

Of Joyrides & Killjoys

Manu Bazzano

Hermeneutic Circular, April 2022, pp.29-31.

During love, the impersonal jewel of the moment shines in the air, the strange glory of the body, matter made feeling in the trembling of the instants – and the feeling is both immaterial and so objective that it seems to happen outside your body, sparkling on high, joy, joy is time's material and the essence of the instant.

(Clarice Lispector, *Agua Viva*)

How can moments go so slow? (Brian Eno, *Golden Hours*)

1

It feels different today. Kira's gaze is soft, her tone affecting as she begins to speak. I am on the edge of tears and will feel that way through the hour. I don't know why. Our first session after a month break, after her time of blissful solitude and travel. After much sadness and pain and fury. Last week she reconnected with her ex-lover after many years. They had an affair back then, intense, joyous – an unblemished secret. Then sex was suspended in favour of a testing friendship and artistic partnership of ten years, during which they created beautiful things together, works I was lucky to see. Our beautiful friendship, she says. The beautiful things we made, there for all to see. Your children, I say to her. And to myself: How can love survive without lovers making something together? It would be exhausted consummation, as in a D.H. Lawrence novel, the back and forth of love and hate without a deeper love to hold them both.

We made love last week in the afternoon, she says. It was moving and I can't convey it. But you are, I say. You look and feel different. I feel it on my skin; it sings an ineffable tune. Gone is your fury at an unfair world, your magnificent fury against public-school boys running the show. Time suspended, she says, a crossing of semantic circuits. Happy-sad? sad-happy? Is this what joy is? She asks the room.

2

What is 'the body' – this body that moves and feels beyond organs and beyond the factual poetry of biology? *Incorporeal materialism; materiality of the incorporeal*: Foucault was on to something. And so was Spinoza: affect suspends action-reaction loops; it suspends linear time. And Deleuze: *bodying* requires a more abstract and exacting language than the

functionality of linguistic conventions ever allows. And Lispector: the body-in-love as the translucent star-like abstraction of feeling, seizing the moment firmly as crystal, vibrating in space.

A body that *feels* and *moves* generates, by feeling and moving, a fellow-traveller, a subtler body that is *of* the body. During sex, the body does not entirely align with itself. This may not be the case with miserly sex, but it may happen when sex chances on “the *is* of the thing” (Lispector). A sex that does not objectify, that is not geared towards the man’s ejaculation, that allows the isness of things to hover and linger. Kira reprimands me: ‘What’s wrong with being seen as an object?’ And: ‘Are you not setting up an ideal of spiritual sex? What if it’s just like eating?’ Fine I say and for the time being retreat.

3

There is a subject (a self) engendered in the co-ontology of sex. Not the Cartesian, Husserlian, or Sartrean self, but a subject coming into being *despite* the self. Artists know this: a colour, a sound, a dance move comes unbidden, unbidable. Nothing to do with the ‘free expression’ of a self-consciously expressive self. Similarly, the emerging subject in sex is ecstatic: *outside* the self. It takes one’s breath away. It takes away – briefly – one’s identity and linear narrative, opening a space akin to the space of art. One might as well call this domain by its proper name: *affect*, or: the feeling of life.

What chances do existential therapists have to tune in to this dimension? Not many, in my view, if their theoretical support is Heidegger, chief influencer in the existential approach. While it is true that Heidegger does pay attention to the affective register of experience, his focus is narrowed-down to anxiety (*Angst*) and worry (*Sorge* – wrongly translated as ‘care’). It knows nothing of desire, and it fails to notice that anxiety is often linked to desire.

What does it mean that in non-miserly sex a new subject is born? What does *being born* mean anyway? For one thing, the newness of the new-born places it beyond representation. Suspended outside linear time, lovers hear the new-born’s ineffable tune. ‘Ineffable’ is probably not the right word: it’s too mystical, too sublime, too aligned with the divine. Maybe that’s what Kira objects to: the holy-moly, the image of a precious yogi-&-yogini pair mimicking tantra inside a hygge version of Plato’s cave, mindfully sipping their turmeric latte.

4

OK Kira, I get it. I throw my hands up in the air (this time). Too much God in it, a God who’s been dead for ages, its carcass oozing cheap metaphysics from all orifices, its nails sprouting

into theological claws. So where do we go after the death of God? To 'the body'? Look closely: there is no such thing as 'the body'; it is a notion conceived in bitter resentment against the flesh, and reductively thought of as the jail of the soul. The 'body', this last refuge of the atomist, is but a metaphysical notion. Perhaps it is only through the joyride of non-miserly sexual *abandon* that lovers engender a different body: body of love, the newly-born, the beloved-abandoned-to-the-world and to this western wind heralding Spring.

Abandonment: the act of banishing, *mettere al bando*, turning someone – through sanction, decree, or injunction – into a banned individual; converting a citizen into a bandit. In this sense then lovers, abandoned to the newly-born body of love, are outcasts. They find themselves in good company amid the founders of great and enduring western myths. Baby Oedipus, abandoned on a mountainside. Baby Moses, abandoned in a papyrus basket coated with tar and pitch among the reeds on the bank of the Nile. A young man called Jesus, dying on the cross crying out 'Why have you abandoned me?'

Lovers too are in a state of abandonment. Outside the instinctual/religious command to grow and procreate; at variance with the mandate to take mutual delight solely within the bounds of a socially-sanctified sexual contract – be it monogamous or polyamorous – they enter the sovereign zone of Bataille's *community of lovers*, regally at odds with both the vertical, *patriarchal* socio-political order and the equally prescriptive horizontal, 'siblingly' diktats of absolutist transparency. One does not join this community of lovers through adherence to old or new rulebooks (be they S&M pantomimes or the bankable plea to be catalogued inside a box – dominant/submissive, top/bottom etc) but through a fleeting, poised proximity to a solidarity without a subject – a solidarity attuned to the continuous movement of lifedeath and deathlife, a solidarity whose fire may transfigure and transubstantiate the self.

Abandonment implies that a bond has been lost. The lover may walk alone to the station under the early morning drizzle, his beloved indifferent in her sleep. Or they may be both wide awake in a white room, when the sun, that busy old fool, begins to set, dictating yet another farewell. No matter. Abandonment also implies a loss that preceded the bond. All is lost from the beginning; every bond is transient. Yet some of us get stuck in the maudlin task of re-seduction – attempting to repair (compulsively, repetitively) what was unbroken.

Sex is trouble – *ado* in Shakespeare. It is tension, disorder, excitement, embarrassment, confusion. It derails the orderly thought and conduct so ennobled by the philosophical traditions. It is imperilled by the concerted burdens of legal punishment, social biases, and ambiguous desires, tempting us all the while with the very real possibility of learning new modes of being in the world. *Affect* too is trouble. To be affected is to be destabilized. But how on earth can a practitioner work effectively without being affected, without suffering at times what Pokerfaced Psychotherapy calls ‘vicarious trauma’? And how can a lover shield herself from the vagaries of love? She may be guided by that ancient wisecrack: *keep your mind in hell, and despair not*. Lofty wisdom to be sure, but what often happens is: ‘keep your mind in hell and drive *the other* to despair’. Does it all come down to power *over* the other – envy, greed, and jealousy masquerading as love? Who in the world is prepared to accept with Spinoza that true power is the power to be affected, and to go along with old Baruch in finding that every emotion leads to joy?

6

Whatever happened to joy? It has become a dissonance in the far corner of the bedroom; it has drowned in the dullness and rigidity of a contemporary sex which is embedded within the idiotic frame of patriarchal/hierarchical models – from the violence that simmers politely in the family to the techno-savvy, murder-by-drone savagery of neo-imperial power to the oppressive power of Wall Street, Hollywood, the media, and academia. It is not controversial to say that within these domains sexism reigns supreme. What is fairly new is that since *#MeToo*, these are now also the domains where considerable profit is made through the proliferation of enfeebled progressive narratives which succeed in turning sex from the serious *and* joyous thing it’s meant to be into an exclusively serious matter that has to be legislated.

Whatever happened to joy? There was a time, Clare Colebrook laments, when sex *meant something*. It spoke of a longing forever striving beyond itself towards an otherness that cannot be apprehended. There was a time, she adds, where sex *meant nothing*. Tastes, habits, and styles did not need to be advertised. “One could be a boy playing Shakespeare’s Juliet and not be marked as trans or nonbinary”, she writes. “One could write poetry in which one’s female muse was a modified double of one’s male self, and it would *mean nothing*”. Is hers a form of nostalgia for the good old days when you could have a carefree roll in the hay? I don’t think so. The ordinary killjoys of the recent past – Catherine MacKinnon or Andrea Dworkin

come to mind – had good reasons for critiquing violence and misogyny, but were perhaps naïve, it has been argued by Leo Bersani and others – in implying that it is possible to resolve the complexities and intricacies of sex via contractual agreement, a simplistic view that has become the norm over the last decade.

7

Eros remains forever lawless.

8

Whatever happened to joy? When in despair, I open at random Joyce's *Ulysses*, celebrating its 100th birthday this year, as it unfailingly provides joyful inspiration. Its syntactical infringements, its repudiation of specifying the inner from the outer, the openness to the freewheeling movement of mind and world entwined, and in love with both. The loving way it celebrates a mode of masculinity that is gentle and amusing in the to and fro between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus – so uplifting at a time when the noun 'masculinity' is now routinely preceded by the adjective 'toxic'.

(Lost in the strait-laced backwoods of woke capitalism; dazed and confused by women's projections towards me and by my own projections towards them; hungry for the company of men, for the joy of combined/communal strength and vulnerability, for companionable laughter, warm tears and tender talks, on a cold day in January this year I reconnected with some old pals and it feels good to know that I'll be facilitating men's groups again).

Joyce's celebration of female desire and female sexual agency is tender and unpatronizing. Here is an extract from Molly Bloom's lengthy monologue on the novel's last page – as sacred a text in my view as the Buddha's flower sermon:

and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and the pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

9

Kira is adamant. She says she doesn't want the love between them to 'go anywhere'. She is not in competition with her lover's wife, nor is she intending to break up his family. I remain

sceptical. I know and she knows that soon enough inner and outer shadows will condense around the hallowed moments of joy she is now experiencing with her clandestine lover. During these moments of eternity, the unbearable – the encounter with otherness – almost appears bearable. For now, however brief their interlude, they have joined the community of lovers. She knows and I know that it won't be over once it's over, that it will go on after it's over, that he'll be in her like bittersweet wine for a while longer, and that he'll hear her soft voice in his dreams for a while longer.

My thanks to Jean-Luc Nancy and Lauren Berlant.

Manu will give a talk/performance, **Wayward Angel**, on Thursday 5th May at the October Gallery, Holborn, London at 7pm. Hosted by the *Society for Existential Analysis*. Tickets and more details: <https://community.existentialanalysis.org.uk/event/wayward-angel-manu-bazzano-5th-may-2022-7-9pm-october-gallery-london>