have been conveying a cultural feeling that combined awareness with ignorance.

Notes

1. John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.
2. Flannery O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1969), 67.
3. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 7.
4. I would like to thank the students in my Fall 2017 "Literature and the Senses" class, especially Carolyn Koehnke and Raul Perez Zarate, for leading me to these ideas.
5. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales* (New York: Signet, 2006), 109.
6. Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 114.
7. Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 117.
8. Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 121.
9. Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 127.
10. Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," 128.
11. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 150.
12. Hardy, *Tess*, 150.
13. Hardy, *Tess*, 38.
14. Hardy, *Tess*, 266, 297.
15. Hardy, *Tess*, 81, 158.

Stupidity

RAE GREINER

> Folly is to be distinguished from madness only in the sense that the former, like stupidity, is conscious.
>
> — Friedrich von Schlegel, "Athenäum Fragments"[1]

WHAT if stupidity were a category not so much of intellect as of feeling? Do we not, by and large, *feel* stupid, even when we are not? From the Latin *stupidus* or *stupēre*, to be stupid means to be stunned or benumbed, as in stupefied by surprise or grief. Such stupidity is embodied, felt. It is not primarily (if at all) a deficit of I.Q. (an association that hardened into being only with the eugenics movement). Like the concept of genius, stupidity is a term "possessing rather more evaluative purpose than precise semantic content"; like genius, it refers "to both character and aptitude" while remaining both "hugely overdetermined [and] strangely underspecified in its actual applications."[2] It is everywhere, yet we cannot precisely define it. Still we know it when we see it or, I want to insist, when we feel it—in the way consciousness itself can be felt.[3]

Calling stupidity a "quasi concept," Avital Ronell notes that for the Greeks stupidity "cannot be seen as belonging to the domain of the political because it indicates that which lacks politics: it is being-outside-the-political."[4] She's referring to the ἰδιώτης or idiōtēs, the one who, lacking professional skill, is exempt from public (political) life. He isn't doltish but private; he is ordinary. The Christian type is different, because redemptive. It is by seeing my stupidity and repenting, Ronell writes, that "I begin to become politically responsible."[5] In neither formulation is stupidity evidence of lacking intelligence, much less congenital mental impairment or an unchangeable attribute of self. Indeed stupidity and idiocy are not the same. As Ronell reminds us, by way of Aristotle and Northrup Frye, it is in the nature of the *agroikos*—the gull or rustic, the permanent child or idiot boy—to be, "precisely, *not* astonished."[6] What he is is oblivious: *not* stupefied or stunned. Ronell refers to this state of idiocy as "something like stupidity"—"stubborn and ignorant," humorless, "insensible," from the Greek *anaisthētos*—but I would distinguish such anesthetized unknowing from the stupidity I mean.[7] He who is trapped in a state of perpetual infancy cannot be stupid in the sense of being shocked by his own self-difference with the world or his conceptions of it. He cannot be stupid in the way Schlegel describes as "conscious," for he senses not that he might be otherwise than he is.

The historian François Hartog describes the peasant Strepsiades, in Aristophanes's *The Clouds*, this way: as "ignorant, Barbarian, clumsy, awkward, slow, incapable of remembering anything, old-fashioned, more archaic than Cronos or the moon."[8] Strepsiades is old, even prehistoric, but he is also old-fashioned, gauche, inarticulate not like an animal but like someone with a "noisy (unconscious) ignorance of good manners: of how to dress, when to be surprised, when not to be surprised, etc."[9] A

wealthy man now horribly in debt, bankrupt in all the ways one can be, but also physically brawny, excellent at masturbation and at complaining about the laziness of his slaves, Strepsiades appeals to Socrates for help in learning how to "debate" or "to speak."[10] Calling his a "demagogic rhetoric," Daphne O'Regan describes Strepsiades as "literally minded."[11] Socrates "may imagine lofty disputation," but for Strepsiades "*logos* is to be the force that will make him more availing in the verbal battles here on earth": smallminded as well as violent, "his little notions will prevail over much more weighty arguments."[12] If this reminds you of another political demagogue, frivolous yet malign, closer to home: you are not alone.

It may be difficult to accept the claim, then, that this is just the sort of person who cannot be stupid in the sense that I mean. And yet this is what I want to argue: that, unlike the *agroikos* or tyrant, the stupid person is one who *is capable* of being stunned. It is in the nineteenth century that this new conception of stupidity most forcefully emerges.

The difference between Jane Austen's stupidity and that of George Eliot is illustrative in this regard. Retaining but modifying the Strepsiades type, Austenian stupidity usually registers as a species of vulgarity wherein poor taste and insensibility go hand in hand. This is how you know a thing is stupid in Austen: it either bores or bugs. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), where the word "stupid" is used nine times, it can be a fixed quality of mind and person, and therefore pernicious. Toadying Mr. Collins offends precisely in his unconsciousness of the disgust he produces in others. Strepsiades-lite, the sort of oaf whose tin ear and little mind murder pleasure, he is born with it—a "stupidity with which he was favored by nature"—and it isn't going away.[13] But stupidity can just as often indicate mere charmlessness. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), rain is "stupid"[14]; in *Pride and Prejudice* a table is "superlatively stupid" when dull people sit around it playing dully at cards.[15] Such stupidity isn't fixed but situational, an aspect of time and place. To be stupid is to score low on the scale of charisma, as do those officers of the Meryton regiment who are fine in their way, until judged against the affable Wickham, and then "were become stupid, disagreeable fellows."[16] Stupidity here is not an aspect of identity but something one can "become." Or become less of. He who is stupid in times of flush may grow less so in gray February in a village thirty miles from town.

Stupidity in Eliot is more tragic and more common: a thing that is by everyone felt.[17] Unlike Casaubon, unlike Bulstrode, unlike even the supreme egoist Rosamond Vincy, Austen's Mr. Collins has no shrinking

sense that his friends merely tolerate him, that his wife chooses a smaller chamber for meeting friends because there is less space for him in it. He's not embarrassed by the situation, even the room he's in, and so we might be tempted to say he is the stupider man. But that isn't so, because what Austen means by stupidity isn't what Eliot describes. In Eliot, consciousness always comes.

Notes

1. Friedrich von Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragments," *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 27.
2. Ann Jefferson, *Genius in France: an Idea and Its Uses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1–2, 4.
3. Following Ann Cvetkovich, I find "feeling" useful in its imprecision, in its "retaining the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences" (Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2012], 4).
4. Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 40.
5. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 41.
6. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 40.
7. Ronell, *Stupidity*, 40.
8. François Hartog, *Memories of Odysseus: Frontier Tales from Ancient Greece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 123.
9. François, *Memories*, 123.
10. Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, trans. and ed. William James Hickie (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), http://www.perseus.tufts.edu.
11. Daphne O'Regan, *Rhetoric, Comedy, and the Violence of Language in Aristophanes' The Clouds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 49.
12. O'Regan, *Rhetoric*, 51.
13. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93.
14. Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 84.
15. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 128. Similarly, Mr. Palmer, piqued by storm cloud and boredom, gripes: "Sir John is as stupid as the weather" (84).

16. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 55–6.
17. If not entirely universal, it is nevertheless ordinary.

Sustainability

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"SUSTAINABILITY" generally means the ability to be maintained at a certain level, but in recent years the word has come to refer almost exclusively to environmental sustainability: the perhaps fantastical set of circumstances under which life may continue on this planet under conditions similar to those prevailing now.[1] While the word "sustainable" was not used in the contemporary sense of minimizing environmental impact until 1976,[2] the concept has a much older history: historians of northern Europe, particularly Germany, have traced the development of sustainable forestry management and other agricultural practices back to the middle ages.[3] But the concept (or perhaps we should say anxiety) really got a kick-start with the publication of the Reverend Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798.[4] The argument of that work was simply that population increases geometrically while food supply increases arithmetically; the two upward curves meet at a crisis point where famine becomes inevitable and population growth will thus be "checked."[5] The enormous cultural impact of Malthus's thesis is one good reason to date the birth of the modern sustainability idea to the nineteenth century. Others include the sharp increase in environmental stressors—in terms of pressure on both resources and environmental sinks—occasioned by the industrial revolution, and the birth of political economy as a professional discipline in the early decades of the century.[6]

For sustainability is essentially an economic question. Its two central components are issues with which political economists have long grappled: population and resources, including food. (Two other important components of sustainability could be mentioned: the management of waste, including carbon sinks, and climate change. Waste recycling was an important topic in the nineteenth century, but it was almost always invoked in the context of soil fertilization.[7] And while Jesse Oak Taylor