both the protagonist's first love and of the woman that he, now 65, is just beginning to love? Or in a movie in which a giraffe disappears in an ancient Roman bath?

It is of course possible, however, that a great deal could happen in a movie without there being any tension, and we might also note that tension can be tension-relieving; a lack of tension can be anxiety-provoking. I am reminded of a line from Pascal: « Quand un soldat

se plaint de la peine qu'il a, ou un laboureur, etc., qu'on les mette sans rien faire. » (When a soldier, worker, etc., complains about the difficulties of his life, give him nothing to do.)

On another level, my acquaintance was making a claim about movies: that they should have tension (or, more generally, a plot)—we should be engaged by our uncertainty about what is going to happen, to the protagonist in particular. If we said, by contrast, that *La grande bellezza* was about what the protagonist, now approaching old age, made of the life he had lived and was living, or about what we others—filmmakers and spectators—were making of his life, . . . This would involve a quite different kind of tension than what my acquaintance had in mind. And if we said that Sorrentino's movie was really, fundamentally about the beauty of Rome, . . . Hard to find a lot of tension there—unless, say, in what we might call the dilemma of beauty and empire building or the trilemma of beauty, building and mortality.

In *La grande bellezza* beauty may be found, for instance, in the scene of a performance artist smashing her head on the stone of a Roman aqueduct. We viewers feel a little, to some extent sexual, tension just prior to the smashing, because the artist is naked, we see the cleft of her vulva, and her red-dyed pubic hair features a hammer and sickle. And afterwards we may begin to appreciate or even feel the frustrations of this scene, of the modern longing for impact and the futility of most if not all efforts to achieve it. And there is certainly tension in frustration.

3

Hitchcock of course did a lot with tension—"suspense," as it is called in the case of his genre of movies. I noted in my earlier notes that it is interesting that Hitchcock is able to make us viewers feel tense when, were we to pause one of his movies and reflect we would realize that we had little doubt as to what was going to happen. (E.g.: Do we really think the governess-spy of *The Lady Vanishes* is going to end up dead? Do we think that the feuding young stars are not going to end up kissing in the movie's final scene?)

I began working on this piece with the idea that the tension of *La grande bellezza* could be found just here: in its departing from some standard expectations of how a movie will be organized. We need to be a little careful, however, insofar as *La grande bellezza* is a reprise of *La dolce vita*, and Sorrentino's structure and concerns could not seem at all unexpected to someone for whom Fellini's film came to mind. Instead of a plot, movies such as these offer a series of scenes, most, though not all of which involve the protagonist, and all of which put his life in a particular set of contexts. I think we can say that the filmmakers engage us in and give us tools for judging the life of the protagonist in a fairly straightforward ethical fashion. E.g.: Is he (the protagonist) making good use of his life? Can good use be made of a human life? (*Cf.*, Karl Kraus's quip that life is an effort that deserves a better cause.)

4

I am among those—and I do not imagine this group to be either small or rarefied—who when watching an American movie often know what is going to happen next, incident after incident, the whole 100 minutes through. We have watched enough of these movies to have learned all the basic patterns, all the possible plots. (I have a book at home that proposes

there are 36.) Similarly, like any number of sports fans, I can, before he says it, say exactly what a TV commentator is going to say after a play. The words I will blurt out—showing off to my son—will be exactly the same as those that are about to be broadcast. And, like any number of game-show contestants, if I hear two or three notes of a pop song, I can tell you what the pop song is.

Given all this, when I watch a movie or pick up a novel, I often have rather a thirst for the unexpected. (Not for the killing of a being admired or beloved; that is commonplace, but for such a full-throated and witty response: "answer this letter as soon as you can.") Indulging myself, ignoring *La dolce vita*, I would like to say that the charm of Sorrentino's film lies in its not conforming to standard expectations—e.g. in its not having what goes by the name of tension. If the familiar, the repeated (even repeated suspense) is comforting, the unexpected can be a relief.

The repetitive may be, or may become, if repeated enough, simply meaningless, or its only meaning may lie in the repetitiveness. The unexpected makes even the expected seem more noteworthy, distinguishable and worthy of consideration.

5

A favorite phrase of Jacques Derrida's, apparently, was *l'invention de l'autre*. A quick gloss: the invention of the other, or of *the* or *an* alternative, or of something—despite this idea of invention—independent of "me" or of us, something *seemingly* outside our power, outside even the power of our imaginations, beyond all our calculations, predictions, expectations. I take this idea to have a basis in narcissism or in the solipsism that has a person unable to fully accept that the world already includes other, autonomous beings besides her or him. *L'invention de l'autre* may be the narcissist's or solipsist's only hope (to escape from

repetitiveness and isolation. And I wonder if these experiences—of repetitiveness and of isolation—go hand in hand?)

For others, the other simply exists; it (or he or she) is an at times challenging or stupefying, at times wonderful, at times frightening part of life. The non-narcissist would think of there being not one but many others. But, to escape the confines, the repetitiveness, of his experience the narcissist must be able on his own (and in all his loneliness) to *invent* the other. "Invent"—this is rather more than "discover," "perceive" or "appreciate."

I have read that Derrida proposed that *l'invention de l'autre* could be done, for example, in psychoanalysis or through photography. Nowadays we engage rather more in the latter—peopling our own worlds or at least our storage capacities with images. I find myself thinking, too, of people who seek out pornographic photos or videos in order to get in touch with their own desire, in order to give themselves sexual pleasure. These others—the stock characters, poses and feelings of pornography—are inventions of our culture, to include of our ideas of what constitutes transgression, exposure, hunger, shame and so forth.

6

To me, this Derridean idea that we must *invent* the other is sad, sad is its solipsism. I recall an idea of the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut that the narcissistic personality relates to other people as if these others were parts (though perhaps not always inventions) of itself. Such people are not incapable of loving others, but they are incapable of loving another as another

person. At the same time, I can see in Derrida's phrase this truth: it may well be that—both in our more intimate relations with others and in the current state of global capitalism and of our science and technology—it may well seem that only we can save ourselves from ourselves; only we can dig ourselves out of the holes we have dug and are digging ourselves into. (And we note that digging from within a hole deepens the hole.)

In recent decades other philosophers and psychologists have written of the importance, value, rewards of *recognizing* (i.e. rather than inventing) the other and her (or his or its) autonomy and otherness. The recognition of the otherness of *an* other being, or of other beings more generally, can help to relieve us, however temporarily, of our self-absorption and of the limits of our understanding.

I often come back to a single line read some years ago in the *Science Times*. It was a response by the philosopher Rachelle Hollander to proposals such as "fertilizing" parts of the ocean with iron, in hopes of encouraging carbon-absorbing blooms of plankton, or launching sun-reflecting mirrors into stationary orbit above the Earth. Our "saving grace, our inability to affect things at a planetary level," Hollander was quoted as saying, "is being lost to us." Inverting this, we could say that some of us now see our hopes for salvation—or for future flourishing—as depending on phenomena that are outside and beyond us, beyond even our wildest dreams, as we say.

One of Derrida's American interpreters, John Caputo, has written of the hopes that lie in "the incomings of something we did not see coming." This reminds me of a feeling—a fear—I often have while riding my bicycle on city streets. My larger point is that both Caputo and Hollander are not talking about any other that we might invent; they assume the existence of the other or of others, and they sense the value in our intersections — perhaps even of our collisions — with others.

7

We might say that at one recent moment (a.k.a. the Enlightenment) we humans became extraordinarily enthusiastic about our and "my"—the human individual's—capacities. Some of us—a leading edge? a backwater?—have come to feel—after the Holocaust and Hiroshima, in the face of global warming, etc.—that this enthusiasm was not only extraordinary but also a bit misplaced. One might see, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr's 1952: *The Irony of American History*:

> [W]e face the ironic situation that the same technical efficiency which provided our comforts has also placed us at the center of the tragic developments in world events. There are evidently limits to the achievements of science; and there are irresolvable contradictions both between prosperity and virtue, and between happiness and the "good life" which had not been anticipated in our philosophy. The discovery of these contradictions threatens our culture with despair.

There are those—there are many—who would say that we must invent our way out of this dilemma. Out of the dilemma that our inventing has gotten us into. The other perspective offered above is that we must simply wait. In the beautiful words of T.S. Eliot (which I also take to be an extremely personal statement, to be a single human being speaking to himself during a very troubled time):

> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love of the wrong thing: there is yet faith
> But faith and love and the hope are all in the waiting.
> Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought

We are now seeking relentlessly (repetitively) to solve problems that seem to be of our own creating. But like the plant with which God both cooled and incensed Jonah, problems come up in the dark and perish in darkness. And this phenomenon is at best tangentially related to anything like salvation. It might be thought of as a convenient

distraction from the fact that there is no salvation to be had, or that salvation is simply an idea. Respond to this post as soon as you can?

Credits & Links

Photograph of giraffe is a still from ***La grande bellezza***. Luca Bigazzi was the cinematographer. Sorrentino directed the film, wrote the story and co-wrote the screenplay with Umberto Contarello.

Emily Dickinson letter as quoted by Alfred Habegger in ***My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson***.

Blaise Pascal, ***Pensées* (French Edition)**.

The book of possible plots is Georges Polti's ***36 Dramatic Situations***. The original French-language book was written in the nineteenth century. An English translation was published in 1916 and continues to be reprinted. Polti analyzed classical Greek texts, plus classical and contemporaneous French works. He also analyzed a handful of non-French authors. In his introduction, Polti claims to be continuing the work of Carlo Gozzi, who also identified 36 situations. In April 2014 Wikipedia was offering **a nice outline of the possibilities**.

The photograph of the Roman aqueduct is from "**Scenes and Secrets from La Grande Bellezza**," a post by Flavia Brunetti Proietti in the guide ***romeing***, July 9, 2013.

Karl Kraus as translated by Harry Zohn in ***Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths: Selected Aphorisms***.

Jacques Derrida sources include his "Lecture du Droit de Regards de Plissart," in Marie-Françoise Plissart's "roman-photo" (photo novel) ***Droit de Regards*** (Minuit, 1985), and a website: "**Les mots de Jacques Derrida**,"accessed via http://www.idixa.net. The photographs above of the woman in the white dress are from Plissart's book.

Heinz Kohut, ***The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders***.

Rachelle Hollander quoted in "**Handle With Care**" by Cornelia Dean, "Science Times," *New York Times,* August 11, 2008, F1 and F4. Words of the above descriptions of the geoengineering proposals are quoted directly from Dean's text.

John D. Caputo, ***More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are***. He there references Derrida's ***Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994***, edited by Elisabeth Weber and translated by Peggy Kamuf.

Reinhold Niebuhr, ***The Irony of American History***.

T.S. Eliot. "East Coker," one of his ***Four Quartets***.

As regards repetition at the movies, see also my:

- **A Fresh Look at the Movies** — beginning with the Frank Capra comedy *It Happened One Night* and Stanley Cavell
- **Certum est, quia impossible** — taking off from *Men in Black 3*

As regards the infamous "other," see my "**Science B**" *Zeteo,* Fall 2013.