On the Verge of Tears

On the Verge of Tears:
Why the Movies, Television, Music, Art, Popular Culture, Literature, and the Real World Make Us Cry

Edited by

Michele Byers and David Lavery

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For Asher and Aviva: Mommy loves you forever with her whole heart.

—Michele Byers

Kudos to my exceptional co-editor, who hatched the idea for this book and contributed mightily to it. My thanks, too, to our patient contributors, our Vergers, and to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for giving *Verge* a home. My usual thanks to my brilliant and forgiving family.

I would like to dedicate my part in this book to my wonderful new granddaughter, Adelyn, whose knowledge of crying puts us all to shame.

—David Lavery

INTRODUCTION

THE CRYING GAME[1]

DAVID LAVERY

> Our best understanding of tears comes not from the medical and psychological sciences but from innumerable poetic, fictional, dramatic, and cinematic representations of the human proclivity to weep.
> —Tom Lutz, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (19)

I

August 21, 2005: the airing of the last episode of HBO's *Six Feet Under's* five season run. At its end Claire, the youngest of the Fisher children, prepares to leave for New York, where a job in photography awaits. After tearful goodbyes on the porch of the Fisher and Diaz Funeral Home (even her dead brother Nate is there to bid her adieu), she drives away in her Toyota Prius and, with Sia's "Breathe Me" playing on the mix CD boyfriend (and future husband) Ted has given her for the trip, heads east.

As she drives, sobbing at times uncontrollably, we witness scenes from the future lives of each of *SFU's* principle characters and then, in turn, their deaths: Ruth passes away in bed with her surviving family at her side, Keith is killed in a robbery, David (at a picnic) and Federico (on a cruise ship) succumb to apparent heart attacks, Brenda dies as her brother Billy drones on. Though it is by no means clear whether all these culminations are to be taken as the driver's own mindscreen imaginings or part of the official narrative itself, Claire herself is not spared: she dies in her bed, at the age of 102, in a room filled with her award-winning photographs. We linger for a moment on her cataract-scarred eyes and then, in a stunning match cut, return to her still fresh, beautiful, young eyes as they gaze out on the road ahead.

And I, sitting in my living room in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, have erupted into irrepressible crying. Though possibly my most intense

mediated weeping, it was certainly not my first. The ending of *To Kill a Mockingbird* ("He would be there all night, and he would be there when Jem waked up in the morning") has made me blubber since I was a teenage boy. At the age of forty, the ending of a matinee of *Field of Dreams* ("Hey Dad, do you want to have a catch?") left me sitting alone in the theatre trying to gather myself before I took my salty eyes out into the afternoon sun. It was certainly my most inspirational cry, however, for this book was the result.

II

It all began with a column I needed to write, wearing my television-scholar hat, for the online journal *Flow*. Now that television is my major obsession, the living room is my vale of tears. [2] *Northern Exposure, The Sopranos, NYPD Blue, Deadwood, Gilmore Girls, Veronica Mars, Battlestar Galactica, Doctor Who, Life on Mars* (BBC version)—these and other shows have often unmanned me.

No single television show has opened the tear ducts quite like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Buffy being given the "Class Protector" award in "The Prom"; Anya's poignant speech in "The Body"[3]; Buffy's death (her second) in "The Gift"; the final conversation in "Chosen," the series finale ("Yeah Buffy, what are we gonna to do now?")—these and a score of other moments jerked my tears. The tears I shed were part of my bonding with the show—at least as important as the countless laughs it inspired.

So I decided to write about television and crying. Certain I was not alone in the regularity of my crying before the box, I sought the opinions of a number of colleagues, all television scholars, and though I made no claim to a systematic sampling, I found the responses of great interest. Here are some discoveries (reported in my column) of note:

A wide variety of television shows, from *Champion the Wonder Horse* to *Neighbours, Roseanne, The West Wing, Desperate Housewives,*[4] and *Grey's Anatomy*, have opened the flood gates.

Several noted that endings—of episodes, seasons, series—often prove to be more tear-jerky.[5]

One correspondent (Burkhead) observed that

> The common cause of my tears is that in each case I was responding to a presentation of my ideals made manifest - love vanquishing evil, the good politician coming out on top, America putting aside its prejudices for the greater good. I suspect my tears were equally a result of joy and the sadness of knowing that I have to rely upon television to create goodness

Others found a distinct difference between film and TV (and literary) tears. One, Michele Byers, a Canadian media scholar and collaborator, and the co-editor of this book, who would suggest doing a book on crying and take the lead on its editing, gave television pre-eminence:

> I have cried over films, but the experience isn't the same (even films I've watched over and over again, even ones I own and watch at home). I have cried over the beauty of films and over the narratives, but I think I cry with the characters on TV. The narratives may be sad or painful but I cry often from the connection I have to the ongoing story (I don't think I've ever cried—except on occasion for tears of joy—at the end of a film), to the characters and so on . . . books have made me cry too, certainly. Sometimes when they were so good and came to an end before I was ready to be done with them. And there have been characters in books that I have loved deeply and cried with . . . so maybe, for me, TV is more like literature in that way. But with TV it's more dramatic. It brings together so many things, the story, the visuals and the music and so on. . . .

Another, Hillary Robson, ranked literature first in the crying game:

> By far, for me, the most tear-inducing is literature—I can say that across the board, romance or not, that literature has usually prompted the tear-swells. My favorite novel—*Love in the Time of Cholera*, makes me cry every time I read it—sometimes, I start crying before the parts that make me cry in the novel, in anticipation of that moment. And I've found that when re-watching *Grey*'s [*Anatomy*], the same thing happens—I'll start crying before the moment, and when the moment comes, I'm downright sobbing—so *Grey*'s has been the most like literature for me. I guess that it's because it takes you somewhere that you don't quite expect. That these characters—usually the ones you hardly know—feel real and true to you, and it's like you're living through them (not unlike how I feel when reading a great piece of fiction).

One commentator, Rhonda Wilcox, remembers a strong childhood aversion to tear-jerking on the sofa: "My mom and sister enjoyed a good cry, but I hated feeling manipulated (I still do)." As an adult, nonetheless, television has brought her to tears (*Buffy* evoked again), especially depictions of sacrifice.

Another (Turnbull) notes that her preference is to "cry alone."

In *Flow*, I hoped to "open and inspire discussion about the tears we shed before the tube" and noted that "[t]here are so many questions we need to ask."[6] "We need," I insisted, "to wipe away our tears and begin the work." This book, Michele Byers, and I hope present a clear-eyed answer to that call.

III

Crying is, of course, an age-old mystery, by its very existential nature perhaps forever enigmatic. As Tom Lutz notes in *Crying: The Natural & Cultural History of Tears*:

> Weeping often occurs at precisely those times when we are least able to fully verbalize complex "overwhelming" emotions, least able to articulate our manifold, mingled, feelings. We recognize in crying a surplus of feeling over thinking, and an overwhelming of our powers of articulation by the gestural language of tears. (21)

In a profound and poignant book from the middle of the last century, German phenomenological anthropologist Helmuth Plessner, writing a year after we had been to the moon, wondered how it could be that despite such an achievement we still have no valid, philosophically sophisticated theory of why we laugh and cry. How can it be, Plessner ponders in *Laughing and Crying*, that we have barely begun to plumb the mystery of these dual, inextricably human manifestations? Writing in 1999, Lutz would find the state of "lacrimology" not much advanced:

> We know some of the basic physiological processes involved, a bit about the glands and ducts used and the hormonal activity that accompanies it. We know some of the major nerves that fire, and some of the brain systems that are activated. Physiologists have studied the chemical content of emotional tears and shown that they differ from the tears, called basal or continuous tears, that lubricate our eyes when we are not crying. We know that women in this culture cry more than men, and that infants cry more than either. (18)[7]

But we cannot claim to fully understand the phenomenon.

For the Greeks and Jung, the mystery was linked somehow to *enantiodromia*, the tendency of all things to turn into their opposite.[8] Good and evil, light and dark, hot and cold, laughing and crying—all are united behind the scenes, each needing the other, in a "marriage of heaven and hell," in order to achieve full existence. In our happiest/darkest moments we have all glimpsed *enantiodromia* in action, as crying becomes laughter and laughs tears—one form of hysteria morphing into another. What was dramatic theory, Aristotle to the 18th Century, thinking by insisting that each keep to its quarters? Shakespeare, and *Buffy*, knew better.

It would be arrogant, of course, for us to even suggest that the my original crying column in *Flow*, or this introduction, or this book, might offer some unified field theory of crying. Our ambition in these pages is

much more modest: in keeping with Lutz' wise directions to trust in art as the proper, the wiser guide to true lacrimony, we asked contributors to write about their response to music, art, literature, film, television, and the real world, and the essays that resulted, some highly personal, some more scholarly, some hybrids of both, make up *On the Verge of Tears.* As a read, what follows may not be a tearjerker, but we are confident that its readers will cry more thoughtfully in the years ahead.

Notes

[1] My thanks to Kim Akass (London-based independent scholar and editor), Michele Byers, Cynthia Burkhead (University of North Alabama, USA), Rhonda Wilcox (Gordon College, USA), Janet McCabe (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK), Hillary Robson (Middle Tennessee State University, USA), and Sue Turnbull (LaTrobe University, Australia) for sharing their thoughts on television and tears.

[2] As in so many other ways, television is film's poor stepchild when it comes to understanding the respective media's generation of tears. Neale, Harper and Porter, and Turnbull, for example, have all offered excellent studies of movie crying.

[3] Masson discusses, and quotes in full, Anya's speech in her essay in this volume.

[4] Interestingly, two of my respondents, Akass and McCabe respectively, close friends and writing partners, did and didn't cry at the same *Desperate Housewives* episode. For McCabe, the explanation lay in household "flow": her viewing of the pivotal *Desperate* scene, which she found moving and sad, came after dealing with a teething baby and cleaning up the dinner dishes. She "wasn't in the TV zone" and had not achieved the "intense engagement" necessary to be moved by television.

[5] For more on endings, see Lavery, "Apocalyptic Apocalypses."

[6] For example: "Do the Aristotelian rules of catharsis still apply? How does gender affect crying at television? . . . Nationality? Are long-running series more likely to produce tears?"

[7] Take note that while all the correspondents for my original column were women, thirteen of the twenty three contributors to this volume are male.

[8] For the Greek concept, see Hampden-Turner, *Maps of the Mind* (47). Jung speaks of the Greek idea in *Aspects of the Masculine* (chapter 7, paragraph 294):

> Enantiodromia. Literally, "running counter to," referring to the emergence of the unconscious opposite in the course of time. This characteristic phenomenon practically always occurs when an extreme, one-sided tendency dominates conscious life; in time an equally powerful counterposition is built up, which first inhibits the conscious performance and subsequently breaks through the conscious control. ("Definitions," *ibid.*, par. 709)

BRIEF TEARS I

GIN TALKING

WILL BROOKER

For maybe thirty minutes, an hour into the flight, I feel like Dean Martin. Suit jacket off; tie pulled loose at the neck. (Always makes you feel way more relaxed than if you weren't wearing a tie in the first place.) By morning, I'm going to present a bleary, oily, stubbled face to the customs desk at Dallas Fort Worth, have a guy look from me to the circa-97 passport picture as if to say, *this is you? You wish, brother.* But for now, I feel like Dean Martin, and flying feels the way they promised it would, in the 1960s. Jazz on the earphones, Chet Baker's swishy soundtrack making everything groovy. A passably cute stewardess leans across with my gin and tonic, and though it comes in a plastic tumbler with a mini-bag of mini-pretzels, and the lady inches away to my left has got the exact same thing, I can kid myself that flying's still the high life.

And then the in-flight movie kicks in—or the in-flight entertainment system, because of course these days you're switching between sit-coms, arcade games and maps of the world—but in this old-school Vegas mood I'm thinking of it as the in-flight movie. It's some Adam Sandler flick. He's in the Jimmy Stewart role again, playing some decent everyman who gets given a magical remote control—don't ask me how or why, I'd flipped to watch five minutes of *Friends* at this point—and for a while, his world's hunky dory. He mutes his wife when she's bending his ear at the dinner table, slows time down when he's watching a hot piece of skirt; you get the picture. Slapstick bullshit like that. Anyway, as you can guess, he takes it too far and the gift becomes a curse. He realizes he was so desperate to jump thru time to get promotion, he fast-forwarded past his kids growing up and he's alienated his wife. The remote's started thinking it knows best, making decisions without him.

I order another gin, stretch my legs. We're above the black Atlantic. I squeeze back into my seat and the movie's changed. It's the same flick, but it's shifted gears. Adam Sandler's woken up in the 2020s, with another

block of his life lost. His wife's left him, his kids have grown up fat and slutty, and he's got cancer. His dog died, too; and his dad. His dad died and he didn't even know it. If I was at home watching this on DVD, I'd be checking the back of the box: *what the fuck! I thought this was a comedy*. The stewardess fetches my gin and tonic. The lights dim. The movie gets darker. Sandler goes back in time to the moment he last saw his dad, and snubbed him. He's standing there, a mute witness, unable to touch; watching himself treat his old man like shit, and knowing that's the last time. He reaches out a ghostly hand, mouths *I love you* across time and space. His dad looks through him, resigned and hurt.

The gin's making things swimmy. I can't quite believe the way this movie's playing out. The guy who gave Sandler the remote confesses he's the Angel of Death. Sandler's catapulted forward from his dad's gravestone to the penultimate scene in his own life: he's at his son's wedding, excluded from the family. His heart can't take it, and he wakes up a final time on his deathbed, in some future hospital. The guy's lived the past thirty years in glimpses and snatches. Now his grown-up kids are leaning over him, saying goodbye. His son takes off, saying he's going to cancel his honeymoon for some work deal. Sandler needs to persuade him not to go the same route. He crawls out into the rain, chasing his son… dying without the life-support. Lying on the road. They crowd around him, overflowing with forgiveness and love. The screen goes dark for the credits, and I'm staring at my dim reflection, emotionally exhausted. My chest's tight, my throat's clogged, my heart's drained. As I blink, wetness spills down my right cheek; the side turned to the dark window, the side nobody can see.

And I'm thinking, not for the first time: why do these cheese 'n' cornball movies work me over this way? I'm not usually a sucker for sentiment, but they always get to me when I'm up here, on an airplane. I caught *In Her Shoes*, some Cameron Diaz chickflick about sisters and slingbacks, en route to Boston once; it had me gulping and wiping my eyes by the final scene. I watched *Bring it On* eight times on a flight from Hong Kong; I was crying like a cheerleader every time Kirsten Dunst's team got to the finals. I welled up during *13 Going on 30* when Jennifer Garner launched into a *Thriller* dance routine. God help me, I remember snuffling uncontrollably during a Bruce Willis vehicle called *Disney's The Kid*. Yeah, I actually cried at a movie called *Disney's The Kid*. It wouldn't have happened if I'd been grounded down on Earth—hell, I wouldn't admit this to you back on Earth, in the real world. I'm only confessing it cause we're here in flight, stranded between continents, out of the

ordinary, with only strangers for company, and your own reflection, and the black Atlantic, miles across and miles below.

The lady on my left has put her book away, covered herself with the tartan blanket and closed herself off from the world with an eye-mask. I unfold myself past her, work my legs as I walk down the narrow aisle towards the bathroom. Engaged. I circle round the area a little, like prison exercise, rolling my shoulders. Rounding a corner I find my stewardess sitting on a fold-out chair, talking quietly with an older colleague. They look up at me, mildly surprised but welcoming. In their faces I suddenly see my mum and dad, on the nights when I'd wander down blearily from bed and stumble into the living room, during the grown-up hours. Mumbling *can't sleep*, knowing I'd get a cuddle and tucked back in.

"Can I get you anything?" asks my stewardess, standing up. "Would you like tea, coffee, juice?"

I shrug. "I'll take a juice."

"Or hot milk?" she asks, as if reading a part of my mind I'd forgotten about.

A beat. "Yeah. That'd be good, thanks."

She stands up and does something efficient with a carton, a beaker, a microwave built into the wall. The motor whirs, and we're standing here together, having to make conversation as we wait. She's good at it: it's her job after all.

"Will this be your first time in Texas?"

"Yeah. It's a work thing, a conference."

"What's your business?"

"I'm a professor." I'm not a *professor* of course, in the English sense; but you have to translate once you're over the Atlantic. Still, she smiles and comes out with the usual embarrassing response—the reason I started wearing suits and ties, dressing up corporate.

"You really don't look old enough."

I shrug, look down. My disguise still doesn't work: even up here, people think I'm just a kid. "Yeah, thanks."

She smiles, and it's not the dollybird come-on of mile-high fantasy, but the *ahh, bless* indulgence I get from the admin ladies at work; the way your aunt looks at you when she asks if you've got a girlfriend or started shaving.

"Is your family from London?"

"Yeah. Well, my parents moved." I'm shifting as I talk, hand up at my mouth: trying to muffle my own stupid ramble. "They're about an hour away from me now."

"That's nice, so you see them often?"

The microwave pings. Saved by the bell. But she checks my face and reads the reply there. She holds the look: it's part concerned, part chiding, and it says *you really should*.

She hands me a beaker of steaming milk, and pats my arm lightly. "Get yourself some sleep, after this."

I nod obediently, and turn away. The bathroom's vacant; I origami myself into it, trying not to spill the drink. I shake my head at my reflection. My fringe is squashed down over my forehead, my eyes and lips are puffy, and there's a clear tear-trail running down my right cheek. Like a half-hidden message, instantly visible under light.

I splash it away, cleaning off the evidence, and push my hair back wet, gelled-gangster style. Back at the head of the aisle, I sip my bedtime drink pretending it's bourbon or black coffee, looking over the shoulders of my fellow-travelers. Ranks of grown-ups, strangers to each other, isolated but crammed together. Some stare at tiny screens, some read in their own small pools of light. Most now lean back or slump forwards, abandoned; eyes shut, mouths open. Adults tucking themselves in for the night, twitching in sleep. Something touching about the way we all settle to this common level, miles above the world and between continents—sharing this space, trusting each other as we lower our guards, regress a little. Except on a plane, when did you last sleep surrounded by strangers? School dormitory. The nursery nap. In this limbo, rules are suspended.

Academics have a word they love to use for shit like this. *Liminal*. Crossing the threshold, occupying in-between space. I can't tell you how many conference papers about liminality I've snoozed through. But it's true on long-haul flights—you pack your identity into a case and squeeze yourself into a capsule for an entire day, chasing sunsets, tricking time zones—and crossing that threshold is a trauma. Every take-off, every landing, I have thirty seconds of thinking, quite seriously, *I could die here*. The engines protesting at the impossibility of the whole idea as they take the final approach down the runway, racing at stupid, daredevil speed with a *fuck it, OK here we go then*, then tear you off the ground, ripping probabilities, daring gravity. In the first moments of lift-off, before we've straightened out, found our height and started facing the humdrum of eight hours in the air, the idea that this silver coffin could plunge from the sky seems very real and pressing. At moments like this, I find myself thinking about 2001. No, not September 2001. Not the passengers of United 93, muttering last love-messages into mobile phones; I mean 2001 the *movie*, back when that date was still futuristic instead of nostalgic. Dave Bowman plunging through the infinite in an escape pod, his face stretched in a silent scream. Staring helplessly as lights rush up to meet you.

Of course, just a bit of turbulence or engine trouble makes people panic these days—and it lowers the barriers further. Apparently it's not uncommon for strangers to start praying together, or hugging the guy in the next seat. You can understand it. This airplane could become a bullet, a missile. This could be the start of your final scene.

So every take-off, I get that brief flash of life before your eyes—a showreel of life unfinished, of things left unsaid, things never done. I'd die now without having been to Sydney. I'd die without kids. I'd die without having told anyone in my family I loved them, since maybe ten years ago. And up here in limbo, drifting above the ocean in a coffin full of strangers, some heavy-handed Hollywood fable can prod those buttons for me, force out a stray tear or two.

I punch the remote, turn off the TV screen. I'm getting the germ of a headache, a little nagging kernel in my skull. My head's dry from the alcohol, the height, the stale air. I pull a mask over my eyes, prop the miniature pillow against the window glass, position myself for a few hours of hard, broken sleep. I wasn't crying. Nobody saw me crying. Ignore that shit I told you just now. Forget I ever said it. It was just the gin talking.

PART I:

CRYING AT MUSIC AND ART

CHAPTER ONE

THE WATER IS WIDE: RISKING TEARS IN THE MET, AND ELSEWHERE

BRUCE B. JANZ

I've been to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York many times. It's not quite a pilgrimage (nothing so solemn, although perhaps just as compulsive), but there is, for me, a comfortable predictability about returning on a regular basis. As the jewel of the New York art world, the Met probably contains more classic and influential work than any other museum in the country, and indeed, is one of the most important art museums in the world. It embodies the classical tradition, and in doing so establishes a canonical narrative about the history of art. The weight of its tradition and the authority of its narrative somehow give permission for the more edgy and transgressive art done elsewhere, as if we need for the Met to exist in order to know what we're both questioning and (perhaps reluctantly, given that overturning received narratives has become standard practice), indebted to.

Every time I go to The Met, no matter what spectacular, titillating, revenue-generating special exhibit might be announced by the banners outside, I always head up the main stairs, turn right on the second floor, and wind my way through the European paintings until I reach what has become my necessary starting place. The room is almost always empty of people, or nearly so. I turn to face the south wall. Between two other paintings that I barely see, there's a portrait of a Spanish Moor, white lace collar over green velvet tunic, arms crossed, the very image of *gravitas* and composure. I once thought that portraits were just about the most boring genre of painting imaginable— always old white rich people I didn't know or care about. I was young when I thought this way. I hadn't yet seen Diego Velásquez's *Juan de Pareja*.

This image has more than once moved me to tears, at times to my embarrassment, which is itself a curious secondary reaction. Why should I be embarrassed, even when no one else is in the room to see me? It might

be because the tears are occasioned by such an obvious choice of painting. This was, after all, the painting that Sister Wendy Beckett (acclaimed host of *Sister Wendy's Grand Tour* and *Sister Wendy's American Collection*, among other documentaries) regarded as the greatest in the Met. Am I just responding to the cultural weight and expert opinion placed onto this painting by a popular documentarian, among others, or do I respond to the painting itself? Or is it even possible to distinguish between an experience influenced by the opinion of others and my own reaction? I used to think that my emotional reaction to *Juan de Pareja* was due to the sheer evident skill of the artist. Velásquez, so the canonical story goes, intended the painting as a kind of calling card, to demonstrate to the Italian nobles who did not know him that he deserved to be taken seriously. He was a master, not of *trompe l'oeil*, but of spectacle. He didn't try to fool, he tried to amaze. And it worked—they were amazed.

But many paintings, before and since, are skillfully done. Why this one, when few others call me back so insistently? I am, to be sure, moved by the story. Juan de Pareja was Velásquez' servant, freed after the painting was done, but still in his service at the time. The painting was produced around 1650, two years after Velásquez was sent to Rome to purchase works for the Alcázar in Madrid. He brought his servant with him, and painted him as a preparation to painting Pope Innocent X. While the style of this painting is freer than some of Velásquez's previous work (likely in preparation for painting the Pope from life, in short sittings), he managed to capture an immediacy and vitality to Pareja that makes it more than a mere study. The portrayal is not of a secondary figure, hastily sketched. His look is proud without being haughty, confident without being dismissive, and almost kind, in a way. He belongs in this painting as surely as any noble or king would. When it went on exhibition, Velásquez's biographer Antonio Palomino commented that the painting "was generally applauded by all the painters from different countries, who said that the other pictures in the show were art but this one alone was 'truth.'"

And yet, it can't just be about the figure in the painting. Would I be moved in the same way if I met this man? It's hard to say, across such temporal and cultural distance, but likely not, although with that bearing I would surely notice him. The fact that he is rendered in a painting is a necessary part of the emotional impact the painting has on me. And whether I knew his story or not, the effect would be largely the same, although, the fact that he is the first Black person to be painted individually and sympathetically by a European in modern times is something I find inspiring.

We might be inclined to think that what I experience is a taste of transcendence, the classic (and perhaps still most common) reason given for art's ability to provoke emotion. But this doesn't seem very satisfying either. Even leaving to the side for the moment our current distaste for any hint of transcendence in critical circles, I don't think I'm responding to some higher sense of the human condition, some liberal notion that Pareja represents for us a human spirit that transcends the particularity of race, time, and circumstance. Philosophers (and I am one) always move too quickly to the universal. But I find it difficult to accept that there is some Platonic insight into true reality at work here.

Further, the story that inspired my liberal admiration may, in fact, not be true at all. One unconfirmed anecdote about the painting is that Velásquez in fact refused to paint his lowly servant, and instead consigned him to grind pigments. Pareja surreptitiously learned to paint on his own, and the portrait we have is actually by him. He included it among Velásquez' own work when he was asked to show it to the Italian nobles and the king, believing that if his painting were accepted, the subject of the painting must be deemed worthy as well. So, instead of warm liberal feelings about a European giving a hand to a Black person, I might actually be having warm revolutionary feelings about an oppressed person cleverly manipulating a system stacked against him. But in either case, I've moved to the Platonic level, to the moral or political lesson contained within the painting, and ascribed my emotional reaction to that. That's what bothers me—in both cases, the painting is merely a vehicle, and my tears come because of what that vehicle carries. The vehicle itself can ultimately be ignored. And that rings false to me.

It is noteworthy, I think, that we feel the need to account for tears in the presence of art. There was a time (and we know this from historical artistic and literary sources) that this type of reaction was simply taken as the norm. But James Elkins, in *Pictures and Tears*, points out in a chapter called "The Ivory Tower of Tearlessness" that "crying is not part of the discipline [of art history], and has nothing to contribute" (94). He admits that the more he learned about painting, the less likely he was to be moved by a painting (he is, to be sure, more than a little wistful about the loss). "Art history continues to deepen my experience of images, and I keep buying, reading, and writing books of art history, even though I know I am slowly corroding my ability to address paintings with full emotions and an open heart" (107).

Granted, Elkins might just be reinforcing a popular but problematic idea that my students often hold—that developing a critical consciousness is necessarily accompanied by the loss of the ability to experience emotion

in the presence of art. Some students have resented it when I have attempted to decoded any aesthetic experience for them—it's impossible, they think, to "go back" to being able to give oneself over to the experience. Disney (for instance) should be left pure and innocent, they believe—asking about its representations of gender or race ruins the magic. My response has usually been that it is, indeed, still possible to exercise one's critical faculties and at the same time be moved by something. My own favorite example is the movie *The Incredibles*, which I regard as both being very funny (it still amuses me, after multiple viewings), but also deeply disturbing in its implications about the nature of social order, its view about the inherently unequal nature of human capacities (which leads to anti-democratic politics), and its caricatures of the fundamental causes of existing social problems.

But in fact, Elkins would likely argue that he is not reinforcing this view at all. Rather, he would point to the fact that the conclusion that "crying is not part of the discipline" came from surveying prominent art historians about their emotional experiences in the presence of art. It is, in other words, an empirical point, not a theoretical one, that he makes here. We find ourselves in a time different from the past, in which tears before art are seen as the exception rather than the norm, a time in which we have become skeptical of the longstanding reason for those tears, that they are a glimpse of eternal truths or the face of God. Painting (really, art in general) was once assumed to raise the spirit. That was the transcendental moment. If we have become incredulous of that transcendence, as I have suggested, are we merely left with the analytic, objective, lifeless—the tearless? Are we faced with a choice between learning and love? And what happens if those tears continue to come, despite our incredulity?

There is, of course, an alternative explanation for those tears, one which is best seen in another experience from my past. Edmonton Alberta has, for several decades now every August, hosted an excellent and well attended folk festival. The term "folk" is used loosely—roots musicians of all sorts are there, from around the world. It is common at many folk festivals to have multiple side stages, where assorted performers riff off of each other's tunes, combine odd instruments (with mixed success), and generally try to make something new and vital. Many long-time attendees think that these stages are the real reason to go to a festival.

I'm not quite so romantic about them. Brilliance can occur, but just as often, the performers end up looking at each other and waiting for someone to take the lead. But in 2000 I attended a side stage that took me, and the 500 or so others watching, completely by surprise. There were four performers or acts: the Canadian folk singer Garnet Rogers, jazz/roots

singers Karen Avoca and Pete Weitzman, Texan country guitarist Kimmie Rhodes and Malian griot Rokia Traore. Rogers, brother to the sadly missed Canadian folk icon Stan Rogers, began the set, singing one of his tunes in his resonant, rich baritone. Karen Avoca came next, and Rokia Traore followed. Traore, who spoke little English, asked Rogers to sing his song again. The performers were unclear on just what she was asking (this was an unusual request), but eventually they understood that she wanted to sing along to the song he had just performed.

Rather than playing the same song, Rogers decided to sing the old Welsh folk song "The Water is Wide." He sang the first verse, and turned to her, still playing his guitar, waiting to see what she would do. She picked up the tune, singing in her own language of Bamanan, and within a few bars both audience and performers were stunned. As part of the audience, I could feel the evocative, visceral power of her voice. No one, I'm sure, understood a word of Bamanan, and yet her plaintive tone fit this familiar tune so perfectly that we almost believed we could understand what she sang. She kept us mesmerized for about 15 minutes, instruments joining and fading behind her—it seemed both much longer and much shorter than that. At one point, I almost got up and left—I wasn't sure if I could take much more. I was one of those moved to tears from the first notes. But I stayed—this was a unique moment, and I knew that later I would regret walking out on it. As she finished, the performers all collapsed in their seats and looked at each other in shock. The audience rose as one; passers-by came in to see what the fuss was about. Even the sound engineers were getting misty-eyed. I felt as if one would have to be a stone to not be moved at that moment. Rokia Traore simply smiled at the front, as if she had just told us a secret that changed everything.

Transcendence? I didn't think so at the time, and still don't. But this sharpens the issue further. If we become incredulous toward transcendence, we might be tempted instead to psychologize a moment like this, to think that we were all caught up in some mass emotional event that just fed on itself. We might think it merely came from our desire to have a memorable moment at a festival, or from our collective sense of guilt over the fate of Africa, or even just from the effects of a hot, languid day. And perhaps all that was true. But was that all it was? Art historians tend to treat art as an object of analysis, and by Elkins' account, have come to see tears as a sign of weakness. If that step is taken, can it be much further to regard tears in the presence of art as a minor form of pathology? Are we left with romantic transcendence on the one hand, or psychological or psychiatric pathology on the other? In the case of both the Velasquez painting and this experience at a folk festival, are my only options that either there is a

glimpse of transcendence (either in the form of liberal universals or humanistic sentiment) or that I am susceptible to influence by the opinion of others (either the opinion of great interpreters of art, or the crowd around me)? The problem, I think, remains the same—these options tend to dismiss the object itself, and substitute something beyond the object.

The choice between these two explanations can be seen in our attempts to understand the work of a medieval mystic such as Hildegard of Bingen. Her music has been experienced by many as moving, joyful, even haunting, and her writing often has a profound prophetic quality to it. But it has been established with reasonable certainty that the visions that formed the basis of her writing and artistic work were correlated with migraine headaches. Two telling questions then arise: if we have a physiological explanation for her visions, does that indicate that they mean nothing? And second: If they do mean something, must it be transcendental meaning for it to be meaning at all? Likewise, in the experience I had watching Rokia Traore and Garnet Rogers, if we can identify physiological or social correlates in crowd psychology, does that mean that the tears means nothing? And if we resist that psychologized meaning, can it only be understood as transcendental meaning? Finally, if we ask about it at all, rather than just weeping with the crowd, have we all become art historians, sacrificing tears for learning?

When I talk to my students about the nature of courtly love, I often play for them the King's Singers version of John Dowland's classic madrigal "Come Again." It is one of Dowland's best known tunes (even Sting included it on his recent homage to Dowland, *Songs from the Labyrinth*). What the students don't realize is that, every time I play that song for them in class, I have to prepare myself for the fact that I will be moved by it, and that I risk unseemly tears. It just would not do for them to see their professor succumbing to emotion, at least in a classroom situation. They aren't accustomed to thinking of their professors as fully human, or at least seem slightly embarrassed if the professor is revealed to be anything but clinical toward classroom material. But this expected professional detachment becomes an issue in one course where I use "Come Again" as an example: *Roots of Western Mysticism*. We begin that course by talking about the strangeness of trying to objectify and examine a set of human experiences which are, by their very definition, unobjectifiable. I tell them that there is a difficult line to be walked in the course, between the personal and the academic. No one's academic experience can be assessed based on whether one is moved by the content, and yet, to do justice to the history of mystical experience, one must take into account the sheer emotion that is apparent in so many of the writings.

Is this at all possible in an academic setting? Art of all sorts, from Hildegard's music to Bernini's *Ecstacy of St. Teresa* to Philippe Otto Runge's *Morning*, has been used in mystical practice and reflected mystical experience through the ages, as a way of turning abstraction into personal, emotional reality.

A few students might have a chance of understanding the significance of a tear as we listen to "Come Again." Am I just sentimental? Or is it that Dowland, in collapsing human and divine love, in representing love in the classic sense as an illness, in not turning away from *eros* as so much contemporary religion does, has allowed an experience to become manifest in the form of the music itself (as opposed to the content of the words)? Does losing the emotion mean losing the possibility of experiencing meaning in this piece of music (not that there is a singular meaning, but that any meaning requires an affective reaction and not just a rational comprehension), and is it possible that training tearlessness not only makes an important aspect of art unavailable to us, but may even have the effect of training us away from emotional reactions to our own experience? I wonder all this, as I am moved by a piece of music.

Given my earlier hesitations about Platonism, it might seem ironic that this most neo-Platonist of madrigals would be so moving to me. Is all this, in the end, about transcendence after all? Does love, any love, catch us up, move us both spiritually and emotionally, and give occasion for those tears? Or are any tears that might come from listening to this work just the occasion for the externalization of my own hopes and fears? Even with "Come Again," we are faced with the same dilemma, and with the same result if we opt for one side or the other of the dilemma—the loss of the artistic work itself. There must be another account.

Let's recognize, for the moment, that there are many possible reasons for tears in the presence of art. A sculpture may powerfully communicate conditions of oppression, abuse, or genocide—Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial in Berlin viscerally brought home to me the depth of Jewish pain, at least as much as a Canadian Mennonite child of the 60's could be expected to feel it. A piece of folk art may engender recognition and identification—a quilt from my own ethnic background, for instance, brings with it all the warmth and shared meaning of my people, and can be quite poignant. A piece of music can speak for the one experiencing it, and be powerfully moving—there was a time when I thought that Bob Dylan must have been following me around when he produced his album *Time Out of Mind*. An image might produce guilt—Picasso's *Guernica*, for many, is more than just an eloquent statement of the horrors of war, but an indictment to those who failed to stop it or take it seriously. A play might

be so amusing that a person's laughter turns to tears—my introduction to professional theatre as a teenager was with a performance of Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal*, which I found so funny I could hardly catch my breath. Or, a ballet performance may be so skillfully executed, and so beautiful to watch, that a person could be moved to tears—I still recall seeing *Swan Lake* as a child, and being amazed at what ordinary bodies could do. Any of these (and more—Elkins' *Pictures and Tears* covers this much more extensively than I have) could produce a powerful emotional reaction, but it is important to recognize that the experienced emotion might be vastly different in each case or between different people and at different times.

Or, there may be no emotion at all, or not the one we would expect. Actors can often cry on demand. One could use tears to cynically manipulate others. And, it is even possible that one could cry in the presence of a painting and not know why. Maybe, in fact, there's no reason at all for the moment, just as Angelus Silesius tells us that "the rose is without why." Tears are no necessary window to the soul, either my own or another's, they do not necessarily tell the truth (or the truth that they do tell may not be the truth we think).

My point here is not to catalogue all the reasons for tears in the presence of art, or to give guidelines for telling the authenticity of tears, but rather, to outline one central tension in the common explanations for those tears. That tension is between the idea that tears are evidence of a glimpse into ultimate reality or the divine, and the idea that tears are the result of psychological stress or release, or the manipulation of the emotions, and thus are a form of pathology. The first account promises too much, and the second too little, but in either case the work of art itself disappears. It becomes either merely a window to a higher reality or it is merely the occasion for the manifestation of stress or trauma. The art itself is explained away. I am more interested in retaining the centrality of the work of art to the experience of emotion.

In fact, I think that there is something between these two extreme options. The water is, in fact, wide, and the tears bear more than the solid ground of reason will admit. There is something else, something human but not humanist, something soulful but not necessarily spiritual (at least in the limited sense of the term). My point is not that it is impossible for art to lead to transcendence (maybe it can), but that tears are no guaranteed window on that transcendence. Or, put another way, art is not simply a vehicle to understanding ultimate reality on the one hand or the result of psychological conditioning or pathology on the other, despite the fact that either of these may still remain as aspects of art.

Mark Rothko's color field paintings are the 20th century paintings that are perhaps the most often cited as likely to move a viewer to tears (it is the example that Elkins begins *Pictures and Tears* with). My partner tells me that she was both surprised and moved when she first experienced a Rothko color field in a gallery. She was an art major as an undergraduate, well trained in the history and techniques of 20th century art (in other words, inducted into the art historical attitude of tearlessness, despite in fact being quite passionate about other artists), and she fully expected to be unimpressed. The plates in Janson's *History of Art* and Lucie-Smith's *Late Modern* were uninspiring, and the classroom slides helped very little. So, to her surprise, she found herself moved to tears, and swept by a wave of guilt, as she realized how over-hastily she had dismissed his work, the actual work, not the ideas behind them or the reproductions and commentary. Rothko's work has sometimes been dismissed as trivial or easy, and has never fit well into the narratives of abstract expressionism of the 20th century. But I think his dense fields point out a middle way available to us.

Rothko's color fields do not ask us to look beyond or behind the art, as the options of transcendence, objectivity, and pathology do. They ask that we look in front of the art. Rothko's work is special only inasmuch as it gives a window to a particular form of interpretation of art—the same is true of any art. Any performance (and a painting is still a performance, as surely as it is three dimensional) does more than just point to something else. It allows us to create a new world and allows us a bridge from where we are to that world. It is perhaps no accident that function of art was first recognized in literal performances, in Aristotle's theory of tragedy. Tragedy, for him, "achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents." (11) This, of course, need not necessitate tears, but it is an emotional response which can involve tears.

What is notable about Aristotle's catharsis is that it involves both the search for the universal (the point of tragedy is to isolate and clarify events from irrelevancies in order to make the universal available) as well as the recognition of psychological indebtedness (the emotions of pity and fear are natural and integrally related to art). But while the term "catharsis" is usually understood as the purgation of emotion, it also carries with it the sense of clarification. The value of tragedy, for Aristotle, is not that it resolves and tames emotion, but that it clarifies the relationship between emotion and the nature of humanity.

What kind of clarity is this? It is the clarity of the real. Rokia Traore did not move the audience merely by being exotic, but by showing the real