

A Potential Transformer. The Uncanny Book of Taking the Liberty of Thought and Difference. A Discussion: Uncanny Soulscapes in Uncustomary Dreamscope. Collected Philosophical Fragments by Giorgio Baruchello

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Abstract: This discussion brings to the fore a philosophy of humour incursion into its philosophical and literary articulations, into the insights about the human beings and into their contemporary overall weary relation to humour. Humour is difficult to pursue nowadays as the times are particularly prone to a self-defensive and quasi-propagandistic type of reflection (or, lack of reflection). The new book of Giorgio Baruchello, titled *Uncanny Soulscapes in Uncustomary Dreamscope. Collected Philosophical Fragments*, engages the reader in a very surprising journey visiting as well the ontic and the oneiric realms, a book about us all and possibly about none of us with complete exactness; yet, we have here a book which is about our vulnerability, inertia and backwardness, as well as about the transforming powers of sincere humorous introspection and extrospection. We are conducting a discussion that follows such aspects and which does not quite resume the book. It is more than a review, emphasizing the Geist of the work, its meaning and importance in an evaluative essay. Along this discussion, a few other articles and books investigating humour and the philosophy of humour provide welcome referential points for a discussion that has nevertheless a philosophical character, although it is not intended as a pretentious exegesis. The book may seem to some readers pretentious, while it is just an incentive for a more complex and more qualitative vision of the world. However, as one of the well-established theories in the philosophy of humour is “superiority theory” (as found in Plato and Hobbes) and as this theory is so present in our day-to-day experiences it is pretty unavoidable that some sense of superiority in the situation of this author against his characters and readers transpires in-between the lines. But it is rather laughing at ourselves that is beneficial and it has transforming virtues as the reader should come to admit and hopefully, even rejoice.

Keywords: philosophy of humour, superiority, vulnerability, introspection, a new Enlightenment.

Titlu: „Un potential (agent) transformator. O carte stranie despre asumarea libertății de gândire și de a fi diferit. O discuție: *Neobișnute peisaje sufletești într-un caleidoscop de vise. O colecție de fragmente filosofice*, de Giorgio Baruchello”

Rezumat: Această discuție aduce în prim-plan o incursiune în filosofia umorului, în articulațiile sale filosofice și literare, în perspectivele despre ființele umane și în relația lor obositoare contemporană cu umorul. Umorele este dificil de urmărit în zilele noastre, deoarece aceste vremuri sunt deosebit de predispușe la un tip de reflecție autodefensiv și cvasi-propagandistic (sau la lipsă de reflecție). Noua carte a lui Giorgio Baruchello, intitulată *Neobișnute peisaje sufletești într-un caleidoscop de vise. O colecție de fragmente filosofice*, angajează cititorul într-o călătorie foarte surprinzătoare vizitând, de asemenea, tărâmurile ontice și onirice, fiind o carte despre noi toți și posibil despre niciunul dintre noi cu deplină exactitate; totuși, avem aici o carte care abordează vulnerabilitatea noastră, inerția și înapoierea noastră, precum și puterile transformatoare ale

introspecției și extrospecției umoristice sincere. Purtăm o discuție care urmărește astfel de aspecte și care nu este tocmai o recenzie a cărții. Este mai mult decât o recenzie, subliniind spiritul lucrării, semnificația și importanța ei într-un eseu evaluativ. De-a lungul acestei discuții, alte câteva articole și cărți care investighează umorul și filosofia umorului oferă puncte de referință binevenite pentru o discuție care are totuși un caracter filosofic, deși nu este intenționată ca o exegeză pretențioasă. Cartea poate părea unor cititori astfel (pretențioasă), deși este doar un stimulent pentru o viziune mai complexă și mai calitativă asupra lumii. Cu toate acestea, deoarece una dintre teoriile bine stabilite în filosofia umorului este „teoria superiorității” (așa cum se întâlnește la Platon și Hobbes) și deoarece această teorie este atât de prezentă în experiențele noastre de zi cu zi, este destul de greu de evitat ca printre rânduri să nu transpară un sentiment de superioritate în situarea acestui autor față de personajele cărții și cititorii săi. Dar a râde de noi înșine este mai degrabă benefic și are virtuți transformatoare, așa cum cititorul ar trebui să recunoască și, sperăm, de care chiar să se bucure.

Cuvinte-cheie: filosofia umorului, superioritate, vulnerabilitate, introspecție, un nou Iluminism.

An extraordinary intellectual incursion brings the reader into a humorous tarantella with archetypes, misconceptions, shortcomings, intrinsic ridiculousness perceptions and presentations, and illusions, too. Announced as a philosophical satire standing on the shoulders of Thomas More, Voltaire, and Admiral General Haffaz Aladeen (the main character in *The Dictator*, a 2012 satirical film), we are faced with this fictional exercise of the freedom of thought and expression successfully relevant. It is also a courageous endeavour: nowadays, a meaningful work needs various disclaimers for it sends to real-life albeit it is a fictional narrative and to real-life institutions, individuals and behaviors tending to secure themselves in spheres of power and hegemony outside any possibility of criticism and even against any shadow of negative allusion. The powers of inertia and backwardness are particularly squeamish and delicate these times. To a significant extent, we have to acknowledge that we are living in anti-philosophical times, which are in dire need of perspective and infused meaning (conceived as the bearer of value and purpose).

The Latin etymology of humor emphasizes that jocular disposition makes things more fluid, less stuck, less static, more intelligent, transforming ourselves and the world. The problem is that the joker-philosopher cannot escape a sort of elitist superiority aura sending the others, their vulnerabilities and imperfections, on the one hand into an ontological sphere of the derisory, on the other hand, cynically-obscenely shedding light on the vulnerabilities that are not to be generalized and eternized as perpetual deficiencies, which is (would be) repugnant for the most. This book does not escape the approach of the superiority theory in the philosophy of humor and it may be understood as a veritable arrogant exercise of superiority, while this is not our *holzwege*.

A brief theoretical perspective is necessary. Fact is that the superiority theory in the philosophy of humor represents the most offering theoretical background and famous theoretical landmarks underscored it. Mordechai Gordon warn about not taking ourselves too seriously, this implying to laugh at others, but also at ourselves. Laughing at another, the consequence and indicator of humor, is described by the Superiority theory of humor: Plato remarked in *Philebus* that “we [maliciously] laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends” (48-50), in ignorance of their virtues, losing face. Thomas Hobbes approached in *Leviathan* a complete type of Superiority theory showing that laughter is caused either by acknowledging sudden personal glory (when people “applaud themselves”) or by sanctioning something “deformed” in another, in contrast with something that pleases them very much in themselves. Humor is predicated on looking down on others, which is something that the (intellectual) elites do. In contrast to the Superiority effect, three things capture a reflective attention: first, the international quasi-Stoic proverbial remarks about minding your own defects and deformities and not others’, second, that it is widely recognized in the ranks of intellectual elites that the superior one laughs when recalls her or his own weaknesses (especially Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and Freud, in *Humor*, who set most of the purpose of the super-ego becomes laughing at ourselves, with scolding and comforting adjustment virtues) and, third, that the simple fact of using your mind may attract some humorous or violent repercussions, too.

Nietzsche ironizes the Spirit of Gravity emerging from blind attachments to conventions and traditions, Simon Critchley (*On Humor*) capitalized on the ideas of Freud to talk about a mature function of humor in super-ego, of comforting and appeasing nature, as the stern super-ego is associated with pathological conditions.

Fact is that, as John Morreall stated building on the idea of Pascal, we have patterns and expectations of the world and we laugh also at the disproportionate results against the expectations. "The mountains strained and they produced a pocket mouse": this captures the Incongruity Theory of Humor. The lesson is that precisely not taking oneself so seriously one can become finally serious enough in a rightly way. The becoming nature of the self is comprehended and developed via humor. The Incongruity Theory captures as well the humorous absurdity of the human condition. Thomas Nagel interprets the observation of Albert Camus that "aspiration and reality inevitably clash for everybody," as Mordechai Gordon rightly emphasized, too. It is a stupid thing to do not to take our lives seriously, but in order to be able to do just that, we need to paradoxically embrace the perplexingly paradoxical human condition imposing to comprehend uncertainty, absurdity, precarity and doubt by changing ourselves via humor, by changing aspirations, by educating ourselves, by taking on better jobs, by changing friends, by changing our environments, by writing and creating and what not. In fact, all of the above. As Nagel noticed, the solution of defiance of absurdity as undertaken by Camus and the existentialists is the opposite of a solution. Gloom and despair are actually pretty useless for the human existence, anyway, only humor opens the avenues of maturity and progress and it proves to be an educational tool when used well (being critical and self-critical are to become self-employed props, not destructive bombs, and Mordechai Gordon makes a valuable reference to John Ohliger, who mentions in "Forum: You Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make you Laugh," in other terms, that the only way to manage our unimportant importance is humor. Laughing at ourselves "can be seen as the mood where we're conscious at the same time of our importance and of our insignificance", but in psycho-social note it is also a mark of the open, generous and profoundly cultural personality. Only this type of personality capitalizes the situations suitable to laugh at oneself (when we make a foolish mistake or when we sanction our own shortcomings). This is the person who would be easily embracing the spirit of light-heartedness that Nietzsche advocated, since it can liberate us from the weight of dead tradition, by castigating first our own rigid and self-absorbed tendencies.

Peter Rickman emphasizes the joker facet of the philosopher: for the average human being, say, a traveller in the bus, the thought that the bus she or he takes daily to work is, according to Plato, not real, but only an appearance or imitation of the idea of a bus (adding or not "which most-likely God made for it is perfect") or that it exists because it is perceived as Berkeley would argue, or that one who doesn't believe in the existence of God cannot trust having a body, as Descartes, is to make jokes (if not to talk crazy). Lucian Blaga also underlines the parting of the ways between philosophy and common sense, but the philosopher intervenes "into the serene waves landscape" of the common sense even "more radically and devastatingly than the scientist". For instance, Blaga shows, the scientist removes the prejudice of the senses that air would have no "weight," while the philosopher rationalizes to the extreme this attitude by mocking common sense. There is no philosophy that does not get to this mockery, through any of its statements in serious adversity to common sense, not so much in terms of the knowledge and beliefs inventoried by the exponent of the common sense, as in terms of his equipment, sarcastically or drastically contradicting not only the "prejudices" held, but his constitutional prejudices. This is how philosophy creates its own "space" to "make room" for the philosophical foundational reconstructions. Common sense is guided by a (comfortable and naïve) realism that gives senses infinite credit, Blaga says. Philosophy enhances the reflective not the receptive subject. A good example for the uncomfortable and philosophical approach of the world is found at the Eleatic pre-Socratic School masters, such as Parmenides and Zenon, who choose to understand thing challenging the role of senses and the limits of uncontradictory logic. For Parmenides existence is singular, indivisible, finite, spherical, full, solid, unchanging and unmoved. But he is in the wrong, too, for we cannot identify existence with fullness, Blaga notes, contradicting the one he considers the first great rationalist. Heraclitus, on the contrary, rejects any static attribute of existence, so that immobility was declared a simple delusion, either of the mind or of the senses. Only becoming is real for Heraclitus (with its corollary of flow and instability). Leibniz rejects the principle of causality describing a world of monads in pre-established harmony. Thus, Blaga exemplifies that, in a Leibnizian perspective, the one who falls to the ground, shot, does this because this is his role (distributed by the supreme and universal director), not because he was shot.

In the light of the philosophical Geist, we cannot succumb to uniformity of thought and being, or to the uniformity of perspective, no matter how prestigious, we should not impose uniformity, we should not take it to be

a value and, paradoxically, difference infuses sameness indifferent manners even when it does not. At the same time, in this spiritual philosophical light, our times are perfectly described in their worse than modest intellectual possibilities and appetites via these „Warnings“, termed by the Giorgio Baruchello in a manner that reminds more of the cynics than of philosophical criticism, but which are sensed as almost true and necessary, becoming thus modestly funny. This philosopher captures present-day Weltanschauung when he coins these warnings, e.g., the Impact Hazard (for „philosophical books are deep and heavy“; they „impact with traditions, expectations, habituations, or other tacit givens and presuppositions“, with consequences in fits of tantrum or „expressive feats of communication unsuitable for prim professional environments“). There is also the “Gravity Risk”. We are prevented that „Philosophical books are subject to gravitational forces at all times. Never place philosophical books in elevated positions where they may later remember gravity and attempt to emulate the legendary apple which fell onto Newton’s head“. And there are others, too, in a quite long series, which is both saddening and amusing.

The *Uncanny Soulscapes*... is a surprising book of philosophy done with the means of humour, at times, tough, critical and pleasantly informal using everything – „like in sausage-making“, as the author says about literature in a footnote -, to deal with our world times, experiences and existence. It is another type of Socratic exercise that provocatively exposes that would be fun to think about this and that, to confront this or that worth of hilarious vestment and amused attention without suggesting what to think. Here is not exactly *Castigat ridendo mores*, as in the motto of comedy given by the French poet J. de Santeul, for it really has expectations nor pretensions of moral instrument, while entertaining secret hopes for „serious side effects that may include bruised egos, mental collapse, sudden appreciation for interminable dialogue, acoustic disturbance caused by loud exclamations following new thoughts“.

There is a technical brainteasers’ aerobics, with “distraught sighs”, “burning tears”, “screams of outright pain and sorrow”, “gasps of alarm”, disgust, “irked disapproval”, or “fits of boiling rage” that come and go, throughout a series of sixty short stories, brief sketches, and two-person mini-dialogues in a kaleidoscopic adventure that emphasizes from various standpoints our still strong engagement with *humor* via fictional characters aiming to representatively cover the human spectrum and the possible mixtures of distinguishable positive and negative human traits, believable persons, so Jungian archetypes that seem to be lively and fully-fledged, who sometimes evoke humor and cruelty ideas and suggestions echoing Blaise Pascal, the Marquis de Sade, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, G.K. Chesterton, Luigi Pirandello, Philip Hallie, Richard Rorty, or Anita Phillips and Giorgio Baruchello’s previous works.

Finding Richard Rorty in this aspirational and affiliation list is quite a surprise and probably Rorty himself would be a bit shaken to find his name in an enumeration that includes the Marquis de Sade, given his open admission that his thought is *liberal* much in the sense that, as Judith Sklar, he rejects cruelty and he is nonetheless a *postliberal* in the sense that he deconstructs and reconstructs liberalism to admit solidarity, which has no place for cruelty and laughing at others. Indeed, it is misleading that Rorty talks about the philosophical attitude of irony. Especially him who advocated at least social philosophy as a type of literary criticism, does not think much of irony as a literary device. However, he addresses a first type of irony which is rather “dissolving” and not beneficial for democracy and a second type that is eventually something else, namely a commitment to minimize cruelty which leads to a different concept, major in the economy of his social philosophy, “ironism”, a very intellectualized sort of self-irony about which we have to note here that implies very little humor. We have recently developed this observation into an argument for the paradoxical un-Kantian Kantianism in Rorty, enrooted in Enlightenment thought insinuated into the Rortian concept of ironism.

In Judith Sklar’s “Putting Cruelty first” cruelty is casted away as garbage-behavior that we have to get rid of in a liberal society or, at least, repeatedly and (in a quite paideutic manner) place it among the vices, where it belongs. We are still in dire need of culture and education to accomplish this aim. And here is not much amusement for the intended aim is of utmost importance for the continued existence of the social fabric and hopefully for the quality of our togetherness.

More amusing is the capitalization of Judith Sklar’s work *Ordinary Vices* in the comedy series “The Good Place”. The good place is actually not the Good Place as much as the people getting there hope for it, to the point that they believe it and not question much of anything for a while. It is a merciful temporary in-between, a kind and nice purgatory, which much closer to Giorgio Baruchello’s book which creates also a fathom purgatory occasioning the reflection upon the “hopeful humanism of failure”, as someone has put it. The capital lesson is that cruelty is the capital sin and to willfully inflict any kind of pain and fear on another (weaker) being is to be described as

supreme evil by human awareness, out of devotion to the attribute of being human and not out of observance of higher (theological) norms preserving the actuality of a human society, for humans. There is no room for sadistic practices and the fascination with killers and psychopaths such as Hannibal Lecter, the anti-hero hero, is not a liberal choice. The idea that we are all equal in front of cruelty and fear may be disputed by certain liberal intellectuals, but this is not the place for this however interesting debate and it is not a topic that either Judith Shklar or Richard Rorty would enjoy.

Thus, Giorgio Baruchello's book is a misleading Good Place, misleading because it is so uncomfortable at times that gets ridiculous; so, at some point one either get lighter on her feet, or smarter, or more sophisticate to the point that she is transformed to be able to see that all enjoyment comes from a seemingly surprising experience of the bad, the ugliness and inhumanity found in relating as much of it is besmirched by offence, insult, anger, belittle, denigration, enagement, disrespect, exclusion, rudeness, brutality, derision, fault, harm, oppression, ridicule, incense, vexation etc.

These persons, the characters in the book might speak about the author's alter-ego or, at occasions, scarily suggesting things as our alter-ego. Many times, humor succumbs to the bleak absurdity of the Real in a Lacanian confirmation of human psychological existence. Cruelty often devours humor and, at best, the spiritual, self-critical and reflective being, enjoys the spiritual tension of this enduring correlation (humor-cruelty) laughing at our un edulcorated immoral and amoral instantiations as well as at the all-too-aware confrontation of our physical miserable embodiment we work so hard to correct and/or forget. Our, to put it nicely, "shadow" made present with such talent is quite shocking and humbling, nevertheless funny, though. "*Meeting all of these uncouth and sometimes biting 'bits' is part of the dire price that must be paid for the sake of pursuing a candid and comprehensive intellectual engagement with humor and cruelty qua legitimate theoretical-philosophical, socio-cultural, and lyric-literary matters*", Baruchello explains.

The book offers immersive virtual contexts supplied by *oneiric* experiences, i.e., dreams *et similia*, explaining the *Uncustomary Dreamscope* in the title. The theoretical glimpses interweaved with subtlety send to *philosophical* concepts, names, attitudes, or schools of thought, which you may or may not recognize and, in general, the form reflects the content, and the content reflects the intent. Theoretical or philosophical insights are either illuminating to the exposure intended or just a scenery set the author enjoys. As well, the presence of Geist is vital for the author and it is summoned via impressive and numerous cultural and artistic references central to the texts, others are minor or tangential.

The work is a cultural creation as much as it is a philosophical one. It speaks to readers' emphatic organ and to the imaginative one. Redemption and damnation are paradoxically not so far apart, neither are amusement and despair. The readers shall find themselves immersed in both.

Bottom-line, we are reminded how much we sweep under the rug in a heart-breaking childish hope it will disappear. There is no free laugh here, unfortunately. So wet weekends, in the damps of hell! The book is rather a complete Jungian therapeutical stage training not only the awareness, but also the imagination for our human bestiary of evils with the promise that knowing our own darkness shall equip us for dealing with darkness in others and this is the role of this sort of "spiritual colonoscopy". The author takes great pleasure in the turmoil of lucidity. This is acquired taste, for sure, a sort of rather unfortunate professional philosophical hazard. Why couldn't he catch on hedonism instead? If the readers do not share this kind of taste, then they should better keep their safe distance. The book is just an incentive for a more complex and more qualitative vision of the world and, possibly, for another Enlightenment that has to do with the transformative powers of lucidly starting with the acknowledgement of the various self-limitations and of their "roots".

Anyway, as Giorgio Baruchello's book self-ironically admits that "Everything has already been thought, said, and written, more or less" and only our ignorance makes that some things still ring as novel to us. Just go and read and re-read Dante, Blaga, Dostoyevsky, Cicero, Seneca, George Santayana, Tolstoy, Cioran, Shakespeare (plus a myriad others, obviously) and you'll grasp "everything". Or, be brave and let yourself enjoy this dreamscope, too: non-conformity is very entertaining albeit not comforting at all. Anyway, as argues also Simon Critchley throughout an entire chapter in his book *On Humor*, „The joke is on all of us" regardless of how you choose to see things and what you choose to lay out as a theoretical foundation. This is a book that just might make or break your day, while transforming your humorous and existential situation in the world. Hopefully, the first option.

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