

BOOK REVIEW

A Subtle Dance

David F. Bell

Katja Haustein, *Alone With Others: An Essay on Tact in Five Modernist Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Katja Haustein's essay is decisive proof that the value of an argument is not necessarily proportional to its length. In barely more than a hundred pages of tightly written prose, Haustein offers the reader a history of the notion of tact through several centuries, accompanied by close readings of key modern and contemporary thinkers and artists who have foregrounded tact in their work. The etymological origin of the term is the Latin *tactus* from the root of *tangere*, to touch – thus its immediate corporeal link to the sense of touch. Touch puts us directly in contact with the thing to be experienced – touching and being touched are inseparable. This observation alerts us straightaway to the idea that *distance* inevitably becomes a key issue in any discussion of tact and touch.

Haustein begins her historical discussion by reminding us of the musical dimension that the term tact acquired in fourteenth-century German. Tact was measuring the beat, say, by tapping the foot, maintaining rhythm, the proper spacing of the notes in a score. But over the course of the following centuries, tact took what Haustein calls a metaphorical turn and began to signify 'a particular mode of social interaction' (p. 16). The conjunction of the musical dimension of the term in German with the evolving sense of a social interaction furnishes Haustein with a brilliant example that feels to the reader something like an *Ur*-moment in her argument. She lingers on a scene in *Elective Affinities* in which Otilie's connection with Eduard is evoked by the fact that as they perform a musical piece together, Otilie adapts the rhythm of her playing to Eduard's pace, ignoring the intervals of the notes the score

would normally require, in favor of a suppleness that melds their playing together. In Goethe's formulation: "She had made his faults so much her own that in the end something whole and alive came out of them that did not keep up proper time [*nicht taktgemäß*]" (cited p. 21). As Haustein puts it, 'Tact is what deviates from the score and [...] makes room for a spontaneous, situational, and intuitive interpretation that results in a harmony of minds. This harmony is fragile and mobile inasmuch as it exists outside the rule of convention' (p. 22).

This is Haustein's understanding of the essence of tact. It exceeds conventional rules of politeness or formality in favor of an intuitive suppleness that is produced only by the specific circumstances of a given moment. Tact is the indefinable way of establishing proper *distance* between individuals. It is not empathy, neither is it a kind of formality or politeness, but rather an ever-evolving way of respecting the other's social space while simultaneously expressing the requisite care. Historically, argues Haustein, the need for a recalibration of distance between self and other arises in the transition from rural to urban dwelling. The accompanying population growth forces people to interact closely with others in spaces much more confined and unstructured than was previously the case: '[T]act was seen as a strategy of making space where things got too tight and bridging gaps where people tended to drift too far away from one another' (p. 23). The social effect of urbanization is a familiar argument for historians of the early nineteenth century, to which Haustein's perspective on tact adds a rich new dimension.

But what exactly is this fleeting and elusive notion of tact? Haustein spends the rest of her sustained introductory remarks exploring the various paths that the notion takes in a series of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers, from Kant to Gadamer and Ricoeur, as tact eventually becomes a means to envisage how one interprets and understands phenomena in the human sciences. 'Gadamer's introduction of tact [...] contributes to a hermeneutic that does not define the act of reading as an act [...] of appropriation' (p. 33). And later, 'The emphasis does not lie on empathetic identification, [...] but on a joint exploration of space that aims to create and maintain a balance between self and other, reader and text' (p. 34). Tact moves away from 'critical' approaches to reading and interpretation toward the 'post-critical' perspectives favored by Rita Felski, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Marielle Macé. What these critics have in common is their refusal to envisage

interpretation as an act of mastery, favoring instead a subtle dance between reader and text that maintains a respectful, tactful *distance*.

The chapters that follow analyze the role played by tact in the work of several twentieth-century artists and thinkers. Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is a natural source since Proust's novel deals precisely with the end of a certain aristocracy and the ensuing necessity to re-think relations between individuals and groups. Moreover, Marcel's relations with Albertine illustrate how the question of tactful distance can be manipulated in perverse ways to become a strategy of domination. A chapter on Adorno and Helmut Plessner demonstrates how these thinkers, who came from conflicting theoretical assumptions, nonetheless 'share[d] a suspicion of certain forms of intimacy and touch, and a preference for individual difference over communal identification' (p. 64). Tact became a way for them to think the complexities of social relations in an increasingly convoluted and alienated modernity. In a chapter on Truffaut devoted essentially to *Baisers volés*, Haustein contextualizes the production of the film in the days and months leading up to the events of May 1968 in France and argues that the common reception of the film as a light romantic comedy needs revision: '[T]he film can also be interpreted as a response to the all-pervading sense of crisis that marked the year of its production, and the challenge that crisis posed to normative modes of sociability and co-habitation' (p. 84). In a final chapter on Roland Barthes, Haustein's perspective on tact gives depth and a more convincing meaning to the enigmatic later phase of Barthes's work, when the notion of *le neutre* took on primordial importance and the fascination with Japanese art and culture became a conduit for Barthes to explore unfamiliar modes of human interaction.

This sampling of Katja Haustein's argument should whet the appetite of potential readers interested in how to imagine what post-critical reading and interpretation accomplish and on what grounds they have come to be. The detailed analysis of the individual works in the chapters that unfold in *Alone with Others* are challenging and revealing and can provide readers, through the notion of tact, with new avenues for understanding modernist ways of interpreting and interacting with others and with the world more broadly speaking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David F. Bell is Emeritus Professor of Romance Studies at Duke University. He has written extensively on the nineteenth-century French realist novel, as well as on the relation between literature and science. Recently, he has been focusing on embodied cognition through the lens of the neuroscience of touch and voice, with a particular interest in affects generated by gesture and voice in literary settings.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

This article is copyright © 2024 *Barthes Studies* and is distributed under a CC-BY-ND licence. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as no changes are made to it and the origin of information used is credited in the appropriate manner (through bibliographic citation, for example).