

Excerpted from

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Readers of Piper's writings in what she has termed "meta-art," know that she is capable of trenchant analysis and rigorous style.<sup>1</sup> But *Escape to Berlin* is a different sort of writing, tonally distinct: it is concerned with autobiography, and although Piper repeatedly states that she cannot be concerned with what the reader thinks, the book sounds and feels intimate. It is a first-person narrative about Piper's childhood, her experiences with family, and her professional life as a philosopher. The book mentions Piper's career as an artist, but it is not primarily about this aspect of her work. Rather, the memoir focuses on Piper's loving relationship with her parents and extended family, how she came to have awareness of the world, the ways in which "the American caste system, based on the imagined binary opposition between 'black' and 'white' 'races'" affected Piper's family and Piper herself—particularly through her father's abandonment by his own white father—and the ways in which Piper's experience of familial love and societal corruption played out in her work as a professor of analytic philosophy, a field from which she would eventually need, as the title suggests, to escape.<sup>2</sup>

Piper describes a dangerous "dissociation of theory from practice" in contemporary analytic philosophy and throughout the academy, the reign of the "popular rule derived from Socrates' [sic] execution."<sup>3</sup> Her adviser, the moral and political philosopher John Rawls, was supportive only when it was convenient for him to be so and, as Piper maintains, effectively wrote her out of the canon by neglecting to cite her work in his own. Others were devious and competitive, when not openly racist and sexist: There is, and this is a beautiful string of descriptors, the "most subterranean, efficient, and easily angered among [Piper's] colleagues," who at her first job contrived to create a climate that made it impossible for Piper to receive tenure.<sup>4</sup> I'm giving just one example, but what is clear in this account is the hostility of the academy in general to those who are not male and white and who speak their minds, as well as the particularly closed and conformist nature of the field of philosophy. These are not new complaints, but what is unusual is to see someone lay out the sequence of events in such detail, how it is possible to progress from the happy moment at which one is a desirable prospective graduate student, courted by faculty, to the state of being a threat and serious inconvenience, in spite of, or perhaps because of, one's achievements. As we have recently seen powerful tenured academics publicly attribute "malicious" intent to a student, it is quite illuminating to see an individual with tenure—who was in theory in a protected position in the academy—describe an environment in which viciousness and paranoia reign, to the

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<sup>1</sup> Piper says that her writings on meta-art "focus on the presuppositions and conditions of particular works I did that I needed to explicate in order to clarify what I was doing and why, at times when the preoccupations of contemporary art criticism offered no fertile insights." Adrian Piper, "Introduction: some Very FORWARD Remarks," *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968-1992*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1996, p. xxix.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Piper, *Escape to Berlin: A Travel Memoir*, Berlin, APRA Foundation Berlin, 2018, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 99.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

detriment of thoughtful pedagogy.<sup>5</sup> And, in this case, it is Piper's description—which is to say, a description offered by someone whose embrace of the Socratic imperative to align theory and practice, word and deed, means and ends, has given her not just a logical rationale to protest but a professional obligation to do so.

A metaphorical image appears throughout the account, of “a sprout, a tiny sapling slowly and laboriously pushing its way above ground and emerging into the air.” For Piper, this sprout is an analogy for “the self you really are.”<sup>6</sup> Now a doctor of comparative literature and definitely not an analytic philosopher, I find it striking, for literary reasons, that this sounds a lot like a central metaphor of Platonic and Aristotelian poetics, in which personal action (including artistic creation) is thought through using the coming-into-being of nature as a model. Presumably, this sprout also has to do with Kant's epigenetic conception of pure reason, in which innate mental capacities, Erkenntnisvermögen, or “faculties of cognition,” synthesize external experiential data, along with representational processes that are fundamentally prior to experience. However, and perhaps most importantly, the image of this sprout is a place in Piper's writing in which her “three hats” come together for a moment, and we can understand the larger project; the kind of self and cultivation of self that is at stake.

Commentators have been perplexed by Piper's narrative of her clashes with philosophy departments and with Wellesley College, in particular.<sup>7</sup> Can it be true that a smallish women's liberal arts institution aggressively attacked an artist and scholar of Piper's standing, who—and this is perhaps the kicker—stands for the sorts of values of inclusion, reasoned critique, and historical reflection that the college is presumably desirous of fostering? Can it be accurate that Piper's complaints feel only vaguely substantiated (as Piper maintains, she was able to fully identify and address many harmful actions only years after the fact)? Is it reasonable for Piper to have left the United States, to have claimed she did so under mortal threat?<sup>8</sup> And, why didn't she come to the opening of her own show? Is there not something missing here, some part of the story withheld from us, some simple written fact or other piece of evidence that might drop from the sky to clarify what has gone on? Yet it is also the case that Piper's protest does not begin with *Escape to Berlin* or the opening of “A Synthesis of Intuitions.” Piper has been writing about

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<sup>5</sup> I cite a now infamous letter written in support of Avital Ronell, a professor of comparative literature, in May 2018. When Ronell was accused of sexual harassment, a number of colleagues came to her defense; claiming privileged knowledge that “malicious intention has animated and sustained this legal nightmare,” in spite of the fact that “we have no access to the confidential dossier,” which described the charges. See: [leiterreports.typepad.com/files/butler-letter-for-avital-ronell.doc](http://leiterreports.typepad.com/files/butler-letter-for-avital-ronell.doc) .

<sup>6</sup> Piper, *Escape to Berlin*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Chatterton Williams meditates on Piper's accounts in “Adrian Piper's Show at MoMA Is the Largest Ever for a Living Artist. Why Hasn't She Seen It?,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 27, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Piper writes in *Escape to Berlin*, “I knew in my gut [The College] wanted me dead. ... I still think The College wants me dead; that it will want this even more once this memoir is published; and that, with its powerful international political and corporate connections, it will find a way to make this happen. I believe it will feel once again compelled to make an example of me, as a warning to others to keep their mouths shut,” pp. 223-225.

these matters for years.<sup>9</sup> The renewed exploration of the truth status of her claims in *Escape to Berlin* feels like an extension of considerations that have long been a feature of critics' and others' responses: We are not analytic philosophers; can we "trust" Piper's philosophical texts? We are not appreciators of art (in fact, we are analytic philosophers); can we "trust" Piper's celebrated art? And there is the matter of art criticism itself: can critics be trusted not to misrepresent Piper's work? And, conversely, can critics trust Piper not to dismantle their assertions in public, or, rather, trust that she will do exactly that?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, "On Wearing Three Hats," which includes a detailed account of harassment she experienced in academia.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Adrian Piper, "Art Criticism Essay Suggested Guidelines, 2016, [adrianpiper.com](http://adrianpiper.com) .