

Introduction: Whose Guilt?

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I.

“Why me?” That was my first thought when invited to edit a special issue on the topic of guilt for *English Studies in Canada*. I accepted immediately, although my reasons for doing so were at the time, and are still at the time of this writing, rather mysterious to me. Having no particular critical association with guilt, I have felt ill-equipped to speak on or to edit what others have to say about the topic. I guess this is the immediate response of an academic: to feel guilty that I don’t know enough. And if I turned down the opportunity, one of my brighter or more ambitious colleagues would do a better job, which, of course, inevitably she or he would because, well, I’m dumber and lazier. Academic guilt—the worst kind—crystallizes itself when one gives one’s first seminar presentation or conference paper, or leaps the tenure and promotion hurdle, or feels guilty for having tenure and promotion when so many don’t, or feels not so secretly satisfied that one does but then feels guilty for being happy. As Adam Frank says in his contribution to this issue, even “[t]hinking about guilt ... makes me feel guilty” (11). Or perhaps the attempt to mask my ineptitude is a symptom of the academy’s inability to confront its own, a version of Deena Rymhs’s

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statement that “literary criticism avoids dealing with the larger political issues that may shake at its own foundations” (119).

After awhile such sin starts to feel rather primal. Part of my reluctance to take on a topic I knew so little about was, I also now realize, due to the fact that I knew *too* much. Guilt is too much and so much with us that we often take no notice of its presence. We need to ask what this eternal return of our shame might portend at the dawn of the twenty-first century, at a time when a consciousness of our responsibility for the globe is met by an equal sense that we don't matter, that we exist in some neglected corner off to the side of an infinite cosmos. Such is the nature of original sin. The human is a desire that understands all too well the uncanny relationship between a creation that cares little for it and a creature in whom such neglect returns in kind. Shame is the primal matrix of feeling that accompanies such hateful vulnerability; guilt is the human's compensatory staging of shame in order at once to repress and to recuperate its menacing affect. Our suffering for this compensation is the price we pay for our knowledge of it.

In a postcapitalist, Internetted, global arena of social interaction, the knowledge Prometheus or Adam took on in order to know the world of the gods' making, the knowledge that is the rabid spirit of the scientific mind mapped onto a planet that wants to know and thus to wed together all aspects of itself—by whatever means, to whatever ends, at whatever cost—makes guilt as profitable an affective commodity as it ever was. As Lacan writes, “the desire of man ... has quite simply taken refuge or been repressed in that most subtle and blindest of passions, as the story of Oedipus shows, the passion for knowledge. That's the passion that is currently going great guns and is far from having said its last word” (324). Or as Jung knew in his re-reading of Freud's Oedipal scenario, well in advance of Lacan's, guilt is the squandering of our psychic energy, an overcompensation for our neurotic lives. At what point, Jung asks, will the incestuous sin we have fetishized as a passion for knowledge become instead the incest of our desire to truly know the other as ourselves? Is such a knowing ever possible? Or is guilt the inevitable, even necessary, price we pay, as Jung or Lacan might say, for resisting our blindness *as* blindness? In one way or another the following essays address themselves to the issue of guilt as a passion for knowledge, the heterogeneous affect that accompanies human beings attempting to know themselves and their world as the fate of being human within the world. This only world that we have is, in fact, never ours, so that as our only world, we must take responsibility for a creation for which we never asked. Guilt is the compensation for our fetishization

of enlightenment, for our repression of the occult darkness of knowledge. Is it any wonder I had no idea what I was getting myself into? And yet, of course, I've been into it all along.

II.

Another contributor to this issue, Jan Plug, reminded me that “Why me?” is not the question of a guilty person but rather of someone who feels wrongly accused. This did not make me feel any better about myself. Yet it did suggest to me the extent to which one can subscribe *to* guilt as part of one's very being before deciding whether it's true or not. That is to say, one's individual feeling of guilt—apparently originary and unique—is always part of a larger culture of guilt that at once perpetuates and contextualizes this feeling as one's participation within and responsibility for the collective. Partly this sense of culpability comes with a postmediated culture. The court of public opinion in which late democracy negotiates the rights and freedoms of its citizens has become instead the arena of a kind of Calvinist zeal wherein merely having the gaze of public opinion turned upon one's actions implicitly names the guilt of human behaviour and thus determines who does and does not get ahead through a type of social Darwinist survival of the most remorsefully fit. Such has often been the unintended effect of our rabidly politically correct culture, in which to be correct bears an uncanny resemblance to the puritanical and punitive effects of an earlier moral “correction.” The difference here is between guilt and its repudiation, not guilt and innocence. As the poet William Blake already knew, innocence is the pretext of a possible but visionary higher redemption that keeps experience from exerting its absolute sway. One does not return from guilt or the spectre of it; one merely does damage control, trying not to take too much pleasure in the effort.

For as we have come to understand in a post-9/11 environment (which traumatically materialized a traumatic structure of how we have lived guiltily for so long), guilt, or rather the compulsive repetition of both the presumption and expiation of it, has become like the air we breathe. Between guilt and innocence lies a rather murky territory of doubt, suspicion, paranoia, persecution, denial, and blame, the indistinctness of which leaves us often grappling to find our bearings. Our various state apparatuses are only too keen to capitalize on this ambivalence, and in turn we are only too eager to acquiesce. As Lacan writes, “If there is, in fact, something that psychoanalysis has drawn attention to, it is, beyond the sense of obligation properly speaking, the importance, I would even say the omnipresence, of a sense of guilt” (3). And so, while I by no means

insisted on it as a focus of this issue's contributors, it was likely inevitable that psychoanalysis should emerge in the first instance in the following papers as a powerful site for the working through of guilt's affective valences and countervalences at the meeting ground between the individual and the collective.

Adam Frank, for instance, reads forward to Silvan Tomkins's groundbreaking postFreudian work on affect via Margaret Mead's cultural anthropology, which distinguishes between the externalization of shame in some cultures and the internalization of guilt in others. The distinction was the inevitable result of "classical psychoanalytic theory" (12), in which guilt can appear to be less a substantive emotion with a shape, texture, and movement of its own than a symptom of a structure: the conscience-constituting relation between super-ego and ego in Freud's later structural model of the psyche in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), the basis of Freud's later work such as *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Here the matter of guilt as a personal issue generated at the most intimate personal locus via the Oedipal complex becomes the basis of a more comprehensive social externalization that both modifies and monitors behaviour. Tomkins, according to Frank, instead reads identity's genesis out of the syntax of affect in which shame is the semiotic valence within guilt's symbolic structure. Here guilt/shame is both negativity and potentiality, "guilt as a variety of shame that motivates an intention to repair what has been damaged" (23). If guilt is part of our native being, Tomkins claims, it works for us as well as against us. In psychoanalytic theory, one key source for this emphasis on reparation is Melanie Klein. For Klein guilt constitutes itself at the meeting between powerful, often conflicting impulses: love and reparation on one hand; hate, greed, and aggression on the other. Guilt is the product of and in turn produces both conciliation and violence, well-being and shame. The desire for reparation takes shape against a host of deceptive odds, though for Klein, like Tomkins, guilt, however restrictive, is ultimately a necessary check on our instinctual life.

Our desire and compulsion to fit in, that is, are ultimately compensations for a darker matrix of being that always threatens to undermine the ego's fragile and shifting defences, its illusion of personal and social well-being. The critique of what a later American ego psychology would make of such reparative illusions was the basis for Lacan's return to Freud, which begins not with Freud himself but with a psychoanalysis *of* psychoanalysis. Todd Dufresne undertakes such a psychoanalysis but to radically different ends that, in the end, indicate how Freud, and by suggestion Lacan's return to him, was a matter of psychoanalytical guilt—the guilt *of* psychoanalysis.

For Dufresne, a telling symptom of this guilt is one of Freud's later writings, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Dufresne psychoanalyses Freud's own guilt, haunted by the spectre of what has irrevocably come to orient our contemporary sense of guilt, the Holocaust. As the battleground of these demons, *Future* internalizes liberal guilt by taking guilty pleasure in watching the father of psychoanalysis, Freud's own superego, bludgeon his opponents' autonomy in order to assert his authority. As a literary author unusually invested in his own characters, his sympathy ultimately lies with only one protagonist: Freud himself.

The guilty vengeance with which Freud pursues his role as the man who knew too much, Karyn Ball might argue, indicates a reparation that never comes or, rather, that comes all too frequently. Instead, the working through of a rabid egoism in psychoanalysis generates liberal guilt itself in Ball's essay. Citing Freud's notion that "a sense of guilt is invariably the factor that transforms sadism into masochism" (53), Ball explores democracy's sadomasochistic psychodynamics, in which guilt facilitates the excessive governmentality of modern civil society. In the same way that masochism internalizes guilt in order to economize a broader, more destabilizing sadism, liberal democracy stages its own excessive sadism as the masochism of conscience: "[L]iberal criticism not only seeks to regulate this excess but also acts it out masochistically at the level of a wounded and guilt-ridden identification with democratic state ideals" (57). That is to say, liberal democracy's guilty confession of its part in perpetrating the imbalances of a global political economy it seeks to alleviate is the masking of its stake in deriving pleasure from perpetuating such inequities. Or as Lacan writes, "the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire" (319). A little knowledge isn't such a bad thing after all.

A similar exploration of the guilty psychodynamics of liberal democracy's political unconscious informs the next two essays. Partly indebted to Habermas's notion of the late twentieth-century deformations of the liberal public sphere, Jason Haslam reads in Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren* and William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* an exploration of how the formation of Middle America's national narrative is predicated on its repression of guilt about its racial history as its race forward *into* history. In Delany, the past, a malleable "space of both individual neuroses and communal guilt" (79), is both repeated and remembered as part of Middle America's "erotic attachment to and need for" the other (90). Yet as with the Janus-faced psychic façade of liberal guilt explored by Ball, this attachment masks a more insidious need to repress the other in turn "for the maintenance of

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the dominant culture, leading to a potentially explosive cycle of the repression and its return—the very thing that most threatens the dissolution of the dominant narrative is that which enables its reproduction” (90). In Gibson’s novel, the response is more than hysterical, even psychotic, for the “past is not just malleable post 9/11; it ceases to exist as an object of study and instead becomes a quasi-mystical fetish object” (97). One sure way to turn the guilt for our blindnesses about the past into cultural capital is, well, to remain blind about our blindness to the past. If Oedipus had worn such rose-coloured glasses, he wouldn’t have had to pay such a debt for making Mom the woman of his dreams.

One aspect of this blindness is that guilt can become a fetish, the performance *of* guilt. The performativity of reconciliation within an “economy of guilt” (119) is the topic of Deena Rymhs’s essay, which explores how the national climate of reconciliation established by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples serves less to “deconstruct” than to “re-construct” “national master-narratives” (106), specifically those that bear an uncanny resemblance to colonialist attitudes that distinguish the white Canadian Self from its indigenous others. Addressing the RCAP as part of a larger global reconciliation (in South Africa, Australia, and Britain, to name only three instances), Rymhs unearths buried “questions about [reconciliation’s] ideological underpinnings and the interests they serve” (105). In particular she weighs “academic discussions of indigenous people” (118), which as part of a larger public sphere of reconciliation more often than not “rehearses tragic versions of [Aboriginal] history” (114) against the histories themselves in letters and literature, which attempt to re-imagine this past productively in order to move past it. This telling move from comedy to tragedy exploits literature’s power by producing “affective identifications with indigenous history” (118) that substitute for active, material reparations. The process turns guilt into an “ideological construct, produced by a set of processes in which cultural difference becomes transposed as moral difference” (110) and the more insidious racialization of guilt.

In different ways, Ball’s, Haslam’s, and Rymhs’s contributions build upon the psychic economics of guilt outlined by Frank and Dufresne to explore the automatism of liberal guilt within the public sphere, not unlike what Slavoj Žižek calls “interpassivity.”¹ Like prayer wheels that do the work of faith for us, or pornography that fornicates for us, is it possible that reconciliation commissions and their larger cultural apparatus, established by and carefully ensconced within hegemonic national power

1 See Žižek 22–27.

structures, do our repenting for us while we get on with the everyday business of perpetuating the same actions for which we're apologizing? Such economies of guilt orchestrate themselves around the stain of guilt, like the stain of the Real itself. It is to this unavoidable affect of existence, and the interpersonal sociality of our psychic defences against it, that the final three papers turn.

Jonathan Boulter explores the writing of guilt in Haruki Murakami's *after the quake* and *Underground*. Boulter turns away from the fetishization of 9/11 by returning to two after-effects of those two other primal scenes of twentieth-century cultural guilt, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in the Kobi earthquake and Tokyo subway gas attacks.² Murakami's texts should be read, Boulter writes, as "displaced narrative, but ... narrative that knows it is a displacement" (128). Both, that is, evoke the extent to which guilt is an imaginary structure that we live as real or, as Boulter writes, the difference between "the guilt of failing to imagine the possibility of trauma ... and the traumatic guilt of being unable to imagine the means to represent the traumatic event in order properly to mourn" (126). Suspended between two impossibilities, we are the labourers in guilt's "precise economy" (128). And from the interconnected nexus of American, German, and Japanese guilt that made Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki possible, in their playing out of a certain passion for knowledge, we see the "precise" capital that can be made from negotiating between such impossibilities.

Exploring how fiction is all we have to recompense a loss that cannot be recompensed, Boulter's essay reminds us that there is a fine line between terrorism and testimony, between writing as reparation and writing as terrorism. Call it the guilty terror of knowing. Or as Peter Mathews suggests in his reading of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, a novel so saturated by the traumatic events of the mid-twentieth century that it is unable to speak of that time's most traumatic sites of global guilt in the Holocaust, the novel's genius is to stage precisely another kind of guilt economy: that of the secret, which works via the fact of its concealment not via the content of the secret itself. Such secreting implies a guilt that requires—demands—atonement. Such psychic confabulations are the work culture imposes upon us for being born into it. They are also, Mathews's essay suggests, the very stuff of how we live in worlds of our making: by staging

2 As Lacan writes of the profound "breakdown of wisdom" that came with the modern alliance between science and money, such ventures "are themselves capsized by the turbulent swell of a heavy sense of guilt. But that isn't very important because it's not in truth an adventure that Mr. Oppenheimer's remorse can put an end to overnight" (325).

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our lives as having to take ethical responsibility for the crime of surviving, of wanting *to* survive.

III.

What does it mean to be guilty or to feel guilt, as individuals and as collectives—societies, gangs, communities, corporations, nations? Perhaps survivor guilt is the law of our global consciousness, the trauma of our missing history that we narrate via the guilty imperative that we allowed it to go missing in the first place, the inferiority complex that is a state of grace we manufacture in order to survive our knowledge of such crimes. Such psychic manipulations and evasions are what produce that all-too-recurrent phenomenon, when one feels guilt, of the fact that other people seem immune to guilt. I don't trust them. I wonder what they're hiding. Certainly this makes me the WASP from southwestern Ontario that I am. It's so much of a cliché to say so, but I knew I was a Canadian the first time I went to New York City, accidentally bumped into someone on the subway, and said "I'm sorry." I was met with a look not even of surprise but, merely, indifference. Why was I apologizing? What was there to apologize for?

To apologize for being there, for being in the way, was to apologize for not being good enough, a personal feeling that mapped a global situation. In my case this meant being the son of a Czechoslovakian father who spent his life feeling like a dirty immigrant who could never assimilate. Such inferiorities demand guilty compensations. In the Fort Garry Hotel bar where this special issue of *ESC* was conceived, I needed to remind myself that the people waiting on me were predominantly either immigrants like my father or indigenous members of a "class" that we—we who live in that special place called white Canada—still too often think of as immigrants in our "own" country. We all travel as foreigners in a land whose sexual, racial, ethnic, economic, or political beliefs we don't necessarily share. How about we just call ourselves *Canadians*. Or, better yet, how about just *people*. But the answer isn't that pat, and we need to ask what guilty stakes we can claim in keeping divisions in place or in magically wishing them away—or both.

Where does Canada fit in the grand scheme of things? Some call us polite, a moniker that is quickly becoming outmoded. Others say we're deferential to our betters, a feeling that, I suspect, still comes with having been confederated in the Victorian period, never having really left mother behind, like the Founding Fathers in America when they decisively said no to Mother Britain (in order to father themselves differently and thus to exercise their own special brand of paternalism). Thus exists our own

culture war to at once buttress and dissect our *Canadianness* by anxiously speaking and narrating the traumatic silences of our indigenous and immigrant pasts. At the same time, we export this internal struggle by selling ourselves wholesale in the global marketplace, where the imposition of silence becomes the compulsive repetition of—and the repulsive competition for—forces that produce an uncannily similar kind of empire to the one we supposedly left behind. The inferiority complexes that both generate and are generated by guilt leave us with an impossible situation of framing an identity we are then too guilty to inhabit.

This guilty rumination about Canada is one sure sign, as Lacan might say, that guilt is the price we pay for the *jouissance* of, well, being guilty. As Canadians, perhaps we enjoy such guilt. To paraphrase Wordsworth, we're guilty things surprised by our own guilt. Wordsworth's guilty encounters with all those indigents frames a sympathy for mankind that itself induces guilt: one hasn't done enough or one has done *more* than enough. In the end, perhaps the global situation to which I referred above is rather more of an existential inevitability: the guilt of being. As Jan Plug writes in this issue's final essay on the fiction of Robert Walser, guilt gets "ontologized" as "the guilt of being itself, the name for which ... is *shame*" (166). The guilt of being guilty. "This, then, would be the meaning of religious—or perhaps better, sacred—guilt or shame: the meaninglessness with which we are left in the face of God's indifference, rather than the feelings associated with some transgression, even that of an original sin" (174).

That Plug names our guilty condition as "sacred," as an issue of "original sin," takes us back to my opening point about the primal nature of guilt as it breeds our passion for knowledge as the inevitable suffering or passion of knowledge. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer says that "guilt is to be found not in willing, but in willing with knowledge" (1: 156). The kind of knowledge that comes with human being, being human itself being anything but a natural state of things, Plug suggests, inevitably produces the being of guilt as the guilt of being, what Schopenhauer calls "the guilt of existence itself" (1:254). As Schopenhauer writes, "since we are what we ought *not* to be, we do necessarily what we ought *not* to do," for "man comes into the world already involved in guilt" (2:604, 603). Where we imagine ourselves liberated from guilt is precisely where we become more enmeshed within it.

So much for Schopenhauer, but not for Plug or the rest. Perhaps the following contributions are a kind of Nietzschean seeing beyond such inevitable traps. For their willingness to be involved in guilt, in the following guilty proceedings, an involvement costing no less than everything,

from this self to those others, much gratitude—and much guilt for not having risen to the occasion of your work, to the excellence of which I happily, shamelessly reconcile myself.

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