

FLESH AND ETHICS

Book Review of *Flesh and Mind: The Time Travels of Dr. Victoria Von Dietz* A Novel by Valerie Bentz

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Valerie Bentz's *Flesh and Mind*, which won the first place novel award in the Lillian Dean Writing Competition, is an entertaining and thrilling novel, difficult to put down. It is filled with humor and fictitious presentations of Mead, Heidegger, Schutz, and Wagner that anyone who knows their writings would find thoroughly enjoyable. But in my view a subtle philosophical dialogue is also taking place between flesh and ethics, between two figures who do not appear in the story, but whose philosophical views can be shown to be at play in this novel: Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. I would like to make explicit this dialogue and to see what Valerie thinks of this interpretation.

"Flesh" is mentioned in the epigraph, in which the author cites Merleau-Ponty, "The flesh is at the heart of the world," and then adds "Flesh is the entire world, past, present, and future, in which our bodies and minds are uniquely entangled." "Flesh" reappears after Victoria Von Dietz gives birth to twins, prompting Schutz to comment that they could not have a we-relationship in the strict sense since they are not aware of themselves as separate beings and stirring Annabelle Carter-Jackson, Victoria's African-American friend and grant supervisor, to respond by bemoaning how philosophers have discounted the actual world and failed to understand birth (340). Guy, Victoria's former student, chimes in "We are thinking dualistically . . . it's not mind or body. It's bodymind, mindbody," to which Victoria adds "Flesh and Mind!"—the title of the book.

The overcoming of dualism between flesh and mind appears most strikingly when Victoria time travels into the 1930s and 1940s and has sexual relations with Mead and Heidegger, whose thoughts she has loved, and comments on the entanglement of thought and eros that is as old as Plato's *Symposium*: "I feel passionate about men who think deeply, create ideas, and who care about the world. For me the flesh and the mind are inseparable." (141) Annabelle earlier supported such inseparability when she described the mandate that one not feel but only think as "the stuff of colonization." (61) Victoria's own teaching exemplifies the interlacement of flesh and mind when she explores Freudian concepts in class only to run headlong into the opposition of police students whose protests against her "Freudian prurience" play a role in her being denied tenure (47-54). Likewise, to pursue the theme of the unity of flesh and mind the novel fictitiously presents key figures in the phenomenological tradition in an erotic light through which the tradition never conceived them—and the novel can do this precisely because it is a piece of literature and not history. Hence, Schutz, "despite his love and devotion to his family. . . was susceptible to attractive women" (222), and Mrs. "Hullerst" fell in love with her husband by listening to his lectures (300), is attracted to a handsome young man a short time after her husband's death (297), and is even said to have engaged in sexual relationships with Hullerst's followers (373). Literature enables the author to phantasize beyond what we may know or not know on the basis of empirical facts in order to emphasize for the reader that intellectual figures of the past were indeed flesh and blood thinkers (61) and that, consequently, thinking is not separated from flesh.

Of course, as one might expect, sexual relationships are not overly romanticized or disembodied from the rest of life. Hence, they emerge from a history, with Victoria's unresponsive and alcoholic husband Tom looking like Mead—at least when they first met (6); with Mead's first name being the same as her father's (7); and even with Mead's tobacco smelling like her father's (75)—as if passive synthesis with other figures plays a role in whom one finds attractive in the present. Further, such relationships, while filled with elation (76, 86-92, 135), carry with them their share of turmoil. Such relationships can end painfully, as her relationship with Tom deteriorates to the point that she finds life with him dull, lacking both intellectual and physical stimulation and then falls completely apart when she discovers his ongoing sexual relationship with a student (14, 27, 35, 45). But also, Mead, for example, is not always easy to live with since he is patronizing (95) and threatens Victoria's independence (95, 122, 359). Moreover, jealousy and competition trouble such relationships throughout the book, with Mead being jealous and defensive over Heidegger's presence in his relationship with Victoria (94), Heidegger mistrustful of Mead and his relationship with Victoria (172), and Victoria repeatedly expressing concern about Mead's relationship with Jane Addams (101, 266). Victoria gives symbolic expression to this ambivalence of sexual relationships, when, recalling how attractive Mead looked in his picture on her desk before time traveling, she tells him: "It's one thing to see your beard and mustache in a photo and quite another to be scratched by them." But even Victoria's passionate desire to overcome the dualism between flesh and mind and flesh is not without its ambivalence, since Victoria late in the book finds herself loving Guy, her former student, who is not a dream like Heidegger and Mead (365, 379) and who had hope that Victoria would come to realize that a realm man from her real time could be more to her than some philosopher-hero of the past (301)—as though the imperative to hold flesh and mind together were not that absolute.

The close linkage between flesh and mind so central to Merleau-Ponty's idea of "flesh" and to this novel has wider implications for avoiding other dichotomizations. In the face of the bitter polarization of philosophical positions against each other (80), particularly in the case of Heidegger and Mead (351-355), Victoria appreciates the strength of each opposed position, defending, for instance, *Dasein* to Mead (134-137) and opting in the end (145, 398) for both Mead's pragmatic humanism, focused on communication and democracy, and Heidegger's opposition to technology and bureaucracy that reduce people to a "standing reserve" (216) and drive Being and Nature into hiding. Reflecting on how her past has shaped her present proclivities to resist setting one outlook against another, she comments, "I made my place in a family filled with conflict as the one who exists in order to heal, to take care of, to make better, to soak up the anger of the larger ones, the ones who hollered so much with such loud voices." Of course, the quintessential, symbolic undoing of deep antagonisms, such as that between Mead and Heidegger, occurs near the end of the book when she gives birth to twins that bear marked resemblance to their two fathers, Mead and Heidegger (340).

This ambivalence between conflicting positions finds a correlate with the novel's approach to feminism. Feminism is of great importance to the novel insofar as there are reflections on sexist practices in academia: the existence of faculty wives' clubs with no corresponding "husbands' clubs" (69), the prominence of women in poor-paying adjunct roles (137), the subordination of women to distinguished professors like Mead (137) or Sartre (300), and the denial of tenure to a woman (Victoria) because of her supposed broaching topics of sexuality in her classes and even though male colleagues of lesser ability had been recently tenured (69-70). However, as opposed to setting herself up as a feminist exemplar over against

the outer sexist world, Victoria's perspective is messier insofar questions are repeatedly raised by herself and others about why she reveres male figures so much (20, 58-59, 177, 372, 384) and about why she enjoys male paternalism (97). Nevertheless, Victoria criticizes the sexist prejudices of which the 1930's were not even aware (99), admires Jane Addams's womanly independence and strength of character (107, 122, 129), revitalizes her feminist convictions through phantasies about an Amazon utopia (98), and highlights how philosophy, dominated by men, has tended to focus more on death than on the experience of giving birth to children (333, 340). But some tendencies that could appear in a feminist are themselves subjected to critique, when Victoria opposes Annabelle and Ms. Hullerst for dichotomous thinking regarding men and women, bashing men (although in many cases there are valid reason for such bashing—385), and overlooking the potential of women to be tyrannical and abusive of power also (376). By the free exercise of the critique of sexism, of her internalized sexism, and of feminism's own possible blindspots, Victoria prevents the insidious dualisms that can occur when any group, movement, or individual self-righteously assumes its own purity over against all others and immunizes itself against critique.

Religion, too, is ambivalent. On the one hand, Victoria recalls her moralistic upbringing in a Lutheran school proscribing sex outside of marriage (5), and she experienced the large-sized image of Luther across the street from her house as seeming to praise her in a demeaning manner for being a good little Lutheran girl, up early and working hard (24). But on the other hand, as she attempts to deal with the denial of tenure, her father's death, and the separation from her husband, Luther's "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise" inspires her (41). Likewise, Mead praises Victoria's spirituality, independent of institutional religion—in particular her ability to "direct her consciousness through meditation" (263). Furthermore, even though the images of Christ and the saints have lost their power for Victoria (263), the author qualifies their irrelevance by adding, "or so she thought" (263). Furthermore, Victoria claims to still feel their presence, and she tells Mead that she continues acting under Luther's influence by trying "to make the world a better place." (264) Finally, she counters Heidegger's anti-Semitism by finding links between Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism—far beyond the restrictive religious atmosphere of her youth, which isolated religions and often set them against each other, parallel to the dichotomizing of flesh and mind (350). Religion is inherently neither destructive nor beneficial, but a confusing blend of each.

Although the temporal segments of past, present, and future are distinct and although both Mead and Heidegger discuss how these times are all interconnected, this book conjoins these disparate times through the idea of time travel. Victoria in the 1930s and 1940s knows the final outcomes that will result from actions undertaken then and that their actors have no idea of, whether one speak of the havoc and destruction Hitler will wreak (105-106, 160), the fate of Jane Addams that is still unknown to her (126), the later publications of Heidegger and Schutz that will affect the interpretation of the works written in the 1930s and 1940s (143, 178), the eventual translations of Schutz's works in English of which he would not have the least idea, and the achievements that Helmut Wagner will have in the United States (177, 188). One is surprised by this the unusual amalgamation of these separate times that are ordinarily kept apart, when Victoria speaks in the 1930s of World War I, to the horror of Jane Addams, who wonders how one could give that war a number and whether Victoria somehow knows that there will be other similar wars after that (126). Paradoxically, Victoria recognizes that the fathers of her two sons will be dead before the time (of Victoria) in which they were conceived (406); she wonders how one might be a different person upon returning to the present after a sojourn in the past (120);

and there is always the looming prospect that maybe by traveling to the past, one might be able to alter the future of that past, such as blocking Hitler from the actions that will be so destructive in the future (96, 106). It should not come as a surprise that in the epigraph, when Bentz talks about the fusion of mind and flesh, she also conceives as part of the flesh the past, present, and future as constitutive of the world in which we are uniquely entangled (vii). Just as flesh and mind cannot be separated, so Bentz conceives the boundaries between the temporal segments as broken down and their interrelationships as more fluid than ever.

Finally, just as this book refuses to conceive flesh and mind as opponents, so it avoids moral binaries that might rigidly separate good from evil and consolidate all the latter in certainly admittedly corrupt individuals; hence Victoria approaches even the Nazi villains Heidegger and Hitler with a blend of sympathy and critique. Her literarily constructed Heidegger exhibits sexism (159), manifests racialist prejudices (110, 152, 286), espouses elitism (349), spurns equality (177), upholds German nationalism (348), resists Victoria's pleas that he abandon Hitler (160), underestimates and even denies the existence of concentration camps (198, 200, 219), and is insufficiently contrite about his abandonment of his colleague "Hullerst" (the removal of the dedication to whom from *Being and Time* is not mentioned in the novel) (195, 208). And yet, the novel presents Heidegger as accepting the rector's position at Freiburg to ward off the potential Nazi decimation of the German professorate (168), as opposing fanatical book-burnings (191), as being interested in the revitalization of Germany after the worldwide humiliation it suffered after World War I (219), as worried about German self-survival in the second World War (219), as being grateful to Jane Addams for caring about starving German children after World War I (178), and as assisting German professors in escaping (198, 200). Perhaps, though, the novel goes to an extreme in preventing the total demonization of the fictional Heidegger when Victoria idealizes him by stating "Martin resists when he can" (190)—something that seems quite at odds with what we have learned about the historical Heidegger. Similarly, Victoria approaches Hitler wanting to give him therapy (303); seeking to change him rather than kill him (307-308); witnessing him sobbing like a tender child (393); feeling attracted to him (321) and excited by him (409), and feeling compassion for his distorted upbringing (412). At the same time, she is repulsed at what he is doing (409, 411), repeatedly recognizes his craziness (409-412, 415), and characterizes him as a depraved, social monster (411, 415).

But if this book conveys so well the insights of flesh, the resistance to facile dualisms and the embrace of the ambivalence and messiness of life, the conclusion and climax present an alternative to the ambivalence pervading the book up to that point: a clear, decisive ethical action by Victoria, without regard for the consequences to herself or her children, with no ambivalence, with her mind focused on the future victims of anti-Semitic hatred who might be spared. Victoria attempts to assassinate Hitler—an attempt whose final outcome we do not see because the book terminates. It is as if this climax offsets any absolutization of ambivalence itself, introducing ambivalence even into the reign of ambivalence itself. And yet, at the same time, perhaps this stunning ethical act, this act of justice, reveals the ethical-justice dimensions of all the ambivalence that precedes it. Hence, resisting the "colonization" that requires people to think but not feel, listening to and appreciating contrasting positions rather than allowing them to harden into polarizations, approaching self-critically feminism and religion so that their liberating potentials can be realized, imagining the goodness that can result if we would no longer isolate the present from the past but would somehow be able to insert ourselves within the past, and finally refusing to cordon off evil from good and to demonize even those who are despicable—all these modalities of the flesh are also ethical. It is as though the visions of

Merleau-Ponty and Levinas resist and complement each other, and, at the same time, it is as though Levinas's thought reveals the secret dimensions of ethics and justice at the heart of the flesh.