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Alive as You and Me

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Rethinking Philosophy, Semiotics, and the Arts with Umberto Eco

Section one | Philosophy

Alive as You and Me

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Note della redazione

This text was presented by the author at the commemoration of Umberto Eco during the *Festival della comunicazione* held in Camogli in September 2018.

Testo integrale

Laughing with the Dead

- 1 «Only one boy was capable of laughing while Derossi was declaiming the funeral oration of the king, and Franti laughed.» We must be aware of this: our remembrance of Umberto Eco risks bringing back Franti, who laughed at the funeral of another Umberto, killed in Monza by Gaetano Bresci. Of course, it's not exactly the same thing, because Franti was laughing *at* the dead man, or at least at the obsequies, and maybe at Derossi and his way of expressing them, while we are trying to laugh *with* the dead man, as if he were still here, but the essence doesn't change much.
- 2 Compared to Franti, we have both an aggravating and a mitigating factor. The aggravating circumstance is that Franti's Umberto, the good king, was not good at all, and had on his conscience at least Dogali, Adua and the Bava Beccaris massacre. Instead, not only would we be unable to reproach anything similar to our Umberto, but we are grateful to him for having given us so much, including indeed *In Praise of Franti*, a work that is very critical of king Umberto's world. In point of law, however, Article 69 of the Penal Code leaves no doubt: aggravating factors prevail over extenuating circumstances.
- 3 Laughing at a dead person, in short, is simply not done, even if this laughter is driven by the best intentions, assuming that laughter can ever come from good intentions. Indeed, this is far from obvious, at least if we follow Jorge de Burgos in *The Name of the Rose* (*Il nome della rosa*, a book that Bompiani wanted to immediately print in 80,000 copies, worrying Eco that it would turn into *The Name of Surrender*, *Il nome della resa*). The great inquisitor sees laughter as a clumsy remedy, a lesser evil, a consolation for a radically fallen and insufficient humanity—indeed, let us face it, a

deficient humanity. But this consolation becomes inadmissible if «the function of laughter is reversed, it is elevated to art, the doors of the world of the learned are opened to it, it becomes the object of philosophy».

- 4 Jorge here is talking about Aristotle's book of *Poetics* on comedy and laughter, found by William of Baskerville. This is where I would like to start in order to justify the legitimacy of laughing with the dead. Eco has done just that: to reverse the function of laughter, to open the doors of the world of the learned, to make it the object of philosophy. More precisely, to borrow three categories proposed by Nietzsche—someone who wouldn't be caught dead laughing, so to speak – in Eco we find three forms of comedy: monumental, antiquarian, and critical.

Monumental Comedy

- 5 Monumental comedy is about finding and giving great examples of comedy. Indeed (to stick to the genre) what can be greater than Nabokov's saying «To leave is to die a little, but to die is to leave a little too much»? Are we sure that Euripides would have done better? Gadda, Beckett, as well as the unsuspected Manzoni and the unbearable Leopardi, all have great comic moments. Moving from literature to philosophy, even Quine is credited with a memorable joke: «I do not remember what my illness is called, Althusser or Alzheimer, but since I cannot remember it, it must be Alzheimer».
- 6 Eco made an essential contribution to the monumentalisation of comedy. From *Misreadings (Diario Minimo)*, which despite its title is one of his greatest works) to *How To Travel With A Salmon*, Eco has managed to give humour the same space that other philosophers give to the tragic and the sublime. In doing so, he followed a strategy that was both coherent and charitable. Rejecting Wittgenstein's "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent", Eco embraced the view that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must tell a story.
- 7 Now, since not everyone can write *The Name of the Rose*, and since many writer professors would have done better to follow Wittgenstein's precept, Eco suggested an exit strategy: whereof one cannot speak with total philosophical certainty thereof one can fool around. And this is within the reach, if not of everyone, of most, as long as they are equipped with a minimum of common sense – failing which they will be left with the *extrema ratio* of empty words.

Antiquarian Comedy

- 8 Antiquarian comedy, like antiquarian history according to Nietzsche, guards and worships small things. As we all know, Eco was an extraordinary collector and teller of jokes. Sometimes, back in the days of the telephone, he would call just to tell a joke; indeed most of the time the first thing he would say, even before saying hello or engaging in any pleasantries, was a joke.
- 9 This is not at all obvious, for a philosopher. Philosophers, who for an unfortunate tradition—from Hegesias exhorting people to suicide, to the many thinkers who have done so – are supposed to be very serious and gloomy, are credited at best with aphorisms enunciated with a *pince-sans-rire* that leaves one somewhat puzzled. Take § 147 of the *Passions of the Soul*: «A husband mourns his dead wife, though he would be sorry to see her brought to life again». This passage composes a perfect diptych with the title that young Achille Campanile, writing for *Il Messaggero*, gave to the news of a widow who died on her husband's grave: «the pitcher goes so often to the well...».
- 10 Most of the time, however, philosophers at most indulge in *reflections* on jokes, like Wittgenstein's consideration that one could write a very serious philosophical book made only of jokes (Žižek tried to put Wittgenstein's idea into practice, but the result is not too serious, and I am not sure whether it is a success or a failure). Instead, philosophers who tell jokes are very few. I'm thinking about Croce, who told at least one joke to mock sociology; Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*; and

Derrida who, being a great joke teller in private, wrote a wonderful booklet starting from a joke: God asks Abraham again to sacrifice Isaac, adding, this time «*Above all, no journalists*».

Critical Comedy

- 11 The third (and, worry not, the last) side of history, for Nietzsche, is critical history, which destroys idols. This is also the third dimension of comedy for Eco. Everything deserves to die, and laughter, besides sinisterly propitiating the death of others, as in the saying “a laughter will bury you all”, can facilitate a good death, or at least a death without regrets. This was Eco’s advice in a memorable 1997 article: the only way to die peacefully is to become convinced that the world we leave behind is populated by assholes.
- 12 Now, the snarky Latin saying that “laughter abounds in the mouths of fools” (*risus abundat in ore stultorum*) often overlooks the fact that the person who utters it with an air of superiority is in fact an asshole who has just said something ridiculous. As William of Baskerville used to say in reply to Jorge da Burgos, «And now I say to you that, in the infinite whirl of possible things, God allows you also to imagine a world where the presumed interpreter of the truth is nothing but a clumsy raven, who repeats words learned long ago».
- 13 Eco and I had actually envisioned an anthology of philosophical humour. Umberto had a plan for it as well as some material: «I can get quotations from Hegel and Croce from Lacerba’s *Sciocchezzaio*, there is some authentic Gentile in Vita Finzi’s parodies; I think with Heidegger it suffices to pick at random, like the medieval did with Virgil, and I have a letter from Galileo that could have been written by Benigni». It is a pity that we did not complete it, but others will be able to do so, adding new foolish remarks and hopefully not forgetting the two original curators, the illustrious and the less illustrious.
- 14 And anyway, it’s better to laugh, because in the end we all have to die. This is the advice that Montaigne takes from Plutarch, according to whom the Egyptians had a great image of death brought to the banquets, with a herald announcing “Eat and enjoy, this is what death shall be like”. As far as I know, Eco has never organised such banquets, although he did write about *Finnegans Wake*, which after all is a funeral service. Yet, it turns out that back when he taught in Bologna, at a dinner with colleagues and students, when, after chatting about academic quarrels and departmental gossip, silence would fall, Eco would say, with a cigarette in his hand: «And then, of course, there is the problem of death».

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