

HOMAGE OF THE MEDUSA TO RENATE AND COMPANY

THE LAUGHTER OF TRAGEDY

Sometimes it happens that suddenly certain characters from Renate Bertlmann's theater make me laugh. Yet they seem as serious as popes.

I'm talking about a very singular kind of laughter, among all the sorts of laughter. It's the laughter at what in my daily life does not make me laugh, the Laughter of Tragedy. This laughter that erupts in the midst of despair or dread.

A Laughter of resistance. It has lasted for so long, the Dictatorship of the phallocracy, this worldwide exercise of power, how long has it been? Since forever. Since time immemorial, it has become the sediment of thought, the History of Humanity, one would think it's the Proper trait of humankind, this omnipotence, this imperial gravity.

There has been however more than one attempt at revolution, more than one sunrise in the reigning obscurity, each century has known a movement of contestation, a bursting forth of voices, a heroic revolt, every fifty or hundred years, women wake up with a start, call to one another to rise up against the temples, the monuments, the fortresses, launch great cries of indignation, are pursued by Servile Opinion and its suppressive forces. Are repressed, incarcerated. Erased. Extinguished. Fall. In ashes. Beneath the silence of the ashes revolt smolders.

Beneath the erasure, the spark of anger. And one morning a hundred years later, the fervor reignites, the revolt takes off again. And what if this time the revolt won, if it went from dream to its realization? If the Just carried the day, if Life finally had its chances?

If, this time, let's say for example in these springtimes of the 70's (1770, 1870, 1970, 2070?) the Phallus were dethroned, put to route, or, simply unmasked, if it deposed itself? If Narcissus gazing down at himself saw himself looking madly at himself and suddenly was mortally bored of being only ever in his own company? If the mirror sent back a self-portrait of Himself as Phallus-itself, Phalselself?

But this If, from Century to Century, undergoes the same fate, rises, hopes, and loses. What wins, if there is winning, what grows is discouragement. It takes more and more energy, more faithfulness to the idea of Life, to rekindle the hope, the will to act. The more time passes the more the Phallus sends its roots deeper and deeper toward the heart of the Earth higher and higher toward the extremities of the Universes.

There are moments on the path of destiny when fatigue is irresistible, when the world seems closed like a concentration camp, when the soul finds itself confined without exit. So one sits down on a staircase step. One says to oneself: "It's over. Human beings are fools for the love of hate."

It is then that from the bottom of one's belly, from the middle of one's chest bursts forth, with the freshness of a spring suddenly freed from secrecy, a stream of laughter. The gift of Life. In certain cases it is called Grace. The respite granted when there is no more hope. Then from desolation bursts forth a crisis of laughter. Irresistible.

It is immortal Life that pierces the wall of Tragedy.

To live is to foil dying with laughter. Leaping in one bound beyond the finite.

– How does one do that? you ask. – By ruse. By magic. By agility of the soul. By the secret force of a word. Of an image. By the poetic aid of the thinking word. When you no longer see a way to get out of the fatal Cave of Polyphemus, change, Galatea, change yourself into another you. Don't forget the resources of a Ulysses or those of Achilles. I is always another, slip yourself into a sheep, be a woman with women, you have more than one trick of being in your bag. Proust would call that, from the beginning of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, his book full of books, a *turn of the screw*, in French, a *tour de vis*, do you see? a *tour de vis*, is a *tour de vit* and a *tour de vie*, a turn of the penis and a turn of life. There is the secret of life without end: *one* being does not exist, *one* being is always *more than one*, a being, *un être*, are you listening to me? is a *borning*, *un naître*, you have a thousand times what it takes to be reborn in your bag, simultanatally.

– But, I remind you, you give us all these magic tricks in your French language, whereas these pages are addressed in the first place to a reading in the German language. Because they are sent to the address of Renate Bertlmann in Vienna. That's what worries me.

– That’s what reassures me. That’s what inspires me: is not the key to Renate’s whole oeuvre the chance of her given name? What does this signifier that destines her hide, and promise?

What’s in a name? There again is the question around which Shakespeare has led us to turn. *What’s in a name?* Romeo asks himself, or Juliet or Stephen Dedalus, Joyce or Shakespeare, who know so much about the secret powers of these apparently decorative medals of language that are in fact archi-powerful.

People know somewhat that Shakespeare sows his signature in many of his plays, the way one sows trouble, panic, confusion. *Shake* is his mark and his watchword. How one sees its agitating effectiveness in *As You Like It*, where Orlando, the uncertain boy, presents himself as He who is *love-shaked*, trembling all over and upset by love, meanwhile Rosalind, the shaker who moves him, erects herself as a superphallus, likewise Renate inscribes the magic formula of her given name on the body of all her creations. One cannot be called Renate in vain. “Renate” predicts. Announces more than one birth and more than one being. Thus more than one leap outside the end. One is reborn, *renaît*, by laughing at death.

Let’s play with our signifier: what is the masculine of Renate in German? The masculine of Renate is in French. It’s René.

Perhaps Renate will have been destined since her birth – since her “baptism” – to always play *double je*, double I, double game, to be the living proof that we are beings whose sex is variable, acrobats of all the versions of the self. Certain days one sees Renate take pleasure as Renée or René or more precisely in an autoerotic sleight of hand she-he gives herself-himself bipleasure, simultaneously alter-natively, from one second to the next, each second reversing the following one. In that case this Renate Renée or René is dressed in a man’s suit very well-tailored for the occasion, so as to maintain the comedy of the genders. He-she seems to be that actor-actress of the Globe who plays the woman who acts the young man who acts the woman *As you like it*. We are warned, Renate Bertlmann is the name of one of those beings made up of what he-she is and what he-she is not together with what she-he has and what she-he has not.

It is the play of this indecision that provokes us and retains us in a delicious hesitation. Every image, every instant stuns us. And it often happens that an undecidable

subject is “defined” by appearance. That is to say the clothing. Without her little pink dress the little girl doll might be a little boy doll. See *Mama’s Liebling*, Mama’s Little Darling: the darling, the *chouchou*, is always double, *chou* and *chou*, as one hears in the French signifier. In truth does Mama prefer to mother the little girl or the little boy? Or is the secret of the seduction of this object in the intervertibility? Or in the uncertainty? The girling of the boy. The ill-imitation of the m’other.

RENATE THE MISCHIEVOUS

The first time I walked among the images, visions, surprise objects of Renate Bertlmann, I was without warning, except for the name of Renate, I went from innocence to astonishment, from unknown to impression of déjà-vu, but a déjà-vu in another world, from the other side of the dream, in another garden of time. What is it that I see there? I asked myself. What are they, these inanimate animates, these creatures that have a little human air, these species of animals, perhaps marine animals without the sea? And these fellows sitting at a long table, simplified? These twelve little guests who in a first moment sit up straight facing us and in a second moment collapse on the table and on one another as if they were dead drunk? And this gang of subjects who fall over are gathered under the title *Verlust der Mitte*, Loss of the Middle. This Without the Center would thus be the staging not of a presence but of an absence. It’s enough to make one muse about the strange visual evocation of the invisible. And about the explosive effect of the ellipsis of the Middle. This scene seemed to me strangely familiar. But! But? But it’s the scene of the Last Supper! But they are the twelve witnesses of Phallic Spectrality! The twelve little champions of the Lost Illusion are knocked to the ground by it. Let’s move on. And I studied successively the labels and titles to find the answer to my uncertainty. I read: *Ambivalences, Zärtliche Berührungen, der Erstegeborene*.

To be sure, the words made sense, but the thing was playing with me. Was teasing my mind. Sharpening my curiosity. Arousing an unease, tickling my brain, mocking my serious desire to understand, defying me. I was in the state of the human being subjected to the shock of the three narcissistic wounds that Freud talked about. My ordinary narcissism was taking a blow. In short, I was beginning to lose my usual assurance.

It's at that point that, all of a sudden, as I passed it an image pivoted and cast a wink in my direction. And I burst out laughing. It's as if the image were itself the burst of laughter and the laughter at first caught me unprepared, then freed me. End of the resistance, my own and the one opposed to me by each work each object *invented* by Renate Bertlmann, this great artist of the Transvestite of Truth.

Renate Bertlmann acts toward the reader-spectator like the torero who attracts and misleads his animal by veiling his message with a great red veil. The public charges, all at the once the veil is dropped, and the naked thing, the sharp truth, strikes.

I laughed. What drew this laughter from me? I am always astonished when laughter overtakes me in front of a work of art. A double astonishment: first I have a critical astonishment as regards myself. A mirror says to me: you, with your seriousness, you were really wrong. You were mistaken. You took this for that. Second, I have an astonishment of gratitude: a joyous salute to this object that has been stronger than me, until I can conquer it little by little. It's like in a Shakespeare Comedy, where a double pleasure bubbles up: that of error and that of revelation. In writing these lines, I see that I am describing here that state-of-discovery that enchants early childhood. And precisely, that is one of the traits of Renate Bertlmann's work: in a certain way everything she fabricates, in practicing various genres of visual works, belongs to the season of childish marvels and mischiefs. She has never lost the erotic visionary power, the libidinal freedom of the child, the secrets of the animism of human beginnings. That is what makes for her mysterious power of seduction.

So I surrendered to the charms of the First Born, this so-called Baby, this larva of our metamorphoses, this little seductive being who like the child at play pays no attention to us, this imposter baby that had bamboozled [*embobinée*] me so well. And the more I looked at it, the more I laughed. I was laughing at my initial blindness, at my automatic emotional response, at my docility in letting myself be misled, at the strange pleasure that was born from my own error. Right away this pleasure recalled another, an ancient pleasure that I sought out in my early childhood: I liked to turn round on myself like a top, until, having lost direction, the world began to turn around me, having changed into a merry-go-round. To command myself the shaking up of the subject brought back to mind

the experience of the Fort-Da, the bobbin that little Ernst, Freud's grandson, puts to work in his cradle.

Then, under the impetus of desire, I began once again to think about the enigma of the *Erstgeborene*.

How many turns of mind are awakened by this little thing – doubly immobilized, like a mummy, first of all by the tight-fitting swaddling cloth, then by the enclosure in the plexiglass box!

Let's play!

I unwind a few threads: there is [would be] thus such a strict relation between a newborn and a penis that the one equals the other. That a newborn is a penis, for the mother, is something Freud had remarked. Provided it is immobilized, wrapped up, a member deprived of its members, consisting in a trunk with an undecipherable head, mock-up or mascot of a sex organ. Embalmed. A fetishized, detached piece. There then is a touching phallus. It is the phallus turned into a toy. Reduced to impotence.

That is not all: this one, Renate tells us, is precisely the *first born*. There is only one of them. The first of the series. And no doubt the first of all the first born. The divine child therefore. The very-powerful powerless one.

And, thus, conversely, the Phallus, if one takes the time to look at it with a thinking eye, is always a baby secreted away. Impotence is the secret of its power.

This *Erstgeborene* is arrested, seized, immortalized, put under plexiglass, at birth turned into an object of curiosity or cult. Boxed. Conserved. Simultaneously exposed and preserved. Untouchable. Ah! If only the phallus knew that it is but a poor penis confided to a sort of incubator!

And this bobbin without facial features, like the mugs of characters in comic books, assures to the first born the absence of singularity that grants to the subject without body its universal quality. This synecdoche that sleeps or seems to sleep would be, sexually, undecidable, without the hilarious blue ribbon! As a baby, the thing could be male or female. It's thus the blue ribbon that serves as identifying sign! And that, if it were possible, weakens still further the supposed phallus. For without the ribbon no distinction! One would forget that the little one is a penis. The fact that masculinity hangs by a thread, a ribbon, a tie, strikes an ironic blow at this inert-thing-being. And what if,

another hypothesis, it was on the contrary the phallus that had dressed itself up as a poor little inoffensive thing, so as to disguise its aggressive potential, a miniature and satirical version of the wolf disguised as grandmother? Put a lace bonnet on the bobbin and the trick is played.

In any case it's the swaddling that makes the fetish. The robe makes the monk. And it's our refusal to renounce the mother's phallus, as Freud would say, our stubborn resistance to the threat of castration that dresses the naked Emperor in an illusory mantle.

What makes for the absolute singularity of Renate, the mischievous juggler of dildos, is that no one can say where and when the metamorphosis begins, it has neither head nor tail, or rather the tail is a cock is a head, the head sucks the cock, everything is head-to-tail-to-cock. According to some it's about transforming the condom into a tit that is transformed into a pacifier. Some believe that it's the tit that commands. One laughs because the pacifiers are made from baby's toes, one believes. One thinks one sees the baby who is playing with the pacifier. As a tit, doesn't the pacifier play with the baby? One laughs. What makes you laugh: *the elasticity* that makes the "it," the thing with multiple interpretations, yield to pressure. The fact that it is me, you, or Renate who acts and that the "thingy," 100% inert multithing reacts. I'm the one with the mastery and yet the movement comes from the inert.

My laughter bursts out in reaction to the reaction of the suddenly animated thing. As if Renate caused to be born a strangely comic genre of the *Unheimlich*. All the more comic when the chain of penis-character subjects turns out to stage equally and almost simultaneously two universes in principle as distant as that of infancy, i.e, in-fancyon the one hand, and of high ecclesiastical dignity on the other. And thus these "little" penis-characters, cardinals, and newborns resemble each other like two little peas peeing in a pod. And what's to be said of those penis-characters preparing to feast, going from erection to collapse, by lack of Jesus, the superphallus, the Absent from every feast? Or the Teuton-tits, which one cannot decide whether they are armed breasts or pointed helmets?

Let us not forget that Renate's Great Comedy is fed by the imaginary of the war. This mixture of anxiety, dream, and humor spreads out here as if in the shadow of

Ingeborg Bachmann. Here and there, one gathers one's thoughts before a tomb. A soldier's tomb, a woman's tomb. The woman also falls [*tombe*] as a soldier for the cause of women. But each time she rises up, or she is raised up by the genius of the play.

Yes, the Penis makes one laugh. It's the revelation of the joyous years of the feminist decade of the seventies. One practices then a non-violent desacralization of the Phallus. The De-Penilization is still rather Tender. The art is to laugh. One chooses to work on the Tender, while deconstructing the tensed.

It is always a question of translation, substitution, replacement, thus supplement, secret addition. Surreptitious augmentation of pleasure.

In causing a moment ago the French word *embobiner* to come onto my tongue, I allowed for supplementing translation. How is translation going to do its thing with this word that holds in reserve for us, in French, more than one surprise?

Now, as for translating, Renate Bertlmann is a born expert. Born, that is, *née* and also Renée and René in French, as she has declared on her own account. Translation, she does nothing else in her way. From one language to another, to be sure, but also from one genre to another, from one sex to another, and finally from one mood to another, passing, in an instant, from gentleness to violence or even to cruelty. For, as she recalls in many images, everything touches everything, *everything is touch*. And as the German word *Berührung* prevents us from forgetting unlike its French or English equivalent, touch acts, agitates, moves, there is no contact that does not displace, affect, offend. Alter. Beginning with the primitive experience of touching, that inaugural meeting between a breast and a mouth.

POINTS OF VIEW

I laughed. Then I took my friends on a walk in house Renate. "Men," at least in appearance, diverse, more or less young, more or less "virile," "male" varieties. Each

time there was an explosion of laughter. Except in the case of P.Y. The latter resisted laughter, that is to say, a threat – of castration or feminization.

After reflection: are there many examples of works of art that provoke laughter? Here is work that tickles my brain, seriously. For me, it's as if Renate Bertlmann had read *Glas* (1974), Derrida's immense book that is more than one book, the monument to Genet where one thinks one is reading Hegel but one is reading Freud and, through an infinite exchange between two sexual columns that are intertwined like Renate's lovers, auto-affect each other, meanings proliferate, contraries imitate each other, fetishization has a field day. Or as if *Glas* had heard Renate laugh up her sleeve while fabricating her simulacra.

Each one has his or her joking objects. For Genet, it will be the clusters of fake grapes, flowers, roses, broomflowers, for René Renée, dolls, babies, little soldiers, apostles, personnel of the Christian religion. For both of them, swaddling clothes or undershirts, girdles, inside-out vaginas, hymenoptera.

The catalogue that is devoted to Renate Bertlmann (Works 1969-2016, edited by Gabriele Schor and Jessica Morgan) is pink. On the cardboard cover figures the principal character. Her hair stands up like a helmet of curls, that is to say, of ancient serpents changed into pacifiers. Between her legs, this mythological being holds a mask with pacifier features, like an apotropaic shield in front of her sex. The true face is hidden there. Pink.

As Prelude to the volume, we are welcomed by the Vision of a Kiss. The kiss gives itself a kiss. In the Kiss a twinship briefly takes form. The kissers melt altogether into the pulp of the kiss. The Kiss has flesh – a sort of flesh that shines in a pink monochrome – softly shimmering.

– Don't tell me, says P.Y., that this catalogue is an entire book of pacifiers [*tétines*]?

– More precisely, says my son, these *tétines* would be *tétins*, these pacifiers would be nipples. That is, this nipple is not a nipple. One has only to “contemplate,” as Proust would say, these nipple-things in *Tender Touches* in German. What we are given to see is

a sexual act, between precisely . . . tits, alias *tétines* or pacifiers, or Schnuller, which seem to be made out of condoms with sperm wells, inflated. Or else: these condoms are, or represent tits. These tits caress each other mutually, like . . . like cats, like lambs, like women, like twins, like homosexuals, masculine and feminine. And suddenly, bang! One of them becomes – or becomes again – a pushing sex, enter-into, aggressive, the one, as in one of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, stands up, the other bends. There is surprise invagination.

– When, in mathematics, you take a convex function, says my son, that means that the upper part is convex, it's called the epigraph. If you look at the same outline upside-down, it turns into concave. The absolutely full and the absolutely empty are the same thing, it depends on which way you look at it. The object that Renate shows, seen from the outside, is convex, it is phallic, protuberant. Take the pacifier, turn it over to the hollow side, you see an invagination, a hole. Depending on whether it is seen from the outside or the inside, the condom can be seen as the two sexes. Is it a what is called in French a *préservatif*? An *expreservatif*? A she-whale or he-dolphin in love?

–You can invert the phallus-condom by using the elasticity of the latex. Renate's imagination is elastic. Elasticity is an operation of the topological mind, and of the mind that undresses, which Freud talks about. In the amorous relation between *tétins* – *tétines* – condoms, the inversion is done through pressure, as if an offensive drive were set off in one of the partners. Suddenly the phallus wakes up, is revealed, and invaginates the other. It is as if the vagina were created by pressure, pushing. As if the sexual relation began in a caress, until it is accentuated in pressure then in combat. At least for a moment. Who knows what pleasures take form between the nursing breast and the sucking nursing, what delicious hostilities, what unspeakable pleasures between the combatants, what reciprocal cannibalism? Before the series of pictures *Zärtliche Berührungen*, one thinks one sees return, dressed in latex, in its most simple expression, the sublime erotic duel of Penthesilea-Achilles, where Kleist's heroes are inverted into each other. Like ferocity laid bare by tenderness itself.

THE BRIDE IS PREGNANT

What a strange population in the world of Renate Bertlmann! There are no men, properly speaking, no women either. No animals exactly. And yet there is a world apparently, soldiers, little children, priests, butterflies, lovers. And above all there is a bride, and not just any one: the Pregnant Bride. Pregnant? or rather *grosse* as one says in German. The Bride or the Body Promised to Procreation. The body promised to metamorphoses, the haunted-woman, the augmented woman, but augmented in secret.

What is *The Bride*? It is not a woman. It is the phantasm and the support of the phantasm. It is a dress. It is an object. It is doll for boys. The object for desire. A bride is always a bridal-gown. A mask or veil for Dilda. The Bride (is always) denuded by her celibates, even. The Bride is a male hidden by the veil. When the Bride is denuded, there remains a mechanism. For Duchamp, it turns out that the Bride is a helicopter. It's a flat mobile that doesn't turn. Celibates are but clothes put on lackeys. The scene surprised by Duchamp dis-mantles the mechanism of marriage. Marriage is an apparatus. The Bride is an opposite, she takes the veil so as to lose the veil. All the characters of Duchamp like those of Renate Bertlmann are civil servants of the celebration of the amorous illusion. Renate's Bride is not a singular person, it is a figuration of the female role of autoerotic puppet. It is a pocket for fecondation, an incubator. An instrument for procreation wrapped in an attractive envelope. In case one has not understood the subtle violence in store for The Bride, Renate "dresses" her with a wheelchair. As if she were exhibiting in this way the veiled part of impotence. The reduction to passivity. It could make you shiver with fear. But then the wheelchair is *pink*. Candy-pink. Little-girl-pink. A toy! And just when I was going to shudder with horror, I begin to laugh.

And I think I hear Renate intone her hijacked motto:

I laugh therefore I am.

Hélène Cixous
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(Translated by Peggy Kamuf)