

Feyerabend's Stories of Immanence



"Why do I like the King Kong poster? Because I have sympathy for the poor creature. There he is, living peacefully, and they pick him up and subject him to their own bloody rules. Besides, it's a nice picture."

Photo by W. J. Broad

Review of Paul Feyerabend's Stories from Paolino's Tapes: Private Recordings 1985-1993 -- Terence Blake

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I have been listening to these tapes that Feyerabend recorded as a form of spoken letter to his partner Grazia Borrini when he was far from her, and I find them quite moving. It is a great chance to hear Feyerabend's voice, as he talks informally about books, film, opera, and people's lives. The first track begins with a citation in German from Brecht's *THREEPENNY OPERA*: "Denn die einen stehn im Dunkeln und die andern stehn im Licht. Und man sieht nur die im Lichte, die im Dunkeln sieht man nicht."

Feyerabend sings this excerpt and then complains about the English translation, and proceeds to propose his own translation and commentary. (This is one of the curses of being bilingual, one is never satisfied with the translations of others).

“And the ones stand in darkness and the others stand in the light. We only see those who stand in the light, those who stand in the darkness you don’t see”.

Feyerabend describes the scene, where you see a few people in the light, jumping around and there is a huge number of people in darkness, being born, dying, laughing and crying. This, according to Feyerabend, is humanity. Not just the elect in the light, but all the others who go unsung and unnoticed. When intellectuals talk about “humanity” they just mean other intellectuals, in the First World.

For me this image contains in a nutshell Feyerabend’s whole philosophy from *AGAINST METHOD* and *SCIENCE IN A FREE SOCIETY* to his last completed work *THE TYRANNY OF SCIENCE* (whose real title should be *AMBIGUITY AND HARMONY*, as it is in Italian). It is also a point of passage to Deleuze and Guattari’s collaborative works as well as to James Hillman’s vision of the imaginal unconscious (with its aim of finding the luminosity in all things and of relativizing the projected light of the ego). It also connects to the project of Dreyfus and Kelly’s *ALL THINGS SHINING* (« all things », and not just a few things or a few people in the limelight). I think the internet (Web 2.0) can help spread this sort of light more widely, and more democratically if we can stop it from being coopted by the insatiable appetites of the lumivores.

Feyerabend’s *STORIES FROM PAOLINO’S TAPES* is composed of fragments from the recordings he made for his wife Grazia Borrini while they were apart. In the latter part of his life Feyerabend led a nomadic existence as a philosophy lecturer, traveling between Zurich, Berkeley, and Rome. These stories are fragments from an amorous discourse addressed to “Grazia”, in which nothing is said of love directly but where Feyerabend talks of his passions: theatre, opera, cinema, science, philosophy, popular song, boxing.

In each story there is a moment where an awakening to immanence takes place, and oppression, viciousness and resentment, the tyranny of opinion and the authority of experts, the power of systems and of abstractions are undermined or provisionally overthrown. There is little personal confession, but we are given a rounded view of Feyerabend’s passions and personality, and of his lifelong commitment to freedom from obfuscation and domination.

Perhaps the best commentary on the recordings is given by Stephen Toulmin:
“As is clear to anyone who knows of Feyerabend’s personal life and interests, he had a passion for Science, just as he did for opera and for the cinema. At one time, he was recognized as being a passable operatic baritone, and considered going on the stage professionally; for the rest of his life, too, he used to say that he would have preferred to be a film director rather than a philosopher. So, when he spoke of being “against method” in the sciences, all he wanted was to protect scientists from unreasonable constraints.

There can no more be a set of fixed rules for making scientific discoveries than there can be for producing a great opera or a fine film. What was true of Verdi and Visconti was true equally of productive scientists: they must be allowed free rein, not

criticized for a failure to conform to predetermined rules of composition.” (Toulmin, RETURN TO REASON, p.85)

1. “Sometimes The Context Is Completely Silly”: Feyerabend on Schroedinger

Sometimes it is advisable to avoid an exchange as the context forbids any real thinking and we are faced with just sad old ego talk: no real communication, no openness, caricatural binary oppositions, hectoring and bullying, oversimplification, aggressive declarations and emotions that replace the subtle and nuanced intensities of thought. One should just walk away, or at the worst smile and say “Yes, yes, of course.”

Sometimes it can be necessary to stay put and speak up, because even if a dialogue is impossible the monologue of the self-elected is unacceptable, one must show, to others and even to one self, that alternatives exist, that other voices are possible.

Feyerabend talks a little about Schroedinger in Stories From Paolino's Tapes. Schroedinger is someone that he respects and to whom he is grateful for helping him get his first job. He recounts how he was invited to participate in a television programme on Schroedinger, but he declined as he did not know into what context he would be put. So he watched the programme that was partly silly, but partly good as it told the story of Schroedinger's life. Feyerabend was deeply moved to see footage of a man with whom he had lunched and strolled and had friendly exchanges decades earlier.

One can hear the pleasure and the gratitude in Feyerabend's voice as he evokes someone who played the role of “intercessor” (as Deleuze would call it), helping him to live and to think. Feyerabend is often thought of as a purely negative figure, playing superficial mind-games. But here he talks simply and deeply of things that have moved him and that move him still, the tone is mellow and affirmative of life despite its silliness (Falstaff) and its tragedies (Joe Louis).

2. On What To Do In Silly Contexts: Feyerabend's First Job Interview

When you find yourself convoked to talk in a “silly context” sometimes the best response is just to avoid that situation altogether. We saw this in the last post with Feyerabend declining an invitation to talk about Schroedinger on a commemorative TV programme. He preferred to stay at home and watch the programme, and was moved by what he saw of the life of Schroedinger. He thus managed to select out the joyful affect of having known and being inspired by Schroedinger, without having to suffer through the sad affects of sterile intellectual discussion.

However, sometimes it can be more appropriate and rewarding to accept the convocation and to turn it to one's advantage in some way. A job interview is an interesting case study as the asymmetry of the interview, with its pre-established significations and its forced choices, is reinforced and overcoded by the asymmetry of power. Feyerabend indicates that this interview came at a decisive juncture in his life, and that he could easily have ended up a homeless drunken bum in Vienna. As Deleuze remarks, demolition is always a possibility on a line of life. Feyerabend submitted to the interview process, and even had to suffer the nastiness of someone

noted for his vicious and bullying behaviour. At the end he said “Stop! You ask me a lot of questions, now I want to ask you some questions”. Thus he decided to break with the asymmetry of the interview and speak to his interviewers on an equal footing. Even here in this little anecdote we can see Feyerabend’s lifelong engagement in favour of immanence, and refusal of the asymmetries of transcendence. He remarks that this act of enunciation, plus Schroedinger’s recommendation, got him the job.

3. Feyerabend’s Metapoiesis: Expressing Or Suppressing Affects

Feyerabend is concerned with the microphysics of power and resistance as expressed in the ordinary contexts of everyday life. I see his later reflections as somehow prolonging the meditations on *metapoiesis* that can be found in Dreyfus and Kelly’s ALL THINGS SHINING. The problem posed by their book is an ethical one: what to do when faced with a surge of physis in us or around us? The response that is sketched out is not in terms of mastering a set of rules but rather of developing a metapoietic skill for evaluating and navigating through the situations that life throws forth.

One of the recurrent themes of Feyerabend’s STORIES FROM PAOLINO’S TAPES is acts of resistance to the various microfascisms that surround us. He gives a whole typology of possible responses. In the last two posts we have seen declining (Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”) and restoring symmetry (Feyerabend’s “Now I want to ask you some questions”). Another response is exemplified by Schroedinger’s action when he saw a Nazi SS harassing a Jew: “he went up to him and spit him in his face”. For Feyerabend, this act, while courageous, is not to be understood solely in terms of refusing to give in to fear. More deeply he remarks that “Few people give such expression to their disgust”. When such disgust is felt before the intolerable, many people do not take action, but suppress their feelings or turn away. Schroedinger would “go forward and act on it”.

4. “Schroedinger Was An Outsider”

Deleuze detested schools of thought and tried to teach his students to “love their solitude”, to reconcile them with the necessity of being an outsider and of treating their teachers as intercessors and not models. His aim was not communication and consensus, but to impart a conceptual matter that could be worked over in many different ways. He did not want “immediate reactions”, where the ego asks questions and poses objections that would disappear if it had been patient enough to wait, but something deeper that came from his students’ solitude and goodness. He did not want merely intellectual reactions, but an alliance of intellect and emotion. He wanted to protect them from the impulse to imitate and to join, preferring a pedagogy of the outside.

Feyerabend declares his admiration for Schroedinger: “he was a good guy”, that is to say that he was an outsider who would not shut up. He would not stay and keep silent in a situation where he was not in agreement, but either leave or speak out and give his opinion. He could not be prevented from acting on his opinions either. Feyerabend praises his insight and courage in denouncing the dangers of nuclear power in the early 1950s, warning against the danger to the whole world if industry

got hold of it. Schroedinger was also a precursor in uniting physics and hinduism and declaring that there were many different types of science. He also worked hard to make science comprehensible to the ordinary person. Feyerabend piles up anecdotes and character traits to create an ethical and intellectual portrait of Schroedinger as more than just object of memory and of historical narrative, a field of singularities capable of moving and inspiring us decades after his death. "What a person!", Feyerabend exclaims.

5. Xenophanes: From Homer To Plato

In STORIES FROM PAOLINO'S TAPES Feyerabend translates some fragments from Xenophanes, taking care to conserve as much as possible of the original rhythm and style. From Feyerabend's point of view rhythm and style are just as important as content. He comments on how the style of a scientific paper today is not that of ordinary language, but a special sort of elevated language that has been formalised so as to eradicate the imaginal dimension, what Xenophanes calls the *plasmata*, the phantasms of Homeric and Hesiodic poetry. It all becomes Mondrianesque after the presocratic revolution,

Xenophanes was an "expert", one of the Homerides, "one of the traveling singers who went from city to city reciting Homer, but he also recited his own elegies and mocking poetry. His elegies, which expressed his own ideas, had a precise form: one line hexameter, one line pentameter. Contrary to foundational figures of the theoretical attitude and the theoretical style (such as Hecateus and Anaximander), Xenophanes used poetry to mock and so to criticise the poets from within the poetical style. He criticises the tales of "battles fought with Titans and Giants and even Centaurs", calling them the "phantasies of our fathers". His objection is utilitarian: "not useful are these events". Here Xenophanes is distinguishing himself and his world from that of Homer and Hesiod, but he is still using poetry. He is a transitional figure in the invention of "theory". He recommends not to talk about fantastic battles and civic dissent, but about "how you pursued virtue and what happened to you". These events concerning virtuous acts, we are to understand, are useful.

Xenophanes is an interesting example of what Zizek would call ideological critique. He makes fun of the cult of the stars of the time, the athletes. He critiques the popular anthropomorphic representation of the gods and substitutes his own de-humanised conception: "One God alone is the greatest, the greatest of gods and of men, not resembling the mortals, neither in shape nor in insight". This is a philosopher's God, post-human in the trivial sense that human degrees have been left behind, but still anthropomorphic in that certain human qualities have been exaggerated at the expense of the rest: thought, vision, hearing.

"It is important to know the rhythm of the whole business, because it is not just content, it is also the form." Today we think that we don't have to worry about "form", we just have to present our ideas. This is itself a special form, "prose". But at some time this prose was a newly invented form, a neutral medium for presenting things. "This was a new artificial idiom: scientific prose." For Feyerabend everyday speech was far from the unified model of prose, but was quite fragmentary: "bits of

statements, bits of sentences”. This is the type of fragmentary speech that Feyerabend attempts to restore, not just in these tapes, but in all his later work.

6. Sympathy For The Beast: Feyerabend’s Animal Becoming

Sometimes we are doing nothing special, living peacefully, cultivating and expressing our singularity – when suddenly we are picked up and subjected to the rules of some external authority. Feyerabend remarks that this is what happened when he published AGAINST METHOD: he was picked up and examined by the “intellectuals”, and subjected to their rules of judgement. They explained all his errors and shortcomings, then put him down and went on with their business. Feyerabend’s philosophy is a vital protest against the system of judgement, and against all forms of universalism and essentialism. He prefers sympathy, which is a response to the concrete individual in his or her (or its!) context.

7. Babich on Schroedinger (and Nietzsche)

Babette Babich has given a brilliant lecture on “Schrödinger and Nietzsche on Life: Eternal Return and the Moment” which fleshes out (quite literally given her discussion of Schroedinger’s amorous practice) the affective portrait of Schroedinger given by Feyerabend. Feyerabend cites Schroedinger as a precursor of recent attempts at convergence between Western science and Eastern religion. He refers to Buddhism, but in fact Schroedinger was very influenced by Hinduism, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, and the philosophy of the Vedanta. A key idea of this philosophy is the illusory nature of the ego and the unicity of consciousness. This monism (“consciousness is one”) is attenuated by the pluralist affirmation that consciousness is always now, which entails a perpetual series of successive “reincarnations” inside one’s life. This is the basis for Babich’s comparison of Schroedinger’s views on consciousness and Nietzsche’s Eternal Return: you return eternally, but not as “you”.

As Babich sums up this view: “Personal identity isn’t guaranteed after death, but continuity is ... You lose nothing when you lose personal identity because you lose it all the time.” You are not any of the collections of memories and experiences that are scattered throughout your life, but rather the “canvas” on which they are assembled. Babich remarks that this is an Empedoclean idea (and also a Heraclitean, Parmenidean, Anaximenean, and above all Vedic idea). These collections or assemblages are not “things”- not stable, separate, essential unities. All things ebb and flow, there are only waves and superpositions of waves. But a final ambiguity remains: is this vision an invitation to transcendence and renunciation, or an incitation to immanence and the affirmation of life? The combined portrait of Feyerabend and Babich seems to come down, in Schroedinger’s case, on the side of immanence: Schroedinger shines forth as motivated by aesthetic desire and erotic passion, courage and sympathy, a man who spoke his mind and acted on his beliefs, who was politically prescient in militating against the use of nuclear power, who declined the “stupidity” of the ascetic ideal that would reduce life to mere business and calculation. This is a gift, to live a life itself experienced as a series of gifts (and Babich exclaims at how much Schroedinger was given, that we may also construe as how much he was capable of receiving). The Vedantic exclamation is “Thou art that!” (you are the universe); its Feyerabendian equivalent is “What a person!”. One lives in

the “faith” that they are equivalent, what Deleuze and Guattari called “the magic formula that we are all searching for: PLURALISM = MONISM”.

8. Feyerabend and his Shadow: Compassion and Complexity

One of the themes of STORIES FROM PAOLINO’S TAPES is the need to perceive and to pay attention to all that is outside the narrow limelight of official knowledge and social success. The light is but a narrow selection from a far larger and more ambiguous field. In the incipit Feyerabend quotes from Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* (“And the ones stand in darkness and the others stand in the light. We only see those who stand in the light, those who stand in the darkness you don’t see”) and evokes those living outside the limelight, living, loving, and dying. This is humanity, not the bloodless fiction created by intellectuals who set themselves up as spokesmen for their own partisan values treated as universal.

One needs a shadow perception to see those in the dark and to pay attention to them, and not just fixate on the important people (and the important facts and ideas). The need for shadow perception shows itself again in the story of Falstaff in Verdi’s opera, who is too naive, too innocent. His innocence constellates the cruelty and vengeance of the two young women, Alice and Meg, who wish to punish him for his impudence. He falls for their ruse, no shadow warns him, he takes their ploy at face value, falling victim to a veritable conspiracy of *ressentiment*. At the end there is a recognition of life as “silly”, as containing both bright and dark moments, both innocence and cruelty, in a complex comedy regented by no transcendent value. The darkness is there in the account of Schrödinger – saying no to power, refusing to accept the viciousness of the Nazi harassing the Jew and spitting in his face, perceiving the dangers of nuclear power and warning against it when opinion was in favour of it. Speaking your mind is not innocence or provocation but a “gift”, ie not the property of a heroic autonomous ego, but the outcome of sensitivity to a wider perception and the willingness to act on it.

Feyerabend’s account of Fritz Lang’s FURY is yet another example of the need for shadow perception. The innocent hero, Joe Wilson, is nearly lynched by an angry mob, but the sheriff shows compassion and violates the “law” to save his life. However Joe identifies with the fury for vengeance of the mob, and wants revenge against those who tried to kill him unjustly at all costs. At the end he has a “change of heart” and accepts the complexity of life and the need for compassion.

Compassion is paying attention to and valuing those who do not stand in the light, caring for the losers and the lost, for those who do not have the power and prestige accorded to the élite by the régime of light. As Feyerabend recounts these stories we can feel his compassion, his emotion at the the twists and turns of people’s lives.

9. Shadow and Complexity: Homer’s Non-Platonic Virtues

Intellectuals tend to see themselves as missioned *by* humanity to express and articulate its knowledge, its needs and desires, and the principles on which they are based. They are thus also missioned *to* humanity to guide it on the right way to truth and virtue, “to direct humanity on the path to goodness” (cited by Feyerabend here). Feyerabend argues that such views are not only naïve and simplistic, they are also inhumane and dangerous.

These views are naïve and simplistic because they are examples of the pretention of intellectuals to speak in the name of humanity to justify the imposition of their categories and values without consulting the opinions and desires of the vast mass who are being imposed upon. In the eyes of intellectuals such as Parmenides and Plato, the “many” live in a world of illusion, cut off from true knowledge and true goodness:

“Their fears and joys, their political actions, the affection they have for their friends and children, the attempts they make to improve their own lives and the lives of others, and their views about the nature of such improvements are chimeras” (*ibid*, paragraph 4).

These views are also inhumane and dangerous because they ignore their own shadow: “Philosophy is not a single Good Thing that is bound to enrich human existence; it is a witches’ brew, containing some rather deadly ingredients. Numerous assaults on life, liberty, and happiness have had a strong philosophical backing.” (*ibid*, para 2). Further, to impose their categories in a complex and variegated world intellectuals need the backing of power, influential institutions, government agencies and apparatuses, to give their directives force, to browbeat and brainwash people into submission.

For Feyerabend, the past is no dead matter to be studied and embalmed in intellectual history, but a living repository of values and ideas that can be drawn on at any moment to contest and even overthrow the status quo:

“There is no idea, however ancient and absurd, that is not capable of improving our knowledge” and, we must add, of enriching our life (cf *AGAINST METHOD* p33).

So in order to criticise and go beyond the Platonic tradition that is still with us today, Feyerabend turns to the Greek world before Plato, before even the Pre-socratics, and finds material for the improvement of our knowledge and the enrichment of our life in the Homeric world. (Note: This is one of the many points of convergence between Feyerabend’s philosophy as expressed for example in CONQUEST OF ABUNDANCE, and that of Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly elaborated in ALL THINGS SHINING). In Homer, concepts such as the virtues are not static universal essences but complex assemblages depending on and varying with circumstances, best illustrated by examples rather than defined by principles, embedded in community practices and skills rather than in the autonomous will of the rational agent:

“The Homeric epics reflect this situation. They do not define, they use examples, including cases that show, without explicitly saying so, under what circumstances a virtue turns into a vice” (*ibid*, paragraph 5).

Virtues are not simple unambiguous entities, they are not only complex and context-dependent they also have their shadow side. Homer can show Diomedes’ courage sometimes veering towards madness, and Odysseus’s wisdom and intelligence merging into cunning and ruse. The virtues’ complexity implies also their openness, we can enrich them with our imagination and our spontaneity, we can apply them to new situations or in new ways in familiar situations. For Feyerabend, the Homeric epics do not define or regulate, they do not submit things to rigid rules and universal principles, they use examples and cases, their appropriation and their projection into other circumstances. Echoing Deleuze on Châtelet, we can say that for Homer:

“the universal does not exist, but only the singular, singularity, exists. “Singularity” is not the individual, it is the case, the event, the potential (potentiel). or rather, the distribution of potentials in a given matter ” (DIALOGUES II, p160).

In such an open field of examples and cases, of events and potentials, of singularities and their prolongations, the best way to learn is by immersion, we are learning moral (and perceptual and cognitive skills) not methods and algorithms. The best style to convey such immersive concepts, remarks Feyerabend, is not a systematic account aligning “conceptual artifacts” (which seemed to him a particular, and often very superficial, literary form) but the Homeric (and Biblical) style of telling stories. STORIES FROM PAOLINO’S TAPES is from this point of view a fitting form for Feyerabend’s exposition of various virtues and their exemplars.

One of Feyerabend’s aims from very early on was to outline a theory of knowledge that would present the sciences and the humanities on the same plane, as “different parts of one and the same enterprise” (NATURPHILOSOPHIE, p347). He imagined this theory as more like a manual of rhetoric containing various illuminating examples, useful rules of thumb, and diverse observations and remarks on the suitability of the rules to various circumstances. He wanted to avoid “easy syntheses” and “facile generalisations”. He claimed never really to have achieved that goal, but he wrote and spoke out of that guiding polytheistic imagination.

10. Is Feyerabend Post-Identitarian?

Feyerabend would “adapt himself excellently to those with whom he conversed ... He accomplished this to such a point that from his correspondence one almost gets the impression that there were different people who shared the name “Feyerabend”. Lakatos is said to have commented on this feature of his friend, “Paul everybody loves you, you have no character” ». (Hoyningen-Huene, “Paul K. Feyerabend, An Obituary” p7)

Feyerabend’s “character” resembled an assemblage of multiple personalities allowing an astonishing degree of empathy (Hoyningen-Huene speaks of his “warmth” and “helpfulness”), but also of independence and of evasiveness. To use James Hillman’s expression, Feyerabend was not so much an individual, a fixed separate egoic personality, as a series of “personifications”. His books and articles were written not from the unified perspective of a constituted author, but were as he claimed “collages” fabricated by just such a series of personifications and meant to be read in the same way, by a reader open to their own multiplicity.