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# It's Nothing Personal

Kelly Ross

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

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## IT'S NOTHING PERSONAL

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*Impersonality: Seven Essays* by Sharon Cameron. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. 272. \$65.00 cloth. \$25.00 paper.

In everyday usage, “impersonality” denotes an absence of personality, often figured as a machinelike or robotic manner, such as the impersonality of customer service call-center operators. It also refers to something that is not particularized, not connected to specific individuals but dispersed more generally, suggesting disinterestedness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* emphasizes this set of meanings, which describes a person who is not acting like a person. In *Impersonality*, on the other hand, Sharon Cameron presses hard on the texts under examination to elucidate another, more radical sense of the word. In each of the seven essays, impersonality denotes not just a person who is not acting like a person, but the erasure of the “personal”: the effort to eradicate persons entirely. For most of the authors in this study, the payoff of such effort is enlightenment, variously defined. Radical impersonality shares features with the nonhuman and the inanimate, but as Cameron is continually at pains to demonstrate, the boundaries between these categories become themselves unstable and permeable. Once one takes seriously the concept of “impersonality” as more than just a descriptive term for abnormal behavior and makes it an end in itself, it ruptures all other categories that depend on the stability of the personal.

This essay collection is undeniably challenging, but it amply rewards the reader’s investment.

Cameron's close readings are stunning in their precision and penetration. Moreover, her consideration of the ethical stakes of the texts is exemplary, as she strikes a careful balance between generous reading and conscientious interrogation. Each essay focuses on one author: William Empson, Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson (who is the subject of two essays), Simone Weil, T. S. Eliot, and Herman Melville. Although there are resonances among these authors' representations of impersonality, each formulates it differently, and each has a different view of whether and how it can be achieved. Cameron's analysis of these multifarious understandings has broad-ranging implications, particularly for the study of nineteenth-century American literature. While reading the book, additional authors leaped to mind—Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, Frederick Douglass—whose texts would complement or complicate Cameron's analysis.

*Impersonality* is a departure from Cameron's earlier monographs on nineteenth-century American authors such as Dickinson, Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Thoreau, and Henry James. In those studies, Cameron limited her data set to a single author—or a pair, in the case of Melville and Hawthorne—in order to anchor her investigations of such vast and abstract concepts as “time” and “thinking.” This circumscription resulted in a deep, thorough, complex engagement with

her material. Treating a similarly vast concept in the new book, Cameron comes at it obliquely and partially, treating a range of authors from different times and places. It is not a tradeoff between depth and superficiality, certainly, as Cameron is as rigorous and nuanced as ever. Yet the collection lacks the synthesis that characterizes Cameron's previous book-length studies. Cameron repeatedly acknowledges this difference in her preface, calling her essays “provisional” (xvii) and conceding that the various genres of the texts “invite different kinds of consideration” (xv). Rather than taking that insight as a prompt to a systematic approach that contemplates the limits or conditions that genre places on representations of impersonality, Cameron uses it to excuse herself from comparative analysis of the authors at hand. This lack of an overarching argument is merely a disappointment, given the impressive powers of synthesis on display in Cameron's earlier work, but the lack of reflection on exclusions that her selection criteria permit is a more serious weakness, one to which I shall return.

Chapter 1, which also serves as an introduction, treats Empson's fascination with the asymmetrical faces of Buddha statues. Empson argued that Buddha faces reconciled seemingly incompatible opposites, such as “complete repose” and “an active power to help the worshipper,” by separating these attributes onto either side of the face.

Cameron contrasts Empson's positive view that impersonality can arise from a unity of contradictions with the recognition articulated by the other five authors she treats, each of whom dwells on the costs of impersonality. There is no sense of violence or loss in the achievement of impersonality in Buddha faces; after all, Empson is analyzing images of a divine being, not a person. This counterexample underscores the pathos embedded in the writing Cameron examines in the remainder of the book, as persons struggle with the fact that "impersonality (as a practice, as an ethic, as a representation), since it is undertaken by persons, could only be contradictory by definition" (7). This contradiction takes a toll on persons who "surrender" to "a force that effaces what individuates them" (12); specifying the effects of that toll on various authors is Cameron's aim in the following six essays.

In chapter 2 Cameron argues that Edwards differs from Empson, Emerson, Weil, and Eliot (Melville is a special case) in rejecting the possibility that persons can achieve impersonality—even fleetingly and as a result of rigorous training. Edwards's last work, *The Nature of True Virtue*, closes off this possibility, which had remained open in his earlier works. For Edwards, "true virtue" consists in ideal love, in which one loves things impartially according to the degree of being they possess, rather than according to their relationship to oneself. Cameron

claims that Edwards makes this impersonal love, which is intuitive for God, categorically impossible for persons because it would always be based on calculations performed within a self-interested frame of reference.

The first of two essays on Emerson is a brilliant reading of "Experience," yet it is only tangentially related to impersonality. Cameron argues that "Experience" enacts the recognition that a particularized, individual experience (grief at the death of a son) is equivalent to all experience, and that both are defined by dissociation. Emerson resists this impersonal grief by refusing to mourn Waldo, his son, directly; instead, he pushes his personal grief over Waldo's death to the margins of the essay so as to "preserve what is dismissed from anything that might threaten it—specifically . . . to empower the grief that the essay has marginalized" (78). The "triumph" (78) of the personal over the impersonal in this essay is at odds with the overwhelming force of the impersonal in the other essays in Cameron's collection.

Cameron argues in chapter 4 that Emerson's essays dramatize the transformation of the personal into the impersonal, a transformation that Emerson calls "ravishment." In most of his essays, Emerson constructs an impersonal voice that lacks embodiment or individuality, whose source is unrecognizable, and whose contradictory propositions preclude summary. "The Poet" is a

telling exception because ravishment does not occur; the person who calls the poet into existence is visible as a person and does not transform into the poet, who would be impersonal. “The Poet” is thus a productive failure for Cameron, since it illuminates the problem at the core of the other essays, a problem critics have previously formulated in terms of Emerson’s ethical failure. While ravishment, in its dual meaning of violation and rapture, implies an intense mixture of pain and pleasure at the moment of transformation, the impersonal voice represents only the nondifferentiated serenity that follows the annihilation of the person. Since there is never a person—except in “The Poet”—for the ravishment to happen to, there is never a convincing representation of that ravishment, which is ostensibly the goal of the essays. The impersonal voice, with its utter lack of ambivalence about the destruction of the person, cannot speak *for* any person, and thus, ultimately, cannot speak *to* any person.

In contrast to Emerson’s disregard for the costs of impersonality, Weil was minutely aware of the violence that self-annihilation exacts on the person. In chapter 5 Cameron elaborates Weil’s theory that attention constitutes real being. Attention is a practice that strips away the illusions of will, personal point of view, motive, even basic discrimination, until being becomes simply interminable waiting, without object and without hope. In the latter

part of the essay, Cameron meditates on Weil’s death from starvation, positing that the extremity of Weil’s commitment to attention seems to necessitate a commitment to death. The sixth chapter, on Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, also centers on the representation of death, but Eliot blurs the line between the living and the dead. This effacement of distinction permeates the entire poem, eroding any sense of individual identity. Returning to the Buddhist doctrine that being is momentary, not continuous, Cameron argues that Eliot extends this insight to experience. Making “experience” independent of “persons who experience,” Eliot depicts phenomena as unbound and mobile.

The final chapter, on Melville’s *Billy Budd*, is the clearest and most systematic account of impersonality in the collection. This clarity might derive from the fact that Cameron’s analysis here focuses on fictional character, already a category not equivalent to person, whereas elsewhere in the collection she examines examples of genres—essays, notebooks, and lyric poetry—that are traditionally presumed to give access to an authorial subjectivity. First, Cameron shows how characters who seem to be opposites, such as Claggart and Billy, reveal that differentiation cannot be sustained, thus destabilizing the very concept of character. More radically, Cameron demonstrates that characters share features with entities in the non-characterological realm, such

as light and stones. This latter insight collapses any distinction between persons and other phenomena. The violence of this version of impersonality is not legible on the surface of the writing, in Melville's elegant, seductive prose, but rather in the shocking imperative Melville places on his reader to accept the radical erasure of categories without the promise of any consolatory enlightenment.

While most of the authors included in *Impersonality* are American, traditional organizing rubrics of geography and time period are incidental to Cameron, who instead emphasizes a qualitative component to her principle of inclusion. She chose to study these six authors because of the "uncompromising nature of [their] writing" (viii), the "intensity of their engagement with this topic" (vii), and their "*resistance* to impersonality" (xvi). The value system encoded in those descriptors—uncompromising, intense, resistant—reveals a problem with the collection. Cameron's narrow focus on authors whose main concerns are spiritual or philosophical excludes instantiations of impersonality that might complicate her emphasis on the individual. Although Cameron occasionally raises issues of the social, her selection criteria have excluded, almost by definition, writers who negotiate the compromises necessary for the social world. Moreover, Cameron does not engage with the sense of impersonality that arises in relation to masses of

persons—the impersonality of the mob, for example. This omission is all the more surprising given her stress on violence; the impersonal mob's proclivity to violence in Poe's or Baudelaire's imaginations literalizes the metaphorical violence that Cameron elucidates in Edwards or Emerson. These counterexamples invert the representations of impersonality that Cameron traces, as Poe, for example, portrays the submission of individual will to mob rule as pleasurable (in a brutish, sensual way) and spontaneous rather than an arduous sacrifice requiring extensive training.

Further, while Cameron treats bondage and freedom as religious concepts in her essay on Weil, she never addresses the material reality of chattel slavery in the United States. Although the texts Cameron discusses celebrate the permeability of the boundary between human and nonhuman as a source of philosophical and intellectual pleasure, sometimes even as an idea that promises an end to personal suffering, many slave narratives worked to reinscribe those divisions and to reject proslavery ideologies that would blur the distinction between enslaved persons and animals. The "resistance" Cameron observes in her authors—their recognition that, to a person, impersonality feels like a loss—pales in comparison to the urgency of Douglass's resistance, for example. Joan Dayan and Maurice Lee, whose work overlaps with many

of Cameron's concerns, offer examples of a more historically grounded philosophical criticism, attuned to the social ramifications of abstractions. Eschewing a conclusion to the disparate essays, Cameron never reflects on her decision to include only privileged authors who are free to contemplate and practice the types of radical impersonality that, whatever their psychic cost, nevertheless are sought by the practitioner.

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