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TRAGIC THOUGHTS AT THE END OF PHILOSOPHY

A review of Gerald Bruns, *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy: Language, Literature and Ethical Theory*. Northwestern University Press, 1999. 280 pages. \$25.

GERALD BRUNS ASKS: "What would it be for philosophers to relocate themselves at ground level, no longer outsiders to the world but (in some non-trivial sense) its inhabitants" (14). Written over a fifteen-year period, the essays gathered in this volume pursue that question by exploring the dialogue between philosophy and literature taken not as genres but as "limit-concepts" that are "internal to one another's histories" (2). Bruns argues that literature puts the self-identity of philosophy at risk by confronting philosophy with its own limits. He even doubts whether philosophy will be able to recognize itself when exposed to its materiality, historicity, and linguisticity. However, by abandoning its claim to provide foundations, Bruns believes that philosophy can recapture an "intimacy with the world" of the sort that Levinas describes as a relation of proximity. From this perspective, our relation to the world and others in it is no longer the theoretical relation of the detached observer, but rather the practical relation of those situated within an ongoing history. In accord with the primacy placed on the practical, he privileges ethics as a crucial site for the encounter between literature and philosophy. Though by "ethics," Bruns means an "ethics of alterity," understood as openness and responsiveness to the singular and irreducible. As understood, he even claims to discover a certain symmetry between poetry and ethics "where poetry registers responsiveness to language as ethics does to other people" (15).

Although devoted to the critical reading of the work of others, these essays present a clear and consistent voice elevating the singular over the universal, the contingent over the necessary, event over law, and responsiveness over self-assertion with the aim of subverting the inherited conception of philosophy as the foundation of knowledge.

Following Cavell, he asserts "philosophy is to be located at the level of the singular and irreplaceable rather than at the level of the universal and the necessary" (200). In this view, openness to the world and others replaces the

sovereignty of the subject. Thinking is now a question of listening rather than argument, and writing becomes more a matter of response than assertion. Here, Bruns glimpses a “turning of the rational” such that it becomes “the exercise not of power but of reception” (211-212). In fact, this is just what Cavell’s concept of the ordinary amounts to: “The ordinary is not a category of reality but a description of our proximity to it. The ordinary is what reality is, not so much when it is known...as when it is inhabited” (212). Bruns is clearly drawn to Cavell’s understanding of the ordinary and the return to the everyday that it implies. But as Bruns takes up Cavell’s “quest for the ordinary,” that quest is profoundly inflected by elements from the work of Heidegger, Levinas, Gadamer, and Bakhtin, whom he considers decisive for the task of thinking at the end of philosophy.

Language is the focal topic in the first section of essays. In “Law and Language,” Bruns argues for a hermeneutic approach which would highlight the linguisticity of the law. “Linguisticity” (*Sprachlichkeit*, a term borrowed from Gadamer) does not refer to a theoretical construct; to the contrary, it indicates precisely what cannot be contained within a theory of language, legal or otherwise, for “linguisticity is heterogeneous and irreducible, that is, untheorizable” (61). A theory of language would inevitably reduce linguisticity by conceiving it as a system of rules. In Bruns’s view, such “deep structures” are instituted in order to keep the unpredictable events of language under control, thereby rendering it rational and intelligible. A hermeneutic approach would expose the law to such events, resituating it within an anarchic space where the very idea of the law itself is in question. For this reason, he suggests that we “think of poetry or literature...as a region of discursive practices designed to let linguisticity go in Heidegger’s sense of *Gelassenheit* or letting-be...” (61-62). As event rather than structure, linguisticity stands as a foil to language conceived in conformity to law as a self-regulating system. Instead, following Bakhtin, Bruns thinks linguisticity as a plurality of languages—a heteroglossia of conflicting tongues resisting the attempts of the legal (or any) institution to centralize it into something coherent and manageable.

However, linguisticity does not just mark the extraordinary events in language, but extends to the linguistic events of ordinary life. It is “the proximity of language,” as that is lived in our relation to the world and others. Bruns explores this idea most fully in a remarkable essay on Donald Davidson’s claim that a “passing theory” is what must be shared if communication is to succeed. According to Davidson, such a passing theory cannot be given in advance, as in a set of grammatical rules, codes or conventions; it must be improvised on the spot in the give and take of conversation. The common ground enabling communication does not exist beforehand, but must be worked out anew in each case. Thus, Bruns says, “Davidson buries the idea of language in the everyday

second to second construction of passing theories" (51). He notes Davidson's kinship to Gadamer who would certainly agree that no overarching theory or set of rules and conventions can be invoked to explain what is an everyday event of linguistic practice. Bruns even wonders on Gadamer's behalf why Davidson uses the word "theory" to describe what is in fact an instance of *phronesis*, of knowing how to carry on in an unprecedented situation. Through such linguistic practice, Bruns argues, we achieve intimacy with the world. Davidson also realizes that he has effectively erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing one's way around the world. Here language becomes less a way of referring to reality, than a way of inhabiting the world.

In the essays comprising the second section, Bruns addresses the import of narrative for recent attempts to reinvigorate the Aristotelian tradition of moral philosophy. In one piece, he examines Alasdair MacIntyre's appeal to narrative as a model for developing a conception of rationality embodied in a living tradition. By contextualizing actions in an ongoing story, narrative enables us to make sense of those actions and to give unity and coherence to the lives of the actors. Narrative also requires the ability to give an account of our actions and thus includes the capacity for self-criticism. Although he concedes that justification is only binding within a given tradition, MacIntyre argues that a living tradition is able to justify itself—to give an account of its conception of the good—in the face of challenges from other traditions. What attracts Bruns to this project is precisely the way it reconceives rationality in terms of contingent and historical norms, rather than universal and necessary principles. However, he remains suspicious of the unity and coherence that MacIntyre attributes to the rationality of a living tradition. For Bruns, the threat of exclusion becomes most palpable when MacIntyre introduces the concept of *telos* into his account. Bakhtin's idea of the novel as a stratification of multiple narratives suggests to Bruns a more open understanding of narrative and rationality that would no longer be governed by the sense of an ending.

In the title essay, Bruns turns to the work of Martha Nussbaum. His interest is spurred by her insistence that moral action cannot be reduced to rule-governed behavior or by the application of principles to concrete situations. Instead, she advances an Aristotelian "morality of perception" for which the key is one's ability to see and respond to particular situations in their bewildering complexity. However, for Bruns, Nussbaum's ethics remains "subject-centered," especially when contrasted with the ethics of Levinas, for there, by being exposed to the other, the subject is turned inside out and "resituated in a place of responsibility rather than that of cognition, intentionality and agency." In the end, he concludes, "responsibility for the other is not part of Nussbaum's theory of the good life for me and mine" (111). Bruns's criticism of Nussbaum comes to a head in his discussion of *phronesis*. He rejects her interpretation of practical

choice as a matter of *aisthesis*, appealing instead to Gadamer, for whom *phronesis* is understood as a dialogical response to the other. Nevertheless, Bruns endorses Nussbaum's conviction that literature is indispensable to moral philosophy. Just because any account of the good life must be particularized, it must be supplemented by the imaginative exploration of concrete cases supplied by literature. But for Bruns, literature has a more radical role to play. By compelling philosophy to confront its historicity, its groundlessness and illusions of transcendence, literature can free thinking from its prevailing preconceptions.

The third and final section of essays offers a sustained encounter with the work of Stanley Cavell. This encounter provides the center of gravity of the entire collection. Bruns cites what Cavell calls "the moral of skepticism," namely, that the relation of human being to the world is not that of knowing, at least not where knowing requires the stance of the disengaged spectator before whom the world is made present. Since the world always exceeds one's conceptual grasp, the presence of the world cannot be a function of knowledge, but rather of *acknowledgement*. "Acknowledgement is not an alternative to knowing," Bruns writes, "but an interpretation of it, even a critique of it, since acknowledgement is just what an outsider is in no position to give" (184). But acknowledgement also implies an openness and acceptance of the other as such, "that is, as that which resists every effort on my part to reduce it to something containable within the legislation of my concepts" (184). In such acceptance of the other lies the ethical significance of acknowledgement that recognizes the other's claim upon me, a claim that forces me outside the mode of knowing and into that of answering, of having to respond. "Being human is an ethical relation that calls for acknowledgement of one to the other" (203). In this regard, Cavell's "quest for the ordinary" is intended to answer "the problem of human separateness" as a separateness from both the world and others.

In one essay, Bruns considers poetic language itself to be, in the title phrase borrowed from Cavell, "the accomplishment of inhabitation." Along with modern poetics, Bruns holds that while poetry is made of language it is not strictly a use of it, i.e., poetry exhibits the irreducibility of language to its semantic features. But he resists the Mallarmean distinction of poetic language from ordinary speech. Instead, he takes up the counter-development within contemporary American poetry, which, according to William Carlos Williams says, "A poem can be made of anything." On this view, poetry is internal to the discourse of everyday life and not aesthetically differentiated from it. He pursues this view by taking up the "language poets" for whom poetry is, at least on Bruns account, a matter of listening to the linguisticity of everyday life. If indeed a poem can be made of anything, then poetry depends altogether on how one listens. By refusing any criterion that would distinguish it from ordinary language, the language poem offers a non-exclusionary poetry that

“alters—displaces—the traditional site from which we approach it” (143). The poem no longer stands apart as an aesthetic construct, but is instead “internal to a collective or social achievement of inhabitation” (160).

Although Bruns refers to “tragic thoughts” in the title of this volume, he only treats of tragedy in passing. In light of his more sustained discussion of this topic in *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (Yale, 1992), one might expect Bruns to take up again Cavell’s view that tragedy exposes us to the condition of human separateness. However, the definition of comedy and tragedy that he adopts in his essay on Nussbaum points in a rather different direction. For now it is comedy, and not tragedy, that takes the lead. “The task of comedy,” Bruns writes, “is to elude greatness [which, tragic insight tells us, is tied to catastrophe] and to accept the ordinary...” (122). Here, philosophy plays the part of the tragic hero, impelled by an implacable fate and headed for catastrophe. Governed by “blindness and rigidity and a will to control,” philosophy exhibits a refusal to recognize the world and others as a limit to its own will to power. By contrast, Bruns says, the comic hero’s relation to the world is one in which “he or she knows that the world is beyond one’s control, that one belongs to it and is defined by its limits” (123). Exposed to contingency, the comic hero exhibits the resilience and responsiveness needed in face of the vicissitudes and vulnerability of existence. If Cavell himself is a comic thinker, as Bruns suggests, this is because he forges a path that leads thought back to the everyday, the ordinary. To pursue this path is to forego knowledge, to give up disengagement and control and thereby “giv[e] up the desire to bend the world to our will, to lay it bare and know it through and through” (123). The openness and acceptance of the comic hero is precisely what Bruns calls for in the realm of thought. In the wake of philosophy’s tragic fate, he recommends that thinking adopt a comic posture, one that understands itself as a way of inhabiting, not dominating the world. Despite the book’s title, it may be more appropriate to read the essays collected here as comprising a comedic effort seeking to embrace the ordinary. Perhaps what we find here are in fact *comic thoughts* that will help to see us through the tragic end of philosophy.

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