

# Writing as Performance

Revealing “the calculation that underlies the appearance of effortless-ness”

by STEPHEN GREENBLATT

illustrations by JOSEPH CIARDIELLO

**T**HE FIRST and perhaps the most important requirement for a successful writing performance—and writing is a performance, like singing an aria or dancing a jig—is to understand the nature of the occasion. This particular occasion, the Gordon Gray Lecture, is unusually gratifying, since I am called on to talk about something I care passionately about—writing—and, indeed, about that aspect of the subject to which I have given the most sustained practical attention: my own writing. Under most other circumstances, so self-centered a focus would seem fatuous, and I would fear to cut what Italians call a

*brutta figura*. In the sixteenth century, a famous behavior manual by Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, counseled what it called *sprezzatura*, or “nonchalance.” The successful courtier must cunningly hide all signs of practice, calculation, and effort, so as to make everything he or she does seem spontaneous and natural. But the Gordon Gray Lecture is an invitation to lift the curtain and reveal the

*Editor's note:* Cogan University Professor of the humanities Stephen Greenblatt adapted this essay slightly from his Gordon Gray Lecture on the Craft of Scholarly Writing (sponsored by Harvard's Expository Writing Program), presented to students and colleagues last October.

calculation that underlies the appearance of effortless-ness.

So let me begin by reading you something I wrote last summer, something that, as it happened, turned out also to be self-centered. It is short piece for a volume being put together in honor of a friend of mine. Such volumes are called *Festschriften*—literally, celebration-writings—and the German name, used even in English, somehow suggests their nature: these are honorific books that are almost never read, even by the person who is being honored. As the summer waned, the last thing I wanted was to stop working, even for a day, on the book on which I am currently engaged, a study of the loss and miraculous recovery of the manuscript of Lucretius's great philosophical poem, *On the Nature of Things*. But the person being honored by the *Festschrift*, a Stanford professor of comparative literature named Sepp Gumbrecht, is an old friend of mine, and I could not refuse. So I sat

down to write something about a recent book by Gumbrecht on the aesthetics of sports, published by the Harvard University Press.

The book was controversial. It had been sharply attacked by the historian Hayden White and others who thought that, in focusing so sharply on the beauty of sports, Gumbrecht had almost entirely ignored the sociological dimension. The aesthetic ap-



preciation of sports, White argued, is not innocent: it serves as an excuse, one among several, for a grotesque over-expenditure of money for team sports, and particularly male-dominated sports, at many universities, universities that could be using this money for financial aid, teaching, and research. More broadly, Gumbrecht's critics charged, the aestheticizing of sports conceals the actual motives that draw people to invest their time, money, and passion in spectatorship. What is needed, instead is a disenchanting analysis of the kind that the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu had offered for "the love of art," a love that Bourdieu revealed to be merely a piece of the cultural capital by which people attempt to secure their class distinction.

These critiques had, I felt, considerable force, but their weakness was their inability to register the aesthetic dimension—of sports or of art—as anything but a screen, an ideological cover for something else. My overarching strategy, I decided, would be fairly simple: I would at least obliquely rehearse the theoretical objections to Gumbrecht's book, objections centered on rival sociological and psychological accounts of sports, and then I would assert the validity, even within such a framework, of the aesthetic claim. I would not argue that this claim had priority, but I would refuse to let it disappear altogether into functionalism. Yes, being a sports fan is not pure aesthetic appreciation: it is deeply enmeshed, as Bourdieu and others could easily show, in social, psychic, economic, and political strategies. But, if the aes-

thetic dimension that Gumbrecht praises is ignored, it is difficult even to understand these strategies or to grasp why they are attached to this set of human activities and not another.

A short *Festschrift* essay was hardly the occasion to grapple directly with these arguments. I tried to think how I could amuse myself and at the same time do something slightly unexpected with the genre of the celebratory essay. I decided to write about Gumbrecht's book and its critics almost entirely indirectly, by describing an event in my life, an occasion whose nature I had grossly misunderstood.

Here is what I wrote:

SEPP GUMBRECHT'S *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006) came along about fifty years too late for it to have had the practical effect on my life that it might have had: namely, to have gotten me into Harvard. My parents passionately wanted me to go there: the children of poor immigrants, they regarded Harvard with something like awe. As for me, growing up in the vicinity of Cambridge, Massachusetts, I imbibed with everyone else the conviction that it was an immensely desirable fate.

I was near the top of my large graduating class in high school, quite good at standardized tests, and frenetically busy in activities like the literary magazine, the drama club, and the newspaper, so I at least stood a chance to be admitted, but no one in my world had a clue how the whole admissions business worked.

My older brother Marty was commuting to Brandeis, but he wasn't happy there and had no advice to give me. Neither of my parents had gone to college, nor (with a single exception) had my many aunts and uncles, so there was virtually no family lore, and though my high school had a few guidance counselors, they did little more than urge the students to apply to a "safety school" or two.

There was certainly nothing equivalent to the professionals that some parents now hire to "package" their children for college applications, a practice that recently made the news in a charge of plagiarism brought against a gifted Harvard undergraduate who had published a popular "chick-lit" novel that bore a suspicious resemblance to another novel in the same genre. The parents of the undergraduate in question turned out to have employed such a professional to help their daughter gain admission. The packager remarked casually, when she was interviewed, that the parents had not chosen the most expensive option—the Platinum service costing something like \$30,000—but had opted for somewhat less elaborate assistance.

I suppose, looking back at the 1950s, that there were such services, after a fashion, but they were simply called prep schools, whose students stood a much better chance to satisfy whatever it was that the admissions officers were looking for. In any case, places like Exeter or Choate were far outside my parents' ken or their wishes, not to mention my own. Since public education was free (and in my town quite good), they would have regarded the cost of private school as what they obsessively called, in Yiddish, "aroysgevorfene gelt," that is, money thrown away. And, after all, students were regularly admitted to Harvard from my high school, so my parents were not wrong.

Since I was applying to Harvard from the Boston area, I was expected to have an interview, and my parents grew increasingly apprehensive. "Stevie, put down that book. You'll ruin your eyes," they would constantly nag at me. Usually, their urgings were an invitation to watch television with them on the little black-and-white set of which they were so proud. But as the date for the interview approached, their words were more often the earnest prelude to what they conceived of as a strategy session. The interviewer doesn't want to see an "egghead," my father would say, looking askance at whatever it was I was reading—*Everyman* or *Anna Karenina* or Camus's *The Stranger*; "he wants to see a regular fella, someone who doesn't always have his nose buried in books." "Well, what should I talk about, Dad?" I asked. It wasn't as if I had had an infinitely thrilling set of experiences on which to draw: I had been taken to Miami Beach once, over Christmas vacation; had visited New York a few times, where I had seen the Rockettes and eaten at the Automat; spent most of my summers with my aunts and uncles and cousins at the beach in Maine.

"You have to talk about sports," my father said. "Whatever you are asked, wherever the conversation seems to be going, bring it back to sports. That's what the interviewer is looking for." I have

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no idea where in his immediate life-world my father's advice was coming from. He himself was no athlete, and had never been one, though I remember that he would occasionally throw a ball in the backyard to my brother and me and complain that my brother threw "like a girl." In Maine, he generally stayed out of the water, even when it was steamy, or at most only waded in up to his waist, since he had not learned to swim. He certainly never skied, or picked up a tennis racket, or played golf. And though he was a vigorous walker, I never once saw him actually exercise. And, as for me, though I had learned to swim and to play tennis and though I occasionally played softball at the playground, I hardly had any athletic prowess to speak of, let alone to turn into an intriguing conversational gambit.

Perhaps my father had read somewhere—in *The Saturday Evening Post*, it could have been, or the old *Boston Herald*—an article that claimed that college interviewers wanted more than anything else to talk about sports. More likely, he was speaking out of his own sports mania, which was genuine and intense. He would watch sports on television for hours on end, any sports at all—baseball, football, basketball, and hockey, of course, but also boxing, candlepin bowling, even (if there were nothing else) tag-team wrestling. Often while he watched these contests, he would listen to another game on the radio, pressed to his ear. On Yom Kippur, which frequently happened to fall during the World Series, we were not allowed in our house to turn on lights, switch on or off appliances, or do anything else that constituted "work," according to the rabbinical interpretation my synagogue followed, so my father would leave the television on at sundown, before the beginning of the holiday, in order to be able to look at the game on the following afternoon, when we walked home for a few hours between the *Musaf* and *Ne'ila* services.

This sports obsession had, as I've said, no roots in any personal skills of my father's, but it did have deep roots in his identity. It was, as I early on understood, bound up with a kind of cultural insecurity. On the one hand, though he was born in Boston, he defined his entire existence through the lenses of his Jewishness, secretly distrusted most Christians, and adored speaking Yiddish as the language of privacy, intimacy, and fun, and, on the other hand, he was eager to be thought, as he constantly put it, "100 percent American." Being a sports fan—not only a public, vocal role but also a genuine passion in the privacy of his home, when his guard was down—was for my father a way to feel truly American, as if some mocking voice were always calling his Americanness in doubt. And not only truly American but also truly a man: that is, I presume, why none of the women in my extended family took more than a polite interest in those games that occupied so many hours of my father's time and that of my uncles and others in his circle. They were all only one generation removed from the *shtetl* and from those men with the long curled earlocks and kaftans who represented in the conspicuously nar-

row view of mid-twentieth century America the opposite of everything manly.

But I—I who would never have uttered the sentence “I am 100 percent American,” because it would not have occurred to me that I wasn’t; I who had been strongly dissuaded by my parents from learning Yiddish; I who was baffled by my parents’ preoccupation with who on television or in the movies was Jewish and who wasn’t—had no comparable identity-stake in being a sports fanatic. And though I certainly worried about my masculinity—I can still recall my intense junior-high-school embarrassment when I was teased for holding my books “like a girl”—it did not, for some reason, occur to me that the solution lay in watching the games on television. Or rather, I doubted that memorizing the batting average of every Red Sox player for the last hundred years would compensate for the fact that I had difficulty hitting the ball out of the infield.

Still, I was in fact a baseball fan, an enthusiasm no doubt inherited from my father, confirmed by my friends, and cemented in the summer of 1957, when I was fourteen, by a piece of great good fortune: someone offered my father a season ticket to Fenway Park, or at least for the mid-week day games there. I was home that summer, I wasn’t working, and I was old enough to take the MTA to the park by myself, without my mother, who had a nervous disposition, being thereby driven to call the police. This was a time in which a preponderance of games was still played in the afternoon and in which Fenway Park had plenty of unsold seats—something that hasn’t happened for years—so that several days a week I could quietly slip down from my perch in the grandstand to a box seat near the field, close enough to hear the umpire shouting “strike” or the first-base coach’s hoarse voice when he urged the runner to take second base or to hold up.

The 1957 Red Sox were not a great team—they finished third in the American League, 16 games behind the first-place Yankees—but they had a 16-game winner in Tom Brewer, a fine new third baseman in Frank Malzone, a strong right fielder in Jackie Jensen (a golden athlete hobbled as a professional baseball player by a crippling fear of flying), and a capable, though mentally ill, center fielder in Jimmy Piersall. But most of all they had my hero Ted Williams. Though he was nearing the end of his astonishing career—he turned 39 that summer—and was thickening around the waist, Williams was and remains the greatest athlete I have ever seen.

Most games are built around some condition of great difficulty, often enhanced by the rules—the prohibition against using your arms and the off-side rules make it almost impossible to score a goal in soccer; the fierce charge of menacing 300-pound linebackers makes it almost impossible to concentrate enough to throw a football

with pinpoint accuracy; the fundamental structure of the heart and lungs makes it almost impossible to pedal a bicycle at high speed over the Alpe d’Huez. In baseball, the difficulty is simply hitting a small, hard ball hurled toward you, often with a wicked spin, at speeds close to 100 miles an hour. To decide, between the moment the ball leaves the pitcher’s hand and the moment it arrives over the plate, when to swing and when to hold off, and then, if you decide to go for it, to time the swing perfectly is, again, almost impossible. A major-league player who can hit a ball successfully one in four times, or a bit more, is handsomely and deservedly well-paid; a player who can steadily do it one in three times is a star. In 1957 Williams’s batting average was .388; his slugging percentage (a measure of his power, calculated by dividing his total number of bases by his at bats) was .731, and his on-base percentage was .528. To a baseball fan, these statistics, along with his 38 home runs that season (including homers in four consecutive at bats) and a streak of reaching base 16 straight times, are phenomenal.

I was completely under the spell of the magic. Sitting near the on-deck circle, in my purloined place, I would repeatedly shout his name, “Hi Ted,” hoping that he would look around and catch my adoring eye, but he never did. His concentration was lethal, his timing uncanny, his physical grace breathtaking. He would stand at the plate, not hunched over as hitters sometimes are, but straight and poised; and then the perfect swing would uncoil, and the ball would rocket off his bat. He was like a god.

This image of Ted Williams was the only thing that came to me, when I sat with the Harvard interviewer, trying my best to hijack every question and take it back to sports. No matter what I was asked, I contrived somehow—often with a subtlety and indirectness worthy of the narrator’s elderly aunts in *Remembrance of Things Past*—to conjure up the athletic genius of the Red Sox’s number 9. No doubt the interviewer was increasingly perplexed and annoyed.

And here, of course, is where Sepp Gumbrecht could have saved me. For I was not only following my father’s injunction and I was not simply displaying my sports ardor to hide the fact that I was a hopeless egghead: I was in fact trying to describe what was, to that point in my life, my most intense aesthetic experience. But I did not have the language for it; indeed, I did not know that I had had an aesthetic experience. If only I had had the German word for composure, *Gelassenheit*, I could have conveyed about Ted Williams what Gumbrecht calls the athlete’s “peculiar quietness,” his “capacity of letting be.” If only I had had Gumbrecht’s account of a beautiful play as “an epiphany of form,” “the sudden, surprising convergence of several athletes’ bodies in time and space”; if only I had had his observation that “at

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decisive moments in a competition, the flux of time seems to be suspended"; if only I had had his description of the way that rapt fans "immerse themselves in the realm of presence"; if I only had had at my command the words of the Olympic gold medalist Pablo Morales that Gumbrecht richly analyzes—"lost in focused intensity"—I could perhaps have persuaded the impatient, skeptical interviewer that I was not merely wasting his time.

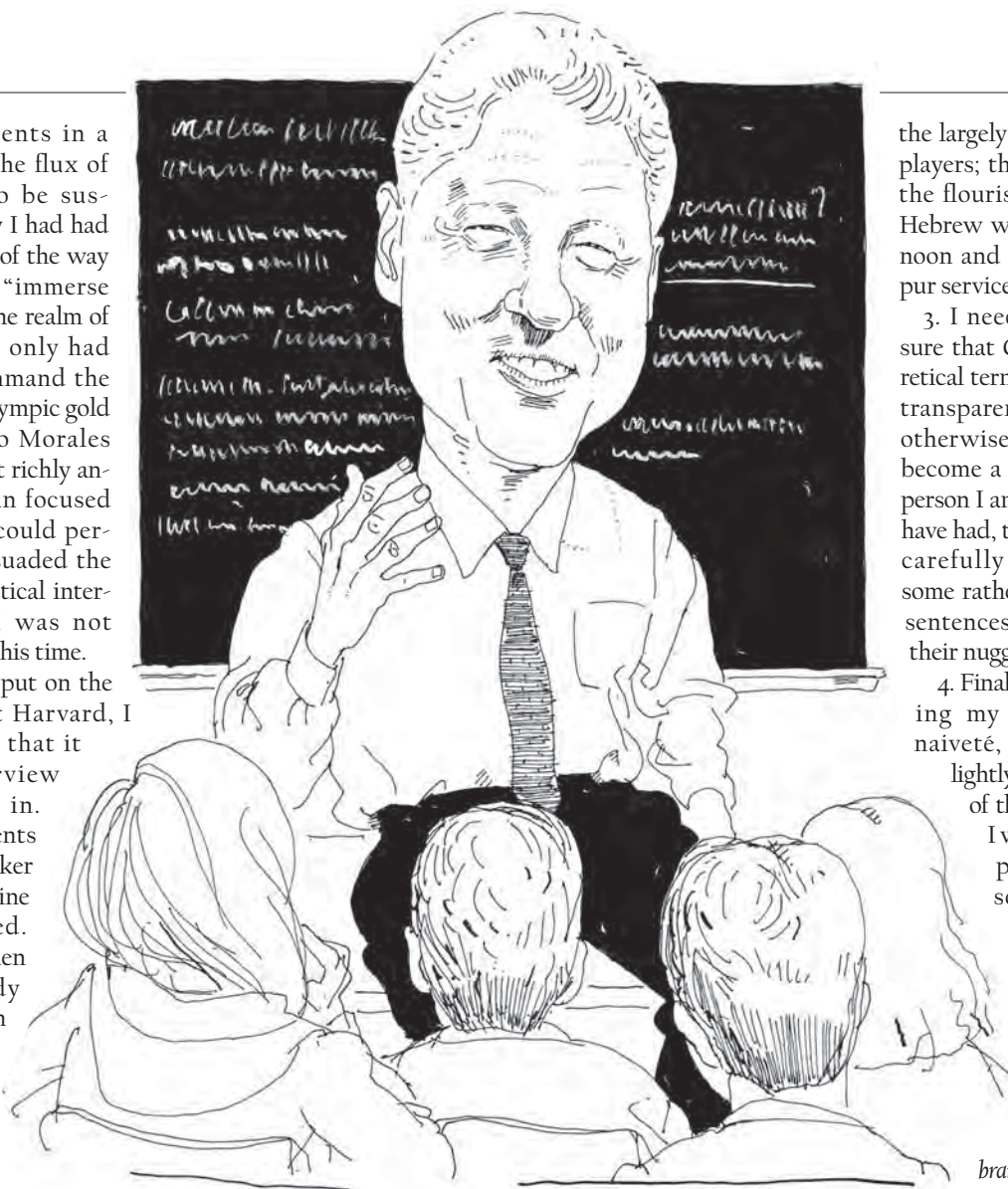
When I was put on the waiting list at Harvard, I said to myself that it was the interview that did me in. After all, students with much weaker records than mine were accepted. Years later—when I had already begun to teach at Harvard—I told the story to a friend who worked in the admissions office. He

laughed and urged me to read the spate of books that have recently appeared documenting the anti-Semitic admissions policies that were in place at the time I applied. Did I by chance, he asked me, remember the last names of the students who were admitted? I got the point. Still, Yale, where I went (happily, as it turned out) to college, was certainly at that era as anti-Semitic as Harvard, if not more so; the difference was that I did not have to go to New Haven for an interview and therefore did not try to convey to anyone my aesthetic admiration for Ted Williams.

I WILL NOT BELABOR THIS ESSAY, which is very slight, but I will quickly note several small rhetorical features.

1. If the piece is to work at all, and of course I am not sure that it does, I need to separate the language of Gumbrecht's analysis from the personal anecdote. The analysis has to enter—like a *deus ex machina*—to provide (but only too late) the conceptual framework that I sorely lacked back in my interview.

2. This means that I need to keep my own anecdote simple, humorous, and above all localized and concrete, in order to highlight the contrast with the largely abstract, theoretical terms that Gumbrecht employs. I use various devices to situate my own account and to give it the air of authenticity: the names of



the largely forgotten baseball players; the riff of statistics; the flourish of Yiddish; the Hebrew words for the afternoon and evening Yom Kippur services, and so forth.

3. I need, however, to be sure that Gumbrecht's theoretical terms seem reasonably transparent and effective—otherwise, the piece would become a satire on the very person I am trying to honor. I have had, therefore, to choose carefully and to break up some rather heavy Germanic sentences in order to elicit their nuggets of clarity.

4. Finally, while representing my own adolescent naiveté, I have to suggest lightly that I am now one of the initiated; that is, I want to contrast the past with the present. But I do not want to sound self-satisfied. That's the purpose of the sentence in which I comically invoke the elderly aunts in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*: the allusion is (or hopes to be) at once sophisticated and self-mocking.

Moreover, Proust serves as the very epitome of the aestheticism that I want through my personal anecdote at once to affirm and to analyze as a social strategy.

I DO NOT BY ANY MEANS hijack everything that I write into the service of personal memoir. In fact, I used to begin many of my essays with an historical fact, often attached to a date:

In 1531 a lawyer named James Bainham, son of a Gloucestershire knight, was accused of heresy, arrested, and taken from the Middle Temple to Lord Chancellor More's house in Chelsea, where he was detained while More tried to persuade him to abjure his Protestant beliefs....

\* \* \*

In his notorious police report of 1593 on Christopher Marlowe, the Elizabethan spy Richard Baines informed his superiors that Marlowe had declared, among other monstrous opinions, that 'Moses was but a Juggler, and that one Heriots being Sir W. Raleighs man Can do more than he.'...

\* \* \*

Between the spring of 1585 and the summer of 1586, a group of English Catholic priests led by the Jesuit William

Weston, alias Father Edmunds, conducted a series of spectacular exorcisms, principally in the house of a recusant gentleman, Sir George Peckham, of Denham, Buckinghamshire.... Or—one more—

In September 1580, as he passed through a small French town on his way to Switzerland and Italy, Montaigne was told an unusual story that he duly recorded in his travel journal.

The advantage of these beginnings—which became a bit too familiar in my writing, so I had to stop—is precisely that they take you away from the self, the self of the writer as well as the reader. You do not have to write the dreary sentences that say “In this essay I intended to explore the theme of transvestism in William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. My goal will be...blah, blah, blah.” Instead you plunge the reader into a story that has already begun, and you create—or at least try to create—the desire to know more. Did Thomas More persuade the heretic to abjure? Why did Marlowe call Moses a “juggler”? Exorcisms in Buckinghamshire? And what exactly was the story that Montaigne was told? (It was the story of Martin Guerre.)

But I am certainly not afraid of the personal voice and not averse to personal anecdotes, provided that they are good and that I can make good on them in constructing a piece of literary analysis. Here, for example, is how I begin a recent essay on the ethics of authority in Shakespeare. You will see that I combine my old trick of the date with what seems like a casual story. Only then, once the story is told, do I write the kind of introductory sentences that I just ridiculed:

In 1998, a friend of mine, Robert Pinsky, who at the time was serving as the Poet Laureate of the United States, invited me to a poetry evening at the Clinton White House, one of a series of black-tie events organized to mark the coming millennium. On this occasion the president gave an amusing introductory speech in which he recalled that his first encounter with poetry came in junior high school when his teacher made him memorize certain passages from *Macbeth*. This was, Clinton remarked wryly, not the most auspicious beginning for a life in politics.

After the speeches, I joined the line waiting to shake the president’s hand. When my turn came, a strange impulse came over me that I cannot adequately explain and certainly cannot justify. This was a moment when rumors of the Lewinsky affair were circulating, but before the whole thing had blown up into the grotesque national circus that it soon became. “Mr. President,” I said, sticking out my hand, “Don’t you think that *Macbeth* is a great play about an immensely ambitious man who feels compelled to do things that he knows are politically and morally disastrous?” Clinton looked at me for a moment, still holding my hand, and said, “I think *Mac-*

*beth* is a great play about someone whose immense ambition has an ethically inadequate object.”

I was astonished by the aptness, as well as the quickness, of this comment, so perceptively in touch with Macbeth’s anguished brooding about the impulses that are driving him to seize power by murdering Scotland’s legitimate ruler. When I recovered my equilibrium, I asked the president if he still remembered the lines he had memorized years before. Of course, he replied, and then, with the rest of the guests still patiently waiting to shake his hand, he began to recite one of Macbeth’s great soliloquies:

If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well  
It were done quickly. If th’ assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
With his surcease success: that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and the end-all, here,  
But here upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We’d jump the life to come. But in these cases  
We still have judgement here, that we but teach  
Bloody instructions which, being taught, return  
To plague the inventor.

There the most powerful man in the world—as we are fond of calling our leader—broke off with a laugh, leaving me to conjure up the rest of the speech that ends with Macbeth’s own bafflement over the fact that his immense ambition has “an ethically inadequate object”:

I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself  
And falls on the other [side].

I left the White House that evening with the thought

that Bill Clinton had missed his true vocation, which was, of course, to be an English professor, and therefore I feel drawn to put some pressure on this brief but resonant exchange. Specifically, I want to consider whether it is possible in Shakespeare to discover an “ethically adequate object” for human ambition and for the actions that one might take in the service of this ambition.

In the course of the essay I can keep coming back to the concept of ethical adequacy, teasing out its implications for interpretation of *Macbeth* or *King Lear*, drawing upon the energy that the initial anecdote generates. Could I make my crucial points without the anecdote? Yes—all the more so because, if I am right, in Shakespeare there is no position outside the world or outside history from which his characters can authenticate their actions or secure an ethically adequate object for their ambitions. The president’s comment, fascinating as it is, does not in fact work as an overarching interpretive insight for Shakespeare; it belongs

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instead to a much later world, the world of Immanuel Kant or John Rawls, not the world of Machiavelli and Montaigne.

All the same, the anecdote served my purposes, and not only as a device to make the reader sit up and take notice. First, because some avenues that turn out in the end to be blocked serve, along the way, to provide fresh perspectives. And second, because the invocation of Clinton enables me to tap into a sense that literary questions have a peculiarly intense relation to the real world. This sense sets up the close of my essay, many pages later, in which I consider whether the goal of saving the state itself served for Shakespeare as an ethically adequate object for human ambition. My answer, based on a close reading of a scene in *King Lear*, is no. In the wake of Lear's abdication, the Duke of Cornwall is the legitimate, formally sanctioned ruler of half the kingdom, and we see him acting to save the state. Yet the play stages and clearly justifies his assassination. The attack comes suddenly and without warning when he is going about the business of statecraft: specifically, he is attempting, by any means necessary, to extract from the Earl of Gloucester certain information vital for national security, information about a French army set upon invasion of the realm.

This is not the occasion to rehearse my argument. My point is that the opening anecdote, though it may at first seem merely decorative or entertaining, serves to situate and greatly to intensify the phrases "by any means necessary" and "information vital for national security." It enables me to stay entirely within the text of *King Lear*, patiently explicating its horrific representation of torture, and at the same time, without any explicit reference, to evoke that text's uncanny relevance to the current national and world crisis.

I WANT TO CLOSE THIS TALK with a few reflections on the issue of contemporary relevance. I do not at all think that everything one writes should have an immediate bearing on the present. On the contrary, one of the crucial achievements in a liberal education is the understanding of worlds far removed from our own. That understanding is never complete, any more than one can escape entirely from one's own body or one's own culture. But the ability to suspend the craving for immediate relevance and to project oneself at least part way into difference and otherness is an invaluable resource. But that projection depends not upon neutrality or indifference but rather upon carrying one's passionate energies into an alien world. That is, you should write about the other as if your life depended on it. My indirect invocation of the current crisis—specifically, of the debate about the legitimacy of torture—is intended at least as much to illuminate *King Lear* as it is intended to bring Shakespeare's wisdom to bear on our own dilemmas.

I am not suggesting that you keep the television news on constantly when you are writing your papers. I am suggesting only that you should try to write well—and that

means bringing to the table all of your alertness, your fears, and your desires. And every once in a while—say, every third paper—tell yourself that you will take a risk.

I am currently writing three lectures on Shakespeare for an academic occasion in Germany. [The lectures were delivered in Frankfurt on November 27-29, 2006.] They are called the Adorno Lectures—after the important twentieth-century philosopher Theodor Adorno—and are a source of some anxiety to me, for German academic audiences tend to be extremely demanding, and even scholarly lectures have an unnerving way of being reported in detail in the national newspapers. Two of the three lectures as I drafted them began very cautiously. Here is the opening of the first, a lecture on the status in Shakespeare of the concept of aesthetic autonomy:

"Aesthetic autonomy," that will-o'-the-wisp that haunted Theodor Adorno, was not a phrase that Shakespeare, who had a passion for rare expressions, could possibly have encountered. If the *Oxford English Dictionary* is to be believed, "aesthetic"—which, as the term for a science or philosophy of taste, first emerged with Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in the mid-eighteenth century—did not appear in English until the nineteenth century, and then only with many reservations. "There has lately grown into use in the arts," wrote the English architect Joseph Gwilt in 1842, "a silly pedantic term under the name of *Æsthetics*." It is, Gwilt added, "one of the metaphysical and useless additions to nomenclature in the arts in which the German writers abound."

I thought it would serve my purposes to start by introducing a central concept and marking out with gentle irony some distance between my subject, Shakespeare, and Adorno, so that the listener would not expect an easy fit. (I also want to point out to you the fantastic usefulness, in writing virtually anything, of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which as a Harvard student you can consult on line. This is an historical dictionary which tracks the evolving meanings of words and provides key examples of the first known written use of each of these meanings. You can in

effect watch the moment when every word, and hence every concept, in our language emerged into the light of public discourse, and you can ask yourself why then, and not a hundred years earlier or later.)

My second Adorno lecture, on the status in Shakespeare of normative Renaissance concepts of beauty, also begins cautiously:

Beauty, the great Florentine architect Leon Battista Alberti writes in an influential passage of the *Art of Building*, "is that reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken away, or altered, but for the worse." The cunning of this definition is its programmatic refusal of specificity. It is not this or that particular feature that makes something beautiful; rather it is an interrelation of all the parts in a whole. The key qualities are harmony,

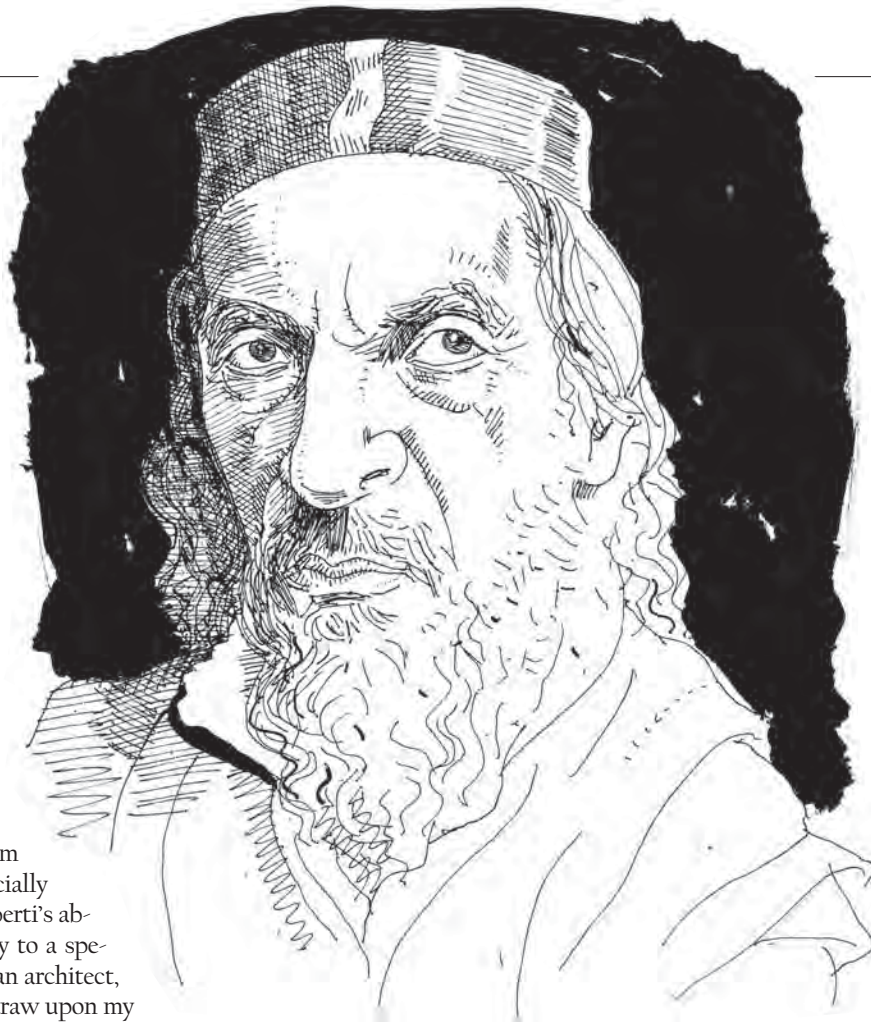
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inherence, economy, and completeness. There is nothing superfluous and nothing wanting. As in Alberti's façade for S. Maria Novella in Florence, which dates from the 1450s, the pleasure derives from the sense of symmetry, balance, and the elegant ratio of the constitutive elements.

Once again I want to get a clear, memorable definition of terms out in front, so my audience will know what I am talking about and follow me while I gradually reveal Shakespeare's profound departure from an aesthetic ideal he officially endorses. I move from Alberti's abstract definition of beauty to a specific instance of what, as an architect, he created, so that I can draw upon my astonishment, many years ago, when I stepped for the first time out of the train station in Florence and saw before me the marble façade of Santa Maria Novella. Ten minutes in the Widener library took me to a translation of Alberti's tract on architecture and 15 minutes more turned up the quotation that I needed. And because Alberti's vision of beauty had actually reached me, I knew it was not merely a straw man that I would have Shakespeare easily overturn, but a magnificent and coherent achievement in itself. I could use it, in short, to get at something weird and uncanny about Shakespeare's alternative vision, one that led to the dark lady, to Cleopatra "wrinkled deep in time," and to the wild structure of plays like *Hamlet* and *The Winter's Tale*.

Still, as you have seen, there is something defensive about both of these opening gambits: you do not step onto the lecture platform in Frankfurt with your shirt sticking out of your pants. But on the principle I have already articulated, I am going to try in my third lecture, on the topic of negation in Shakespeare, to take a risk. This is how I propose to begin:

Here is the situation. We have, living in our midst, an alien population who hate us, as the saying goes, with a vengeance. To hate us with a vengeance means that, despite the fact that we tolerate their presence here and allow them the benefits of our civic order, these aliens feel that they have been injured by us, and this feeling of injury justifies any hostile measures that they might choose to take. Since we are fully at home here and are stronger than they are—we embody the dominant values, embrace



the dominant beliefs, and control the dominant institutions—the hostile measures to which their hatred of us drives them will almost invariably be sly and covert. When they see us, they bow obsequiously, as if they were courting our friendship, but the pretense is almost comically unconvincing.

I go on in this vein for several long, unnerving pages. Only after I have fully mimed a voice of fear and hatred, do I turn in the direction that some of you may have anticipated. For, as you may have noticed, I have already

begun to conjure up the situation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. I have tried to do so in a way that enables me to suggest the play's uneasy contemporary relevance, a sense at once fascinating and disagreeable that it is playing with fire. All my life I thought of the combustible material as anti-Semitism—or, to put the matter more carefully, Christianity's Jewish problem. But the queasiness of Western cities no longer centers on the synagogue. It takes only a small substitution for the word "synagogue" to tap into current fears: "Go, Tubal, and meet me at our mosque. Go, good Tubal; at our mosque, Tubal."

To learn how my argument comes out, I'm afraid you will have to read the lectures when they are published (and to do so, since they will be published in translation, you will have to learn German). But I hope I have done enough to suggest that you approach your writing not only as if it were a performance but also as if it constituted, for the moment, an ethically adequate object for your deepest ambition. It does not finally constitute such an object—a few, though mercifully not many, of the best writers in the world have been moral monsters—but it is a promising start. ▣

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