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WHY READ JOYCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

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JOYCE'S "POLITICOECOMEDY": ON JAMES JOYCE'S HUMOROUS DECONSTRUCTION OF IDEOLOGY IN *FINNEGANS WAKE*

From all accounts Joyce is said to have claimed that World War Two need never have happened, if Europeans had read his last book *Finnegans Wake*. Whether true or not, the book is intensely anti-authoritarian and anti-fascist—not only in content, but also in its performative language. The radicality of this experimental text runs parallel with the radicality of its ethico-political scope. In other words, the language of the *Wake* plays an ideological-critical role that in a most powerful manner fuses the aesthetic with the political. The rampant laughter heard and experienced throughout the text performs an effective deconstruction of any political, religious, moral, or philosophical ideology that explicitly or implicitly lay obstacles in the way of man's birthright to freedom. The humour of Joyce's poetic language entails an unmasking of unuttered premises of the ideologies as well as a recognition of man's radical eccentricity and interdependence on the other; Joyce's immense language-experiment displays an ethical and political preoccupation issued forth via an intense fusion of humour and poeticity.

I. The Quest for Freedom

Like the laughing heard at the carnival, Joyce's unassuming laughter does not originate from a pent-up, bitter feeling of privation, but rather from a surplus of life, which is not determined by class (or other) distinctions or differences—only with excessive, transgressive, expansive, and inclusive affirmation. The person laughing is not burdened by formal respect, specific considerations, feelings of inferiority or fear, but is reversely inspired and animated by a self-transcending sense of self. The revolutionary potential inherent in the phenomenon of laughter is localized in an assumption

of equality and freedom, which in the nature of the case has constituted a major problem for those interested in elevating themselves morally or politically above others. Joyce relentlessly aims at such authorities that posit themselves at the seat of the superego, and who demand subjugation and conservatism – for as Helmut Bonheim notes in *Joyce's Benefictions*, the author carefully appeals in favour of freedom and joy: "Man's birthright, Joyce argues repeatedly in *Finnegans Wake*, is to seek freedom from oppression of any kind" (1964, 127). This birthright is in many ways given as the right to laugh unhindered, because it is by means of laughter that the chains are loosened or even forced open. Hence, the text pleas for the rights of the individual to be free, whereby it proves to be "anarchistically respectsful of the liberties of the noninvasive individual" (Joyce 1978, 72). None has the right to subdue the freedom of anyone. For this reason it becomes an important task "to explique to ones the significat of their exsystems," (*Ibid.*, 148) that is to say, to *explicate* the *significance* and value of the individual *existence* as a stepping out from a frozen and burnt-out *system*. In other words, it is about time that this system is replaced—not by a new one, but by an existence liberated from any system (*exsystems*).

II. The Deconstruction of the Proper

Through Shaun, Joyce's overall work plan for *Finnegans Wake* is given in an inverted manner: "what do you think Vulgariano did but study with stolen fruit how cutely to copy all their various styles of signature so as one day to utter an epical forged cheque on the public for his own private profit" (*Ibid.*, 181). Shaun attacks Shem for allowing himself to write about ordinary, prosaic things (*It*. vulgaria) in diverse vernacular (*Lat*. vulgarus) languages about common people (*Lat*. vulgus); the result is nonetheless to be perceived as a secularized, existential translation of biblical dimensions, since *Vulgariano* brings the canonized, Catholic bible (the Latin translation, *Vulgata*) to mind. Yet the worst of all is, according to the moralistic Shaun, most likely that the poet blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, the ego and the other, whose sharp distinctions precondition the civil right of ownership, which secures a clear dividing line between what is mine and what is yours. To this, the anarchistic artist answers brashly with Proudhon (1809-65) that property is theft (the provoking answer given to the question of the book, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?*).

It may very well be one of Joyce's greatest achievements that his work at one and the same time is the most private and the most general, the most original and the most tradition-bound, as well as the most groundbreaking praxis, which nevertheless bears witness to the greatest historical awareness. As a consequence, Joyce accentuates his holistic belief in the special interdependence between part and whole, between the individual and the community, which designates the very amorous space in which we are born, love—laugh—and die. Hence, he belligerently opposes every power-ideology that unceasingly strives to uphold the distinctions, the boundaries, and the dividing lines. It is also the reason why the *kleinbürgerliche* and conservative Mr Deasy from *Ulysses*, who is furthermore anti-Semitic and misogynous, becomes a negative of Joyce's humanistic vision when the former, on behalf of every authority, ejaculates: "*I paid my way* […] *I owe nothing*" (Joyce 1986, 25). This conservative and rightist formulation is quite telling for the ideology that Joyce castigates, because it displays how one does not *need* to take care for others, since no-one is indebted to anyone. In other words, a notion like solidarity is no longer binding or consistent, if one is fundamentally of the belief that one does not owe anything to anyone. But the truth is rather, as Joyce discloses through his art, that one owes almost everything to others, and that the precondition for any thoughts of solidarity, not to mention love on a more atomic scale, is precisely given by the recognition of this basic circumstance.

It is a deeply rooted tradition within European thinking—such as conservatism, liberalism, and romanticism—to stress the independent nature of human individuals. This tradition stresses self-possessiveness as well as the autonomous and non-indebted essence of man implicitly engendering an appreciation of how everyone is left free from any obligations toward anyone. John Locke (1632-1704), for example, asserted the interdependence of selfhood and possessiveness in the *Second Treatise on Government*: "Every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*" (1988, 27, 287). In an essential manner, every man belongs to himself and this self-possessive self-identity is what secures him his status, rights and dignity. This tendency peaked with Jean-Jacques Rousseau (and the romantics succeeding him), who stressed how the ego feeds on itself and is nurtured by itself: "Réduit à moi seul, je me nourris il est vrai de ma propre substance […] je me suffis à moi-même," as it says hyperbolically (1959, 1075).

This logic of self-possessiveness, as outlined here by Rousseau, culminates in his dichotomy between authentic self-love (*amour de soi*) and vain

comparison with others (*amour-propre*). Self-love (*amour de soi*) designates an original and natural state of man before socialization, which, for example, is to be found in the "noble" savage, who lives independently and alone in the forests, and who is naturally good by and in himself. This son of nature nurtures but one passion, namely *amour de soi*, which is primarily tied to self-preservation, and which has nothing excessive about it. This love is characterized by a unity with oneself, i.e. by a state where one is not at the mercy of others or the opinion others have of you. In contrast to this splendid and contented solitude, *amour-propre* is characterized by the comparison with others and by the circumstance that one, in addition, wants others to do so as well. Even though, according to Rousseau, it is impossible to satisfy, and even though it leads one into a conflicting relationship with others, it nonetheless makes one desire the recognition of another—a yearning that one, for example, strives to satisfy by dissimulating oneself. When unaffected by the other, one experiences a happy, solitary narcissism (*amour de soi*), where one is entirely oneself, whereas the introduction to the other contrarily brings a split about between being (in oneself) and seeming (the appearance in and of the other), a state in which one is not oneself, where one is alien and non-similar to oneself. As in Augustine's depiction of the perversion of Adam and Eve's original and uncorrupted love in Eden (*amor dei*) that was perverted into vain and sensual love (*cupiditas*, *concupiscentia*, or *libido*), love was originally good and self-sufficient, but the introduction to the other entailed a break away from nature and oneself.

In other words, if we are to believe this ideological strand in the Occidental tradition, man is happy in an original union with himself when being alone, but falls when presented with the other. Hence, the other embodies the fall away from self-possessiveness and self-presence. It is this tradition, which Joyce deconstructs in his general subversion of the idea or sense of *property*. Hélène Cixous displays a keen sense of this when she asserts that: "*tous* les gestes de Joyce, gestes d'écriture, gestes biographiques, sont allés dans le sens d'une contestation mondiale de la propriété sous toutes ses formes, de l'impérialisme, du capitalisme, du familialisme, du conjugalisme, du bureaucratisme, du formalisme, du psychanalysme, du paternalisme et de son semblable le maternalisme, etc." (1974, 233-34). Taking a stand for the heterogeneous entails ethical and political consequences, since the proper, the self, now comes to recognize that its 'property' of itself is only made possible by the grounding presence of another. In her wonderful study *Ethical Joyce* on the ethical dimension of Joyce, Marian Eide ascertains that

Joyce "suggests a variety of ethical responses to political inequity based on a destabilization of both opposition and identity based on a recognition of the proximity or even interdependence of self and other" (2009, 108).

III. The Deconstruction of Religion

Joyce's criticism of the Christian God in *Finnegans Wake* is not merely limited to questioning the metaphysical dimension of this religion, but also the very authority which this heavenly, paternal embodiment exercises. By doing so Joyce seems to endorse the Russian anarchist Bakunin's (1814-1876) famous inversion of Voltaire's dictum—*if God really existed it would be necessary to abolish him*. The metaphysical collapse is brought to work by the blasphemous ridicule in which God (*Ger*. Gott), just to take one example among others, is juxtaposed with contagious veneric diseases: "Gotopoxy" (Joyce 1975, 386)—*got a pox* or *God a pox* (it is obviously not of little importance to bear in mind here that the last medical phase of pox syphilis often culminates in insanity). This manoeuvre runs parallel with the disrespectful metamorphosis of the religious supplicant's ejaculation ('My Lord! My Lord!') to: "My Lourde! My lourde!" (*Ibid.*, 299). In the new modern world God is not only perceived to be a heavy (*Fr*. lourde) burden, he is also impiously reduced to the abject state of shit (*Dan*. lort). In other words, God (*Fr*. Dieu) is quite simply *deaf and dumb*: "Dieuf and Domb" (*Ibid.*, 149).

The Christian catechism is, in addition, associated with *Ku Klux Klan* as "K. K. Katakasm" (*Ibid.*, 533). A part of the reason why Christianity is directly linked with such a brutal and disgusting organisation must be sought in its conservative tendency working towards withholding *status quo*. Paul—and most notoriously Martin Luther after him—energetically and hysterically defended the ruling order and those in power, who were said to represent the will of God; and Jesus harshly rebukes the Jews' longing for political and social change with words that inspire passivity and resignation: "Render therefore unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's and unto God the things that are God's" (*Matthew* 22.21). It is also Christianity's immense cynicism and laissez-faire attitude toward human sufferings that refuses to work against eradicating suffering, and which (in spite of the overwhelming sum of human pains) finds that all is well and expresses the realization of God's best intentions, that is castigated here.

This indignation at the Christian satisfaction with *status quo* which ignores and rejects the prospect of working towards a better life as well as reducing human sufferings, is clearly expressed by an *older Ku Klux Klan alderman* in the following: "the olderman K. K. Alwayswelly" (Joyce 1975, 365). The Christian code supports the *status quo* of power, for as the divine voice says in *Finnegans Wake*: "as it was let it be, says he!" (*Ibid.*, 80); and by doing so, it consequently supports suffering and suppression, which is why Joyce ties it to one of the most repulsive and callous movements of modern history. The Ku Klux Klan found a like-minded ideology in Nazism, a movement also mentioned by Joyce in the *Wake*. *Finnegans Wake* was published in 1939 at a time when the incredible atrocities and crimes of the regime were neither fully manifested nor fully known to the public; yet Joyce does not hesitate in his condemnation of "the Nazi Priers" (*Ibid.*, 375), whose fascist greeting (*Sieg heil*) is unequivocally rendered as: "Seek hells" (*Ibid.*, 228). As a consequence of this, it is an extraordinarily hostile assault on Christianity (as the religion with which Joyce happened to be most familiar), when the latter is fused and amalgamated with the Nazi greeting to Hitler (*Heil Hitler! Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*): "heal helper! One gob [God], one gap, one gulp and gorger of all!" (*Ibid.*, 191). *One* God, *one* leader – this is the very quintessence of fascism and monotheistic religions, for as He says himself: "For thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name *is* Jealous, is a jealous God" (*Exodus* 34.14). *One* God, *one* leader, leading His people to victory over all others as an omnipotent army commander – cf. the frequent invocation of Jehovah as the lord of army commanders (*jhwh ṣᵉbā'ot*) in *The Old Testament* – and *one* God, *one* leader, unconditionally demanding bloodshed by everyone (*gorger of all*) as well as blind submission to His will.

The monstrous sacrifices effectuated by the blessings of the representatives of Christianity throughout time are also satirically castigated in *Finnegans Wake*, where the Christian evocation of the Trinity—'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost'—is tellingly rendered as: "In the name of the former and of the latter and of their holocaust" (Joyce 1975, 419). The elevated holiness of Christianity is hence made synonymous with the benediction of genocide – for as it also says in the *Wake*, the Trinity amounts to "the fetter [*Ger*. fett: fat, rich], the summe [*Ger*. sum] and the haul it cost" *Ibid.*, 153). In other words, the praxis of Christianity is an exercise in power, primarily interested in consolidating its supremacy with all means available; the hunt for profit or to get a fine *haul* is executed

on the background of the *howls* of the suppressed and tortured—a praxis that will not refuse genocide (*holocaust*) if there is money in it. In addition, the Jewish and Christian expression of worshipping God, *hallelujah* (from Hebrew *hallelu yah* meaning 'praise Jahve'), is reformulated by Joyce as "hilleluia, killeluia" (*Ibid.*, 83), thus stressing how praising God, in praxis, has been equal to *killing* in his name.

IV. The Deconstruction of Power

Joyce's merry and anti-authoritative human comedy is not limited to the sacrilegious ridicule of the Christian god, but is also directed against the political establishment and the state as such – for as he told Georges Borach in a conversation: "As an artist I am against every state […] The state is concentric, man is eccentric. Thence arises an eternal struggle" (Ellmann 1983, 446). What Joyce, then, also strove to achieve with his art was a political vision given as socialism without Marx's revolutionary teleology and anarchism without violence. His political vision is therefore, to be more exact, a "politicoecomedy" (Joyce 1975, 540). By means of the puns the self-proclaimed authority and dignity of the tyrants are reduced to their rightful ridiculed and scorned abjectness—as, for example, the Italian fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, who was known under the pompous title *il Duce*, a word meaning "leader" but cognate with *Duke*, and who, in Joyce's disrespectful and humanistic optics, is rather perceived as a *joke* as "the juke" (Joyce 1975, 162). It is through the war of language, and the succeeding laughter (*Lat.* risus) following in the wake of this, that *regicide* is performed as "risicide" (Joyce 1975, 161).

Art, pleasure, and love stand in a certain opposition to the state's engagement with money, politics, and power. In continuation of this, Joyce explained why it simply was not possible for him to work as an artist in England: "I decided that I could never have become a part of English life, or even have worked there, for somehow I would never have felt that in that atmosphere of power, politics, and money, writing was not sufficiently important" (Power 1974, 64). The reader only has to direct his attention to the book itself to get confirmation of the fact that the book explicitly defines itself in opposition to English mercantilism and *common sense*: "You will say it is most unenglish and I shall hope to hear that you will not be wrong about it" (Joyce 1975, 160). In addition, England, the "nation

of shopkeepers" (in the words of Adam Smith) and conquerors, is understood as "Englend" (*Ibid.*, 170), i.e. as a nation that has brought much misery (*Ger*. Elend) about. The deconstruction of the English language is, as a matter of fact, equal to the author's violent assassination of the idea of the unity of the British empire: "having murdered all the English he knew" (*Ibid.*, 93). To say it "inplayn unglish [and not *plain English*]" (*Ibid.*, 609), the poetical gesture of *Finnegans Wake* consists in a *playing* (not *plain*) negation (cf. the suffixes in- and un-) of English language and ideological structure (as Joyce saw it). With Beryl Schlossman, we can in sum say that: "English becomes a series of enunciations that are undermined, pulverized, and pluralized by the lexical and syntactic presence of other languages. English as such begins to disappear into fragments. Its apparent unity has been invaded" (Schlossman 1985, 162). Joyce's idiomatic language marks a revolt or violence toward the unifying function of everyday language that consolidates a cultural, national, and political centralization. Joyce's war on the English language is not merely aggressive, for by its transgression it makes way for an openness and hospitality, which is why he, in one of the notebooks, writes: "JJ's [James Joyce's book] not hell open to Christians but English open to Europeans" (Joyce 1978, 13). And the liberating, inclusive, as well as welcoming gesture of his dissolution of English is furthermore evidenced inasmuch as the sternness of old Anglo-Saxon English (*Ger*. Altenglisch) is invested with laughter (*Ger*. lachen) "wherever my good Allenglishes Angleslachsen is spoken" (Joyce 1975, 532). Joyce replaces the ruling discourse of those in power with his own syntax, "sintalks" (*Ibid.*, 269), which inscribes the marginalized and repressed (*sin*) into the very core of authority, wherefrom *sin talks* freely now. Hence, Joyce's writing works as a linguistic virus that in its capacity as *sintalks* goes directly in the veins of the authority, which henceforward is seriously weakened by this infection that thus fights the enemy on his own ground.

The ridicule and debasement of the heavenly as well as the earthly authorities do, then, serve the cause of deliberation, enjoyment, and *humanism*: "To the laetification of disgeneration by neohumorisation of our kristianisation" (*Ibid.*, 331). The passage does not only display how the *degeneration* and painfulness of existence has been made lighter, happier, and more joyous (*Lat.* laetus) by the recent ridicule and mocking of Christianity, it also shows how Christian (and other religious) rituals and credos are merely to be perceived as euphemisms. In continuation of Vico—who, though he

held his hand over Christianity, considered the early images of deities to be projections of humans living a long time ago—Joyce seems to claim that the Christian God is an anthropomorphic phenomenon originated from a deification of a departed patriarchy. Joyce celebrates a new joyous humanism that is intended to replace the grim and dark bitterness of Christianity with a merry and freedom-seeking art, which, in its modern and unprejudiced temperament, revolts against provincialism, petit bourgeois morality, repressive religiosity and conservatism. In other words, Joyce lets "jest come to crown [town]" (*Ibid.*, 331) as he replaces the *Christian civilization* (*kristianisation*) with Ibsen's (the exemplary freethinker of modern time) hometown, *Kristiania* (Oslo today).

In an echo of the sentence engraved on the monument of the Irish champion of liberty, Charles Stewart Parnell (which is to be found at the end of Dublin's O'Connell Street), and which is taken from a speech given in Cork in 1885, it says: "No mum has the rod to pud a stub to the lurch of amotion" (*Ibid.*, 365). Parnell's words were: "No man has the right to put a stop to the march of a nation". The sentence is in Joyce's reformulation more general, inclusive (even cosmopolitical), and non-political in a sense, since it emphasizes how the *lurch* of *emotions* are immune toward the censorship of tyrants and oppressors. Hence, a common community is not defined in terms of nationality or political orientation, but rather from a common emotional and existential lot; and this emotional community primarily consists in love, i.e. a community in which no-one has greater rights than others as regards the feeling of others, which consequently makes this community more democratic and inclusive (cf. the transformation of *man* to *mum*).

With his *politicoecomedy*, Joyce endeavours to create the framework for such a community and to introduce the reader to a specific unworried and merry broad-mindedness that dignifies the latter to be addressed as: "My little love apprencisses [apprentices]" (*Ibid.*, 365). Or as it says in another wonderful pun—in which Issy's rainbow-girls plea for a *separation* and *emancipation* from the oppressing and burdensome world of stern males in order to erect a utopian, female world of love (*Lat.* amans: lover)—it is only through love that freedom and emancipation makes sense: "And when all us […] shall have ones for all amanseprated" (*Ibid.*, 239).

V. Conclusion

Joyce's self-declared war on language (see *Letters* 1, 237, 11 November 1925) effectively fuses the poetic with a hilarious socio-ideological critique. The negativity and linguistic violence of this manoeuvre is not merely negative and destructive, for as Julia Kristeva argued in her book on the avant-garde of the nineteenth fin-de-siècle (Mallarmé and Lautréamont), poetic language contains a revolutionary potential through its effects of negativity, striving "à remodeler le *dispositif signifiant* historiquement accepté, en proposant le représentation d'un autre rapport aux objets naturels, aux appareils sociaux et au corps propre" (Kristeva 1974, 116). That is to say, Joyce's new language thus paves the way—through the linguistic ridicule and deconstruction of the established, repressive power-ideologies—for an opening up of the new, i.e. of a dynamic potentiality stressing freedom, love, and solidarity. As Jean-Michel Rabaté has aptly shown, it is in this manner that Joyce succeeded in unleashing a veritable poetics of hospitality:

> As he hoped, individual artistic toil might redeem and perhaps heal the diseases of the collective spirit such as xenophobic nationalism, fascism, and religious bigotry. The new language should in the end create a new and different reading practice strong enough to subvert those ideologically reactionary values that are still latent in the old *Sittlichkeit*. (2001, 82)

This new language of hospitality is erected on the powerful background of laughter and linguistic negation of the proper, thus disclosing how a sensitivity towards bathos, comedy, and negativity—i.e. the ability to laugh freely at this or that articulation of power—entails an ethical, amorous, and political chance or even necessity. For as one of Joyce's great predecessors energetically asserted: "Das Verlangen nach *Zerstörung*, Wechsel, Werden kann der Ausdruck der übervollen, zukunftsschwangeren Kraft sein" (Nietzsche 1997, 245).

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