



Response

Making sense of a multitude of (immoral) 'intoxicating stories'



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In Philip Roth's novel *Sabbath's Theatre* (1995) the protagonist Mickey Sabbath – an adulterous husband, incapable to care for his alcoholic wife, and former customer of prostitutes in Latin-American ports – searches through desk drawers in the room of his friend's daughter. She has moved out to attend college, and Sabbath is now looking for Polaroids that might give him some sexual satisfaction. During this search he comes over her notes from a literature class' discussion of a poem by Yeats: "Class criticized poem for its lack of a woman's perspective. Note unconscious gender privileging – his terror, his glory, his (phallic) monuments." Without any comment Sabbath "ransacked the remaining drawers."

At this point, 165 pages out in a novel about a man who unquestionably fails to live up to many moral standards, while he is immorally invading a young woman's privacy, it is as if Roth is pointing out that if one were to take on the perspective of the women Sabbath has offended, that would be the end of a fruitful interpretation. More generally, if one wants to understand people and practices, not least those that appear immoral, one would need to suspend some judgments in order to arrive at an understanding of these people and their practices.

If one were to study how someone like Sabbath explored his own sexuality by paying poor women in ports to have sex with him, then bringing in some conceptualization of how this practice is gendered would of course be paramount. However, there are ways of interpreting this practice that if given space could make the whole attempt at understanding what we set out to understand – someone's exploration of his own sexuality – collapse under the pressure from our own moral reflexes. Being shaped by the moral narratives of our time, we can too easily move from a description of a gendered, exploitative social relation to a moral judgment of this relation. No one really believes that anyone is merely interested in gender relations; our interest is fundamentally moral and political. Still, at times, some perspectives should probably be kept at bay.

But these suspensions are only temporary. Any study is an answer to something and has an implicit "to be continued. . ." at the end. Criticizing a study's lack of some agents' perspective – morally motivated or not – bears resemblance to the literature class' critique of the fourteen lines by Yeats, which demands that a man writing from a man's perspective should rather aim at some total truth. It should go without saying that writing about something does not necessarily mean that everything else is uninteresting or not real. In their commentary to Tutenges and Sandberg (2013), Radcliffe and Measham (2014) comes close to suggesting that certain gender perspectives should always be included. This makes for predictable and reifying research. We would not be exploring aspects of social reality but reconstructing whatever we study – poems, drunken transgressions – as gendered relations.

This becomes more complicated when, as in Tutenges and Sandberg's article (2013), different perspectives are included, but they do not paint the picture one expected or wanted to see. Radcliffe and Measham suggest that Tutenges might have generated data that due to his gender lacks the "more ambivalent attitudes to control and risk" of British women. If one really were to speculate like this, one could also speculate on whether the hypothetical presence of more ambivalent attitudes, had he been a she, would be caused by a mutual expectation that women talking to each other about drinking should tell a certain kind of (ambivalent) story. Rather, we should be open to the possibility that different, apparently contradicting narratives appear authentic to the storyteller(s) under different circumstances; stories told to entertain will be different than those told to cope with tragic events (Tutenges & Rod, 2009).

References

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