

Curtain

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With the lights out it's less dangerous.

Here we are now. Entertain us.

Kurt Cobain

The end of a première always fades out into a perfect silence in which the afterlife of a performance is at stake. The enthusiasm or the refusal of the audience, following this moment of perfect silence, determines the destiny of the performance; its destiny depends on whether the audience accepted the play for what it is or not. Applause means success, booing means failure: these signs are unequivocal beyond the possibility of dispute. Naturally, now and then, applause might be disturbed by some faint critical or even enthusiastic booing, and a chorus-like booing too might be mixed up with some lonely sounds of clapping or even bravoing. A failure at the première does not totally determine the destiny of a performance; audiences vary, and the relation between audience and performance might change. In the life of the so-called society each moment of social role-playing count as a première; even if one might have the impression that the dilettante players and actors of society, politics and life hold only worse and worse rehearsals each time with no end. During such plays of the so-called society though, in contrast with the institution of classic bourgeois theatre or opera, one can never be solely a member of the audience without consequences. The one who sat among the audience yesterday is the one who takes the leading role of the comedy today; and tomorrow s/he will be just another extra. The impression that directors and theater-makers of society, who are said to rule this so-called society, have even relatively immobile positions or roles rests on a shallow presumption. In the social scene the director is just another actor who should be the most excited about the success of the play because s/he may have

the most to lose. Success should be attained from moment to moment; the perfect silence determining the further fate of the performance is at the threshold of each moment. And although one can never have a rented seat among the lines of the audience, the one who initiates clapping or booing at a social play cannot take part in the performance in that moment: there and then s/he has to be an outsider.

I.

„Er war als Premierenmacher gefürchtet. Er riß mit seiner Begeisterung, weil er damit ein paar Sekunden früher als die anderen eingesetzt hatte, die ganze Oper mit. Andererseits landeten mit seinen Erstpfeifen die größten und die teuersten Inszenierungen, weil er es wollte, weil er dazu gerade aufgelegt war, in der Versenkung. Ich kann einen Erfolg machen, wenn ich will und wenn die Voraussetzungen dafür gegeben sind und sie sind immer dafür gegeben, sagte er, und ich kann einen totalen Mißerfolg genauso machen, wenn die Voraussetzungen dafür gegeben sind, und sie sind immer dafür gegeben: Wenn ich der erste bin, der Bravo schreit oder der erste, der pfeift. Die Wiener haben Jahrzehnte nicht gemerkt, daß der Urheber ihrer Operntriumphe letzten Endes der Paul gewesen ist, genauso der Urheber der Untergänge im Haus am Ring, die, wenn er es haben wollte, nicht radikaler, nicht vernichtender hätten sein können. Sein Für und Wider in der Oper hatte aber mit Objektivität nichts zu tun, nur mit seiner Launenhaftigkeit, mit seiner Sprunghaftigkeit, mit seiner Verrücktheit.“¹

Der Paul is Paul Wittgenstein, nephew of the famous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the central object and character of Thomas Bernhard's book *Wittgensteins Nefte*. Of course, the existence connected to the other name on the cover (Thomas Bernhard) is at least as central an object and character of that book as the existence connected to the name Paul Wittgenstein is. This is implied by the subtitle: *Eine Freundschaft*; the subject matter is the description of a friendship which presupposes two persons. The motto, copied from the closing passages of the book itself, presupposes somewhat more people, at least two hundred: *Zweihundert Freunde werden bei meinem Begräbnis sein und du mußt an meinem Grab eine Rede halten*. This sentence is the last will of the book's character Paul Wittgenstein, and it is a request addressed to the book's other character Thomas Bernhard. It is rather rare in Bernhard's books that mottos are taken out from the books themselves, and with *Wittgensteins Nefte* it is the sole occurrence that the addressee of the motto is the character named

Thomas Bernhard. This character finally did not take the role which his friend asked him to take. He did not fulfil the request, did not make a speech above the grave of his friend; at the grave there were not two hundred friends at all, only eight of them. The author named Thomas Bernhard, however, has documented and published his memoranda as a book, commemorating, as a gravestone, though less mutely, the dead Paul Wittgenstein. The character named Thomas Bernhard, according to the author named Thomas Bernhard, has never visited the gravestone of Paul Wittgenstein since the latter's death.

The secret of Paul's art of bringing about success or failure in the opera lay in the bare fact that he was the first who dared to break the deadly silence following a performance, perhaps because he simply let himself live through his first caprice, his first will, his first signs of madness. With his lonely firstness, with his separation from the homogeneity of the rest of the audience the necessary conditions for creating success or failure were given at once. His way of thinking and acting was thoroughly operatic way of thinking and acting, so it was a musical and a theatrical way at the same time. Where conditions are given simply by the bare fact that he is the first to bravo or to boo is the auditorium of the opera; here it is perfectly clear which person is a member of the audience, a spectator, and, in contrast, which one is a performer working for the audience; this space is the most suitable field of practice for Paul's way of thinking and acting, for his character. Mainly because its simplicity and its harmonic interval from the operatic to the social theatre this self-assured dramatic action, consisting simply of a lonely bravo or boo at first, convinces the audience in a moment, and, in exchange, the audience, following this performance after the performance, does its best to express its appreciation by either a collective burst of applause, or a chorus of boos: by these conventional ritual expressions of success and failure. Paul's art had its limits even in this relatively transparent social field though. His ability of bringing about failure could not compete with the conducting genius of Herbert von Karajan, whom he tried to fail several times, but the audience had never followed Paul in these experiments, rather contradicted him, in spite of his most authentic booing performance sprouting from his deepest antipathy towards Karajan.

II.

[HIM:] But it was even worse if she got the part—then I had to go fearlessly *through the midst of the booing public* (and they're good judges, no matter what people say about them) and make my applause heard as a one-man claque. I attracted people's attention and sometimes stole the booing away from the actress. I'd hear people whispering beside me, "It's a valet in disguise, one of those belonging to the man who sleeps with her. Won't the rascal ever shut up?" People have no idea what could make a person do that. *They think it's stupidity; whereas it comes from a motive that excuses everything.*

ME: Up to and including breaking the laws.

HIM: Finally, however, I became known, and people said, "Oh, it's Rameau." My only option was to throw out some ironic expression *to salvage the ridicule of my solitary applause* so that people would interpret it as its opposite. You have to admit that it takes a *powerful interest* to brave the assembled public like that and the effort is worth more than one small écu.²

(italics mine – LZ.)

Rameau is Jean-François Rameau, nephew of the famous composer and theoretician Jean-Philippe Rameau, and central character and object of Diderot's dialogue *Rameau's Nephew*. Of course, the existence connected to the name Denis Diderot is at least as central an object and character of that book as the existence connected to the name Jean-François Rameau is. This is indicated by the dialogue-form: similar to Horatian satires, the author-I talks to another person from an elevated moral position. Unlike Horatian satires, however, this position in Diderot's writing gets perverted several times, and thus becomes a bare posture, a stiffen motion in the social pantomime. The pantomime is provoked by Rameau's nephew; with his provocative unscrupulousness he forces the character Diderot into stiffen motions of character. Rameau's nephew used the title *le neveu de Rameau* as a name in real life; he even signed his letters thus. He may have had certain interests in doing so. The subtitle of *Rameau's Nephew* is

Second Satire. Second in the sense of quality and not in the sense of chronology; Diderot started to write the so-called *First Satire* later, but this latter was most probably originally intended as a simpler piece, and thus the unfinished *Rameau's Nephew* earns the subtitle *Second Satire*, meaning a satire of a higher degree. Satire does not indicate genre: the *First* takes a form of a letter, the *Second* is a dialogue. Rather satire indicates a figurative and discursive mode in which the rich etymological and hermeneutical tradition linked to the words *satura* and *satyr* also gets involved. The mottos of both Diderot-satires comes from the so-called satires of Horace, which poems Horace himself did not call so: the volume known as *Satires* was originally titled *Sermones*, meaning discussions, dialogues in verse, or rather sermons masked as dialogues. Epodes of Horace are frequently more satiric than his so-called satires. Nevertheless, both Diderot-mottos suggest a plural(istic) view, thus directing the attention towards the interpretation of satire as *satura lanx*, *bowl of varied fruits*, that is, *poem of varied themes*. The motto of Diderot's *First Satire* comes from the first poem in the second book of *Sermones*: "*Quot capitum vivunt, totidem studiorum milia*", [So many heads, / so many passions by the thousands.] The motto of Diderot's *Second Satire* comes from the seventh poem in the second book of *Sermones*: "*Vertumnis – quotquot sunt – natus iniquis*", that is "[to be] born under the evil influence of every Vertumnus". *Vertumnis* in Latin is the plural form of Vertumnus, god of seasons and change. In Rameau's context the motto suggests that he inherited all possible (bad) characteristic features. The impersistent character, and here impersistence permeates everything, could not be monotheistic, could not be monomaniac, could not be obsessed; for capriciousness that permeates everything by virtue of the Vertumnis takes metamorphosis as its natural form. *Satura* then does not simply imply varied themes but rather a primordial variability and mixedness of matter, spirit and character. No pure spirit, no pure character. The one who manifests the best this primordial and ever-present mixedness is the satyr, like Rameau. "The notions of honesty and dishonesty must be really badly confused in his head, for he shows without ostentation that nature has given him fine qualities, and has no shame in revealing that he has also received some bad ones." (RN). The satyr shows her/his socially and societally shameful characteristics, body parts and postures not merely because s/he has no feeling of chastity; s/he shows them basically because showing off is an element of her/his existence, from which s/he might

gain some pleasure as an extra, but foremostly from which s/he makes his existence and living. The satyr, the fool, or the so-called genius are channels and generators of social and societal tension; for moments such a person is able (or forced) to get outside of society via her/his uncontrolled outburst of freedom; thus, in an indirect way, their behaviour or words throw light on the weakly conditioned degree of freedom of partakers in the social drama; in their best moments, they suddenly draw the curtain, turn the lights on the scene, and thus create a spontaneous première out of a mere rehearsal. Reactions depend on the actual degree of freedom of those taking part in the current rehearsal: with the unexpected rise of the curtain some of the partakers may get stuck in their movement, some may miss their line, others might smoothly improvise on the basis of the new situation. The satyr, the fool, or the so-called genius thus becomes indispensable for a society or for an association: they are those who make a performance out of a rehearsal; and if, in a situation like this, someone happens to be in the lucky position of the observer, or—at any rate—is able to observe at all, that observer might learn elemental social and societal knowledge, and, as a member of the audience, may have fun. “If one of them appears in company, he's a grain of yeast which ferments and gives back to everyone some part of his *natural individuality*. He shakes things up. He agitates us. He makes us praise or blame. He makes the truth come out, revealing who has value. He unmasks the scoundrels. So that's the time a man with sense pays attention and sorts his world out.” (*italics mine*, RN). The so-called natural individuality is also part of the social drama: it is even the most rigid part, a forced posture, an epileptic fit: the character Henri Bergson writes in *Laughter* that “in one sense it might be said that all character is comic, provided we mean by character the ready-made element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically.”³ From the comical perspective the character is the individual's most rigid nucleus of social roles, which at the same time locks her-/himself up, and from which, unless having the infinite flexibility of a satyr, a fool, or a genius, s/he could not get free.

III.

Arlecchino, or Harlequin is a stock character of *commedia dell'arte*. The most important requirement for taking Arlecchino's role is physical agility. While usually described as stupid (or as one pretending to be stupid) and gluttonous, the character must be infinitely agile and flexible as, before anyone else, he takes responsibility for the acrobatic elements of the performance. Arlecchino is one of the *zanni* in *commedia dell'arte*. "Zanni is both singular and plural, the Venetian diminutive of Giovanni. [...] In Italian, it is simply the name given to any unnamed character, a person whose actual identity you cannot be bothered to discover." (67) Socially speaking, "Zanni is that regrettably eternal unfortunate, the dispossessed immigrant worker." (67) One of the *zanni*, Arlecchino is "a shape-shifter: he frequently adopts disguises and cross-dresses without demur" (77). In his stance, Arlecchino shares his continuously lower, close to the earth position with the *zanni*, but for him "this increased gravitational pull is compensated by an irrepressible upward energy in the torso: Caliban and Ariel united in the same body." (77)⁴ In Diderot's satire Rameau acts as and pretends to be an Arlecchino: a stupid, gluttonous and greedy being, who—at the same time—is driven by the bare motive of satisfying his low desires, has an infinitely pliable and flexible spirit, character and body. A continuous performance is necessary to make a living. At first sight his lonely clapping in the audience seems to be rather differently motivated than Paul Wittgenstein's art of bringing about success or failure. While the latter stems from the autocracy of character and taste, from mere caprice, Rameau's confrontation with the audience is driven by a "powerful interest", "a motive that excuses everything": hunger, that is, an imperative for Rameau to hold his social position as a clown, a fool, an outsider-inside. It is his existence, it is his way to make a living. In this particular situation, he has to satisfy two contradicting demands in the same gesture. He has to make the dilettante actress, his patroness, believe that she herself is a living genius of the art of acting, and, at the same time, he has to convert the audience (consisting of people who are "good judges, no matter what people say about them") to be his pander in interpreting his one-man *claque* ironically: it is only a feat at a fair. He provokes the audience in order to make a living. In case freedom and spontaneity is considered as existential necessities, which they—at least on the

level of an unconscious claim—doubtlessly are, no matter whether consciously or not, they are necessary just like breathing; continued even while sleeping when one cannot pay conscious attention to breathing; in case freedom and spontaneity are necessary, then the bravoing and booing of Paul Wittgenstein is also a means to provoke the audience in order to make a living, his performance is also an existential provocation of society. His existence, however, is not built of coins and bank notes. The Wittgensteins were one of the richest families in Austria, and Paul, just like his uncle Ludwig, could hardly get rid of the “filthy” money via his regal acts of charity, his rampageous revelries, his crazy journeys and opera-tours like the one by taxi from Vienna to Paris. Rameau is usually poor, and, allegedly, he has an utmost desire to become rich, though that would mean that he should abandon his fool-existence, a basic element of his being. Rameau, analogously to Socrates’ philosopher in *Phaedrus* who is not wise but a lover of wisdom, is not rich, and could never be rich, only a lover of richness. Paul Wittgenstein however, manages to break down completely, financially speaking. Both Rameau and Wittgenstein have the role of a fool as a defining social role. They were main characters in the social anecdotes of contemporary Paris, and, respectively, of contemporary Vienna. Narrator Bernhard even risks the claim that Paul was more famous in Vienna than his uncle, the world-famous philosopher. Both Rameau and Wittgenstein are conscious of their own defining roles. Basically they are not helpless lunatics, although, from time to time, Paul is transported to the asylum Steinhof, to the so-called Pavilion Ludwig, at times when his provocative behaviour becomes unbearable for his environment, or for himself. In both writings, title characters are counterbalanced from two directions: on one hand, by their famous genius uncles, on the other, by the authors as characters, Diderot-I and narrator Bernhard. The claim that counterpoints stem from the play between socially respected (famous uncles, authors as characters) and socially unacceptable (title characters) is not false but superficial. The most important common element of the two writings is precisely the problematisation of these counterpoints in order to make them sound like music. The problem is whether there is recognisable boundary between the socially outcast, unacceptable and the socially respected, celebrated; the problem is how these boundaries work like resonators which strengthen the intensity of sound, of the sound of clapping and booing too; the music of extreme counterpoints is made up by the oscillations between outcast and celebrity. The

rise and fall of stars are profane daily passion plays of our time. Comebacks are profane resurrections. In their nuclei they, nonetheless, remain mysteries, like passion plays in medieval times, and some of the former might as well be considered sacred and authentic performances, like the suicide acts of Joy Division's Ian Curtis or Nirvana's Kurt Cobain. Both of these performances were way beyond pop music postures. And these acts of suicide became an authorising stamp on the oeuvre, an inarticulate last will that empowered their music to kill, to bring about serious damage on worn-out conventions of society. No matter how music industry (labels, magazines, etc.) made money from the made-up and false posthumous pathos and legend of their deaths, especially in the case of Cobain. Market-mentality and capitalist logic itself does not touch the fact, which their acts of suicide made the most clear: that they were lost and damned and laughed at from the beginning. But they provoked fear too; both had a weak messianic power intensified in their music, which made them really dangerous and antisocial. But the role of the Messiah finally ate them up. They fulfilled this false destiny; they did not find the way to resist it. Because the proper way to resist is always beyond destiny. Rameau and Wittgenstein represent a different kind, a stronger and more self-reflected kind of social foolishness. They are not victims of their audience; they resist the compelling role of the martyr as a parody of the Redeemer. The logic of love-hate relationship between audience and performer permeates and becomes a model for all social relations in Diderot's and Bernhard's writing. The functioning of basic socio-psychological motives of idolatry and of the need to destroy idols are explainable, but the existence of the motives remain problematic. None of the two writings attempts to solve this problem, precisely because by throwing an intensive light on it, they make the problem the clearest possible. Among other reasons, that is why the position of the nephew must be indicated in the title. According to the texts, the relations between Jean-Philippe and Jean-François Rameau, and between Ludwig and Paul Wittgenstein are not merely blood-relations, but close relations of spirit too: the blood-relation between uncle and nephew is narrowed to the proverbial distance of a hair which separates the genius and the fool from each other. It is known that an organic part of Diderot's and Bernhard's authorial and public manifestations was social provocation; at their best moments, merely the manifestation of their sharp sense concerning the required high degree of freedom made it possible for them to confuse the current social play or rehearsal

going on. It is known that Thomas Bernhard was frequently termed *Nestbeschmutzer* in his own country, especially by papers like *Kronen Zeitung*. This antisocial pattern is a publicly determining factor of both authors' personalities; this threatening sign of their latent "madness" was ready to blow at any time. Their contemporaries are frequently named on their real-life names in their writings, and these contemporaries usually do not show a pleasant picture. *Le neveu de Rameau*, containing the most developed and sophisticated hosannas of defamation, was not published during the author's life though. In spite of strong defamatory tendencies, or maybe rather because of them, both authors seem to strive for impartiality and try to stick to the facts, however, both of them (and most manically Bernhard) reflect frequently on the fact that this impartiality is impossible. Satiric description is preconditioned by the observer's intellectual and moral superiority, and, though, time after time, a superior tone is discernable in Diderot's and Bernhard's discourse, this superiority becomes relativised and invalidated. The observer-speaker-narrator has only moments of independence from the universal social play going on, and, after that moment, he is an actor again, he has to take his role, he has to take a posture. Diderot's "satire" shows the social-ethical impossibility of clear, unspoiled satiric description through the figure of Diderot on stage (the character Diderot-I of the dialogue). The values of Diderot-on-stage are questioned, his rigid righteousness becomes ridiculous, he cannot be a mere observer, from time to time he is forced into a defensive position. On the other hand, the fool Rameau proves to be at least as sensitive an observer as Diderot-on-stage is. Of course, supposed values of the author Diderot get their voice; it is not mere fatalism that rules here; Palissot and his others, making fun of philosophers, certainly get their share in exchange, as gets Bertin and even "de Voltaire". But Diderot himself as Diderot-on-stage is part of the game. Everyone is charged with something, and nearly every charge is proven. The fool Wittgenstein proves to be at least as sensitive an observer as narrator Bernhard is, and none of them could ever be exhausted of making charges.

"Da er ein unglaublich geschulter Beobachter und in dieser seiner Beobachtung, die er mit der Zeit zu einer Beobachtungskunst entwickelt hat, der Rücksichtsloseste gewesen ist, hatte er fortwährend allen Grund zur Bezeichnung. Es gab nichts, das er nicht bezichtigte." (WN, 98-9.) Narrator Bernhard adds to this that *„ich ja überhaupt kein größeres Vergnügen kenne, als*

Leute zu beobachten” (WN, 100); but near the end of his writing, near the end of Paul’s life, mere observation (*Beobachtung*) is shown from quite another aspect of value. Character Bernhard no longer observes „people” (*Leute*) in general, he now observes his deceasing friend Paul. „*Ein paarmal habe ich ihn, ohne daß er davon eine Ahnung hatte, in der Innenstadt beobachtet, wie er nur mühselig, fortwährend darauf bedacht allerdings, seine ihm angemessene Haltung zu bewahren, an den Wänden der Grabenhäuser entlang ging, auf den Kohlmarkt und bis zur Michaelkirche und darauf noch in die Stallburggasse, tatsächlich und in dem ganz eigentlichen Sinn des Wortes nurmehr noch als der Schatten eines Menschen, vor welchem ich auf einmal Angst gehabt habe. Ich getraute mich nicht, ihn anzusprechen. Ich ertrug lieber mein schlechtes Gewissen als die Begegnung mit ihm. Ich beobachtete ihn und ging, mein schlechtes Gewissen unterdrückend, nicht auf ihn zu, ich fürchtete ihn auf einmal. Wir meiden die vom Tod Gezeichneten und auch ich hatte dieser Niedrigkeit nachgegeben. Ich mied in den letzten Monaten seines Lebens meinen Freund ganz bewußt aus dem niedrigen Selbsterhaltungstrieb, was ich mir nicht verzeihe.* (WN, 148) [...] *Ich beobachtete ihn und schämte mich gleichzeitig. Denn ich empfand es als Schande, noch nicht am Ende zu sein, während der Freund es schon war. Ich bin kein guter Charakter. Ich bin ganz einfach kein guter Mensch.* (WN, 149) [...] *Je unbarmherziger sein Verfall, desto eleganter war jetzt seine Kleidung gewesen, aber gerade diese kostbaren und gleichzeitig eleganten Stücke aus seiner Garderobe, die er von einem Jahren verstorbenen Fürsten Schwarzenberg geerbt hatte, machten den Anblick des schon beinahe ganz Ausgelebten zur Qual. Es war aber durchaus kein groteskes Bild, das er jetzt zeigte, sondern das erschütternde.* (WN, 150)”

Not merely the satiric perspective, but also the distance of the comical becomes impossible here; the observer gets too close. Observing cannot be fun any more because observing, the lack of pity is negligence in a situation like this. According to the most probable hypothesis, the character of the fool Arlecchino/Harlequin originates from the Hellequin-character of French passion plays. In these passion plays the black-faced messenger of the devil, Hellequin, with his bunch of demons runs through the countryside chasing the damned souls of evil people to hell. The most rigid and most pregnant nucleus of Diderot’s and Bernhard’s public role-playing and writing is the posture, the role of Hellequin,

the Hellequin-pose. They chase to hell a considerable number of their contemporaries, even former friends, but in a way that they themselves are manifested as demonic characters; this alleged demonic characteristic saves them from falling into the ridiculous role of the moralist Pharisee; this self-demonising pattern in which their often comical and excessive self-reproach continuously counterpoints their often comical and excessive reproach of others.

IV.

Humorists rather than satirists. They could get over people's heads for brief periods only; they could suspend or forget about the continuous labour of the law of gravity for moments only; gravity in its turn pulls them off back down to earth from their god-like levitating, observing position, and now they are forced again into another posture in the never-ending universal earthly pantomime. Rameau is tempted by the possibility of heavenly undisturbed observation and judgment by Diderot-on-stage, but he refuses to give in. With this gesture author Diderot himself seems to refuse to give in for this temptation. "ME: So there you are, too, if I can use your expression or rather Montaigne's, perched on the epicycle of Mercury, contemplating the different pantomimes of the human species.

HIM: No, no I'm telling you. I'm too heavy to raise myself so high. Those misty regions I leave to the cranes. I move around from one piece of earth to another. I look around me, and I take up my positions, or I amuse myself with positions which I have derived from others. I'm an excellent mimic, as you're going to see." (RN) The law of gravity is impartial, it makes no exceptions: one should bear in mind this in order to be impartial, or at least in order to be able to strive for an impartiality that could never be realised perfectly. It is not possible to elevate over postures permanently; it is only possible to be conscious about my own positions and those of others. My own posture, my stiffen motion of character, my routine reaction can only be made conscious in retrospect, when I am already free from the fit; under the rule of the fit I am helpless like an epileptic. Diderot-on-stage of course, could not give up the ideal of the philosopher, of a "creature who can do without pantomime". Although "whoever

needs someone else is a beggar and takes up a position”, and “what you [that is, Rameau – LZ] call the pantomime of beggars is what makes the earth go round”. and there is no exception for this, even not for a king; however, the philosopher Diogenes “who has nothing and who demands nothing” is not a beggar because he “mocked his needs” and thus no one calls the tune for him, he has his own tune to whistle. But the form of the dialogue implies that Diderot-on-stage himself is positioned, his values, among them his ideal of the philosopher (himself), are at stake in the game of the dialogue where there is no guarantee for profit. It is not certain that he is the one to laugh last, to laugh best. Rameau says to Diderot-I: “I think you’re making fun of me, Mister Philosopher. You don’t know who you’re playing with. You don’t suspect that at this moment I represent the most important party in the town and at court.” (RN) It is the dangerous possibility hidden in satire (as it is in irony) that it turns against the satirist through the accepted and prestigious public opinion, no matter how evidently stupid this public opinion may be. Then it is the satyr’s turn to laugh. Satirist now falls to a lower, that is, more defenceless position than the position of the satyr, because the former is always interested in winning. That’s why he plays more carefully; he tries to remain invulnerable, as Jorge Luis Borges puts it in his essay “The Art of Insult”. Borges later modifies his claim: he says that the satirist’s carefulness is identical with the carefulness of the card-sharper who knows which cards he should combine in order to create a pseudo-figure. The careful satirist knows that any socially effective insult is built on conventions and prejudices. Doctors are charlatans, lawyers are corrupt, politicians are criminals. These are the sure cards; all of them nicked a bit. The art of satire consists in playing out these socially nicked cards at the right moment, in the right way, and with the greatest self-evidence. Nicked cards are not always untrue; the chance to play them out does not depend on their truth, but on their unspoken self-evident character, on the quiet consensus, the silent gesture of social panderism. The satirist is a social card-sharper after all who pretends to be outside or above the social game of cards, but he is in it more than anyone else with his passionate desire for winning. Satire is the most sophisticated and most reflected passion for gambling. Diderot-on-stage (Diderot-in-the-game) opposes the satyr’s gluttonous *libertinage* not with the satirist’s addiction to insulting and winning but with the undemanding freedom of the philosopher. During the dialogue Diderot-on-stage, while praising the idealistic philosopher, manifests the sophist who is laughed at,

the parody of the philosopher, the object of ridicule; his own character counterpoints his own ideal. The philosopher-laughed-at is the hypocrite. Philosopher-costume does not suit the philosopher-laughed-at; the monk's cowl is too loose: it becomes a fool's masquerade.

“Why else do we so often see devout people so hard, so angry, so unsociable? It's because they've imposed on themselves a task which isn't natural to them. They suffer, and when one suffers, one makes others suffer” (RN) – says Rameau.

The philosopher-laughed-at, the hypocrite could not laugh freely because he is prevented from laughing by a stiffen motion of character, by an externally imposed moral fit. Diderot-on-stage describes his own conditions while observing Rameau thus:

“I listened to him. While he was acting out the scene of the procurer and the young girl being seduced, I was pulled in two opposite directions—I didn't know whether to give in to my desire to laugh or get carried away with anger. I was perplexed.” (RN)

Narrator Diderot writes in the introductory lines that while he was sitting on his customary bench he let his thoughts the greatest *libertinage* possible; he says:

“*Mes pensées, ce sont mes catins.* [For me, my thoughts are my prostitutes.]” (RN) He shows off these thoughts. He pays for these thoughts in exchange of their pleasure. In public life free thoughts are prostitutes, that is, published thoughts are prostitutes, publication is a means of prostitution, the prostitution of one's own head. The author of *Le neveu de Rameau* is at least as much a satyr as he is a satirist. A humorist rather than a philosopher.

V.

In the text *Wittgensteins Neffe* two prize-giving ceremonies become the most intensive and most explosive kind of scenes in the social drama. Both prizes was given to character Bernhard: he receives the Grillparzer Prize from the Austrian

Academy of Sciences, and, later on, the so-called “*Staatspreis*” from the Austrian State. Character Bernhard could not be mere observer during these ceremonies, he has to take his role, and, in accordance with social custom, this role would be the leading role. However, in the Academy he seems more like an insignificant extra, in the audience hall of the Ministry he acts like an actor falling out of his role. It seems that prize-giving ceremonies would work much better without the prize-winner’s presence after all. His friend Paul escorts character Bernhard to both ceremonies; according to narrator Bernhard the description of these ceremonies in the book are meant to demonstrate Paul’s strength of character and presence of mind. Paul is the one in these situations who is able to see them as they are: as plays, as rituals; and thus he is able to value them and react to them in a suitable way. He clearly feels that his existence remains untouched by these ceremonies, no matter how he reacts, and thus his freedom to react remains untouched; he stays intellectually independent. During the Grillparzer Prize Ceremony he intervenes: he bursts into a loud and lonely laughter. Bergson writes in *Laughter* that “the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art.” (HB) Later, when he speaks about social ceremonies, he claims: “The ceremonial side of social life must, therefore, always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view. It might be said that ceremonies are to the social body what clothing is to the individual body: they owe their seriousness to the fact that they are identified, in our minds, with the serious object with which custom associates them, and when we isolate them in imagination, they forthwith lose their seriousness. For any ceremony, then, to become comic, it is enough that our attention be fixed on the ceremonial element in it, and that we neglect its matter, as philosophers say, and think only of its form. Everyone knows how easily the comic spirit exercises its ingenuity on social actions of a stereotyped nature, from an ordinary prize-distribution to the solemn sitting of a court of justice. Any form or formula is a ready-made frame into which the comic element may be fitted.” (HB) The comic is the mere form without content, or, to be more precise, a form in which we imagined content previously; we thought about this suit that it contains a human being, and now we see that it won’t move, now we realise that it hangs on a dummy. Bergson, in this context at least, does not think through that when I separate form from its content, I—in that very moment—could not help filling it with another

content, as form and content are correlational concepts, none of them having any sense without the other. And this is not mere sophism. Bergson does not problematise the “social body” because in his essay the relationship between mechanic and organic, between the rigid seriality of the machine and the continuous motion of the living body is itself conceived as rigid and static counterpoints. The description of the Grillparzer Prize-giving Ceremony is introduced by the buying of the suitable suit. “*Der neue Anzug war grauschwarz und ich dachte, in diesem neuen grauschwarzen Anzug werde ich meine Rolle in der Akademie der Wissenschaften besser spielen können, als in meinem alten.*” (WN 106.) It turns out soon that the suit is tight. According to character Bernhard it is the result of the mistake he makes time and time again, the one he should never make again: to buy a suit before the eyes of others. Changing the suit uncovers the body for a moment, and then again re-covers it into a tighter space, analogously, the podium of the social ceremony becomes a narrow cage for the character. Character Bernhard is not received, even not recognised at the Academy, then, after he has taken a seat among the audience, he is arrogantly ordered to join the Minister on the podium and out of sheer defiance he joins the social game of ranks and positions: he insists that the President of the Academy of Sciences should personally ask him to join the others on the podium. With this reaction character Bernhard has already taken up his position. This time the suit is not loose but too tight. “*Ich selbst hatte mich in den Käfig gesperrt. Ich selbst hatte mir die Akademie der Wissenschaften zum Käfig gemacht. Es gab keinen Ausweg. Schließlich war der Präsident der Akademie zu mir gekommen und ich bin mit dem Präsidenten der Akademie bis vor das Podium gegangen und habe mich neben die Ministerin gesetzt. In dem Augenblick, in welchem ich mich neben die Ministerin gesetzt habe, hat sich mein Freund Paul nicht beherrschen können und ist in ein den ganzen Saal erschütterndes Lachen ausgebrochen, das solange gedauert hat, bis die philharmonischen Kammermitglieder zu spielen angefangen haben.*” (WN, 112). After leaving the Academy in anger character Bernhard returns to the Kohlmarkt where he bought his suit, complains about its being tight, and asks for another suit. With the repetition of the changing of the suit the comic aspect becomes obvious for him at last: he imagines that in a few minutes another body will run to and fro along the streets of Vienna in the suit he just put down; the same suit in which he was humiliated at the Academy will be filled with another miserable content. The other prize-giving ceremony in the

audience hall of the Ministry turns into a scandal. Following the so-called laudatio of the Minister, “*der dumme Mensch aus der Steiermark*”, in which he spoke nothing but nonsense (*Unsinn*), character Bernhard, in his turn of podium speech, in “*eine kleine philosophischen Abschweifung*” animates the Minister to such an extent that this latter punches character Bernhard in the face, then leaves in outrage, shutting the glass door after himself and thus shattering it to pieces, producing a nice theatrical finale for the ceremony. The question is how the audience reacts, how they use the opportunity: it is their turn to act now. “*Einen Augenblick herrschte, wie gesagt wird, vollkommene Ruhe. Darauf geschah das Merkwürdige: die ganze Gesellschaft, die ich doch nur als Opportunistenmeute bezeichnen kann, ist dem Minister nachgerannt, nicht ohne vorher noch gegen mich vorzugehen nicht nur mit Schimpfwörtern, sondern auch mit geballten Fäusten, ich erinnere mich genau an die geballte Fäuste, die der Präsident des Kunstsenats, Herr Henz, mir entgegengeschleudert hat, wie an alle anderen gegen mich vorgebrachten Ehrenbezeugungen in diesem Augenblick. [...] Keiner war bei mir und meinem Lebensmenschen geblieben, alle waren sie, an dem für sie aufgestellten Buffet vorbei, hinausgestürzt und dem Minister nach und hinunter – bis auf Paul. Er war der einzige, der bei mir und meiner Lebensgefährtin, meinem Lebensmenschen, stehengeblieben war, entsetzt und amüsiert gleichzeitig von dem Zwischenfall.*” (WN, 116-7.) Paul’s laughter suits his customary role of audience- and performance-provocateur, but it gets a new aspect at the Academy: it is turned against a social ceremony. There is nothing provocative in his refusal to join the “opportunist bunch” though. He rather joins his friend, and they amuse themselves on the *Zwischenfall*. This is a natural gesture of partaking, in contrast with observation.

¹ Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgensteins Neffe. Eine Freundschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982. (WN from now on.) pp. 45-6.

² http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/diderot/rameau_E.htm Online version in Ian Johnston’s translation. (RN from now on.)

³ Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay ont he Meaning of Comic*. Authorised Translation by Cloudesley Brereton L. es L. (Paris), M.A. (Cantab) and Fred Rothwell b.a. (London). Online version: <http://www.authorama.com/laughter-1.html> (HB from now on.)

⁴ John Rudlin, *Commedia Dell'arte. An Actor's Handbook*. Routledge, 1994.
See http://books.google.com/books?id=PIXRy1G8bHcC&dq=commedia+dell'arte&printsec=frontcover&source=in&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=12&ct=result#PPP1,M1