

Identity, Mockery and Democracy

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The Irish experience of colonisation and migration has much to tell us of three related questions: What has mockery to do with an identity forged from resistance? What is it to be a democrat whose vision is inclusivist? And, is kindness something that only individuals can extend to others? But let me begin with one of the things which psychoanalysis has to teach us.

It is not clear what it would be to feel at home - completely so, as it were. After all, since the psychic unconscious exists, are we not always, to some degree, strangers to ourselves? Are we not always in the business of finding out who we are and might become, of trying to come up with some solution to the question, "To what or who am I equal?"

If I ask myself, "Do I feel completely at home in myself" and answer "Yes, I do", it's a pretty good bet that I'm not good company in the pub. In flight from the curious, question-asking child in me, I must have stopped taking myself as an interesting specimen of inquiry, stopped trying on new clothes for size and convinced myself that my internal conflicts can, and should be, silenced. For, as Adam Phillips suggests in his recent book, *Equals*¹ it may well be that our conflicts are what make life worth living and convince us that we are truly alive. Without our conflicts to guide us, we would have nothing with which to compare our moments of joy, the pleasures we experience and much else besides. Conflict can be understood as the fuel that drives us forward, as that which makes our imagining of new horizons possible.

Another way of saying this is that being human and everyday suffering are two sides of the same living coin. And from that follows that there will never be a society in which we will not struggle with our repudiated shadow sides, with our aggressiveness and envy, with our rivalries and with our propensity to believe that we lie at the centre of the universe. Being human is to be conflicted, then; it is to conduct a struggle with ourselves, and to suffer beneath the skins which our historical times and cultural locations have fashioned for us. I think it important to emphasise this point, if not only because our conflicts can so easily be palmed off onto other people. It is equally important however, to acknowledge that there has always been something dubious about the brand of psychoanalysis that holds that 'integration' is what we should be striving for. To be preferred is the notion of a fluidity born from acceptance of the committee of sub-personalities which constitutes every human being.

A History of Colonisation

Yet, there are some species of conflict which prove unbearable precisely because they have NOT been generated from within us. Our conflicting impulses and desires are not at issue now. Nor are our capacities for loving and working without, as Freud would have put it, gross inhibition. One such species of externally generated conflict stems from the history of colonisation, from a history of deformation that, as in the Irish case and many others, is still too alive for comfort.

I would like to share an anecdote about my father who is dead now. He was in England during the war years, experienced the Blitz in London, and, later in his life, often spoke to me with gratitude of the many kind people he had met here. He did not

forget. Yet he remained furious with the 'British', as he called them. Not for him the controversial and painful discussions we can have these days about who does and does not belong amongst the 'British'. His fury, which was often disguised by an odd mixture of joking and vehemence, expressed itself in the flirtation he liked to conduct with the republicanism of Irish politics. Somewhere inside him he felt humiliated by what the British had done in Ireland. And he sought to deal with his fury and humiliation by, amongst other means, taking pleasure in the disappearance of the British Empire, and mocking the Queen - whom he called, with childish glee, Lizzie Windsor. He could be hilarious on a good night with a whiskey or two to hand.

What am I trying to get at? Well, it seems to me that mockery of the oppressor, of the Other who has wounded our sense of who we are, who has besmirched our place of birth, is an efficient way - an ego-syntonic way, some of the psychoanalytic literature would call it - of getting our own back. Let's think about that phrase, 'getting our own back'. Taking it literally, it is saying that something has been lost, but that we can recover it, or re-invent it or somehow grant it a new significance in our lives. This is where mockery enters the picture. Because mockery can serve our newly emerging self-image well, and so release us from a haunting by the colonising Other, it can help to transform the power relations between the humiliator and the humiliated. The once humiliated comes to find the humiliator absurd, too big for his boots and books, and so takes delight in sticking a pin in the balloon. As you have humiliated mankind and me, so I will now mock you and yours. This tells us that though mockery is often funny, liberating too, its seed corn is revenge: it is meant to hurt.

We must respect this everyday revenge if those whose ancestors were colonisers were to be less cruel to those who are not like them. To put it in another way, because it takes mockery to transform histories of humiliation, the Other whose ancestors were colonisers must be prepared to suffer a little, and to forgive. And that is why I like to imagine my father at tea with Lizzie Windsor: he's taking the piss, as usual, but Her Majesty is laughing at his anti-British jokes.

This line of thought suggests that we should begin thinking of the history of colonisation not just in terms of oppression and loss but also in terms of a resistance to its effects which assumes the form of mockery. My father's mockery was born of a self-confidence made possible by the heroes of the Irish Free State; by resisters who refused to embrace the destiny designed for them by their oppressors. In this sense, his mockery of Lizzie Windsor and all she represented for him, came not from him but from his identification with the men and women who fought to found the country that is now the Republic of Ireland. Rather than identifying with the aggressor, he identified with the resisters. And so do I, his son, for otherwise I could not be writing as I am now.

A Diverse Community of Equals

I will introduce my second theme, democracy, by remembering that John Mortimer, of Rumpole of the Bailey fame, long ago wrote a play called *A Voyage Around my Father*. It's a beautifully poignant piece and very funny, too. Most of all, though, it's a homage to a father who, though he was often daft, inexplicable and cantankerous, left his son a rich legacy. What my father has left me is an essential knowledge, one that has helped me to be serious about my wish to live in a diverse community of equals.

All of us know that we must find it in our hearts to welcome differences of all sorts rather than take refuge in the narcissistic fantasy that all of us must be, and remain, the same.

Failure to embrace this knowledge, and to act upon it as best we can, will inevitably lead to resentment, to the worst expressions of nationalism and to what is probably the greatest sin of them all - lack of hospitality. Amnesia and being inhospitable are related: when my door is closed to you, stranger, I have forgotten how hard it has been for me to find a secure place in the world. To which the good psychodynamic counsellor adds: “You do not know what it is you are repudiating when you deny the stranger your door. When you can accept the many facets of yourself, invite the repudiated in you into your own home, the stranger will lose her power to frighten you.”

This provides us with another slant on the toxic legacy of colonisation and on a democracy for which it is worth striving for the kind of democracy Richard Rorty² has written about so well. For Rorty, democracy - what he calls, with tongue in cheek, ‘bourgeois liberalism’ - is not simply a sociopolitical order in which the relations between state and civil institutions are regulated by law. Rorty is as much concerned with our beliefs about, and attitudes towards, others and ourselves in writing of the society of the future he wishes to see. For my purposes, he can be understood as holding to two related theses. First, that though our ‘identities’ can be lived as if they had some essence to them, as if they were born rather than made, they are nevertheless historically contingent, constructed things. So much that we hold dear is built on shifting sands. We know this from our practice: depression can secrete the possibility of transformation, and grief, although it can be terrible, can provide us with the opportunity of re-inventing ourselves. Perhaps, too, that our identities are changing things partly accounts for why inhospitable nationalism and similar ideologies can take such a hold on our imaginations; it is as if we sense that our identities are so fragile that we are driven to defend them by all means at our disposal, I will return to this point.

Rorty’s second thesis is that democracy is a lie if it does not seek to widen the range of those who will count as belonging amongst ‘us’ - to ‘our’ community. We must act to increase the ‘us’ and so decrease the ‘them’. On this understanding, racism and sexism, malignant cancers of the social body, make nonsense of our claim to be democrats. So Rorty’s advice is that if we are to envision the form of life we wish to see, we require a public sphere where those who have thus far been excluded from community can be heard. This seems unexceptional, even banal, until we add that being heard is not just a question of enjoying certain legally codified statuses. Being truly heard requires listening by an audience willing to transform itself.

An analogy will make this clearer, one which comes from Jung’s vision of the psychotherapeutic process. For Jung, it is not only the so-called ‘patient’ who is changed by undertaking psychotherapy. Every time the therapist encounters the patient, she too is transformed, in some way. True dialogue, in other words, is a mutually transformative practice. And so it is for Rorty’s vision of the democracy of the future, one all of us can help to prefigure in our every day conduct. If you, a black woman, tell me, a white man, that some of my attitudes and beliefs are racist, I owe it to you, and to myself if I wish to be a practising democrat, to undertake self-examination and, if necessary, transformation. Only in that way will my ideal of inclusivity cease being pious cant.

We can read Rorty here as saying something that complements much that is valuable in recent psychoanalytical thinking informed by postmodern themes. ‘Identity’ can be as much an imprisonment as a liberation, as much a violent assault upon the newcomer as an illusionary refuge for the ‘us’ who experiences an assault when a welcome is extended to those not like ‘us’. My old homeland, much like some homelands in the Middle East, is struggling now with this Janus-faced character of identity. Those who have fought hard to

win independence from their oppressors, to make their new identities on their own terms, are presently in grave danger of becoming like their old aggressors.³

Three Broad Conclusions

From these reflections I have come to three broad conclusions. The first is this: it is so easy, frighteningly so, to buy our 'identities' at the cost of cruelty to others. We can buy our comfort at the price of the Other's suffering. When that happens there will be resistance - a resistance that will manifest itself in numerous ways, all depending on the resources to hand. When those resources are few or not present, we can assume that our way of life is, in the terms used by Michel Foucault, an order of domination. Power has become domination. But we do not live in such a state in England today. For resistance is everywhere around us, as is what resistance has made possible - spaces from where the excluded can struggle so as not only to belong to the 'us' but to transform its very character.

Controversy may be provoked by my second conclusion. I have said that many people were kind to my father when he was in England. But the kindness at issue was not, I believe, simply an attribute of some of the good people he was fortunate to meet. Kindness can go deeper than that when it belongs to a tradition. I, too, have experienced kindness of the latter sort in this land. This country has educated and trained me as a counsellor, has allowed me to travel back and forth to Dublin without a passport and has given me a job I much enjoy. Is this because I am a white, middle-class man? And, is the anomaly vis-à-vis my passport to be understood as some idiosyncratic leftover from colonisation? Perhaps partly so, on both counts, but that is far from being the whole story. For England has long shown its hospitality to strangers, even as it now struggles to welcome so-called asylum seekers and refugees. Like it or not, therefore, and for all its faults, because this land has extended the hand of fellowship to innumerable strangers, it has gone some way towards prefiguring the good society we wish to see. For this reason, 'England' (if one may speak in such terms) has a great deal to be proud of, although it has still a long way to go in granting equal opportunity to all its citizens.

In saying this, I am remembering what a kind woman said to me in the discussion that followed my paper. I must not forget, she said, that skin colour has proven a powerful determinant of migrants' experience in England. I did not then, and do not now, wish to say anything to the contrary. Yet, nor do I believe that this land is usefully understood as being 'racist'. That there are still many unashamed racists amongst us, and that we still have a long way to go in combating racist practices, attitudes and 'common sense', does not mean to say that we - all of us - have learnt nothing of cruelty. Indeed, that we can have conferences like the one for which I wrote the present paper shows that spaces exist for us - for all of us, together - to protest that the country we wish to live in has not yet been achieved.⁴

MY third conclusion is that if we are to be democrats worth the name, we have an ethical obligation to welcome and celebrate the transformational potential that our diversity entails. We must always strive to treat others as we ourselves would wish to be treated. We must be prepared to lose our old horizons, our visions of homeland, so as to expand who may belong to 'us'. There is a paradox here: whilst loss is the price we have to pay if we are to be kind in a diverse society, it is nevertheless true that we can get our own back in a welcoming land. That is what songs, poems and all the other witnesses to cultural memory can do for us. Put in another way, unless we can renounce our bad habit of conceiving of, and living our hard-won identities on the model of once-and-for-all fashioned things, the secular God Cruelty will win again.

When we allow Him sovereignty, we will encounter the stranger, and her memorabilia, as an explosive threat rather than as a source of enrichment. And we will be unable to bear life-affirming mockery - a mockery which, though it always hurts, can be understood as one of the growing pains of a new order of things.

References

1. Phillips, A. (2002) *Equals*. London: Faber.
2. See, for example, Rorty, R. (1989) *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and (1998a) *Truth and Progress*. CUP.
3. In holding that cruelty is the worst thing we do, Rorty is not writing of torture only, but of capricious, tantalising parenting, of, say, a teacher's abuse of power, of the maliciousness of everyday gossip, and similar human failings. Moreover, he is being a good, and, to my mind, challenging, 'bourgeois liberal' in insisting that cruelty is what we do when, by whatever means, we fail to live up to the practical dream of Enlightenment. On this view, cruelty is what we do when we refuse to extend to others the privileges we, in the 'west', are lucky to enjoy.
4. See Rorty, R. (1998b) *Achieving Our Country*. CUP

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