

Chapter Title: IS ART LIGHTHEARTED?

Book Title: Notes to Literature

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Published by: Columbia University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.7312/ador17964.42>

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CHAPTER 35

IS ART LIGHTHEARTED?

The prologue to Schiller's *Wallenstein* ends with the line, "Ernst ist das Leben, heiter ist die Kunst"—life is serious, art is lighthearted. It is modeled on a line from Ovid's *Tristia*: "Vita verecunda est, Musa jocosa mihi" (II, 354), or "My life is modest and sober, my muse is gay." Perhaps one may impute an intent to Ovid, the charming and artful classical writer. He, whose life was so lighthearted that the Augustinian establishment could not tolerate it, was winking at his patrons, composing his lightheartedness back into the literary gaiety of the *Ars amandi* and repentantly letting it be seen that he personally was concerned with the serious conduct of life. For Ovid it was a matter of being pardoned. Schiller, the court poet of German Idealism, wanted nothing to do with this sort of Latin cunning. His maxim wags its finger with no end in mind. It thereby becomes totally ideological and is incorporated into the household stock of the bourgeoisie, ready for citation on the appropriate occasion. For it affirms the established and popular distinction between work and leisure. Something that has its roots in the torments of prosaic and unfree labor and the well-justified aversion to it is declared to be an eternal law of two cleanly separated spheres. Neither is to mingle with the other. Precisely by virtue of its edifying lack of cogency, art is to be incorporated into and subordinated to bourgeois life as its antagonistic complement. One can already see the organization of leisure time this will eventually result in. It is the Garden of Elysium, where the heavenly roses grow, to be woven by women into earthly life, which is so loathsome. The possibility that things might sometime become truly different is hidden from Schiller the idealist. He is concerned

with the effects of art. For all the noblesse of his gesture, Schiller secretly anticipates the situation under the culture industry in which art is prescribed to tired businesspeople as a shot in the arm. Hegel was the first to object, at the height of German Idealism, to an aesthetics of effect [*Wirkungsaesthetik*] dating back to the eighteenth century and including Kant, and with it to this view of art: art was not, he stated, a mechanism for delight and instruction à la Horace.

2

Still, there is a measure of truth in the platitude about art's lightheartedness. If art were not a source of pleasure for people, in however mediated a form, it would not have been able to survive in the naked existence it contradicts and resists. This is not something external to it, however, but part of its very definition. Although it does not refer to society, the Kantian formulation "purposefulness without purpose" alludes to this. Art's purposelessness consists in its having escaped the constraints of self-preservation. It embodies something like freedom in the midst of unfreedom. The fact that through its very existence it stands outside the evil spell that prevails allies it to a promise of happiness, a promise it itself somehow expresses in its expression of despair. Even in Beckett's plays the curtain rises the way it rises on the room with the Christmas presents. In its attempt to divest itself of its element of semblance, art labors in vain to rid itself of the residue of the pleasure-giving element, which it suspects of betraying it to yea-saying. For all that, the thesis of art's lightheartedness is to be taken in a very precise sense. It holds for art as a whole, not for individual works. Those may be thoroughly devoid of lightheartedness, in accordance with the horrors of reality. What is lighthearted in art is, if you like, the opposite of what one might easily assume it to be: not its content but its demeanor, the abstract fact that it is art at all, that it opens out over the reality to whose violence it bears witness at the same time. This confirms the idea expressed by the philosopher Schiller, who saw art's lightheartedness in its playfulness and not in its stating of intellectual contents, even those that went beyond Idealism. A priori, prior to its works, art is a critique of the brute seriousness that reality imposes upon human beings. Art imagines that by naming this fateful state of affairs it is loosening its hold. That is what is lighthearted in it; as a change in the existing mode of consciousness, that is also, to be sure, its seriousness.

3

But art, which, like knowledge, takes all its material and ultimately its forms from reality, indeed from social reality, in order to transform them, thereby

becomes entangled in reality's irreconcilable contradictions. It measures its profundity by whether or not it can, through the reconciliation that its formal law brings to contradictions, emphasize the real lack of reconciliation all the more. Contradiction vibrates through its most remote mediations, just as the din of the horrors of reality sounds in music's most extreme pianissimo. Where faith in culture vainly sings the praises of music's harmony, as in Mozart, that harmony sounds a dissonance to the harsh tones of reality and has them as its substance. That is Mozart's sadness. Only through the transformation of something that is in any case preserved in negative form, the contradictory, does art accomplish what is then betrayed the moment it is glorified as a Being beyond what exists, independent of its opposite. Though attempts to define kitsch usually fail, still not the worst definition would be one that made the criterion of kitsch whether an art product gives form to consciousness of contradiction—even if it does so by stressing its opposition to reality—or dissembles it. In this respect seriousness should be demanded of any work of art. As something that has escaped from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and lightheartedness. It is this tension that constitutes art.

4

The significance of this contradictory movement between lightheartedness and seriousness in art—its dialectic—can be clarified in a simple way through two distiches by Hölderlin, which the poet, no doubt intentionally, placed close together. The first, entitled “Sophocles,” reads: “Viele versuchen umsonst das Freudigste freudig zu sagen / Hier spricht endlich es mir, hier in der Trauer sich aus” [“Many attempt, vainly, to say the most joyful thing joyfully / Here it finally expresses itself to me, here, in sorrow”]. The tragedian's lightheartedness should be sought not in the mythical content of his dramas, perhaps not even in the reconciliation he confers upon myth, but rather in his saying [*sagen*] it, in its expressing itself [*aussprechen*]; both expressions are employed, with emphasis, in Hölderlin's lines. The second distichon bears the title “Die Scherzhaften,” or “The Ones Who Make Jokes”: “Immer spielt ihr und scherzt? ihr müsst! O Freunde! mir geht diss / In die Seele, denn diss müssen Verzweifelte nur” [“Are you always playing and joking? You have to! Oh friends, this affects me deeply, for only the desperate have to do that”]. Where art tries of its own accord to be lighthearted and thereby tries to adapt itself to a use which, according to Hölderlin, nothing holy can serve any longer, it is reduced to the level of a human need and its truth content is betrayed. Its ordained cheerfulness fits into the way of the world. It encourages people to submit to what is decreed, to comply. This is the form of objective despair. If one takes the distichon seriously

enough, it passes judgment on the affirmative character of art. Since then, under the dictates of the culture industry, that affirmative character has become omnipresent, and the joke has become the smirking caricature of advertising pure and simple.

5

For the relationship between the serious and the lighthearted in art is subject to a historical dynamic. Whatever may be called lighthearted in art is something that has come into being, something unthinkable either in archaic works or in works with a strictly theological context. What is lighthearted in art presupposes something like urban freedom, and it does not appear for the first time in the early bourgeoisie, as in Boccaccio, Chaucer, Rabelais, and *Don Quixote*, but is already present as the element, known to later periods as classical, that distinguishes itself from the archaic. The means by which art frees itself of myth, of the dark and aporetic, is essentially a process, not an invariant fundamental choice between the serious and the lighthearted. It is in the lightheartedness of art that subjectivity first comes to know and become conscious of itself. Through lightheartedness it escapes from entanglement and returns to itself. There is something of bourgeois personal freedom in lightheartedness, though it also shares thereby in the historical fate of the bourgeoisie. What was once humor becomes irretrievably dull; the later variety degenerates into the hearty contentment of complicity. In the end it becomes intolerable. After that, however, who could still laugh at *Don Quixote* and its sadistic mockery of the man who breaks down in the face of the bourgeois reality principle? What is supposed to be funny about the comedies of Aristophanes—which are as brilliant today as they were then—has become a mystery; the equation of the coarse with the comical can now be appreciated only in the provinces. The more profoundly society fails to deliver the reconciliation that the bourgeois spirit promised as the enlightenment of myth, the more irresistibly humor is pulled down into the netherworld, and laughter, once the image of humanness, becomes a regression to inhumanity.

6

Since art has been taken in hand by the culture industry and placed among the consumer goods, its lightheartedness has become synthetic, false, and bewitched. No lightheartedness is compatible with the arbitrarily contrived. The pacified relationship of lightheartedness and nature excludes anything that manipulates and calculates nature. The distinction language makes between the

joke and the wisecrack captures this quite precisely. Where we see lightheartedness today, it is distorted by being decreed, down to the ominous “nevertheless” of the sort of tragedy that consoles itself with the idea that that’s just how life is. Art, which is no longer possible if it is not reflective, must renounce lightheartedness of its own accord. It is forced to do so above all by what has recently happened. The statement that it is not possible to write poetry after Auschwitz does not hold absolutely, but it is certain that after Auschwitz, because Auschwitz was possible and remains possible for the foreseeable future, lighthearted art is no longer conceivable. Objectively, it degenerates into cynicism, no matter how much it relies on kindness and understanding. In fact, this impossibility was sensed by great literature, first by Baudelaire almost a century before the European catastrophe, and then by Nietzsche as well and in the George School’s abstention from humor. Humor has turned into polemical parody. There it finds a temporary refuge as long as it remains unreconciled, taking no notice of the concept of reconciliation that was once allied to the concept of humor. By now the polemical form of humor has become questionable as well. It can no longer count on being understood, and polemic, of all artistic forms, cannot survive in a vacuum. Several years ago there was a debate about whether fascism could be presented in comic or parodistic form without that constituting an outrage against its victims. The silly, farcical, second-rate quality is unmistakable, the kinship between Hitler and his followers on the one hand and the gutter press and stool pigeons on the other. One cannot laugh at it. The bloody reality was not the spirit [*Geist*], or evil spirit [*Ungeist*] that spirit could make fun of. Times were still good when Hašek wrote *Schweyk*, with nooks and crannies and sloppiness right in the middle of the system of horror. But comedies about fascism would become accomplices of the silly mode of thinking that considered fascism beaten in advance because the strongest battalions in world history were against it. Least of all should the position of the victors be taken by the opponents of fascism, who have a duty not to resemble in any way those who entrench themselves in that position. The historical forces that produced the horror derive from the inherent nature of the social structure. They are not superficial forces, and they are much too powerful for anyone to have the prerogative of treating them as though he had world history behind him and the Führers actually were the clowns whose nonsense their murderous talk came to resemble only afterwards.

7

Because, moreover, the moment of lightheartedness inheres in art’s freedom from mere existence, which even works that are desperate—and those works all the more—demonstrate, the moment of lightheartedness or humor is

not simply expelled from them in the course of history. It survives in their self-critique, as humor about humor. The artful meaninglessness and silliness characteristic of radical contemporary works of art, characteristics that are so irritating to those with a positive outlook, represent not so much the regression of art to an infantile stage as its humorous judgment on humor. Wedekind's *pièce à clef* directed against the publisher of *Simplizissimus* bears the subtitle: satire on satire. There is something similar in Kafka, whose shock-prose was experienced by some of his interpreters, Thomas Mann among them, as humor, and whose relationship to Hašek is being studied by Slovakian authors. In the face of Beckett's plays especially, the category of the tragic surrenders to laughter, just as his plays cut off all humor that accepts the status quo. They bear witness to a state of consciousness that no longer admits the alternative of seriousness and lightheartedness, nor the composite tragicomedy. Tragedy evaporates because the claims of the subjectivity that was to have been tragic are so obviously inconsequential. A dried up, tearless weeping takes the place of laughter. Lamentation has become the mourning of hollow, empty eyes. Humor is salvaged in Beckett's plays because they infect the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair. This process is linked with that of artistic reduction, a path leading to a survival minimum as the minimum of existence remaining. This minimum discounts the historical catastrophe, perhaps in order to survive it.

8

A withering away of the alternative between lightheartedness and seriousness, between the tragic and the comic, almost between life and death, is becoming evident in contemporary art. With this, art negates its whole past, doubtless because the familiar alternative expresses a situation divided between the happiness of survival and the catastrophe that forms the medium for that survival. Given the complete disenchantment of the world, art that is beyond lightheartedness and seriousness may be as much a figure of reconciliation as a figure of horror. Such art corresponds both to disgust with the ubiquity, both overt and covert, of advertisements for existence, and resistance to the cothurne, which by its exorbitant elevation of suffering once again sides with immutability. In view of the recent past, art can no more be completely serious than it can still be lighthearted. One begins to doubt whether art was ever as serious as culture had convinced people it was. Art can no longer equate the expression of mourning with what is most joyful, as Hölderlin's poem, which considered itself in tune with the *Weltgeist*, once did. The truth content of joy seems to have become unattainable. The fact that the genres are becoming blurred, that the tragic gesture seems comic and the comic dejected, is connected with that.

The tragic is decaying because it raises a claim to the positive meaning of negativity, the meaning that philosophy called positive negation. This claim cannot be made good. The art that moves ahead into the unknown, the only art now possible, is neither lighthearted nor serious; the third possibility, however, is cloaked in obscurity, as though embedded in a void the figures of which are traced by advanced works of art.

