

after wedding poem

by Christian Schlegel

when i biked over
to henrys and after
having seen the gaza
paintings when i
was standing in the
front hallway with
him by the boots
he told me he
had been to tel
aviv years before
i was sayin
g to him he
dan noah and i
should all parti
cipate in scream
therapy to get
in touch wi
th our inner
children before ha
ving our own
theres an
anatomical fact
about me
that i cant scream
he said and
he learned this because
hed found himself swept
out in a current overpowe
ring his young limbs
and he tried to yell
for help but even
on the verge of drowning
he couldnt raise he voi
ce below a medium servi
ceable talking volume but
just as he thought
he was in real trouble t
he current relented and h
e floated back to shore
in the show
are 3 and dan this
is his idea are henrys 3
modes he has combin
ed them in the paintings
before you
the first is

the oil pours w
aleatoric element there
in second is text
screen printed on
and as henry told
me first it was profess
ionally done then late
r he did it himself in an ama
teur way like the bricks
supporting the paintings
he fired in the back
yard
neoclassic
ally delicate a
nd balanced prose
and
the third is what you
would call the gestural
figural smoothly articulated
slightly spectral presence
of the human form
itself in 3 parts
palestinians in suppliant
motion against an occ
upying self styled defen
sive force and the seated
reflective person in
the imperial core
like in the brown paint
ing that hangs off the dining
room table in henry and
lauras house
and what i want
to say is a predominating
emotion for me was a
suspension between these
these possibilities
henry has offered us
the word the gesture
and the contingent pour
maybe its not impossible
to separate the paintings
one looks at from the person
one has gotten to know
that person is patient
of an ironical cast of mind
serious funny graceful
youre looking through that
guy in the jamesonian
formulation back through him
at the two paintings
the two big paintings

i want to talk about here
in addition to those smaller
canvases on raw linen
and the glowy diptych
now i have had
a hard time disabusing
myself of the rortyan idea
that there is your trotsky
your political commit
ments and your wild orchids
your personal hothouse of
fascination
(rorty says orchids
are the evolutionarily
youngest plants)
“there is no meta
vocabulary that
can smooth out
your political sent
ences and your sentences
on beauty”
but ill admit like
many id venture that that
is a pretty lame concl
usion as tho to say
you just “do” art
and you “have” politics
and if you “do” politics
you somehow abnegate
art if briefly
when i was in
college i had a
set piece about
abstraction starring
every college german
major boys favorite
painter gerhard richter
who i argued
could choose abstraction
or choose figuration
(smudged nazis) and
the art lay in the
choosing
being able to do
both was the idea
enholding that choice
young boys like
mastery and
that was mastery
now is henry
showing “mastery” here
i wd say yes

in a few senses
lawyers by the way
the joke is always say
"it depends" b/c for a law
yer theres only
circumstance and rule
is a method for
navigating circ
umstance not
for overcoming it
the tyranny of fact
but one thing
henry has lassoed
i feel is an unstable
3 stage repeated
process of seeking
but not finding solace
in one of the 3 modes
an equilibrated instability
between text
abstraction
and gestural figure
and that movement is a
phantom fourth mode
the insufficiency mode
because palestinians
are dying because israeli
soldiers and the american imper
ium are killing them
so in the ostensibly
static painting is
a renewable insufficiency
i was at the wedding
in this painting and talked
to lauras sisters hus
band a doctor
about the east bay and
being a dad
i think david an
tin was proud of his vietnam
activism when he was
younger but as he age
d he found it embarrassing
he had "tipped his hand
" morton feldman
ashbery they had expo
sed
themselves
the artist
can be embarrassed
by his own conv
ictions and does

that derive from
affective austerity
the poverty of impassivity?
where do they
go your political
self your commitments
one time henry and i
walked down dean st
talking of beautiful things
and he said
well look what are
we doing this for
if not to be beautiful
what is there bey
ond that
and it basically is
i would say the out
ermost horizon
"bothered by beauty"
but as you know you
can have political beau
ty the beauty of ideas
and of companionship
historical intervention
going on strike
the oil sinks scandina
vianly into
the raw linen
henry margaret
told me was voted "ligh
test touch" in school
knowing what to
put where and
i guess for
how long
one of my favo
rite literary critics
is michael clune and
he has an article called
whatever charms is
alien: john ashberys
everything that is about
how familiarity is
figured in ashbery
as a break from modernisms
fixation on defami
liarization ashbery
renders alien wor
lds familiar and to
do this he points
to "a window past which
everything streams"

the "formlessness"
of the alien object
gesturing toward a
continuous but unknowab
le world like where all
the RNA bends the
other way the
mirror universe
except each new figu
re produces a new
such universe
i hope ive done
that justice an arctic
le so subtle i feel
toward it the same defe
rence i do to
ward ashbery and to
henrys touch
yes it rained
on laura and henrys wedding
day there were read
ings and speeches
dancing was
on chairs and bricks
and i walked
over the tub henry
soaks in 10 times
a week onto the
small square roof
when i get pol
itically upset and
nauseous and i
decide im going to devote
time back to the unpr
oductive but sooth
ing practice of utop
ian despair i listen
to mario savio and
i think well ok i can
put myself on the gears
in my little way and
my friends will put
themselves on the gears
we will be fearful at
first because our lives
have offered us gr
eat bounty and our
muscles need
toning our tolerance fo
r privation deepen
ed through accum
ulated despair soci

al hope regret and
whatever things weve
learned how to do alone
after you get married
youre married thats another
under the paving stones
the beach
"solidarity doesnt mean
you agree its the practice
flowing from the articulation
of cointelligible difference"
this means a general strike
and tactically the organization
of local actions the scope of
which i cant pretend to know
i go to law school and people
talk about this stuff refusing
illegal orders asking whether
federal law or administrative
law will exist in the same way
by the time were barred in
and representing people
Rortys political problem despite
his limited aesthetic and
argumentative sophistication
is a credulity toward american
perfectibility fortunately i dont
have political problems
i sat with Henry in his
studio very far away so that
the paintings could fill up my
eyes he wore clothes the same
color and when he wrote me
back a few days later he said
the big paintings were the same
but hed redone the diptych
having removed the clocks that are

his notes and all
the small ones
were on raw line
n i think that clune and
rorty are joined by
their mutual long way
around the barn method
of affirming heideggeri
an analysis i rememb
er being so turned off
by that stuff in coll
ege but in my dotage
it seems indispensable
to me and rorty argu
es for the bracketab
ility of heideggers pol
itics but just as clune
says ashbery
offers something out
side the univers
alizing language of
global capital and the
local myth
language of "nation"
rorty appears to
me on his best day
to be more radical
than his pol
itical conclusions
admit to and im
not sure how radical
henrys paintings admi
t themselves to be
but i want to think of
them as clune does
ashberys descriptors
beamed from a life
world in which argum
ents about who
owes what to whom
are settled by putting
oil onto canv
as in this way

Christian Schlegel is a poet born and raised in Pennsylvania. He has written three books: HONEST JAMES (The Song Cave, 2015), RYMAN (Ricochet, 2022), and THE BLACKBIRD (forthcoming from Beautiful Days, 2025). His poems and criticism have appeared in Lana Turner, Kenyon Review Online, and the Cleveland Review of Books. He has worked as a teacher, is studying to be a lawyer, and lives in New York City.