

presented a richer, more interesting account of Plato's Socrates if they had addressed a broader spectrum of the criticism, "continental" as well as "analytic."

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CHILDREN OF THE EARTH: LITERATURE, POLITICS, AND NATIONHOOD by Marc Shell. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. x + 353 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

In the words of the poet: "I don't believe in father / in mother, / got no / papamummy."¹ Shell agrees: we are all orphans, or might as well be; we "indifferent children of the earth" (*Hamlet*) have no reliable method of tracing our genealogy or of fixing our origins, and thence comes our discontent. "[L]ike the child in the story of Solomon's judgment," Shell writes, "we cannot truly know who our blood parents are—we could all be changelings, switched in the cradle—and there is no unshakeable answer to the question of our true parents" (p. 196). To say that all men are brothers, that the human species constitutes a family, as do the universalist ideologies of the modern nation-state, is to experience nationality as the metaphorical extension of a literal fact, that of siblinghood or kinship as our "primary" identity (as the etymology of *nation* suggests, of course). But the self-evidence of literal kinship is only apparent; "real" kinship is *already* figurative. The fictive character of "real" kinship fuels the desire to hypostatize it so that the "metaphorical" brotherhood of the nation-state convinces us of the self-evident givenness of a "nature" from which our cultural distinctions arise and which they only second, mirror, extend, or perfect. Nationalism therefore is a text, and Shell's book is, as he puts it, "a literary study in politics" (p. ix). Foregrounding the "literariness" of nationalism (as well as of religion and other social constellations) and exposing the epistemological conundrums that animate them, Shell's wide-ranging, erudite, and provocative book is a singularly impressive demonstration that no encounter with the political can avoid the structuralist and deconstructive moment of reading and interpretation.

According to Shell, we do not know who we are and are going to have to live with that fact, yet that is precisely the fact whose acknowledgment the West sets itself against. Deleuzian orphans, freed from guilty acknowledgment of parental authority and obligation, schizophrenically scrambling codes and creating new practices, do not found states. More typically, our

institutions deny the indeterminacy of the human condition by inventing, with the zeal of the hysteric and the imagination of the paranoid, totemic systems of kinship that are seized on as the metaphorical foundations for our political and especially national life, not without violence and exclusion. "Toleration," Shell writes, "requires . . . never-ending vacillation."

But by far the greater part of his book is devoted to the myriad ways in which the West suspends vacillation in favor of the frozen and reified oppositions determining those we treat with respect and the "others" who are not "our kind." Among the most mischievous and tenacious of these is the "universalist" version of the kinship metaphor, which affirms the siblingness of the whole human race but whose all too easily inferred correlate is that anyone *not* one's brother or sister is not human and hence belongs beyond the pale. As Chamfort paraphrases the motto of the French Revolution, "Be my brother, or I will kill you" (p. x). Lost in the universalist metaphor is the possibility that someone might be *both* other *and* human. Indeed, the entire metaphoric of kinship depends on thinking in terms of "either/or" to the exclusion of "both/and." And apart from its intolerance, the idea of universal siblinghood has psychologically troubling symbolic implications, implying as it does that one must either be a celibate (the strategy of the saint) or commit incest (p. 38). It also involves a kind of performative contradiction because, as Shell holds, human beings necessarily define their national identity by contrasting themselves to others of a different lineage (p. 38). As a result, those who profess universalism actually act and think particularistically, although not as effectively as real particularists; the universalist's failure to admit the existence of "nonsibling humans" means that he or she has precious little experience in formulating the rights of such beings, whose very existence threatens his or her universalist identity.

If the idea that all men are brothers is so pernicious, then why is it so appealing? Because, Shell argues, universal kinship is the most comprehensive "solution" to the figural indeterminacy that haunts kinship identity; given the "unallayable anxiety about who's in or out of a particular kinship group," the prospect of "a universal kinship that renders knowledge of particular kin or nation beside the point" possesses an almost irresistible allure (p. vii). It is an impossible allure nonetheless. As Nietzsche pointed out long before Levi-Strauss, metaphorical distinctions and the oppositional forms of linguistic binaries insist on absolute differences where in fact one finds a graduated continuum of change, interpenetration, and contamination. Clearly and distinctly applicable divisions are inevitably haunted by phenomena that do not fall neatly on one side of the symbolic divide or another because they seem too much like us, or too unlike us, than they should (such as domestic animals and house pets, to the ambiguous meaning of which Shell

devotes a chapter), or, more ominously, religious and racial differences appealed to by institutions such as the Inquisition and racially based slavery. As Shell shows through a series of analyses whose breadth is stunning—of the anxiety surrounding incest and miscegenation in nineteenth-century America, multiculturalism in Muslim Spain and twentieth-century Quebec, bastardy in Elizabethan England (indeed that of Elizabeth herself), *Hamlet*, Racine's struggle with Roman and Christian universalism and the monstrosities it breeds, and much more—the permutations of the kinship metaphor easily take on an "intolerable" complexity that undoes the clear criteria for inclusion and exclusion for which they are originally invoked.

Shell argues that in face of the unexpected violence of universalistic ideologies, the only real option, the only road to peace for human beings "still vertiginous from the last world war" (p. 198), is particularism. Particularism varies the kinship metaphor to hold that "some men are brothers, and some are others" (p. viii). The advantage of this variant is that it encourages us to recognize that others, not our "kind," are deserving of respect and protection even if they appear utterly different from ourselves or our group and even if they possess a radically different understanding of what it means to be human. The Islamic particularist ideology of Muslim Spain, for example, was tolerant of otherness, Shell argues. The Islamic view held in essence that "some people are siblings and some are others," allowing for "a coexistence grounded in protection of *dhummis*, or non-Muslim residents of Muslim states, as human beings" (p. 25). Such an ideology would recognize that a nation, in H. G. Wells's words, is simply "an accumulation of human beings who think they are one people" (p. 196). The success of particularism depends, however, on tolerance for the ambiguity of kinship, acceptance of the fact that one might not be right about one's belongingness, contentment with probability only (it was dissatisfaction with probability and the desire for absolute certainty that drove us to universalism to begin with). Political toleration, as practiced by those who do not and cannot know exactly who they are, demands that we "admit in good faith as ours the particularistic likes and dislikes that constitute political and sexual being" (p. 198).

But if what matters in the end is learning to live with mere probability—if political toleration is founded on tolerance for ambiguity—then why retain the kinship metaphor at all? Shell assumes that, whatever its hermeneutical or epistemological problems, the notion that blood and birth are primary modes of identity and that all other relationships are secondary is a "sociologically needful prejudice" (p. vii). As such, our models for political association are limited to variations that take the prejudice for granted: either all

men are brothers, or some are and some are not; human beings simply are not prepared to regard political association as anything but an artificial mirror or extension of some more basic, primary, fixed natural characteristic.

Given these choices, Shell's case for particularism over universalism as the less destructive and intolerant of the two genres is convincing enough. But he might consider the possibility of a third alternative, perhaps a mixed genre, namely the "comedic liberty" that he finds articulated in *Hamlet*. According to Shell, Shakespeare's play dramatizes the repressed horror of the dream of universal siblinghood (any act of sexual intercourse is, symbolically, incestuous), and the tragedy is fueled by "the heroic refusal to commit the kind of incest that any such idealized universalist siblinghood requires" (p. 97). Hamlet seeks to transcend particularistic but impermissible love and arrive at a chaste universal brotherhood and sisterhood, but he is undone by his realization of the absolute identity of chastity and incest (p. 103). While doing nothing or choosing not to be are two ways of responding to this dilemma, another is to become "an actor in life," pretending to virtues one fears one lacks, self-consciously acting and enacting roles according to a "general liberty" (p. 113)—a politics or community of theatricality enacted by orphaned or displaced children, as imagined in utopian or Edenic form in *As You Like It's* Forest of Arden (p. 117). That Shell rejects such a model is not surprising, because, in his view, it culminates in "the tragic and genocidal conjunction of kinspersons all in death" (p. 123). Yet, it also suggests how to find identity not in terms of self-evident physical or biological features but rather in a tragic vision of human beings as role players in a game they understand only partially and that therefore is "both desired and feared" (p. 1x). To the extent that such speculation is credible, one would then want to submit to criticism the socially needful prejudices that lead us to require, of ourselves and others, inflexible markers of identity—along the lines, say, of Nietzsche's diagnosis of the deep "slavishness" concealed beneath modernity's strident assertiveness or Heidegger's diagnosis of the "will to will," our technological mode of presencing devoted to ordering and enframing. Given the slim likelihood of the benign forms of particularism that he recommends taking hold in our world, which to all appearances is rushing toward disaster, such speculations, uncertain as they may be, are no more pious than those of Shell.

NOTE

1. Antonin Artaud, as quoted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking, 1977), 14.

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