

Hospitality, Comments without Conclusion

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These final comments are not, in fact, ... final. Instead, they are intended to direct us in our closing discussion of the papers we have read over the past two days and to send us home, ideally, with more to think about than we had in mind when we all arrived.

I cannot sum up all that has been said. Not only for the obvious reason—that the papers are too rich and strange to be reduced to a few slogans or common preoccupations—but also because we have, I think, been brought to the point of proposing more questions than answers, and to the point of being able to see what some of those questions are. “Is it a topic?” was a question raised in the opening remarks: the question still has legs. There may be no such thing as a ‘hospitality’ unqualified by all the adjectives that we have heard hitched to it: limited, pure, unconditional, commercial, local, religious and so on. And in another phrase we have heard—the “hospitality industry”—hospitality itself becomes adjectival or (at minimum) part of an uncomfortably compound noun. As our papers have worked through and with all of these different modifiers, it has become clear that hospitality is a hermeneutic project, something that requires fashioning and refashioning in its variously specific sites. Right here we must start to question the availability of something like *an* ethic or *a* culture of hospitality.

As such, hospitality seems perfectly at home in a workshop, one with able and willing bodies having to hand (or sometimes not quite within reach) a range of tools and raw materials. We have asked questions about the sorts of tools we need for the job, and what we can expect to produce with them. *Translation*, for instance, may look like a tool but has turned out to be a project and a puzzle itself. Perhaps it is a desideratum for all interactions that might go by the name of hospitable: who are you, what can I make of you, what do you expect, why are you at my door, do I understand your language (even when I seem to speak it already)? We started with a spectacular instance of translation questions—what is a niece to a Delaware?—cycled through Ottoman Turkish and the fate of the translator himself and kept alive always the insight that, after Benveniste and Derrida especially, there is no single language of hospitality. Instead, hospitality is marked by the *unheimlich* dialectic of friend and enemy, host and guest, familiar and stranger: when I am most at home in opening my door to you, I am least at home. The fate of the translator—that figure who is safest only when ignored, and marked only as and when vilified—is not a merely historical topic. Think of all the Iraqi and Afghan translators we have left behind in our war zones, to whom we have not offered hospitality, whom we have left behind, hung out to dry, marked by a collaboration whose content will always remain unknown to both (or all) sides of the exchanges. They are sites of privilege and mystery but also scapegoats, not least because of their ability not to take a side and their circumstantial inability to generate trust. Hospitality can be a trap.

Hospitality, we have found, is conceptually at its clearest when it marks something we think we have lost forever: the good old days, the Scottish Highlands, Pre-Columbian America, fantasies of premodern life (life without rampant commerce, fortified nation-states, and so on). We should remember that commerce has also been proclaimed, by Adam Smith and others, as itself the progenitor of hospitality in its commitment to the conditions for peaceable exchange. Think of the history of free-trade zones as icons of cul-

tural openness, limited or otherwise. Or perhaps as sites for asking the question [of commerce's relation to hospitality].

Hospitality, even when in the form of surprise, can also come with a history: can be the most embedded when seemingly most spontaneous. So at least thought the Greeks. That Bellerophon was once the guest of Oeneus saves at least one life (for a while) in the *Iliad*, when Glaucus and Diomedes suspend their combat. History offers a reason not to kill at least one person (though the whole mass killing is a function of history). But inequality succeeds the equality of life over death: the gift of Diomedes is worth only nine oxen, while the one he receives is worth at least a hundred. Homer says that Zeus confused Glaucus's wits and led him to a bad bargain. But is it so simple? Is the obligation of Diomedes now all the greater? Is there any burden of guilt? Not for the merrily materialist Greeks, we are often told, but possibly so for the inwardly self-censoring modern consciousness who reads them from a distance? Diomedes's father also got the better deal, as it happens. A paean to or critique of wily Greek traders, a twist of fate? What then is hospitality, and for whom?

The guest you never want to see, but who can be guaranteed to arrive, is the one in black with the big sickle. Any guest who is not death is a stay of execution, a granting of time. I remarked, a propos of the *Levite of Ephraim*, that the goal of absolute fraternity would be a world with no need for hospitality, with all difference abolished. Liberalism, with its commitment to difference, cannot abide this prospect. And indeed it is strongly affiliated with death (see Jacques-Louis David's "Oath of the Horatii," 1784).

But then the appearance of a guest is also dallying with death. It seems there is no getting away from it. So Thomas De Quincey found out, or says he did (for the story seems so improbable as to appear invented). In his house among the English Lakes—still a remote area today and more so in the early nineteenth century—there is a knock on the door. There stands a Malay, who does not speak English. Or classical Greek, but that is the language in which De Quincey addresses him, which mightily impresses the servants. The Malay pretends to understand and goes to sleep on the floor, watched by his host. The two have made a silent pact to pretend to understand one another. On waking to set out on his way, the Malay is handed a large piece of opium—for that is what Malays eat, don't they?—enough to kill a horse. He swallows the lot and sets out. Now De Quincey is worried. Suppose he dies on the roadside? But no more is heard of him; no breaking stories of dead Malays. De Quincey is still worried. He has nightmares. A scene of hospitality. And exemplary as such. Each host and guest, potential enemy or friend, to the other. Each a potential destroyer. Two opium eaters. In falling asleep, the Malay makes himself vulnerable: he could be killed. Death is deferred but risked again in the drug dosage; hospitality as the displacement of the violence it also includes only barely works. And in this sense hospitality does have an ontological dimension: death put off, for now; each achieved act a risking of death that is set aside, but only for a time. Hospitality as the rehearsal of a power to put death aside, as a lease on life, for the time being.

Kant wrote of a right to temporary residence premised on our sharing of the limited space that is the surface of the earth. But only for a time, not permanently: a rite/right of passage but not settlement, the sort of right that the Levite invokes with such murderous results. Kant's prescriptions set a challenge for "the West," which is now willing to do a bit better as long as the national labor force is wanting, but only under duress and with huge debate. Our idealists keep trying: cities of refuge, rights to asylum.

But the record is mixed. If cosmopolitan hospitality is a version of an Enlightenment ideal, commercial or otherwise, how are we faring? Yes, “give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses,” but Emma Lazarus goes on to describe these same as the “wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” Welcome, wretched refuse! Meanwhile fortress Britain is on the electoral agenda. How was it possible for Assad’s Syria (about which very little good, it seems, can be said) to open its borders to hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians, and then, after 2003, to huge numbers of displaced Iraqis? This was minimal hospitality: a right to reside and little more. But could it be that our more fully developed ideal of hospitality, wherein more is to be given, actually prevents us from doing more, allows us to profess such high ideals that we are assured of never applying them to more than a very few? Are the operative hospitalities of the West employing an enriched ideal in order to keep our numbers down? The fuller the idea, the more unworkable it becomes. Note: these are ‘our’ wars. According to the *Washington Post*: in April 2013 70,000 Iraqis left Syria to return to Iraq, but 41,000 arrived. For some of our species, there is no place to go. Syria is doing our hospitality work.

I am out on a bit of a limb here, perhaps straining the tolerance of our hosts, certainly inviting questions about the relevance of all of this to the eighteenth century, however long we make it. But our papers have already taken hospitality out of its commonplace nesting in the warm and fuzzy. *Hostipitality* indeed. Apparent command over a threshold is not a reliable indicator of power, it is also vulnerability. (In early modern times, a visit from one’s sovereign on tour could mean economic ruin). The gift of the book was a prominent motif in eighteenth century and earlier “slave” narratives, and remains in the form of Lévi-Strauss’s encounter with the Nambikwara. The eighteenth is a long century indeed! Or: some things just keep happening. Lévi-Strauss, we recall, thought he was bringing the gift of writing (actually a poison), unaware (according to Derrida) that it was already there, along with all the other critical signs of previous contact and contamination: syphilis, influenza, and so on. But one could read the comic-satiric tone of *Tristes Tropiques* (and I would thus read it) as suggesting that Lévi-Strauss knows what he is doing (or writing), and that he is staging his own performance of ethnographic reverse racism as exactly that.

Perhaps to name something “hospitality” is to request an intermission, a breathing space before decisions are made. In as much as “hospitality” thereby models a moment outside critical time, it harks back again to that predicament of waiting for death and putting it at a distance. In early America, Tahiti, in Britain after the ’45, in Spain after Napoleon, and in the other situations described in our papers, we have seen a trying out of this gesture of suspending critical decisions, of suspending violence. But obligations and expectations cannot be avoided for long. We as commentators struggle to understand the reported acts of others who were themselves trying to understand what they were engaged in. Much of the “hospitality industry” whose beginnings we have also seen operating in our period of study is designed to simplify these uncertainties: we travel around too much to want to experience the primary challenges over and over again. We want the bathroom fixtures to be roughly familiar: we want to know how to turn on the shower. A peaceable kingdom in which what is strange remains unencountered. But only for us, and a few like us. The total war situation within which Kant wrote has been displaced to far-away places, immediate only to those who suffer from it (including our own returning

veterans). And, in those aspiring-to-be-identical motel rooms, someone else cleans up. Hospitality requires a work force. In the book of Judges, it requires the death of women.

So there is still much to talk over and to take away, not least the question of who speaks for us and how. Not our college presidents and senior administrators, to be sure. And yet in our own daily lives it is becoming increasingly difficult to get away with the traditional celebration of the freedom of thought and ideas as a simple rationale for offering hospitality to colleagues from places where those same freedoms are not on offer. Unconditional hospitality may be one size fits all, but there is very little of that, even as it remains an ideal by which we may measure the degrees of our failures. Instead of summing up, it seems that I am summing down.