

## A RESPONSE TO VIVANTE, GAMEL, AND DOUGHER

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I never really thought about personal voice theory until Judith P. Hallett and Thomas Van Nortwick asked me to be a respondent at the panel that they organized on the personal voice in classical scholarship at the 1995 meeting of the British Classical Association. What I had to say there, that is, my initial reaction to the theory and how it seems to shape scholarly discourse, can be read in the pages of their *Compromising Traditions* (Beye 1997). Today I am not yet sure that I understand the implications of the theory, exactly how it works, or what the value of it is. Yet each of these papers has been helpful in giving me a fuller insight into its potential. In essence, I guess, it's all about authority.

The argument for personal voice, it is often said, derives from the feminist movement as a defense against the male voice. This would be particularly true in a field such as classical studies. As a strenuously conventional and traditional discipline, it has long been a province assigned to elite males; moreover, what survives from antiquity as a subject for study is also emphatically masculine. But I would say that personal voice theory is immediately more attractive in the contemporary United States because of the profound dislocation of the traditional nominal common culture of this country and the concomitant alienation of so many Americans. We have nothing else to fall back upon save our own particular take on any given situation or idea.

Bella Vivante's paper seems to me an excellent illustration of this through her own personal story as someone with a very special and harrowing childhood experience who then discovers marginality as a Jew in the American South; the forbidden pleasure of contacts with southern

African-Americans; the Jewish ghetto of Los Angeles's Fairfax district; and, finally, the peculiar and very special mix of ethnicity, class, and race in Manhattan. This is a very American story; it is a story that African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos can also tell in their own words. It is a history that, finally, the increasingly diminished and culturally marginalized upper-class WASPS are coming to discover is theirs as well. The failure of their authority as the makers of American culture is perfectly realized in their increasing discomfort with that perennial Christmas film, "It's a Wonderful Life," a cultural icon now incongruent if not glaringly false. In America's shifting cultural scene, where no one can really be sure where he or she belongs, there is nothing left to validate what any of us says other than the conviction of each of us of our own uniqueness.

Vivante's account of her discovery of the cultural force of menstruation was to me another highly significant element of her paper. Both sexes, I would argue, are empowered by acknowledging or, perhaps, insisting upon the essence of what they are. In the profession of classics, it has been males more often than not who have been in the position of defining, describing, and psychologizing women. Needless to say, I grew up in an era when menstruation was never mentioned; half a century ago, certainly, no woman classicist would lay claim to menstruation at a meeting of the American Philological Association, as Vivante did when presenting this paper.

The mention of menstruation, however, endows Vivante with authority over an aspect of the reproductive process forever alien to males, in some sense unknowable and scarcely to be understood. She is taking back something that rightfully belongs to women, that endows them with authority. On the other hand, I was immediately struck with the thought that the mention of menstruation liberates males to acknowledge their own special biological truth, which is the capacity of the penis for erection and detumescence beyond the control of human consciousness. (As must be clear to my audience, I hold to the now less than fashionable position that males and females are largely defined by their biology.) Women will say that men are obsessed with their and every other male's penis. It is true, but the more interesting fact is that men will not acknowledge this—well, straight males in any case. Nowhere is this more obvious than in classical studies, where it took a woman—Eva Keuls—to write *The Reign of the Phallus* (Keuls 1984). But perhaps times are a-changing. A few years ago, there was an interesting discussion in the *Boston Phoenix* about the problem for male models in art schools who became erect while posing. The models quoted in the article,

for the most part, felt that this was a natural fact of their bodies, the display of which should be no more distressing than a mother's bared breast while nursing. Perhaps males are finally becoming comfortable with their erections.

Mary-Kay Gamel's elucidation of Euripides' *Ion* is another instance of a woman insisting upon the authority of a woman's intuitive reading of the text. This is a play that I have much enjoyed since I first read it with Thomas Rosenmeyer at the University of Iowa in 1950. In subsequent years of reading and researching it, in and out of English translation, I have focused on the *Ion* figure, his naïve, artless, and adolescent character. The play always seemed to me to be a comic—I mean that in the grander sense of the word—a comic version of the Oedipus story. I must admit that I completely dismissed Creousa's pain and her dilemma. They were for me nothing more than the stereotypic woman's situation in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens, just as the slave-like working conditions of teen-aged Irish girls in the mills of nineteenth-century Lowell were just an inevitable historical truth. Gamel made me face the fact that Creousa had been raped and that she had had a baby and that she had given the baby up to die. These are three facts of life that register far more profoundly in a woman's psyche than a male's. Creousa's anguish: the rape, the pregnancy, the abandonment, they are there in the play. While nothing stems from Gamel's imagination, it is the moral urgency of her paper, more especially the energy of her translation that insists upon the pain and the brutality, beyond the surface of the Greek, but implicit in the Greek, that brought me up short in my tracks. It is there in the Greek text, however we may wish to read the culture. What is even more significant, Gamel demands that I, the reader, understand that she writes as a woman for whom rape and childbearing are as real as they cannot be for a male reader. Gamel's woman's authority, therefore, makes the Creousa character come alive as never before for me. And, of course, it makes me think yet again of what it must have been to be a male in the audience of the *Ion*, of what it must have been to be a male writing the *Ion*.

Most of all, Gamel's analogy in this excellently written paper between her professional life and Creousa's experience is just the kind of powerful acknowledgment of her inspiration that gives the paper its final authority. The personal anguish behind her strenuous sympathy for Creousa, instead of making her argument too personal, gives it depth. At the same time, using childbearing as a metaphor for career causes her audience to reconsider themselves in a domestic setting, a patriarchal one to boot, and thus reconstitute their own creativity in those terms. Academic males of my generation

consistently scanted their familial obligations in the pursuit of tenure, partly forced into this behavior by senior male faculty who had done the same thing. They remind me of so many Agamemnons who symbolically kill their daughters so they can sail to Troy, while their embittered wives remain at home to commit adultery in revenge and for dignity. How many dinner parties at Harvard, Yale, and Stanford did my wife and I go to that could have formed part of the script for Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Let me repeat how much I enjoyed Gamel's writing. (I suppose I should also say here—in the interests of personalizing these remarks as required by the personal voice theory—that Gamel is one of my oldest and dearest friends.) I remark on the quality of Gamel's prose because I am reminded of something said by a member of the audience at the British Classical Association meeting. He observed that part of the fear of and defense against the personal voice came from those who realized that personal voice theory also required that scholar-writers employ a personal style. Since style was beyond the capacity of most scholars, they repudiated the personal voice and took refuge in the so-called scholarly voice.

Those of us who began our teaching more or less a half century ago divided our time between courses in the original languages and the newly invented classical civilization courses. In the latter, we tried to get the students to identify what ancient literatures and cultures *meant* to them, how they identified with or were alienated by the subject matter. In the philology courses, on the other hand, we kept to the grammar and the literary historical facts. *That* was classics, the civilization courses were, as was often pointed out to us if we were too simple or naively enthusiastic to realize, simply whoredom. Some of us, however, tried to import the impressionistic reactions of the civilization courses into our courses in the original languages; some even thought to bring them into their scholarly writing. I believe that this is the larger sense of the vague word *spirituality* that Vivante wishes to tease out of the ancient literary, historical, and grammatical facts. It is in fact finally the best defense of the personal voice theory. Whatever it is that we are doing, when teaching, writing, or researching, there are some of us who believe that it *must mean something*.

I was personally liberated by the critic John Gardner, who encouraged me to write as I chose when doing a book on Apollonius for his Literary Structures series. I had thought that this book, unlike my two Anchor Books for Doubleday, had to be—how shall we say it?—serious. He read the first draft and said, “You don't sound like yourself at all. You are boring me!” (Boring, as we know, is just another word for alienating.) So I

tried again and sometimes really made him happy. As, for instance, when I was trying to describe the Euripidean Jason's dilemma when confronted with the opportunity to jettison Medea and marry a Corinthian princess. Medea wants Jason. I wrote, "She wants an emotional life, something more than making out with her female companions up in the *thalamos*. She wants sex with her man for recreation and self-fulfillment. This is an utterly new and preposterous idea. He's done his bit, settled them in Corinth, got a small place across town for Medea and the kids. Does she think that he is going to enjoy sleeping with the Royal Princess? No, that's part of his job, like Odysseus' seven years with Calypso. He'll go on getting his physical and psychic pleasure from his courtesans and boys and his male friends down at the coffee house" (Beye 1982.51). To which a reader commented, "They didn't have coffee houses in antiquity." Like the time I wrote in my book on ancient epic, "History's opinion of Augustus will always be divided: did he make the trains run on time, or was he a monster tyrant?" (Beye 1993.227), and several persons remarked that they didn't have trains in ancient Rome. Oh, well.

Which brings me to Sarah Dougher's penetrating analysis of the style of Samuel Butler, his alternation between professional and personal voice. The ironies are everywhere in Butler. His arguments from observation, for instance, happen to parallel his claim that women write from experience, exactly what he himself is doing. As usual, the gay male is caught between his instinct for acknowledging the human self that he finds in the female manner and his need to identify with his gender peers who demand neutrality and self-effacement. How ironic, as well, that Butler managed to side with the professionals in his misogyny yet alienate them with his personal style. How he must have threatened so many of his professional male readers,<sup>4</sup> who would have been attracted by his misogyny but made nervous by his personal style. Homerists would also have been threatened by his claim of female authorship, since that assessment could only debase the *Odyssey's* canonic value. After hearing Dougher's paper, I am inclined to say that Butler's personal voice throughout his otherwise scholarly disquisition seems to be the way in which he can attack the male classical establishment by making them acknowledge that which they will not, by insisting with that voice that their barrage of scholarship misses the mark because they cannot manage his style. It is not unlike the silently enraged Jew who slips a bit of Yiddish into the ever so proper and repressed and colorless tea table conversation of some really high-class, WASP anti-Semites. But Dougher raises the larger issue, the truly important one,

namely that we have many voices at our command, many selves. We have to find what is appropriate—more to the point, we have to *insist* upon what is appropriate to us. I frequently attend seminars at the Harvard Center for Literary and Cultural Studies in a variety of fields, and I am constantly amazed at the tone of camaraderie in some of the seminars held by those in disciplines other than classics. The field of classics retains, I am sorry to say, an atmosphere that is constantly eristic, defensive, self-protective, exclusive, and repressed. But seminars in American Studies, for instance, or Medieval Studies or Celtic Studies have given me the opportunity to see and hear men and women admitting error, acknowledging superior arguments in a relaxed fashion, helping each other out with citations and obscure references, chiding, kidding—in other words, making whoopee and amusement out of the game of learning. If classics remains an Aztec ball game with the speaker's severed head as the ball, these other fields more and more resemble a quilting bee or a taffy pull. After spending a lifetime at the former, I count myself fortunate that I can go through my dotage at the latter.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The essay printed here constitutes the remarks offered at the Personal Voice panel on Greek Literature at the 1996 American Philological Association meeting. These, I must admit, have gone through a bath of editing and amplification in the interests of greater clarity.