Philosophy in Review

Simon J. Evnine (Ed.) "A Certain Gesture: Evnine's Meme Project and its Parerga! Volume 1"

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Simon J. Evnine, ed. *A Certain Gesture: Evnine's Meme Project and its Parerga! Volume 1*. Tell It Slant Press 2022. 278 pp. $51.99 USD (Hardcover 9798987415719); $24.99 USD (Paperback 9798987415702).

I own a beautifully produced set of instructions for constructing a perpetual motion machine, courtesy of an unexpected visitor who dropped by my office one day. Anyone who's worked in a philosophy department for a while will have likely been blessed with similar offerings, one way or another. Much of this stuff is boring, offensive, bananas, or all three. But, like my set of impossible instructions, some of it has sufficient creative spark to make you wonder: *what if this, but really, really good?*

Simon Evnine might have answered that question. *A Certain Gesture* is really, really good. It might even be a genuine masterpiece. I have no idea whether it might be a masterpiece of philosophy, or of literature, or of auto-text; it's quite plausibly entirely s*ui generis*. But it is absolutely a book that any philosopher with an appropriate aesthetic sensibility will find richly rewarding.

Now, since the book is *sui generis*, it follows that a generic philosophy book review is not going to be appropriate. So, I'm not going to describe its philosophical argument, method, or position; I'm not going to advance inchoate criticisms of them; I'm not going to make suggestions concerning its use in teaching (though I would certainly like to see you try). Whatever responses this book invites, those are not among them. If those are the only responses you're prepared to offer to a philosophical book, this is not a book for you. If you're open to other possibilities, it might well be.

One possibility to which you'll have to be open is that memes are viable vehicles of philosophical ideas. A meme is an image, often drawn from popular culture (a comic book, a film still), with room for additional text, usually superimposed in captions or integrated into the image (as, for example, the contents of speech bubbles). Memes are iterated by variations of the text added to the standardized image. The intention is generally comic, derisive, or satirical, though political memes are hardly unknown. This practice is commonplace across the internet, and several of the most popular standardized images are instantly recognizable to anyone who's spent much time online in the last 20 years or so. The Batman-slapping-Robin image is one of these. It's a single comic book panel showing the superhero smacking his sidekick in the face. Both Batman and Robin are conveniently provided with a speech bubble for the meme-worker to use in iterating

the meme.

A Certain Gesture presents forty-eight iterations of the Batman-slapping-Robin meme, each partially effaced for copyright reasons (intact versions are available online). These memes, we are told, were produced by Simon J. Evnine, partly during a concentrated period of work on a "Batman Meme Project" in early 2016, partly in more desultory acts of production over the following three years or so. These latter are "parerga" to the central project: supplementary material, drafts, that sort of thing. The book presents 28 memes from the project and 20 items of parerga.

The person telling us all this about is an editor, also called Simon J. Evnine. The editor provides commentaries on each of the memes. These commentaries range in length from single paragraphs to many pages, and variously include accounts of the memes' production, detailed interpretations of their contents, critical appraisal of their aesthetics, erudite expeditions into thickets of tenuously associated literature, speculations about what was going on in Evnine's mind (conscious and subconscious), and so on. There are 193 footnotes. The relation between the editor and the artist is somewhat clarified in an interstitial segment early in the section of the book dedicated to the parerga: they are, ahem, identical, but also not. The contribution of an Anonymous Dissertator further complicates authorship. It is suggested in the unexplanatory section that the artist, editor, dissertator, and whoever else's Evnine may be have no clear conception of what they have been up to, or why. It might be that this is a new philosophical method or style, but it might also be that it is ineffable, and that this is its point.

Perhaps it is now clear why the book is plausibly *sui generis*. Most obviously, there is hardly a thriving genre of books using memes as a vehicle of substantial intellectual content. All the same, this kind of formal innovation does have literary precedents (interesting question: does it have recent philosophical precedent? If not, why not?). Two which occur to me are works by Nabokov and Sebald: specifically, and respectively, *Pale Fire* and *The Rings of Saturn.*

In *Pale Fire*, Nabokov adopts and corrupts an academic form—editorial annotation of poetry—to tell an elliptical and fragmentary story whose overall cohesion is debatable. The story is not neatly contained in either the primary text or the addenda but emerges from their interaction. Similarly, Evnine repurposes the art-critical form of the *catalogue rasioneé* to present ideas that emerge from the interplay of the scholarly elements of the text with the primary material of the memes. The point is not just that one can present ideas this way; the point is that doing so changes the character of the ideas.

As for Sebald, the relevant feature of *The Rings of Saturn* is its resistance to genre

classification; it is neither novel, memoir, literary meditation nor travelogue, while also somehow being all four. The book's unity is due to its thematic preoccupations and its miasmic mood, not to any adherence to the strictures of genre. Similarly, the content of Evnine's book roams across all sorts of genre categories (for what it's worth, Amazon lists it under both 'Philosophy' and 'Judaism'). The content's cogency derives from its pursuit of characteristic themes and its dominant mood.

This mood obviates the suggestion one might read into these comparisons that the book is a po-faced exercise in formal experimentation. It isn't, and it better not be, because taking a fundamentally comic form and voiding it of humor would be an egregious artistic failing. Thankfully, the dominant mood of *A Certain Gesture* is a sort of playful exuberance, a sense of pleasure in exploration of the possibilities inherent in the contrast between the highly restrictive form of the meme with the essentially unbounded nature of the commentary. At times, the joke is precisely the pedantic explanation of the joke, and at times, it's the relentless repetition of the themes and memes, but of course making play of repetition is exactly how one respects the meme form.

I've gestured towards some of those themes, namely philosophy and Judaism. Philosophy, here, should be taken in a broad sense, including not just the first-order practice of the discipline, but also consideration of the discipline as such. For example, the commentary on meme 97 discusses the possibilities of doing philosophy in non-propositional forms, while the commentary on meme 39 meditates on the case of Evnine's erstwhile colleague at Miami, Colin McGinn.

Judaism, specifically rabbinic Judaism, is perhaps more dominantly thematic than philosophy (though it is treated at times as an appropriate topic of philosophy, so the themes are not cleanly separate). The reason why is not just its inherent interest, or the possibilities that consideration of Talmudic interpretation provides for erudite digression—though these are evident reasons. The further reason is the deep personal significance of Judaism for Evnine, and here we get to the really central theme of the book: Evnine's exploration and examination of his own motivations, actions, thoughts, and formation, refracted through the lens of broadly Freudian psychoanalysis (recall the comment above that the Evnines in the book have no idea what they're really up to).

I might be in danger again of putting you off the book, this time by making it sound indulgent, self-absorbed, or excessively committed to a reflective practice that some find rebarbative. In some ways, it is. But not in ways that matter for its success, indeed in ways that contribute to success, because the book is entirely, gleefully aware of its indulgence, excesses, and abundances. Here

again we find the humor of repetition, of over-explanation, of relentless excavation of things that surely ought to be left undisturbed.

This is really the point. I'm not trying here to sell you on the intellectual merits of *A Certain Gesture*, or on its literary innovations, or on its value as an exercise in analysis. I'm trying to sell it as, fundamentally, a funny, joyful, creative exploration of form and theme. You don't need to read it as a whole, you don't need to think about whether you agree with it, you don't need to tease out its implicit premises—unless you want to. You just need to enjoy it. At $3.99 for the e-book, it is well worth finding out whether you do.

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