

Final Commentary

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Let me begin by thanking Mary for the gracious invitation to return to the Workshop. Those of you who are visiting for the first time, I hope you have come to share my sense that this is a most hospitable place for thought. I've had the good fortune to attend three of the workshops, in three different capacities, and I always leave feeling buoyed by the incredible commitment to ideas and dialogue, as well as the generosity of spirit.

What follows is, apologetically, a shorthand. We've had three days of exquisite examples and I've decided not to add to them (or at least not too much). So, like the individual session commentators, I have a few summary gestures to make, a thought or two to offer up, and perhaps a few questions for moving forward (both in the short-term and beyond the Workshop itself). After I finish reading what I sketched out, I would like to follow Fritz's example and open up the floor for similar concluding thoughts. If the past three days have taught me anything, it is probably this: it is very hard to talk about examples without citing examples. I don't mean this as facetiously as it might sound. So let me put this differently: the task of imagining a general *theory* of exemplarity always seems to founder on the example's lack of autonomy, its inability to ever be entirely self-evident and still be an example. An example always seemed to be an example *of* something else, even if that *something else* would undergo tremendous torque and grow increasingly remote over the course of our conversation and the history we've collectively recalled. No example could ever quite shrug off its stubborn functionality and escape the system of meaning and utility governed by what requires demonstration or illustration in its name. So, for much of our time together I found myself thinking of the example the way I might think about performatives in the Austinian sense, insofar as the example seemed to *do* precisely what it *is*: the example exemplifies. It strives to deliver something into the world. It doesn't always succeed, mind you, but it also never stopped trying: if it did, we would call it something else ("a stone—for instance"). But therein lies a problem, as the language for discussing exemplarity gets caught up in its own snares: an example is an example of something else, and if it wasn't an example, it would be....something else. That weird semantic toggling between one *something else* and the other, between one that is similitude and one that is difference, is, I want to argue, perhaps something more than a language game. In fact, I want to contend that durable properties of the example stem in part from its capacity to commute between identity and difference, singularity and system, presence and absence. As the last three days have demonstrated, the example proves to be an extremely valuable thing to think with, in every sense of the phrase.

But for the next few minutes, allow me to entertain the notion that the example operates like a kind of performative, if only because I want to focus on functionality and Austin gives me a vocabulary for stabilizing my terms. As this terrific collection of papers and our hours of inspired discussion remind us again and again, examples "do things" in the world, usually with language, and in a relatively specific if not uncomplicated way. And while the great "age of exemplarity" may have passed with the eclipse of antiquity as the sole source of all meaningful correspondence, the example persists. But the persistence of the example now arrives in a range of new and cognate forms, arguably parceled up and recontextualized by the rise of empiricism, or the conflict of the faculties, or the advent of psychology, or the time of revolution, or any number of other world-historical forces that we often assemble under the banner of modernity. Example now endures as illustration, demonstration, paradigm, case; as precedent and standard and prac-

tice and norm; as evidence, supposition, thought experiment; as figure and “set piece” and “the model of symbol.” Even as symptom, while perhaps only symptom of its own diminishing force. When Mary asked me if I would like to serve as a respondent to this year’s workshop, I immediately checked out every book in the Vanderbilt University library that had “exemplarity” in the title....[the academic equivalent of the famous Stevie Smith poem, “Not Waving But Drowning”]....It is probably telling that one of the most recent scholarly works touching on the issue—Paul Fleming’s *Exemplarity and Mediocrity: The Art of the Average from Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism* (Stanford 2009)—tethers exemplarity, once the vehicle of the moral aspirations of a culture, to the mundane and to Hegel’s “prosaic consciousness,” which, indifferent to the search for a greater truth, “is satisfied to perceive what is and occurs as merely an isolated thing, i.e. according to its insignificant capriciousness.” According to Fleming, the example in the post-Heroic bourgeois age enters its dilettante phase: full of good intention but lacking in genius, it is often content to merely copy, mimic, and re-present what already is.

But in the period that is *our* collective focus, we’ve honed in on what our organizers called the example’s increasing “unruliness,” as the heretofore natural relationship between general truth and particular instance are pried apart. The most spectacular and literal account of this prying apart was surely Louis XVI’s execution. I return to Ron’s talk—as so many of us have done already—because it shows us how, as the *Encyclopédie* describes, the example “puts the thing in front of one’s eyes—which men trust much more than their ears.” The King, once the figure of exemplary power, has his head severed from his body in a public display designed to signify a great many things (not least of which, ironically, is a new form of political life). An example is made of a King who moments before was exemplary, and a certain longstanding symbolic logic is put to death in the process. But Ron introduces a paradox of exemplary singularity that we will grow quite familiar with in the course of our deliberations: when only a king can benefit from the lesson of the king’s execution, then the message would seem to be dead on arrival. But significantly, the singularity of the event quickly gives way to its endless mediation in the form of prints, newspaper accounts, pamphlets, and broadsides. We are now in the kingdom of examples, each one susceptible to a welter of intentions, the push and pull of polysemy, competing versions of the event, even different angles of vision. Ron’s talk implicitly posed the question: how do we measure the efficacy of an example when authority is no longer consolidated? When the example, as someone said, goes “haywire”?

In certain ways, these questions of determining efficacy gave contour to most of the papers and I felt at times we were tacitly enumerating a range of ways in which an example can misfire, or where the conditions of its felicity become compromised or scandalized. So, for instance, in Julia’s paper we saw how staged, insincere, or highly ironized acts of charity expose exemplary morality as little more than a “style,” and hence as unable to substantiate the lofty ambitions we ascribe to them. In Susan’s account of “bad precedents” we confront the limits of the archive (both in its material and memorial form), which in turn opens up a space for challenging the history of the legal example. Johannes suggests how the very principles of systematicity that undergird “the logic of the example” are once-and-for-all supplanted by spontaneous and immediate natural affects that create a kind of epistemological short-cut to the ethical. Even when, as in Anahid’s talk, the example is failing to produce new knowledge—in fact, is only capable of being acknowledged in a kind of proleptic mourning for its imminent disappearance—it still requires our theorization. Indeed, we accumulated a great many “bad examples” in the course of our three-day conversation, such that eventually it became productive to speak of what Frauke called the “exemplarity of the gap,” which strikes me as a judicious way of recognizing that

however impoverished the old regime of exemplariness might be, the example is necessary for continued thought. As Michel has reminded us on a number of occasions, there is a pragmatic, pedagogical force of the example that inheres both in our classrooms and in seminars of this sort. One might make the argument that all of the twelve workshops Jonathan [Elmer] has proudly attended have been about the example.

Interestingly, in his discussion of the example, Paul de Man takes us back to a familiar critical scenario that I want to end with. Like many poststructuralist thinkers, de Man was suspicious of the legitimacy accorded the example. In his “Aesthetic Formalization in Kleist,” de Man grants that the presence of examples can be comforting: “From the experience of reading abstract philosophical texts, we all know the relief one feels when the argument is interrupted by what we call a ‘concrete’ example. Yet at that very moment, when we think at last that we understand, we are further from comprehension than ever; all we have done is substitute idle talk for serious discourse.”¹ For de Man, the consolation of examples lure us into a state of forgetfulness, or as he puts it, “Instead of inscribing the particular in the general, which is the purpose of any cognition, one has reversed the process and replaced the understanding of a proposition by the perception of a particular, forgetting that the possibility of such a transaction is precisely the burden of the proposition in the first place.” A few things are worth observing here. First, de Man views the example as an *interruption* to argument, precisely because it reverses the orientation of thought in a way that betrays the general proposition in favor of the consolation we feel. The turn is troped as a forgetting, yet despite getting the directionality (the “transaction”) backwards, the reader, de Man continues, rarely fails to manage the relationship between the example and idea. As de Man writes, “*We all know*” [emphasis added]; this, even as we know that no “example every truly fit[s] a general proposition.”

As a way forward, I thought I might pose a couple of questions that remain open for me, knowing full well that there are many such questions that others may want to supply. One is ethical and the other political in nature. The first begins with Thomas Keenan’s tidy formulation in *Fables of Responsibility*, which reads, “Responsibility begins with bad examples.” To my mind this potentially keeps company with the question that I believe Fritz raised yesterday, riffing on Christopher [Chiasson]’s paper, which asked about empathy or sympathy after exemplarity. How do we understand what is shifted to the individual here? Can the example—whether bad, or strange, or wild or excessive—still deliver something ethical, critical, or otherwise?

Finally, as someone who worked on matters of racial and diasporic identity for nearly a decade, I perked up on Wednesday afternoon when one participant reminded us that the Haitian Revolution might deserve our attention as a historical event with exemplary political stakes. The remark didn’t get much traction at the time, but I’ve been thinking about it ever since, which leads me to wonder how the crisis of exemplarity might look from the point of view of the oppressed. We’ve certainly thought quite a bit about the verticality of exemplarity, but it has almost exclusively been monarchical in orientation. But what if the authority of the example is vexed by the kind of existential impoverishment that is slavery? Suppose for a moment that Olaudah Equiano’s famous autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* was actually titled *The Exemplary Narrative of the Life...?* Equiano’s choice of the modifier “interesting”—a category which Sianne Ngai reminds us was given aesthetic-philosophical weight in German romanticism around 1800 as an “aesthetic without content”—is, it seems to me, significant, insofar as it represents a holding, and holding open, of our attention

¹ Paul de Man, *Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 276.

and experience of novelty.² In that way, it might also be said to be exemplary (and I think most readers would agree that Equiano is aware of the power of his example). Can some sort of exemplariness be co-opted for different ends at precisely the moment of its vanishing in other political arenas?

I hope everyone will feel welcome to add his or her own questions to these and continue the conversation.

² Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard, 2012).