

Decorum and Insolence in Robert Walser's Dialectic of Manners

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I.

Any show of civility, Jacques Derrida suggests, regardless of the intention that informs it or the context that demands it, is subject to an “internal contradiction,” one that persists over and above every effort to resolve it, that for this reason can never be entirely subtracted from the scene in question. “The internal contradiction in the concept of politeness,” he writes, “is that it involves both rules and invention without rule. Its rule is that one knows the rule but is never bound by it. It is impolite to be merely polite, to be polite out of politeness. We thus have here a rule... which prescribes action of such a sort that one not act simply by conformity to the normative rule but not even by virtue of the said rule, out of respect for it” (‘Passions: An Oblique Offering,’ 9). Paradoxical as it may be, then, to act in adherence with the codes of conduct prescribed by politeness is to render these codes inoperative; where manners or custom are concerned, fidelity to the rule in its received form is the very thing that will compromise the rule’s efficacy, leaving it increasingly indiscernible from the circumstance it was meant to mitigate against in the first place: “It is impolite to be merely polite...” Whenever an action manifests itself in accordance with whatever it is this code of conduct stipulates, then this not only renders the code ineffectual in this particular case, but threatens to undermine it *as such*, calling into question the possibility of its further deployment.

Hence the peculiar imperative to which this “internal contradiction” gives rise: if a rule of decorum has any chance of being upheld, it must pass by way of an action that surpasses, and thus in a certain sense contravenes, perhaps even going so far as to contest, whatever it is that the rule would have otherwise prescribed. The integrity of the rule appears to rest upon what should, according to this same rule, be considered antithetical to its proper functioning. It is in this sense that a certain instance of *play* – what Derrida refers to here as “invention without rule” – is intrinsic to the principle of civility at stake here. Without this displacement of terms that carries civility beyond its presently recognized form, the gesture that sought to signal itself as polite would fall short of itself, it could not be said to have to come to pass. And yet, if this is the case, then what is there to stop this “invention without rule” from converging with civility’s contrary, transgression pure and simple: impoliteness, insolence, even outright maleficence? No doubt, the rule set in play should not leave the rule forsaken altogether; the displacement it initiates must take place within certain limits, if it moves beyond the

rule it should carry the rule with it, so to speak. And yet how would it be possible to tell the two dispositions apart – “invention without rule” on the one hand, mere rulelessness on the other – if the customary means of doing so, the rule, is unable to act as a guide here, being precisely what will have been set into play the moment it is appealed to?

In *Minima Moralia*, his “reflections on damaged life,” Adorno also has something to say on this tendency. There he invokes the image of a society in which the “internal contradiction” to which politeness is subject has arrived at, or rather has already passed through, a critical stage, leaving its institution in open disrepair, an “irreparable ruin” Adorno says. Having long since ceased to be a means of bridging the distance from one individual to the next, by providing each party with a protocol, a common frame of reference that would facilitate their prospective exchange, politeness – or *tact* as he prefers to call it here – has instead become something fundamentally corrosive for the social bond, and this is all the more detrimental for having happened in support of this bond, as it were. Far from alleviating the individual’s estrangement, civility now compounds it.

[T]he exercise of tact was as paradoxical as its historical location. It demanded the reconciliation - actually impossible - between the unauthorized claims of convention and the unruly ones of the individual. Other than convention there was nothing by which tact could be measured. Convention represented, in however etiolated a form, the universal which made up the very substance of the individual claim. Tact is the discrimination of differences. It consists in conscious deviations. Yet when emancipated, it confronts the individual as an absolute, without anything universal from which to be differentiated, it fails to engage the individual and finally wrongs him. The question as to someone's health, no longer required and expected by upbringing, becomes inquisitive or injurious, silence on sensitive subjects empty indifference, as soon as there is no rule to indicate what is and what is not to be discussed. Thus individuals begin, not without reason, to react antagonistically to tact: a certain kind of politeness, for example, gives them less the feeling of being addressed as human beings, than an inkling of their inhuman conditions, and the polite run the risk of seeming impolite by continuing to exercise politeness, as a superseded privilege. In the end emancipated, purely individual tact becomes mere lying.

(Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 36-37)

Again, politeness is conceived here in terms of a relation between rule and invention – “convention” and “deviation” – and again, the fundamental equivocation between these terms, each calling forth and yet compromising the other, is ultimately responsible for dragging the practice of civility into contradiction with itself, a contradiction it is no longer able to manage, so that finally it is difficult to see what exactly it is that provides politeness with its justification, once it has become the cause of the injury it is tasked with preventing.

II.

Now throughout the fiction of Robert Walser this contradiction is ever-present – to the point of becoming an organizing principle in his work – and its vicissitudes are followed back and forth there with a fastidiousness that borders on the vertiginous. This, nowhere more so, than in *The Robber*, the author's final known novel, written in 1925 but not published until 1972, and which is, in many ways, a treatise on this theme. It is a novel whose protagonist has set out to make of politeness nothing less than a vocation, a life's work. For the particular moral sensibility that this cultivates, politeness takes precedence above all else so that morality, *Sittlichkeit*, is always rerouted back through the question of manners or custom (*Sitte*). Presided over by an unnamed narrator, an acquaintance of the Robber who more than once lets slip that he may in fact be the eponymous hero himself, without ever confirming this either way, as the novel proceeds on its wandering course it brings forth scene after scene in which the Robber manifests an unwavering commitment to his vocation, and the extraordinary compendium of eccentricities on display to this end, the result of an open-ended experiment conducted on himself and others, are in each case shaped by the internal contradiction around which politeness finds itself spiraling whenever it is called upon. This is precisely what accounts for the pronounced peculiarity of the Robber's behavior, peculiar to the point that it is met with bafflement by everyone he encounters: inasmuch as he places politeness at the heart of all he does, he is animated by two conflicting principles, pulling him in different directions at once: convention and deviation, conformity and invention, and yet whichever side of the dialectic he happens to devote himself to, as it begins to unfurl it will at a certain point cross over into its opposite.

III.

The Robber's deviations from the given rules of decorum are many and varied. Like a child who breaks apart his favorite toy in order to understand the pleasure it gives him, the Robber never tires of flouting a rule to see what effect it will have. He has, so we are told, "innumerable wicked deeds behind him" (Walser, *The Robber*, 83), and time and again he is chastised by those around him for indulging this roguish streak: "hundreds of accusations, unjustified or reasonable, trail along behind [him] like a lengthy serpent or the very serious train of a dress" (8). But even with the most outlandish of his improprieties, it is possible to discern a perverse form of fidelity to the rule, as if he were attempting to defend the rule against the conformity that undermines it, what the narrator disparagingly refers to at one point as "middle-of-the-road-politeness," or in our

terms, politeness lacking in the art of invention. Now of all the peccadillos undertaken to this end, there is one of which the Robber is particularly fond.

“Even the Stalder girls often yawned in the Robber’s company. These yawns struck him as intentional, as no doubt they were, and at first he hated them, though later they troubled him not in the least. One day, on the street, as a gentleman of refined appearance nonchalantly yawned in his face, the Robber tossed his cigarette butt in to this gaping yawnhole. You can imagine the astonishment caused by the ashtray maneuver. One might entitle this deed ‘The Robber’s Revenge.’ Happily, it was performed with finesse.” (43)

There is much to say concerning this ostentatiously insolent gesture, which precisely insofar as it crosses over into the indefensible, at the same time demands to be defended. First of all, is this ashtray maneuver not the very essence of wit, *Witz*, which must itself be understood as a privileged instance of “invention without rule”? Spontaneous and lightning quick, whenever the faculty of wit is deployed its result is each time singular and unrepeatable; it seizes an opportunity that flashes forth, there and then, and that will be gone in the next moment, so as to produce a conjunction where before there was none, and one that is all the more prized for its contingency; that this action is unrepeatable means it does not institute a code, this ashtray maneuver is not, after all, a handshake in the making, it is on the contrary an interruption of the code into which it intervenes. But finally, and perhaps most challengingly, what is scandalous about this gesture above all else is the undeniable claim to propriety that is borne along with it; if only the passerby had placed a hand over this gaping mouth, as good manners dictate, then the Robber would have been spared the unseemly sight, and the gesture would never even have occurred to him. What animates his insolence is an appeal to a certain convention, the sign of which is that the rule is not broken wantonly, but studiedly, with finesse. And it is this, incidentally, that would allow us to place Walser’s Robber in a lineage reaching back to Baudelaire’s dandyism, that “cult of the self” at the heart of which a similar play is underway between rule making and breaking. “Dandyism,” Baudelaire writes in “The Painter of Modern Life,” “an institution beyond the laws, itself has rigorous laws which all its subjects must strictly obey, whatever their natural impetuosity and independence of character... It is first and foremost the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality, bounded only by the limits of the proprieties” (Baudelaire, 26; 27).

IV.

But the Robber is not only chastised for his insolence. In point of fact, however strange it seems, it is precisely his decorous behavior that is met with the greatest opprobrium.

He tends to be forgiven his insolences, but never his courtesies. "His polite manners have worn on certain people's 'nerves' for quite some time," we are told at the very outset of the novel (5). Against expectation it is here, then, on this side of the dialectic, that the Robber's vocation begins to take on its most provocative form, the stakes of which can be deduced to a greater or lesser extent across the many tirades unleashed against him, often by a character whose sole purpose seems to be to voice this general consternation, the sign of which is that, having said their piece, they step off stage and are never to be heard from again. Here is such a person speaking (and it goes without saying that the Robber listens to this and other diatribes patiently, and in good spirits).

"Aren't you almost rather somewhat too nice and kind to all these people who play perhaps quite unscrupulously with the generousities that dwell within you, and have you never considered that you might find some more worthwhile occupation than merely plunging into the seas of good manners... If one of these children, who of course lack all social importance, should happen to drop something, you bound up from your seat and from the conversation you've been having with whoever it might be, so as to retrieve the fallen item with an adroitness that fills all of us who witness this with amazement... Isn't it time you became more intelligible? Your person lacks a label, your way of living shows no particular stamp. When I saw you swoop to the side of that small and no doubt touchingly irrelevant child, I felt terribly embarrassed, for, you see, I was quite simply ashamed for you, on account of this thoughtless happiness, the so utterly unassuming pleasure you took in your preposterous servility." (71-72)

This person is just getting going, there is more of this, much more, but let's stop them there. What is the cause of consternation here? Precisely that the Robber does not discriminate in who he is courteous to. Indeed, children, chambermaids, vagrants: all are at one time or another treated to the Robber's service and all are figures who from the perspective of bourgeois propriety are considered undeserving of this sacrifice. This servility-exhibitionism implicitly levels an accusation against a society whose code of civility is compromised once it is shown that its application is not universally extended. And all the while, to compound the scandal still further, the pleasure he no doubt derives from this means he cannot even be begrudgingly commended for his selflessness. "A rather curious, that is to say, important discovery for me was that it filled me with the most delightful gaiety to imagine myself someone's servant" (104). This, then, is the Robber's true originality. He produces an unprecedented deviation, unprecedented because it is composed out of conformity itself, a servility so pronounced that it itself becomes the precipitant of deviancy here. But such is the singularity of this gesture that it becomes opaque, incomprehensible to anyone but him. This is why, as is made clear from the outset, the Robber is a "pariah," he has "not a friend to show for himself" (1). Whoever chooses to live exclusively in manners, retaining no trace of themselves outside

of this sphere, has thereby committed themselves to an inconceivable solitude. We are left with the paradox of a code of civility that has but a single practitioner. And so in the figure of Walser's Robber, the impossible happens, politeness is momentarily rescued from ruin, but only insofar as this goes unnoticed.

Works cited:

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