

Burnett
Punctum Exercise 1
(Hegel)

"Comedy is the form which reflection takes after it has assimilated the truths of Tragedy to itself" (White, p. 94)

"It would seem that, for Hegel, the reason for writing history is to be sought in the transformations of consciousness which the attempt to do so effects in the minds of the historians themselves." (White, 100)

"Hegel thus fully credited the immediate perception of the historical field as a 'panorama of sin and suffering.' But he set his perception of this panorama within the means-ends question which he insisted in raised in the consciousness by moral reflection on it ('to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered.') ¶ *In short, 'sin and suffering' must be viewed as the means for the realization of some principle that is superior to them." (White, 107)*

I have been unable to ascertain the precise hour. But the "very long range" P-51 Mustangs of the 21st Fighter Group stationed on Iwo Jima tended to take off for their escort missions early in the morning, rendezvous with the B-29s that had departed Guam or Tinian about two hours earlier, and then fly the circa-three-hours to the Japanese coast. Supposing a 5:30 am departure, it is reasonable to surmise, then, that Vincent A. Gaudiani was shot down over Tokyo sometime between nine and ten am on the 6th of August, 1945.

The incident occurred after the completion of the escort mission, when the fighters were expected to strafe ground targets (airstrips, factories, railways) before returning — lightened of both fuel and munitions — to the airstrip at Iwo. Anti-aircraft fire was the primary threat to the Mustangs in this late phase of the conflict. Skilled Japanese pilots were scarce by August of 1945, and the Japanese command was conserving its remaining aviation abilities for defense against a full allied invasion, already understood as likely immanent. In the course of a strafing raid on the Kashiwa Airfield, north of Tokyo proper, Gaudiani's engine received a piercing shot and began losing coolant. Recognizing that the engine would overheat within minutes, Gaudiani made a (soft) crash-landing, bellying the plane into wet agricultural land east of the Tobu-Noda railway line. Here is the report filed by Lieutenant John Combs, flying in Gaudiani's wing, who witnessed the incident:

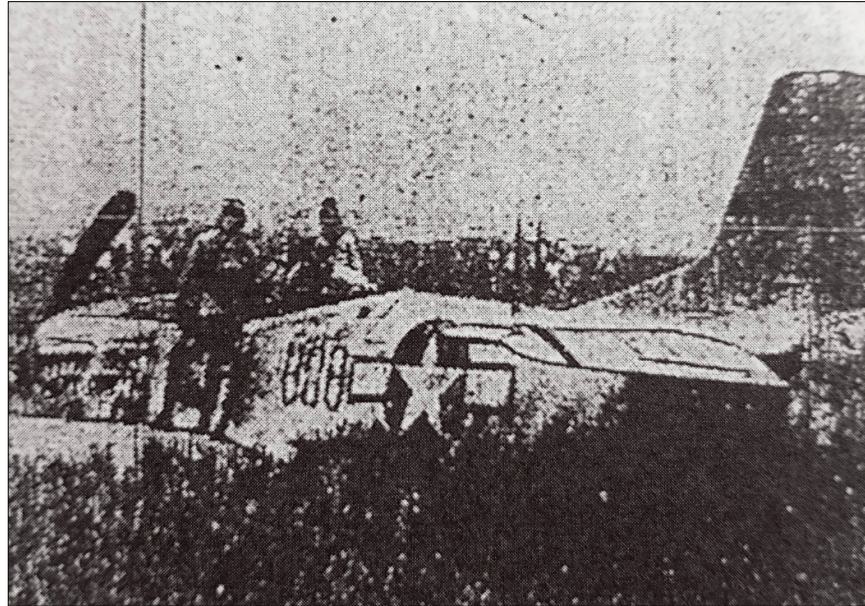
S-T-A-T-E-M-E-N-T

6 August 1945

When I finished my pass on Kashiwa Airfield, I saw a P-51 aircraft streaming coolant. This plane seemed to be losing power. I flew close to this airplane and identified it as "500" of the 531st Fighter Squadron. The pilot bellyed the plane into a cultivated field. There was no fire. I believe the pilot escaped without injury. I did not see the pilot leave the plane.

John W. Combs
JOHN W. COMBS, O-30940,
1st Lt., Air Corps.

Gaudiani survived the landing. Taken prisoner, he was transferred to the Omori prison camp, isolated on an artificial island in Tokyo harbor, not far from the location of the modern Shinagawa Aquarium. A photo of his wreck appeared in a Japanese paper a few days later:



If my reconstruction of the timing is correct, Vincent Gaudiani fell from the sky and landed on Japan at more or less the very same moment that the Enola Gay dropped a nuclear bomb (called “Little Boy”) on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, killing some 80,000 people more or less instantly (with perhaps another 150,000 sentenced at that moment to slow death over the next several years from radiation sickness and other secondary causes).¹

I wish to move, in my series of “Punctum Exercises” for our class, from this temporal conjunction. My subject, then, is the date/moment/hour “6 August 1945, 9:15 am” (Tokyo time). I thereby intend to try to work a conjunction that is simultaneously grotesque (both on account of the disjunction of scale, and the absolute magnitude of the Hiroshima horror), and difficult for me wholly to disregard (in that Vincent A. Gaudiani was my maternal grandfather).

A few basic things: I never discussed any of the matters at issue here with my grandfather himself, who survived the war, but was an exceedingly difficult (and in many ways a dangerous) person — he brooked absolutely no mention of his traumatic capture and imprisonment. Of what occurred, my mother and her siblings appear to know very little, and when I finally (at the age of 48) directly asked my

¹ The bomb was dropped at 8:15 am Hiroshima time, which was one hour earlier than Tokyo time.

grandmother a few basic questions, she said that she and her husband had basically never discussed the episode. "I could see that he did not want to discuss it," she explained to me, "and I did not want to make him feel he was disappointing me by not telling me things I wanted to know, so I just let it be — I was just so grateful to have him home." I cannot know if this is absolutely true. But it very definitely has the air of truth on her lips. There are family rumors that he awakened in the night in nightmare fits across his life — but I also do not know if this is true. I do know that he was violent (and more generally imperiling) in different ways to those around him (his wife, his children); though of these distressing things, too, I have only fragmentary knowledge — knowledge scrimmed by various familial delicacies and protective concerns.

But what might Hegel have to say about all of this?

At the most basic level, Hegel puts to us a monstrous challenge as far as history in general is concerned — a challenge whose harrowing demands are sharpened, I think, by the specificity of my *punctum*. White lays it out for us clearly in the third of the quotes from which I departed above: my aim, in addressing my historical *punctum* in a Hegelian modality, will be to *discern* (or at least *strive toward discerning*) some form of *ratio* (in the Latin sense) in its contours/occasion — some higher manifestation of spirit/reason/plan in the swirling heap of squalor, banality, and horror (individual and corporate; physical and psychic) of the human past.

I cannot, frankly, quite imagine how to go about this. It would require, it would seem, a willingness to place some form transcending "meaning" above the suffering and human specificity (above the contingency and quirk, above the anguish and terror) of my *punctum*-moment — and all the other moments that can be conceived.

Something very deep in me recoils at this charge.

What is it that flinches? At first blush, I think I flinch because I am inclined to privilege the individual human, and individual human experience, over all. To traduce those *specific* and *personal* perspectives (of the "sin and suffering"), in the name of "some principle that is superior to them" is anathema to my understanding of the historical vocation, and to my humanistic commitments more generally.

That said, I can *sort of imagine* the kind of thing perhaps Hegel would have had in mind? Let's see...

- Some phase in the movement of the World Spirit from East to West? As America defeats Japan in the war, but then my grandfather goes to work for a trademark company (RCA) that is eventually owned by a Japanese company (Sony).

- Some dialectical pivot in the nature of warfare, evinced and epitomized by my grandfather's getting shot down at the moment of the birth of the nuclear age? After all, my grandfather was a fencer at West Point, and this tradition links his piloting the "Mustang" directly to the long lineage of chivalry, of warcraft as a matter of mounted men making charges — fighter planes can be understood as cavalry in its final techno-elaboration, and the explosion of a nuclear bomb might be understood legibly to mark the end of the long era of war as some kind of knightly combat.
- Some Providentialism? My grandmother, when I told her I had discovered that Vincent's plane (#308) was known as the "Mary One," immediately wondered if this could have been an invocation of the Virgin. I think it is unlikely. But it is not impossible, I suppose. There can be little doubt that my grandmother, back in New York with my 8-month old mother, was praying very hard to Mary that her husband would return. And she (and my mother) cannot help but feel that, had the bomb not been dropped, he would likely have died at Omori...

	radio (); Forced down (); Seen to Crash (X);
5.	AIRCRAFT WAS LOST, OR IS BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN LO only one) Enemy Aircraft (); Enemy Anti-Aircra as follows: _____
6.	AIRCRAFT: Type, Model and Series <u>F-51D25</u> _____ ;
7.	NICKNAME OF AIRCRAFT, if any <u>Mary One</u>
8.	ENGINES: Type Model and Series <u>V-1650-7</u> _____ ;

I am not able to enter any of these forms of thought about my *punctum*.

Do you hear me? I cannot think in these ways. Not with my actual thinking person.

But the work of feeling my way toward them certainly gives me a sense of the direction in which Hegel's historical thinking lies — and of the great distance that seems to separate us.

Punctum Exercise 2 (Burckhardt)

"[Burckhardt] apprehended the world of historical objects as a literal 'satura,' stew or medley, fragments of objects detached from their original contexts or whose contexts are unknowable..." (White, p. 251)

"The plot structure of this story was Ironic, that is to say, the 'point of it all' was that there was no 'point' toward which things in general tend, no epiphanies of the law, no ultimate reconciliations, no transcendence." (White, 251)

"I know too much about history to expect anything from the despotism of the masses but a future tyranny, which will mean the end of history." (Burckhardt, cited in White, 235)

NOTA BENE: What follows is my best effort to do a kind of pastiche or "impersonation" of the Burckhardtian historical voice or mood (as we encountered it in the passages we read from *Civilization of the Renaissance* and the Hayden White analysis) as I imagine it might look confronting my *punctum*. I should say that I am not very happy with how this turned out. Both in the sense of "I do not like writing history this way," and "I am not sure I did an especially good job bootlegging Burckhardt." The mood of aristocratic pessimism that one discerns in his writing is alien to me, and what it does to one's subject matter I find basically appalling. I also, as a writer, tend toward figural elaborations, and I had difficulty (despite my best efforts) suppressing that tendency here — even as I was mindful that Hayden White is quite correct to identify the anti-metaphorical tenor of Burckhardt's prose (and the preponderance of simple sentences built around verbs of being). As will be clear, I tried to get at my *punctum* via a pre-modern "frame," since I thought this let me work in a key closer to Burckhardt's. It produces, however, a certain looping weirdness in the exercise — together with a sort of elision of historical specificity that, in our current historical mode, clearly triggers concerns about Orientalist "othering." I want to underline several times that this is a stylistic exercise. Not me doing history... -DGB

It may be said of the martial virtues that they die standing. And this may be the best that can be said of them. Internal politics in the Kamakura Shogunate, drove Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189) into an itinerancy of exilic misalliances, despite the youthful *éclat* of his service in the Genpei War. His poetic spirit served him no better than his swordsmanship, and at the age of thirty-one, he bent to the task of ritual self-slaughter in the inner salon of the Takadachi Castle, Koromogawa — thereby making of himself a small gift to *bushido*, the higher nihilism of the warrior class.

But it was outside the main gate of Takadachi that work was being done that would keep the annalists of medieval Japan busy for half a millennium. As Yoshitsune's

belly blood flowed by lamplight in the shrine of Fujiwara no Hidehira, the more charismatic work of spangling fatalism was happening on the bridge outside, where Yoshitsune's warmongering vassal monk, Benkei, had stationed himself to fend off some three hundred retainers of Fujiwara no Yasuhira (many mounted), in order to permit his samurai master Yoshitsune the quiet necessary to kill his whole family — and himself. Benkei's last stand consisted, in essence, of presenting so menacing a figure as to stay any frontal assault upon the bridge whatsoever. Nevertheless, a hail of well-placed arrows soon dispatched him where he stood. And standing he remained. His uncanny commitment to the work of war prevented him, even in death, from falling to the ground, which significantly delayed the final onslaught by Yasuhira's men, who remained durably fearful that their nemesis still lived, despite having become a Saint-Sebastian for their target practice.

In treating the events of 6 August 1945, we do well to recall Benkei's standing death, and the countless *entr'actes* of stiffened submission to dutiful demise celebrated in the Lands of the Rising Sun between 1189 and the fireball at Hiroshima. There, of course, many died standing, and the intense flash of light and heat produced, here and there, striking tableaux: the shadows, on bits of masonry that survived the blast, of figures instantly incinerated where they stood, but whose final moment cast a spectral silhouette and their body absorbed a marginal increment of the fatal brightness. Here the Modern Age meets the daughter of Butades.

Vincent Gaudiani would not die standing. Or sitting either, for that matter — since he was promptly hauled from his bellied craft by a knot of hostile farmers. Family lore among the Gaudianis has it that he was “rescued” by a patrol of Japanese military police, which is plausible enough. Though he had little reason to feel reassured within the bonds of formal custody. Here is an account of the execution of one of seventeen US pilots killed nine days later at Fukuoka, south of Hiroshima:²

Col. Yoshinao Sato, chief of the Air Defense and Air Intelligence Unit, along with his aide, Lt. Hiroji Nakayama, arrived just as the executions began. Hashiyama asked Sato if he would permit Nakayama, who was known as an expert on *bushido*, to participate. Sato ordered his aide to instruct the young officers in the correct procedure.

Nakayama explained that “etiquette, according to old customs, demanded that the neck not be completely severed; this was supposed to be insulting to the person being beheaded.” To demonstrate, Nakayama drew his sword and washed it in water from a bucket. Then, moving quickly toward a prisoner, he cut the man's throat from the side through the neck artery, killing the flyer at once but leaving the neck not entirely severed. Then, before the man fell to the ground, Nakayama swung the sword around and cut the flyer's neck from the front, still not entirely cleaving the head. According to Nakayama, this was “the true method of execution as I have read in books of old Japanese customs.” Upon Sato's request, he executed a second prisoner in the same manner.

² Timothy Lang Francis, ““To Dispose of the Prisoners”: The Japanese Executions of American Aircrew at Fukuoka, Japan, during 1945,” *Pacific Historical Review* 66, no. 4 (1997): 469-501.