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“Brief laugh”: On Disguised Comedies in Beckett and in Late 20th - Century Drama

In his biography of Franz Kafka, Max Brod tells us the now famous anecdote, according to which, while doing a reading of the first chapter of *The Trial* to some friends, Kafka met with a reaction which has come down to us as being somewhat awkward: the audience was laughing irrepressibly, and, which is more, Kafka himself was laughing so much that he sometimes had to stop reading (cf. Brod 1974: 156). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are considering this paragraph of Brod's, when they say that “whoever reads Nietzsche, Kafka and Beckett without immense involuntary laughter and political trembling deforms everything” (Deleuze/Guattari 1984: 76, my translation). I mostly use this line because of the connection made between this specific trio – Nietzsche, Kafka and Beckett – and laughter, which goes somewhat against the grain of their popular portrayal as gloomy, pessimistic and nihilistic writers. As we know, the early assessment of these writers projected into their work a tragic seriousness that downplayed humour so as to better highlight the misery of the human condition that these texts supposedly portrayed, the human condition being no laughing matter.

Another very strong bond between these three has been the question of meaning – or the lack of it. Considering the individual history of Nietzsche's, Kafka's and Beckett's reception and interpretation, their texts can and have been seen as, in some way, concerning interpretation, or, to use a word more frequently used in Nietzsche-studies, hermeneutics. In Nietzsche, this means bringing all value systems down to hermeneutics, there being no “transcendental signified”, as Derrida called it. However, we tend to feel, when reading Nietzsche, that there is one standpoint

stationed above the others, in a special place – unsurprisingly, I’m referring to Nietzsche’s own position, which sometimes sounds quite dogmatic to us. But I will come back to this later.

Still in hermeneutics, one thing strikes us when reading texts by these three writers: they all either talk about riddles or appear to place riddles in front of us, readers. As we know,¹ a riddle suggests the unexplainable by posing a question about it. However, a riddle only exists while there are possible explanations, attempts at answering the question about that which cannot be explained. This is what distinguishes it from a mystery, which nobody aims at explaining, and which is read dogmatically. By definition, as a riddle cannot be explained, there will be no right answer, only answers, interpretations, worldviews, value systems. In fact, the unexplainable only exists as long as these explanations exist: without them it would crumble. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, “unexplainable were, in truth, only the explanations” (Agamben 1999: 136, my translation) – and thus the riddle was created for their own justification. The riddle would after all be the figure, the appearance, of a riddle, not because the answer is “there is no answer”, but because a riddle exists only for its explanations, in a metaleptic reversal. One only does justice to a riddle with more than one interpretation or, in other words, it only exists, it can only have the function of a riddle, when it serves more than one answer.

Nietzsche’s texts, for example, are peopled by a “moving army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms” (Nietzsche 1980: 880, my translation), which still baffles the specialists who try to unify a corpus rich in contradictions and eccentricities. Joseph K., in *The Trial*, is shown unrelenting in his interpretation of rumours, of fragmented information, of what he himself does, should do or should have done. All we read is viewpoints and repeatedly corrected impressions: in this book, all characters feel they have to explain themselves thoroughly and do so, to no better result. Questions of misinterpretation, false impressions, and error can be found in almost every page, and we can read examples of this in the scene with Block, at the lawyer’s house, and in the scene at the cathedral, to name just two of them.

¹ This part of my paper about riddles is based on Giorgio Agamben’s *Idea della Prosa*, without which I could not have written this. His text being occasionally elliptic and itself enigmatic, I would note that all possible interpretative errors here (the points where I may have forced certain meanings into Agamben’s text) are my own and do not derive from this philosophically rigorous and well-argued book.

The same happens throughout Beckett's work, although it is more explicit in plays such as *Rough for Theatre II* and *Happy Days*, when Winnie gives voice to the voyeur afar: "What's she doing? he says What's the idea? he says stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground coarse fellow What does it mean? he says What's it meant to mean—and so on" (Beckett 2006: 294). This happens even more clearly in *Rough for Radio II*. Here an Animator, a Stenographer and Dick, a mute figure, are trying to get another character, called Fox, to say something which is thought to be of importance: "The least word (...) *may be it*" (*Ibidem*: 321). However, the interrogator clearly admits: "Of course, we do not know, any more than you do, what exactly it is we are after, what sign or set of words" (*Ibidem*: 326), yet that does not seem to be a problem, although it does not allow for questions: what matters is that Fox speaks and in a varied way. It does not even matter if he lies, the Animator says: "Even though it is not true!" (*Ibidem*). As would be expected, every incoherent babbling is made meaningful and interpretation is let loose till the inevitable point is reached: the text dictated by Fox is tampered with and distorted – in the Animator's words, it is amended (*Ibidem*: 328/9) –, so that the Animator's hope can be fulfilled sooner: "it seems to me that ... here ... possibly... we have something at last" (*Ibidem*: 328).

These riddles bring the reader into the problem. Saying that they, the riddles, have no solution does not put them away: it is still a unitary position; it means depending on the single-answer model that riddles would traditionally appear to require. Moreover, it is not an answer beyond or outside interpretation: it is as much bound with interpretation as all previous attempts, it just happens to be a negative and cleverly meta-textual answer. As I said before, the only response to riddles is a plural one: with our unsatisfying interpretations, we have been duly answering riddles all along. This is what characters cannot stop doing in both Kafka and Beckett (and also in Nietzsche, if we think of his philosophical theatre), and this is what the reader of Kafka and Beckett, however sophisticated he or she may be, cannot keep from doing. This reader will always fail (better or worse) with his or her interpretations; he or she will not learn from error and experience, just as the artist in Nietzsche's "About Truth and Lie", given that even silence would be a response, already an interpretation, as Agamben reminds us (cf. Agamben 1999: 135). This double bind then turns into an allegory of reading, since the reader cannot avoid behaving as the characters in these texts, but we need not see this as some tragic defeat, a bleak reminder of passive nihilism.

As Wolfgang Iser puts it, in his well-known essay “Counter-sensical Comedy and Audience Response in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*”, failed action, as a comic paradigm, shows us, through its repetition, that “nothing can be learned by failed actions” (Iser 1992: 55). Comedy arises out of a repeated failure of interpretation, also stemming from spectators,² hence the “stifled burst of laughter” (*Ibidem*: 64), the “brief laugh” (Beckett 2006: 91). If we apply this to *interpreters* in *The Trial* and in the Beckett plays I mentioned, this then highlights the comedy of interpretation, the disguised comedy behind all the gloom and bleakness we culturally associate with these texts. This comedy would not only take place among the characters but also among us, readers, as our efforts become a Shandean exercise, frequently as extravagant as what characters offer for interpretations.

If we associate this hermeneutical comedy with the context of the times, we can understand how this changes in Heiner Müller’s and Sarah Kane’s texts, placed after the advent of post-modernity, and which I said I would speak of, even if this compromise of mine has come to seem (to me) somewhat excessive, in view of the immensity of what I would have to say. I shall then go through them briefly, so as to highlight some main aspects of my argument and will afterwards conclude with a loose end I left behind.

As far as Müller is concerned, I chose the play *Life of Gundling Frederick of Prussia Lessing Sleep Dream Scream (Leben Gundlings Friedrich von Preußen Lessings Schlaf Traum Schrei)*, written in 1976. The play is one of Müller’s history plays, focusing on the reign of Frederick II of Prussia, and dealing with the relation between power and the intellectuals of the Enlightenment. This dark satire presents German Enlightenment in two ways, both connected with the problem of interpretation, even if only in an indirect way. On the one hand, we see the way intellectuals and subjects are humiliated in authoritarian and military regimes: interpretation is a royal prerogative, as when Frederick II says that the oranges in the field look nice, to which the peasant answers that they are not oranges at all but beets. The prince then throws him a beet and asks him if the oranges taste good. The peasant, spitting teeth, answers that the oranges taste wonderfully. To this, Voltaire, who is

² “[T]he comedy happens to (...) [the spectator] because he experiences his own interpretations as that which is to be excluded” (Iser 1992: 62).

accompanying the prince, throws up and, at the end of the scene, picks up a beet and says: “A souvenir. The Prussian orange” (Müller 2001: 531, all translations of Müller in this text are mine). The Enlightenment is then also a question of power, since interpretation belongs to whoever has more power. In this play, as would be expected, it is the prince.

On the other hand, the Enlightenment is shown through a perverse lens. In a madhouse, the professor/psychiatrist talks of the straightjacket as an “instrument of dialectics”, “a school of freedom”, a symbol of a “perpetual peace” based on catatonic stupor (*Ibidem*: 526). His own invention, the masturbation strap, entitled a “triumph of science” (*Ibidem*), is supposed to treat a patient “turned into an idiot through masturbation” (*Ibidem*), but when the bandage is unstrapped, during a demonstration, the patient, his face disfigured by pain, grabs his genitals immediately, thus frustrating what the professor called “A victory of reason over raw natural instinct” (*Ibidem*: 527). This pathologic rationalism (which in truth has nothing in it of rational thinking) is, as in the power-oriented distortions I have now mentioned, a demonstration of repeated failure, of enlightened interpretation gone sour, this whole depiction being satirical and even grotesque.

Dark humour is also characteristic of the last playwright I said I would speak of: Sarah Kane. Her last play, *4:48 Psychosis*, first staged in June 2000, also deals indirectly with interpretation and comical error, namely in the relationship between doctor and patient. The title of the play points somewhat to these questions: 4:48 a.m. is “the happy hour / when clarity visits” (Kane 2001: 242) or “At 4:48 / when sanity visits / for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind” (*Ibidem*: 229). But as Daniel Greig notes, “The paradox in the play is that the moment of clarity in the psychotic mind is, to those outside it, the moment when delusion is at its strongest” (Greig 2001: xvi). The impression that one is completely lucid is in fact a delirium in the guise of sanity. On the other hand, Kane parodies the professional interpretations that doctors give to their patients and which are often seen as simply preposterous. It is the case of the following dialogue:

- Have you made any plans?
- Take an overdose, slash my wrists then hang myself.
- All those things together?
- It couldn’t possibly be misconstrued as a cry for help. (Kane 2001: 210)

As it has often been noted, Kane's humour is quite bleak (cf. Saunders 2002: 113) and this she shares with some of Müller's texts. If the comic mode, or the comical moment, is maintained in these two writers, and is frequently associated with matters of interpretation, as I hope to have shown, hermeneutics is however not so much of an issue, as it is in Beckett, Kafka and Nietzsche. We also note an absence of the type of riddles that we saw in texts by these three writers. For Müller and Kane, interpretation is mostly contemplated in its use in politics and in human relations, although also as an inevitability of literary writing. If we can safely say that this question appears in the last two texts I mentioned, we also have to admit that there is now some sense of distance, that interpretation as a repeated and comical failure is now seen as a literary commonplace, the illustration of this thesis through the use of riddles no longer seeming necessary.

This brings us to my final point: I have been speaking of interpretation, points of view, riddles, failure and comedy. I also said that texts by Heiner Müller and Sarah Kane can be read as if this question of hermeneutics were an established and accepted subject. However, what we know from authors' attitudes towards this problem shows us otherwise, and the loose end I left behind has to do precisely with this: I am referring to Nietzsche's dogmatism, which I briefly mentioned a while ago. A common objection to theories such as Nietzsche's has to do with the fact that they advance relativist propositions in an absolute way. The usual commonplace, which is "everything is relative", clearly shows the paradox between what is said and the way it is said. The proposition would lack relativity towards itself, but, as we know, admitting such a reflexive relativity would also imply admitting absolutes, which would not be desirable, in the context of the cliché. In a sense, Nietzsche's dogmatism is as comical as the reasoning he denounces. Paul de Man, for example, notes that:

If we read Nietzsche with the rhetorical awareness provided by his own theory of rhetoric we find that the general structure of his work resembles the endlessly repeated gesture of the artist "who does not learn from experience and always again falls in the same trap". (de Man 1979: 118)

Another example of comical dogmatism is Beckett's decision to pursue lawsuits against theatre companies which would not follow his stage directions. As Anna McMullan puts it:

On the one hand, the increasingly precise stage directions of Beckett's later dramatic work, as well as the decision to prosecute in individual cases, indicates a desire to exercise almost absolute control over the execution of his plays. On the other, the failure or parody of attempts to impose authorial meaning and control is a predominant feature of Beckett's drama. (McMullan 2004: 196)

Since these dogmatic or unifying positions belong to artists who concern themselves with interpretation, then their tone of speech, their actions and public texts in their own name can and should be interpreted ironically. It is as if not only the characters and the readers would have to be part of the comedy, but the writers themselves would also have to behave as their own characters, destined to forever try to unify and forever fail. The only part for them in this play of interpretation would be the ultimate comical part, that of the character who is after all practising not relativism, but an obstinate reliance on absolutes, thus shifting from the figure of famed harbinger of pluralist interpretation to that of the naïve reader of his own texts.

Scenes of interpretation, where characters provide dogmatic solutions or enforce solutions in a unitary way, are thus inevitable in characters from texts, *and* in readers and authors of these texts. In a sense, it is an inevitability of hermeneutics: every answer is the right answer, all other answers being wrong, at least if we understand interpretation as Nietzsche does, that is, as a manifestation of a “will to power”, as an attempt to dominate the interpreted text. What the characters in this theatre of hermeneutics cannot avoid is then their irrepressibly comical status, as their proposals, inside the scheme of one-answer solutions, become successive errors, in view of the interpreter who always comes after. The vertigo of irony, which Paul de Man speaks of, in the wake of Baudelaire's “*vertige de l'hyperbole*” (de Man 1983: 215-6), contaminates all participants in the process and turns the engagement with these texts into a veritable “comedy of errors” of textual interpretation.

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