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Title

On Responsibility, Cunning, and High Spirits: A Response to Ross Chambers

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/16s0p07b>

Journal

Paroles gelées, 14(2)

ISSN

1094-7264

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Publication Date

1996

DOI

10.5070/PG7142003041

Peer reviewed

On Responsibility, Cunning, and High Spirits: A Response to Ross Chambers

Vincent P. Pecora

Ross Chambers's remarks leave us with much—almost too much—to think about as we contemplate, here at the end of a millennium, one of literary criticism's central topoi: "the function of criticism at the present time." Especially for anyone who has in fact lost a close friend or loved one to AIDS, and there are probably quite a few of us in this room today, it is an elegant and affecting and terribly sobering message about the ethical responsibility of critical discourse. It is, as well, a message with which I have had substantial agreement for most of my own scholarly career. So, at least in a general way, I feel like saying "Amen," or something like that.

But I do have problems with some of the argument and my position has not been made any easier by Prof. Chambers's devilishly clever claim that "it seems churlish, for example, to do a 'resisting reading' of a text of witness, or to distance oneself in other ways from what one recognizes to be its *visée*, or 'aim'" (5). Already, you see, my position has been compromised; for if I accept the argument that the responsible response to a text of witness is also a form, or continuation, of the act of witness, then Prof. Chambers's text is itself a text of witness—and it surely calls on me to respond in kind, suggesting that I would be "churlish" otherwise. I think that what has been invoked in this talk is a very old critical principle—decorum—and it is for me, up to a point, still compelling. I too find it difficult to see how—or why—one would want to read, say, eyewitness accounts of holocaust survivors in terms of the "logocentric" tendencies of their metaphors, or in terms of the meta-historical tropes determining their narratives. But I think one would find that, in fact, there are very few who have an appetite for this sort of thing. In a locally famous experiment involving human subjects a few years back on this campus, Saul Friedlander invited Hayden White to address just this sort of issue, that is, whether holocaust narratives could be treated as mere "topological" systems; needless to say, White did not take the bait. I think we make distinctions based on decorum all the time,

routinely refusing to play academic games when they seem inappropriate. The truly impressive force of Prof. Chambers's argument is that it asks us to re-think the grounds of this decorum and thus to re-examine our reluctance to engage texts that threaten to deny us Roland Barthes's "pleasure of the text"—which is, *mutatis mutandis*, one of the main targets of Prof. Chambers's remarks.

Nevertheless, at the risk of sounding terribly "churlish," I am going to respond—as responsibly as I can—by issuing a call to criticism at the end of the millennium that is precisely the opposite of Prof. Chambers's message. I am going to suggest that it is criticism's job to be "churlish"—at times as "churlish" as possible. The hard part, the part that takes the most reflection, is finding out what is worth being churlish about, and to what degree. I think this is in a sense what Prof. Chambers has in mind when he refers, at the end of his paper, to the "salutary" tension between the demands of our profession and the demands of our "vocational responsibility as readers" (21). Perhaps it is simply that I find these competing demands more complicated—more imbricated—than he does; perhaps I am unwilling to forsake what I have come to accept as my own inborn churlishness. But part of the imbrication I am referring to is immediately given to us in the very genre of Prof. Chambers's address, for to an even greater degree than Matthew Arnold's or T.S. Eliot's well-known essays, Prof. Chambers's paper is already a professional discourse and it is, no less than theirs, also a deeply personal call for professional responsibility. I suppose I am less pessimistic about the tension between the personal and the professional—a theme that has indeed become something of the "hot" topic these days, in what amounts to a kind of commodification of confession—primarily because I have always believed (this is no doubt the Hegelian residue in my thinking) that without the approved forms and rituals and conventions of communication our personal utterances would be incomprehensible. Again, for me—and I think Prof. Chambers is in substantial agreement here—the real ethical (and political) demand is knowing how to use those conventions responsibly, neither fetishizing their determining role, nor pretending that some kind of "authentic" human communication—even of the witness variety—could occur without them.

Still, I am uncomfortable with moments in Prof. Chambers's essay where the critical submission to the "authority" of textual intentions and our role as conservators of authorial authority is

held up as the most ethical form of critical response—a form that is coterminous, he implies, with a properly ethical response to our culture’s confrontation with pain and death. And I am uncomfortable with his formulation not only because, even today, this curatorial imperative is invoked by forces hostile to free and independent thought—the recent Smithsonian dismantling of a revisionist exhibit on Hiroshima, precisely because it seemed churlish to the memories of American servicemen who witnessed the death of so many of their comrades, is a good example. I am uncomfortable as well because, somewhere deep in my psyche, I truly believe that, in general, the most important and life-affirming kind of critical response in the long run is the response that pulls no punches, that pushes the boundaries of decorum in ethically responsible ways. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* is one of the oldest pieces of wisdom in the Western world, and one worth remembering; but to respond critically on the basis of such wisdom would, of course, be to abolish ethical thinking altogether.

Even Walter Benjamin, whose wonderful commentary on the “authority” bestowed on the storyteller by the proximity of death Prof. Chambers appropriately cites in his discussion of the texts of AIDS witness, even Benjamin also expected that this “authority” yielded more than mourning in the chain of subsequent stories that would follow. That is, Benjamin expected the story to produce good counsel, the wisdom that comes from experience [*Erfahrung*], and this counsel consisted, precisely, in the churlish—and profoundly life-affirming—destruction of myths:

The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning [*List*] and with high spirits. (This is how the fairy tale polarizes *Mut*, courage, dividing it dialectically into *Untermut*, that is, cunning, and *Übermut*, high spirits). (*Illuminations*, 102)

Now, it turns out that in German, *Übermut* also means “insolence.” So, for me, the authority of Benjamin’s storyteller may be derived from death, but it in fact yields a form of wisdom, and that wisdom, in the good Anglo-Saxon we are using today, recommends the insolence and the cunning of the peasant—the churl. If Benjamin is right about the most important ethical consequence of the storyteller’s authority—and I think he is—then churlishness,

intractability in the face of the power of myth, may be criticism's most enduring and significant attribute.

I want to conclude my response by offering, in cunning and high spirits and, I hope, still responsibly, a possible counterexample of AIDS witness literature, one that is profoundly churlish, that is, one that meets the power of myth in our society with great cunning and high spirits, one that, with profound irreverence and *insouciance*, actually allows the now gloriously embodied *Angelus Novus* of Benjamin's theses on history to come crashing out of the ceiling above a man dying of AIDS. I am speaking about Tony Kushner's frankly millennial *Angels in America*. To be sure, Kushner's play is an act of mourning—or rather, it contains, objectifies, distances, but also elaborates and enlarges upon mourning, for example, in a powerful scene where Kaddish is recited over the body of the dead. But it is also—and you must forgive my reversion here to critical cliché, for I honestly do not have any other words to describe my own personal experience of this play—a remarkably cunning confrontation with American myth through the transfiguration of a dying man's delirium into an infinitely precious, fragile, and (at least for me) never-to-be-forgotten vision, one that would be simply impossible without the distance, and the *Übermut*, of Kushner's technique.

At this point I should perhaps return to my earlier remark about the inevitable imbrication of personal and professional demands, and hence to the central theme of Prof. Chambers's paper. Indeed, I found myself unable to go on after writing that last sentence—because, as it turns out, I was urged to see *Angels in America* by a dear friend, already sick with AIDS, who wanted as many of his friends to see this play as possible, who wanted, though I only dimly understood it then, witnesses who would remember him through it after his death. I spent many evenings on the telephone with him talking about the play, about its technique as well as its content, about its insolent allusiveness as well as about its ethical import. Over and over again, he urged me, as a professional critic, to write a commentary about the play; I promised I would try, but over and over again, amid the demands of my own projects and, perhaps, out of fear of what actually confronting the play in a critical fashion might demand of me, I put off the task of writing about *Angels in America*. And now, in what I thought would be simply one more professional response among many

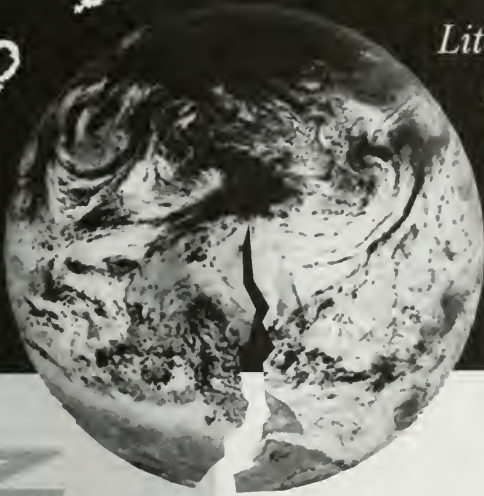
others, I find that I actually have written about it, and that my own personal mourning for a lost friend, still unfinished, has been somehow powerfully re-awakened by an institutional duty. And for this, I would like to thank Ross Chambers.

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- Chambers, Ross. "The Responsibility of Responsiveness." *Paroles Gelées* 14.2 (1996): 9-27.

R I S K & RESOLUTION

*Literary Criticism at the
End of the Millenium*



RISK & RESOLUTION

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PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

Special Issue
Volume 14.2 ♪ 1996

Sponsors: French Consulate of Los Angeles
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Design and Layout: Joyce Ouchida

Paroles Gelées was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French at UCLA. Information regarding the submission of articles and subscriptions is available from the journal office:

Paroles Gelées
UCLA Department of French
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Box 951550
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Subscription price (per issue): \$10 for individuals
\$12 for institutions
\$14 for international subscribers

Back issues available for \$7. For a listing, see our home page at:
<http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/parolesgelees/>

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