

## GUILT'S VISION AND THE SEDUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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The complex phenomenon of guilt that is the subject of this symposium has been contrasted with shame, divided into individual and collective versions, psychoanalytic and existential varieties, and explored in an extraordinary, even bewildering array of psychological and social-political contexts. My own topic today is the complex connection between guilt, vision, and knowledge. I want to suggest that we can bring certain important aspects of guilt into focus if we understand it not simply as a feeling but also as a component of cognition, which entails a new way of apprehending the past that leads to a new but uncertain orientation to the future. Guilt contains the germ of an impulse towards corrective action that may – but does not always -- follow from newly apprehended knowledge.

Consider the story of the Garden of Eden. The apple that leads to the fall is from the tree of knowledge. As soon as Adam and Eve eat it, they lose their innocence and gain the knowledge of death, suffering, and self-consciousness. Their guilt orients them uncertainly towards the future. It does indeed entail important new knowledge that they did not have before – knowledge that both changes the way they see the world and requires them to undertake some new action that remains uncertain. At the end of Milton's version of this story in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve look back to the garden that they have just left and out at the world, which Milton tells us, "was all before them,

where to choose / Their place of rest.”<sup>1</sup> This new knowledge may or may not be liberating, depending on what Adam and Eve do with it. Guilt is not the end of the journey but the beginning.

We need to remind ourselves that while knowledge can be liberating, it can also be paralyzing. I would argue that the knowledge of wrongdoing that comes with guilt is especially at risk of becoming paralyzing. We can so easily wallow in it. This particular form of knowledge can be so overwhelming that it can become an end in itself rather than a means to a higher end. And it is precisely because it always entails knowledge -- profound and consequential knowledge -- that guilt can be so seductive.

There is a wonderful moment in Book 18 of *The Iliad* when Achilles recognizes just how seductive anger can be. He acknowledges the power of “that gall of anger that swarms like smoke inside of a man’s heart / and becomes a thing sweeter to him by far than the dripping of honey. / So it was here,” he says, “that the lord of men Agamemnon angered me.”<sup>2</sup> Achilles acknowledges here that, mixed in with the terrible pain that he has felt as a result of Agamemnon’s slighting of him has been a paradoxical pleasure, a sweetness that may not replace the bitterness but that is just as potent a component of his anger as the bitterness. And it can be intoxicating, even addictive. Like anger, guilt too can be perversely pleasurable enough to prevent us from moving beyond it to some sort of reconciliation, atonement, forgiveness, or corrective action. It is only when one has

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 12. 646-47.

<sup>2</sup> *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 18. 109-11, p. 378.

worked through guilt to remorse that one can escape the paralysis that so often accompanies guilt.

What follows from the deepest knowledge? If that is the question posed by the Biblical account of the Garden of Eden and by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, it is also the question posed by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus's literal loss of vision comes at precisely the moment of his blinding new knowledge. Surely Oedipus stands as the central emblem in western culture for the paradox of knowledge that guilt entails, of the simultaneity of vision and blindness, of a new knowledge whose very power can as readily lead to paralysis as to liberation. In every one of these great works we are confronted with the paradox of knowledge: it is necessary but not in itself sufficient. Indeed it can be seductive, tempting one with the mirage that it is an end in itself. This is the first phase of guilt, when one seems incapable of any action except self-flagellation, in which, indeed, one may well mistake the act of self-punishment for the decisive positive action without which one cannot move beyond this paralysis.

Consider the American wallowing in his guilt about slavery; the German in his guilt about Nazis; the Australian in his agony over the treatment of Aborigines. We know that while feeling guilt may be a necessary and important first step, without further action it becomes self-indulgent. We all know the hypocrisy of the person who has a good strong dose of feeling at a safe distance from tragedy or injustice, the bleeding heart who is as delighted with his own sense of righteousness as he is appalled by whatever injustice he sees. Comedy has had a field day with this all too human tendency. In my own country, novelists like Philip Roth, film makers like Woody Allen, and comedians like Jerry Seinfeld, Mel Brooks, and Larry David have developed a whole fascinating genre

of Jewish-American variations on guilt, many of which take their bearings from the yawning gap between knowledge of guilt on the one hand and appropriate corrective action on the other.

While the focus of most serious literature has been on this gap between knowledge and action, William Faulkner is equally concerned with the complications of knowledge itself. In his magnificent short story "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner takes up the question of what it means to know something in the first place, especially when one is dealing with matters of individual and collective guilt. The stereotypical eccentric old Southern lady who is the hero of this macabre story turns out to be a necrophiliac. After explaining away numerous clues which in retrospect seem obvious, the townspeople discover that the odor in her house that they had assumed was coming from a dead animal is in fact from the rotting corpse of Emily's suitor, who mysteriously disappeared years before and, as we discover only on the final page of the story, has all this time been lying dead in the good lady's bed. "The body," the narrator tells us, "had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now . . . what was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay."<sup>3</sup>

After one learns what has really happened, one comes to a completely new understanding of a whole series of earlier events in the story. Faulkner lures the reader into the same trap that the townspeople fell into, namely, not seeing an accurate connection between many of the story's central events. Only in retrospect does the reader, like the shocked townspeople, discover a completely different pattern of

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<sup>3</sup> William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," in *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*. New York: Random House, 1950, p. 130.

connection. The reader, that is to say, is made complicit in the guilt of the townspeople. Surely when Emily goes to the local pharmacist and says, "I want some poison," the pharmacist cannot be faulted for asking her, "What kind? For rats and such?" And when she responds by saying she wants arsenic, although the druggist starts to recommend a different poison, we can understand why he would not question a lady's preference. "Why, of course," the pharmacist said. "If that's what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for."

"Miss Emily just stared at him," Faulkner tells us; "her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up."<sup>4</sup> Notice here the same imagery of sight we saw in *Oedipus*. The issue of guilt is cast as a matter of knowledge. To ask the question, "Did the pharmacist know that Emily was going to kill a person rather than a rat?" is to confront the whole vexed territory of the murky nature of cognition and of the hundred varieties of self-deception and rationalization that inevitably complicate the question of what it means to "know" something. This is an issue that frequently rears its head when one is considering questions of guilt, and especially of whether one has been complicit in turning, as we say, "a blind eye" to some abomination. Germans have long wrestled with this issue in their own history, as have Americans with regard to slavery or the treatment of Native Americans. I raise the point here simply to emphasize my larger point that if we are to understand the complexities of guilt, we first need to see their deep connection with the conjunction of knowledge and vision.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 125-26.

In “David with the Head of Goliath,” the Caravaggio painting that has been the touchstone – and in some ways, the point of departure -- for this conference, we witness this same conjunction of knowledge, guilt, and vision. Because he is a painter it is only appropriate that Caravaggio’s confession of guilt should take the form of the visual, which he shockingly reveals by turning his depiction of Goliath into a self-portrait. Part of the painting’s power derives from our sense that we are seeing something that has never been seen before, that as viewers of the painting we are present at a moment when some dark secret is being revealed for the first time, that we are witnessing the unveiling of a powerful new piece of knowledge that, precisely because it is so shocking, demands of the viewer that he take that knowledge in. Some have speculated that Caravaggio was thus throwing himself on the mercy of the pope, which would suggest that he is exploiting this dramatic gesture in his own self-interest. If that is so, the artist clearly has in mind an action arising from his confession of guilt that will in some way resolve the guilt. But whatever his motives may have been – and we shall probably never know in any definite way – what continues to leap out from this painting is the extraordinary vulnerability of the gesture of revelation, of confession. What Caravaggio captures so movingly in this painting is the conjunction between that vulnerability and the impulse to move beyond it rather than to wallow in it, rather than to be paralyzed by it. Imaged here is not the kind of self-indulgent guilt to which I referred earlier, or the initial phase of guilt in which one feels paralyzed, but rather the kind that yearns to move beyond guilt. The distinction I am laboring to make is between knowledge that imprisons and knowledge that sets one free.

Is it forgiveness that Caravaggio seeks by representing his guilt in this way? Is it forgiveness that the guilty German or the guilty American seeks? The first imperative is simply to *see* what you have done, to come to knowledge of what you are guilty of. Is this first stage harder – simply seeing, simply coming to knowledge – or is it harder to *accept* what one sees, what one has come to know? Both steps are necessary -- to see and to accept – but both are insufficient. What will we do with the painful new knowledge? Will it lead to a change of mind, a change of heart, a course of action? Will the course of action involve some mitigation of the harm that has been done, some resolution to prevent such harm from occurring again, or will it be an act of penance?

One can be so overwhelmed with the knowledge that one has violated some taboo, or committed some evil, that one becomes intoxicated by the feeling of guilt. We all understand what is meant by the idea of a “guilty pleasure”; and we acknowledge that, however much pleasure and pain may appear to be opposites, there is an important sense in which this is a false dichotomy. Thus we should not be surprised to discover just how pleasurable guilt can be in itself. Like Achilles, even the best of us can be seduced by the very sweetness of the emotion of anger, or of guilt. Obviously there is one level at which both anger and guilt leave a *bitter* taste in one’s mouth; but as Homer points out about anger, however bitter it may taste, it is its sweetness that poses the greatest danger. Only *after* he has wreaked such havoc does Achilles have this moment of insight when he realizes that, however bitter his anger had been, he had been seduced by its sweetness. Like anger, guilt is painful, but it would not pose nearly as big a problem if it did not hold out an enticing element of pleasure mixed in with the fierceness of the pain.

Is there not, then, something of a silver lining in guilt? Is it not, in some curious way, a blessing that we are capable of feeling guilt? Painful and destructive as it may be, is guilt not a lifeline to a second chance, to some sort of corrective action, to the possibility of altering our wicked ways? I do not actually think so. Such a lifeline cannot be located in guilt itself but rather in something that follows from guilt. And what is it that follows from it? Is it remorse? Perhaps it is remorse that is the necessary transitional link between the potentially paralyzing knowledge of guilt on the one hand and the possibility of redemption, through atonement, on the other. Clearly there is a close connection between guilt and remorse, and I am scarcely the first to have observed that relationship. But I would suggest that one way of thinking about that connection is to say that remorse entails a movement beyond the paralysis or sweet self-indulgence of guilt – a movement towards some possibility of ameliorative action, towards some impulse to redeem our error rather than remain frozen in our painful knowledge of it.

If guilt can be simultaneously bitter and sweet, it can also be simultaneously blinding and illuminating. What Caravaggio has created so powerfully is a vision of guilt at the moment of its transition to remorse. It has often been observed that in this painting David is not represented as triumphant but rather as modest, even melancholy in the face of his monumental victory. This makes perfect sense to me, because I believe that this painting is based on a premise that is directly relevant to understanding guilt. That premise is that to move beyond the paralyzing self-flagellation that characterizes the first phase of guilt is always an immensely difficult challenge. To use Caravaggio's visual language, the battle to slay the giant of guilt is always one in which remorse is the underdog. Of course Caravaggio's depiction of the outcome of this epic battle is subdued



and bittersweet. While the guilt has been worked through to the point of remorse, much remains to be done. Far from being a time to gloat about one's victory, the tone is one of deep humility, mixed with a profound recognition of the pain that has already been caused and the redemption that may now be possible but that has not yet been achieved. It is only fitting that Caravaggio emphasizes that this is not the triumphant end of the journey but rather a painful first step in the movement beyond guilt to some uncertain future that may, or may not, be redemptive.

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