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ODRADEK'S LAUGHTER

Comedy—a particular kind of comedy—is the leitmotif of Eric Santner's *The Royal Remains*. Needless to say, this comedy is hardly that of common conception as a madcap sequence of errors to be set aright; still less is it a cruel comedy of debasement, of a satirical cutting-down-to-size or the universal embarrassment of being and having a body. As Santner argues, I think rightly, in his book, such essentially dualistic versions of comedy—based on a high/low, sublime/ridiculous division—fundamentally mistake the locus of their own risibility, thereby strengthening the very order that they would seem to be laughing at and thus in a certain sense actually nullifying the comic element of their own performance.

The comedy of human being must therefore be looked for elsewhere than in the banished notions and nether regions of reigning discourses. That is, it must be looked for as an *intrinsic* process. Accordingly, Santner quotes from Alenka Zupancic's assessment (from her 2008 book on comedy, *The Odd One In*) that the comic is not to be conceived of as the real and actual from the standpoint of the ego-ideal. Rather, it is this standpoint itself that is potentially laughable; as she concludes, "the ego-ideal itself turns out to be the partial (comic) object."¹ In other words, what Santner and Zupancic both demonstrate is that what is comic in those scenes of humiliation and degradation so familiar to comedy's repertoire is precisely not, as has so often been argued, materiality as such, the inevitable fact that even the most upstanding citizen sometimes falls flat on his face and at least one of the king's two bodies uses the toilet. What is comedic is not the lowness of the human, but the thought that human being was ever separable from its lowness—not the fact that the subject gets tripped up, but the fact that this thing on the ground was constituted as a subject to begin with. The comic is thus not the mockery of human materiality from the standpoint of the conceptual; it is instead the perpetual dialectic of the material and the conceptual that, while it operates against the unity of the sovereign subject, *is also* what constitutes the subject *as* subject and what allows the subject to come to be in the first place. Thus, in Zupancic's Hegelian terminology, "Comedy is not the

¹ Alenka Zupancic, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 32. Quoted in Santner, 110.

undermining of the universal, but its (own) reversal into the concrete; [...] *comedy is the universal at work*" (Zupancic 27).

But though the understanding of the comic as mere debasement and the triumph of the material over our better natures is doubtless a misconception for whose clearing-up the time has come, the notion of comedy put forth by Santner via Zupancic is also, I would like to suggest, at times in danger of falling into the same predicament that it critiques. This danger is hinted at, for example, by Santner's summary of the comedic viewpoint as something that "implies a fundamental *lack of fit* not only between man and world but also internal to man" (208). Here Santner almost seems to concede the orthodox interpretation of the comic as something resulting from or identical to "lack," defect, or error—as the aesthetician Friedrich Theodor Vischer once put it, "the negative side of the Hegelian method, translated into the language of the diaphragm [in die Sprache des Zwerchfells überetzte negative Seite der *Hegelschen Methode*]."² Such an assignation of dialectical negativity to the comic—even in a non-censorious sense—is problematic for several reasons, but the one most pertinent here is the way in which it risks reinstating a binary outsidership to the comic that Zupancic's and Santner's own arguments would otherwise seem to reject. For against what, exactly, is such a "lack of fit between culture and culture, between man and himself" (208) to be measured, when this lack is "internal" to the culture or the self that would provide this very touchstone? What sense does it make to speak of a universal *at work* in comedy, if the comic is also a universal *unworking*?

The impasse contained in these questions may be what results in the at times curiously tragic, or rather horrific view of comedy in Santner's text, in which laughter seems to happen less as a spontaneous reaction of pleasure than as the spasmodic release of the rictus of human pain. "I have been arguing here," writes Santner towards the end of his book, "that the only dignified way of enjoying the *dignitas* of being human is to learn to live with, to be especially alive to, the indignity of such discomfort and, perhaps, to experience its pressure—its twitching—as a *Lachkrampf*, a paroxysm of laughter that simply cannot—and ought not—be held down" (247). Certainly, the various relations between comedy, tragedy, laughter, pleasure, and pain are hugely complex and should by no means be reduced to crude dichotomies; nor should the fact of suffering, in all the myriad forms it takes, be minimized. However, it seems to me nonetheless worth insisting on a genuinely comic idea of comedy, one that is not merely about grinning and bearing it, but that finds *in itself* a certain "dignity" of enjoyment. For, as Santner himself argues, "it becomes misleading to analyze the core crisis of modernity under the sign of loss, of losing our access to transcendence, of becoming, as Lukács famously put it in his *Theory of the Novel*, 'transcendentally homeless.'" Rather, "the 'death of God' would seem [...] to concern a fateful process of becoming stuck with an excess, a *too-muchness*, within the space of immanence" (82).

² Friedrich Theodor Vischer, *Über das Erhabene und Komische* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 183. My translation.

Thus my question here is: what might it mean to take this comedy of immanent excess seriously, to give up the notion of a loss to be mourned in favor of the idea of exploding (human being) in laughter? To answer this, I would like to turn to the famous short text of Kafka's discussed at various points in *The Royal Remains*, "The Worry of the Father of the Family [Die Sorge des Hausvaters]."³ The story, as is well known, concerns the ambiguous creature Odradek, of whom the narrator (presumably the "Hausvater" of the title) can say neither what his name means, where he comes from, why he exists, nor even determine with any certainty whether he is a living, sentient being or the discarded fragment of a wooden toy he by all lights appears to be. Santner's discussion of the text displays an almost mimetic quality: as in Kafka's story, the figure Odradek crops up periodically at unexpected but crucial moments. "Extraordinarily mobile and impossible to catch" (77), he lends the power of his inexhaustible hermeneutic potential to a variety of arguments and points of emphasis. Odradek's primary role in Santner's book, however, is as a figure of pure un-belonging, an effective premonition of both Arendt's stateless person and Agamben's *homo sacer*, in whom social and political indeterminateness prove identical with an absolute vulnerability to violence. These figures, of course, are far from simply heuristic concepts; as Santner underscores, the historical scene after the First World War (*a fortiori* after the Second) "produced a chronic state of emergency in which more and more people were confronted with a political and existential status not unlike that of Kafka's strange spool-like creature. More and more people came to acquire the uncanny status—or rather nonstatus—of precisely a remainder of life, a life dominated by the spectral aspect of the flesh" (86). Odradek, in this sense, is the exemplary refugee, the one so utterly deprived of homeland and qualities that even his own name fails to mean anything unequivocally. Santner's interpretation thereby calls attention to the fact that what was destroyed in the Great War was not just lives, land, and property, but also and especially a *world order* that allowed people to take their identities more or less for given; Kafka's Odradek, belonging nowhere and being nothing, thus stands for "the dimension of human existence that is, in some sense, constitutively homeless and yet somehow constitutes every experience of a passionate attachment to the various places and forms of life that we come to call home" (86).

Santner himself focuses his attention on the first paragraph of Kafka's story and the extraordinary etymological denseness of this strange creature's seemingly nonsensical name. But the story's concluding paragraphs are also relevant to Santner's argument, particularly, to the potential relation between a "constitutive homelessness" and the "immanent excess" of comedy. For the moment in which he declares his homelessness is also precisely the moment where Odradek *laughs*:

³ Franz Kafka, *Kafka's Selected Stories*, trans. and ed. Stanley Corngold (New York: Norton, 2007) 72-73; original Franz Kafka, *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, eds. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch and Gerhard Neumann, *Kritische Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), 283-284.

Naturally you do not ask him hard questions but treat him—his diminutive size alone inclines you to do so—like a child. “So, what’s your name?” you ask. “Odradek” he says. “And where do you live?” “No permanent residence,” he says and laughs; but it is a kind of laughter that can only be produced without lungs. It sounds more or less like the rustling of fallen leaves. At this point the conversation is usually over. (73)

Like everything else in Odradek, this laughter, too, is open to interpretation. Many have noted the writerly pun in the “fallen leaves” of Odradek’s laughter, or have taken this laughter’s lungless quality as a reference to Kafka’s own, meager yet all too present, tubercular body; others have read in it a symbol for Odradek’s own senselessness and foreignness, or an allegory for the final and most foreign a-sensicality of death.⁴ But what if, instead—in light of Santner’s identification of comedy with “the verbal and physical twitchings of creaturely life” (251)—Odradek’s laughter here were to be taken at face value? That is, what if it were to be read, not as metaphor, but as a narrative-immanent reaction to the speaker’s second question and his own answer thereto? For “No permanent residence [Unbestimmter Wohnsitz]” is in fact no answer a child would give; it is a box to be checked off in a government questionnaire. The mock legalese of Odradek’s response makes it already a *play form* of the bureaucratic apparatus that, within the biopolitical regime, retains the exclusive right to assign identity, to “[inscribe] biological life into historical forms of life” (Santner 13). In using a parodied bureaucratic language to instead *frustrate* the *Hausvater*’s administrative curiosity, Odradek becomes, not just a figure of homelessness, excess, or disruption—“the spectral yet visceral persistence of a tear in the fabric of being” (Santner 85)—but also a figure of *suspension*, that detaches the language of biopolitics from its use value and brings it into the realm of the ludic.

In like manner, Santner elsewhere compares Odradek to “an *object* agitating the bodies and spaces of a community” (110); Santner’s name for this agitation, which drives sovereignty from kingship to, in Kantorowicz’s words, “the naked misery of man” (quoted in Santner 110), is, precisely, *comedy*. The “care” that troubles the family man of Kafka’s story may thus be read as the result of the comic agitation that Odradek effects, whose specific nature is addressed in the piece’s concluding lines: “Can I expect that one day,” the narrator asks, “with his bits of thread trailing behind him, he will come clattering down the stairs, say, at the feet of my children and my grandchildren? True, he clearly harms no one; but the idea that, on top of everything else, he might outlive me [daß er mich auch noch überleben sollte], that idea I find almost painful” (73; 284). Odradek’s agitation reveals itself here as a matter of his persistent survival, his *überleben*, his *out-living* “beyond the death of the forms of life” of the history of sovereignty (see Santner 252). That is, Odradek lives beyond and *without care* for the

⁴ See Hansjörg Bay, “Kafkas Tinnitus,” *Odradeks Lachen: Fremdheit bei Kafka*, eds. Hansjörg Bay and Christoff Hamann (Freiburg: Rombach, 2006), 41-68, esp. 50-52; also Peter Rehberg, *Lachen Lesen. Zur Komik der Moderne bei Kafka* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), 261.

economic—the household—concerns of the *pater familias* and his progeny. The *Hausvater's* questions stem from the care for a form of being that Odradek himself does not possess and cannot understand, to a *world order* in which he neither is nor has a part. Odradek does not think he is anything. The *Hausvater*, meanwhile, really does believe that he is a *Hausvater*; such “lunacy” (Santner 100, note 31) makes the questions that would confirm this sort of identity as unanswerable as they are amusing.

For Odradek is not making any error, he is not lacking anything, he “harms no one.” He is, one might say, *not even meaningless*. What lack of meaning he can be said to have is in fact *projected* upon him by the *Hausvater*, who insists on trying to pin down to the thing a shape, an origin, an interpretation, and a *telos*, even when these categories prove manifestly inapplicable. What Odradek's laughter thus shows is that his supposed non-belonging is actually an epistemological question—if also one inherent to the forms of life that make the inhabitation of our humanity possible. The *Hausvater's* fear that he will be “survived” by Odradek is an intimation that the form of life in which he dwells, his patrimony and ontological *zu Hause*, rests on uncertain grounds, and indeed could die out ahead of this alien figure or rather figure of an alienation so alien that it is of little use any more to call it by such a name. With his laughter, discourse stops: “At this point the conversation is usually over [Damit ist die Unterhaltung meist zu Ende]” (73; 284).

But “Unterhaltung,” of course, does not only mean “conversation”; it also—in a sense to which Kafka was no less attuned—means “amusement, entertainment, diversion.” This amusement, the very opposite of care, is sustained, albeit briefly, by Odradek as a function of his (for the *Hausvater* seemingly impossible) non-teleological, non-agential life-form. This non-teleological, non-agential (but nevertheless “agitating”) life-form belongs to the “immanent excess” of creaturely life that Santner diagnoses in modernity; but it *also* belongs to the sphere of amusement and diversion, i.e., to the sphere of *play*. Odradek—who, again, as has often been noted, also resembles some sort of fragment of a toy—thus reveals the sovereign operation to be at bottom less scene of horror than *Lustspiel*—“a *comedic* deployment of the ‘stuff’ of anxiety” (Santner 246)—an undying playing-out of being without goal, function, or dialectical recuperation. It may be, as Santner at times suggests, that such an inscrutable *Lustspiel* exists only as Odradek himself exists—that is, nowhere and as a no-thing—and that we ourselves are always rather in the position of the *Hausvater*, always thrown, so to speak, into care as a condition of our being. But it does no harm to consider that this condition is, if in one way necessary, from another angle (upright on two wooden rods, perhaps) also wholly arbitrary, even amusing, and that what the *Hausvater* so fears to lose to Odradek's out-living of him is not something he truly possesses but something he has projected and subsequently assumed as his subjecthood, thereby covering up the trace of his immanent too-muchness that is comical, not in its distance from some ideal, but in its suspension of the categories that make up at once the worry and the interpretability of existence. Odradek is the name for the uncanny, unpredictable obstacle that is this

immanent too-muchness, the one who reminds us that beyond sovereignty, what remains, free from care, may be laughter.

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