

Pity & Terror

I am reading an essay on the American civil war battle at Gettysburg. The essay is by Arthur Danto. I enjoy his thoughts about art so I thought perhaps I would feel the same about his thoughts on war. I haven't any idea about war although I do own a shotgun that formerly belonged to my grandfather, my father's father. He died when I was very small but I remember his gun and his deadly accuracy in shooting small animals from a distance. He didn't like to do it and if they were close he would always pretend his gun had jammed or that the safety was on so they could run away. My grandmother, on the other hand, my father's mother enjoyed the efficiency cruelty afforded her. She butchered the rabbits she raised by hanging them from one hind leg. While they rolled and squirmed at this uncomfortably position, she gouged out one eye and let them die by bleeding from the hole. She said the meat tasted best this way, but I believe she enjoyed watching the portly little creatures writhe, struggling to keep some blood inside their veins against every impediment.



Danto uses this phrase “pity-and-terror” to describe the sensation evoked by tragedy of various kinds. He speaks directly of the calamity of the American civil war but demonstrates how even the “artistically banal” can stir up the same reaction “whenever [he] reflect[s] upon the dense ironies . . . embodie[d]” (99) in even something so standardized and trite as the Civil War memorial. Civil War memorials are not common in California, where I have lived most of my life, but stock yards on the interstate highway filled with patient bovines waiting an unpleasant end they can just begin to anticipate brings me a feeling of despair at the unending possibilities for cruelty people can invent to bring pleasure into their lives.

When I was very small, we moved to our first farm the one we lived on for two or three years before we bought our second farm and stayed there for longer. My dad said, we'll get you a bummer lamb to raise, a bummer lamb being one of a set of twins rejected by its mother and sure to die without intervention. So I was given a glass coke bottle, 16 ounces, a little black rubber nipple, and some kind of dry milk for baby animals who were nursed by human mothers. Of course, being very small and unwise to the ways of agriculture, I quickly made a pet of little Buster, loving him just like I loved my dogs or my cat, Mittens. He followed me around the five acres of our farm, butted my small sister in the bottom when he felt like it, and provided sympathetic

companionship for whatever important questions I might be contemplating at my wizened five or six years of age. Then one day he was large enough to do his duty and my father called the butcher to come and take care of things. I had no way to find a difference between the lamb and our cocker spaniels and I raged with my face down in the sofa cushions fearing the worst for all the creatures I loved. Everyone has to do their part my father said. We can't have freeloaders. But what about the dogs, I screamed. Well that's different was his answer.

Anyway I have been thinking about this pity-and-terror thing as I wonder if I am capable of such a complex sensation or if I am only able to know one or the other. Pity is a terrible position, an arrogant one where you are at least superficially certain of being better off than the object of your pity. Then once you have asserted your pity on the other, (the one you hold at more than arm's length and recognize fully as Other, claiming no real alliance and fairly confident of all the possible detachment, separation, lack of identification with if there is any question at any time) the feeling of generosity and wealth you wanted to extend is eaten away as if by acid, and a fearful sense of complicity, identification, implication seeps through a sludge you always thought was the real stuff filling your high-minded ideology.

I often feel terror when a 1700 pound horse is pulling against my 150 pound offense because he is scared of a gate or some leaves blowing on a tree he has seen a hundred times. But this is fear I am determined to overcome for the good of the horse and myself. Dragging my best friend from a stairwell with his bare and swollen feet after he had called 911 saying he felt like dying and then hiding so they wouldn't take him to the county psych ward was terrifying but I was useful implementing a plan to pull him from danger, hold him against my cold sweating chest, smooth his hair down where it stuck up in the back, murmur quietly things I was not at all sure of. Complicit in his evasion of the authorities as protective as a mother tiger. Deadly accurate at 300 yards. Pity perhaps, terror almost certainly. If they are mixed together, it's difficult to say what emerges, certainly a whole that is much more than any sum of all parts.