Guilt and Shame

Essays in French Literature, Thought and Visual Culture
Introduction

To be ashamed of your immorality: that is a step on the stairway that ultimately leads you to be ashamed of your morality as well.¹

The ethical, ontological and genealogical questions raised by guilt and shame, for Nietzsche, seem as pressing now as they have ever been. At a time in our contemporary culture when exposure to, and consideration of, personal and collective guilt on the one hand, and social, bodily or mediated (or indeed mediatised) shame on the other, are constants of our everyday experience, these issues continue to haunt our moral and ethical lives. In her recent volume, From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After, Ruth Leys engages with key debates in recent shame and trauma theory, to make a compelling case for the continued importance of these issues in our twenty-first-century lives. In her discussions of trauma and torture, she points out how guilt and shame, powerful twin mechanisms of subjectivity, have become inextricably linked to the socio-political dynamics of power. In the context of a media-saturated society where the camera is not only a tool of illumination but also an infinitely extended tool of public humiliation, Leys remarks upon the revelations of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison as a dark marker of our contemporary perceptions of guilt and of shame. She paraphrases Mark Danner when she writes, ‘As a “shame multiplier”

(...) the camera epitomizes the logic of torture at Abu Ghraib, which can be defined as a *spectatorial logic of shame*.²

Leys makes a claim for a shift in contemporary socio-political and psychological stances on guilt and shame, not simply with regard to the torture of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib detainment facility, but more broadly in the world at large. She claims that:

The shift from a logic of torture based on guilt to a logic of torture based on shame reflects a more general shift that has taken place in the course of the last forty years [...] It is not just a question of assuming, as anthropologists used to do, that the Iraqis belong to a more primitive, ‘shame culture’ that our own Western ‘guilt culture’. Today, shame (and shamelessness) has displaced guilt as a dominant emotional reference in the West as well.³

For Leys, tackling questions of guilt and shame in the contemporary world involves a twofold engagement. On the one hand, discourses predominantly disposed towards guilt explore the psychical effects of this guilt upon the self, and consequently upon the expression of that self as individual, separate and distinct. Elements of such thinking are espoused by Diderot’s notions of virtue ethics, by Freud’s psychoanalysis, and by trauma theorists such as Shoshanna Felman, and indeed Leys.⁴ On the other, post-traumatic postmodernity requires a re-evaluation of shame, where shame, both anthropologically and sociologically conceived, has been concerned with a sense of exteriority, of inclusion or exclusion within a community, or of constitution by some external agent of shame.

While shame is, in essence, spectatorial (I am shamed by the look of an other upon me, and consequently I am shamed by the judging and the judgement of that look upon myself as shameful), guilt appears to be what both psychoanalysis and trauma theory have put forward as an originary and explanatory mechanism of a self that also provides its own processes of

Introduction

ethical (or unethical) decision making. It relates to an internalised regulatory system and, as a result, guilt’s involvement with self-regulation also becomes a force of self-constitution. Just as guilt becomes inherent in the social structures of prohibition and patriarchal order asserted in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, Oedipal prohibition and primal guilt are combined in Lacan’s primary signifier, the *Nom du Père*. This primary signifier, the symbolic intervention of the father into the mother–child bond, simultaneously positions the subject with relation to a symbolic order and marks the prohibition of Oedipal desire. Consequently the symbolic naming of and prohibition by the father both inscribes and constitutes guilt as a founding relational structure for the psychically normative subject. Rather simplistically put, guilt structures how the subject comes to be a subject for Lacan. Where subjects become abnormal, such as in his *Séminaire III: Les Psychoses*, Lacan claims that the *Nom du Père* is foreclosed, and the original guilt or promise of punishment is absent. Subsequently subjects which are ‘psychotic’ are unable to organise the self meaningfully with relation to this internalised guilt, in opposition to the self-structuring guilt of the ‘sane’ subject. Guilt, for psychoanalytic thought, is not simply regulatory; it is what constitutes the self as a recognisable social being.

It is interesting, then, that while guilt is a founding structure of the self for psychoanalysis, phenomenological and existential accounts of shame suggest that the inverse holds true. In his writing on ‘le regard’ in *L’Être et le néant*, Sartre sees shame as a primary means of comprehending an encounter with the other; shame is what enables the possibility of comprehending that this other regards the self, while the self regards the other. James Richard Mensch frames this problem in phenomenological, rather than existential, terms when he states:

---


I am ashamed before the actual other, that is, before his or her concrete presence. I internalize this presence, rather than any generalized other. A primitive, immediate, prelinguistic type of empathy is at work here, where I regard myself through the other’s presently regarding me. This regard is painful. I do not want this other to see me in my present situation. In contrast to guilt, then, shame requires the real, or, at least, the imagined presence of specific others to be activated.\footnote{James Richard Mensch, ‘Shame and Guilt’, Hiddenness and Alterity: Philosophical and Literary Sightings of the Unseen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 103–17 (103–4).}

Although not quoting Sartre explicitly here, Mensch articulates what is effectively a Sartrean, existential commitment to the other, regulated or indeed produced by shame. Shame is induced when one is exposed to another: it is ‘routed through the eyes’\footnote{Leys, 126.} and consequently always requires a kind of specularity or scopic function in order for it to be revealed. Shame is a kind of double reflection on the self: we watch our shameful selves being watched. One might also argue that shame is a phenomenological experience that can be accounted for in the face of the other, and consequently operates on the level of the personal body, as well as in terms of broader socio-political discourse. Sartre’s shame, and indeed Levinas’ shame, is constitutive of a presence before the other – an other present to, but totally incommensurable with, the self.\footnote{For an engagement with the ethical consequences of thinking this presence before an other, see Emmanuel Levinas, Totalité et infini: essai sur l’extériorité (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961) and Autrement qu’être, ou au-delà de l’essence (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974).} The incommensurability of the self with the other becomes for Levinas an ethical compulsion to have a manner in the world that, as Levinas describes, is otherwise than being, articulating an orientation towards the other in the face of an other that one can never be.

What becomes noticeable in these series of engagements with guilt and shame is that the visual, scopic and specular emphasis of shame is a noteworthy feature in many modes of contemporary French thought. Twentieth-century thinkers, such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Levinas,
and indeed those European thinkers associated with French thought, such as Giorgio Agamben, share a simultaneously constitutive and yet suspicious engagement with vision as a contestatory mode through which to understand issues surrounding our contemporary subjectivity, including those of guilt and shame. While Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan and Levinas relate the broader philosophical concerns of vision, seeing, and shame to a philosophical investigation of the conditions of general being, Agamben and Levi take up issues of specular shame with regard to the traumatic events of the mid-twentieth century. In particular, Agamben's construction of the Musulman as the abjectly suffering figure of the concentration camps in *Homo Sacer: le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue* inscribes the shame of exclusion as a constitutive practice of understanding the human. As a figure of ultimate abjection, the Musulman is both shamed and shameful, emerging as a sacred figure that is consequently excluded from humanity in order for humanity to maintain its boundaries. This formulation of the inhumanity at the heart of humanity, which is so astutely taken up in twentieth-century literature by figures such as Robert Antelme and Maurice Blanchot, is a terrifying, sometimes abject, encounter with subjectivity, whose borders are so proximal to alterity as to almost exceed them. However, as J.M. Bernstein has mentioned in Agamben's case, perhaps the vision of a morality, rather than a testimony, based on the shame of inhumanity, is grotesque and veers dangerously close towards being a justification, rather than a condemnation, of some of the most shameful events of the twentieth century. Consequently, the Nietzschean configuration of shame cited at the beginning of this introduction, induced by humanity's

own morality, in excess of the shame induced by its immorality, casts a long shadow over the status of contemporary French and European thought around the inhuman.

The discipline of French Studies is particularly well placed to bring to light the critical issues arising from guilt and shame. Metropolitan French and French-speaking culture retains an intimate emotional, critical and philosophical relationship with guilt and shame, from its plural philosophical, literary and cultural perspectives. In studies in French from the medieval period to the present day, the complex structures of guilt and shame play out across the arenas of philosophy, literature, visual culture, history and linguistics. The purpose of this volume is consequently to bring together a range of recent and innovative scholarly work in the area of French Studies on this current in cultural discourse.

Essays in Context

The essays collected here span a broad range of disciplinary methodologies and historical periods. Guilt and shame are far from exclusively modern and post-modern states of being, and in fact these twin themes are significant even in the earliest periods of cultural production that form the object of what is understood as French Studies. This significance is borne out by the first three articles in this collection, which examine medieval texts. These articles present dilemmas arising from the consequences of shameful acts or events, dilemmas which, rooted in Christian ethics, expose the workings of social structures governing personal interaction. Bill Burgwinkle’s coupling of modern and medieval accounts of shame and masculine identity in the article, ‘Guilt, Shame and Masculine Insufficiency: The Case of La Fille du Comte de Pontieu’, opens the collection. His article addresses conceptual transformations of shame, via a series of perspectives from sociology and anthropology, psychoanalysis and cultural studies. In his innovative analysis of the medieval tales, Tristan et Iseut, and La Fille du
Comte de Pontieu, Burgwinkle makes fascinating connections between the chiasmic relation between guilt and shame in medieval literature, and how this might enable us to reflect upon our contemporary involvement in processes of guilt and shame. He suggests that our positioning towards guilt and shame is troubling, confusing, and fundamentally unfixed within social or subjective stratifications. Irène Fabry also cites shame as a transformative moment, but here mythologised in the thirteenth-century roman en prose of La Suite vulgate. In the cases of the knights Enedain and Gauvain, their transformations into dwarves are manifestations of internalised guilt and culpability after rules of social etiquette have been transgressed. Mary Flannery’s discussion of the Roman de la rose adds still more complexity to the picture of medieval concepts of shame and morality. Here shame, the guardian of female chastity, is a necessary ‘attribute’ of female virtue, but one that must be violable in order for a man to assert his power. The figure of shame, and her violation, thus function as key modes of social and gender-based modulations of masculine dominance in medieval French narrative.

By contrast, in the context of a post-renaissance, neo-classical France, the social configuration of shame gives way to a more personal configuration of guilt and ethics. In some ways prefiguring the ethics of social shame and personal guilt expressed by Diderot in the eighteenth century, the satire of the moralistes associates guilt and shame with individual moral struggle and responsibility. The articles by Emilia Wilton-Godberfforde and Frédéric Miquel explore these seventeenth-century anticipations: Wilton-Godberfforde, in ‘Guilt’s Reconfiguration of Time and Relational Ties in Seventeenth-Century French Theatre’, explains the significance of guilt as a structuring device to affectively intensify temporality within the seventeenth-century classical French theatre of Racine, Corneille and others. Anguish provoked by guilt constitutes a moment of the ‘collapsing in’, or coalescing, of past, present and future, and guilt itself thus functions as an authentication of the psychical realities coexistent within the theatrical representation of time. The subsequent article by Frédéric Miquel, ‘Quand le langage spirituel plaide coupable: linguistique et péché au XVIIe siècle’, explores the intimate detail of language itself in the seventeenth century.
Miquel’s examination of ‘le langage spirituel’ in the seventeenth century traces the controversial thematic of an individual acting as a transmitter of the word of God without incurring the guilt either of committing blasphemy or of distorting his divine source. As if to foreground the future transformations of guilt and shame in the nineteenth century, Miquel’s citation of Pascal’s (and indeed, echoing Augustin’s) affirmation that ‘il n’y a de honte qu’à n’en point avoir’ resonates with Nietzsche’s insistence (cited at the beginning of this introduction) on the compulsion to experience the shame of one’s own moral discourse, and to be aware of the shame that foreshadows and constitutes any moral encounter.

In eighteenth-century writing, philosophical discourses of guilt and shame permeate a mode of Enlightenment thought that does not simply engage with what is shameful or what induces guilt, but how one may or indeed should act. Literary thinkers such as Diderot construct value ethics via a socially engaged form of writing, producing a sentimental morality which acknowledges the place of pain and passion, in addition to moral virtue. One might argue that this understanding of guilt and shame with regard to a subject that can experience moral pain shifts the emphasis of morality from a universal determinism to a set of self-determined attitudes towards the world, in the social conditions through which a subject lives. The role of the philosophe, like the moraliste, takes on the character not purely of a philosopher, but one engaged, through writing, with the pragmatic challenge of leading one’s life.

The textual exploration of problematics of guilt, shame and ethics, however, is not the sole mode of representation explored within this collection. Natasha Grigorian explores models of narrative in painting, and contributes further to the debates on femininity (and indeed masculinity) initially invoked in earlier essays by Burgwinkle and Flannery. In Grigorian’s discussion of dream worlds in late nineteenth-century poetry and painting, the two themes of guilt and desire are irrevocably caught up with viewing and envisioning the feminine. Grigorian examines the principles of guilty

---

desire in the Symbolist paintings of Gustave Moreau and the Symbolist poetry of Jean Moréas as aesthetic explorations of beauty, and ventures towards the possibility of myth and fantasy as a quasi-humanist antidote to the anguish of a France on the cusp of modernity.

The crisis of representation undergone in the nineteenth century, and exemplified in Grigorian’s essay, uncannily foregrounds figurative transformations in thought and visual culture in the twentieth century. By regarding shame as in some way ‘necessary’ to the constitution of a self, this shame also represents a necessary attempt of individuals to contain that shame in some way, via either physical or psychical processes, and in particular the psychical processes of memory. Twentieth-century analyses of a politics of memory, and its correlative theories, most notably those of trauma theory, have assessed the cultural history of the catastrophic and momentous events of the twentieth century – thus imbricating the affective processes of trauma, identification with shame, and survivor guilt, with those of memory. At the same time, and on an intertextual level, such discourses also operate through a frame of subjectivity. This subjectivity is one constructed in concert with the forms of representation of imperative moments in collective and societal cultural memory – frequently traumatic moments in history, such as the concentration camps, the hydrogen bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Algerian War.

Memory is consequently a privileged psychical medium (and collective idiom) through which textual and social/historical narrative may be understood: memory is the subject through which history emerges and is also subject to history as a dominant or hegemonic discourse. Equally, history is bound up with a past informed and disrupted by memory – a ‘battle’ between subjectivity and the possibility of truth claims external to the subject. Consequently, in trauma theory, it is cultures of memory, or memorial cultures, which persistently ground the thinking of guilt and

---


shame associated with atrocity, in terms of perpetrators, witnesses and survivors. Guilt and cultural amnesia are closely intertwined, prefiguring a shift between the individual and the national in bearing witness to trauma. The individual and the communal or national operate simultaneously within the realm of attempting to bear witness, however shamefully, to the global events of the twentieth century.

Within the context of French Studies, the complex issue of post-Holocaust memorial, remembering and forgetting, brings into sharp relief issues of guilt, shame, pardon and sin. A number of the articles focusing on the twentieth century in this collection address this issue, from its philosophical and ethical treatment to the moment of experience or quasi-experience of an unpardonable act. Najate Zouggari’s article on the discourse of pardon between Jacques Derrida and Vladimir Jankélévitch addresses the very principle of pardon when faced with the unpardonable act and implacable culpability of killing, linking ethical commentary with the innumerable instances of the unpardonable during civil and international violence in the twentieth century. Notions of pardon and of an originary sin lead Eszter Horváth’s article to examine the concept of an originary figure of thought that appears in several incarnations in the works of Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, in a series of interlocutory manoeuvres around the ‘figures of thought’ of Psyché and Khôra. These figures encompass but do not embody the betrayed figure of ‘woman’ which, Horváth argues, is, for Derrida and Nancy, the inconceivable unknown at the heart of philosophy.

Ruth Kitchen’s article turns to the instance of the individual in her treatment of cultural amnesia and the imperative of forgetting in Maurice Blanchot’s semi-autobiographical account of L’Instant de ma mort (1994), the moment at which he faced the firing squad during the Second World War. Timothy Mathews’ article examines the impossibility of an approach to ‘viewing’ guilt and shame from afar without the inevitable affective distortions of seeing suffering. Through the principles of mediation that Benjamin refutes, he draws together a treatment of the works of Giacometti to examine how presence and absence of witnessing and the witness rely upon an unaccountably visual turn. In his discussion of Giacometti, he invokes gesture and mediation as means of accessing the difficult passages
between history and oblivion, between the guilt of forgetting and the shame of remembering.

The primacy accorded to vision and the specular in studies of shame prefigure the focus upon vision in the last section of this collection. Contemporary cinema invokes a particular relationship to vision and sound, with a sensory appeal that extends into thinking about touch, about breath, and about ways of being in the world. Davina Quinlivan’s article sensitively interrogates notions of touch, the breathing body and embodied shame via Marina de Van’s viscerally striking and controversial film, *Dans ma peau* (2002). Quinlivan argues that close-miked sound produces a particular kind of sensuous encounter with the body of the film’s protagonist, one which produces an uncanny proximity with the protagonist’s progressively destructive explorations of her flesh. The thought of Luce Irigaray here permits an exploration of this protagonist’s silent, breathing body, as a site of a transgressive, renewed form of subjectivity that acknowledges and returns to, rather than rejects, the shame of its own alterity. The article by Lucy Bolton also acknowledges the thought of Luce Irigaray, but instead attempts to think female subjectivity through the English-language film, *Morvern Callar* (2002). Bolton engages with the unusual fate of the eponymous protagonist, as an instance that would conventionally instigate extreme conditions of guilt and shame, but which, in this example seems to set to one side questions of morality and ethics in order to engage with questions of being. Bolton describes Morvern as an Irigarayan ontological figure, an Alice stepping through the looking glass where phallogocentric norms, including the constructs of individual guilt and shame, are inverted. Morvern’s weird, Alice-like anti-moralistic world transforms the potential for female subjectivity.

The focus on seeing, sight and visualising outcast and transgressive figures is a consistently recurring trope in studies of guilt and shame in French – one that comes to light particularly in the contemporary audiovisual medium of film, but which maintains a pertinence in contemporary studies of French literature, thought and culture outside metropolitan France. The final article of this collection negotiates this visualisation of the outcast in a striking trope: that of the albino in African literature in
French. In representations of the figure of the albino, Baker argues, alterity and subjectivity run alongside one another, and produce profound ruptures in ways of seeing the world. By being seen, the albino troubles and threatens boundaries between normality and difference, invoking a crisis of looking that results in shameful acts of stigmatisation, and the designation of the albino body in literature as ‘deviant’. Once again, questions of ethical attitudes to the other, and to radical otherness, arise from an engagement with transgression, vision, shame and guilt.

Conclusion

The articles conclude with Baker’s poignant examination of the figure of the albino, who is forced to submit to another as the object of scrutiny, and is outcast from normative appearance because of this hybrid existence between cultural designations of white and black. The scrutiny of or by the other seems to be a concern which arises particularly frequently in studies of twentieth- and twenty-first-century French cultural production, particularly given that the rise of audio-visual media attaches an emphatic importance upon what can or cannot be seen. Nonetheless, the anxiety and apprehension produced by scrutiny is by no means a uniquely twentieth-century ‘concern’. For instance, Grigorian’s and Fabry’s articles insist upon vision as a vehicle for shame – in Fabry’s article, the transformed dwarf’s shame is activated by the gaze of others, and by the recognition of his alterity with relation to them. Considering the articles in context in this collection draws a fascinating and troubling association between disfigurement and ‘difference’ as punishment, both in the medieval story that Fabry attends to, and the alienation of the albino whose difference can also take the form of punishment, that Baker analyses. Such associations suggest that issues of scrutiny and shame, difference and pain, have been far from laid to rest as key concerns in the analysis of French and Francophone literature.

Articulations of guilt and shame, both at the level of the individual self or subject, and in a mode of societal organisation, take on a philosophical
and ontological significance that goes beyond the anthropological.\textsuperscript{17} Guilt and shame are not solely significant to a time far from us (the medieval period) and very close to us (in the cases of Derrida, Blanchot, Giacometti and our contemporary positions towards terrorism). It is this constant negotiation, between the historical and the personal, the familiar and the estranging, that is always at work in scholarly thinking about guilt and shame.

This collection confirms the challenging and troublingly ‘essential’ nature of guilt and shame. Intimately linked to suffering and trauma, guilt and shame are no less fundamental to human experience than forgiveness and reconciliation, which are also recurrent concerns in this collection. Underlying each exploration of the broader concerns of guilt and shame is a questioning of what it is to be human, how to live among others, and how to recognise or dismiss the ethical imperatives that ensue. From the manuscripts of the \textit{Roman de la rose} to Molière, from Nietzsche to Blanchot, the centrality of guilt and shame demands attention and re-evaluation, not simply to provide an \textit{état present} of their position in French Studies, but also to reflect more broadly upon these ethical, ontological and aesthetic concerns in the study of the humanities.

\section*{Suggested Reading}


\textsuperscript{17} For further philosophical explorations of guilt and shame, see Bernard Williams, \textit{Shame and Necessity} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).