

If We Be With Things

1 Humour

Gradually it dawns on us.

“It dawns on us.” Katarina Zdjelar’s piece *Shoum* partly plays with this very expression – that something dawns on us or starts to dawn on us. And perhaps this *something* is already too much. *It* dawns on us.

When something dawns on us, the about-ness of things, of texts, of artefacts, is temporarily bracketed. Something is appearing, coming to light, and this is the only thing that concerns us. We are accustomed to saying that we watch the dawn because we are so used to watching dawns. In that sense the dawn no longer dawns on us. When it dawns on us we experience something being done to us and with us and through us, not in terms of manipulation but in terms of a growing and attentive togetherness. There is a kind of encompassing awareness involved, a growing clarity, a lightening up.

In a mathematical, philosophical and aesthetic sense, this was at stake when Gilles Deleuze made the distinction between  $2 + 2 = 4$  and  $2 + 2 \& 4$ . In the first case the 2 and the 2 are replaced by the 4, this is because in the West we read in a linear way from left to right, and learn in the process that the 2s are instrumental in getting us to the 4. If we were to reverse the direction the result would be different. Then, although the process remains similar, the 4 is gradually taken apart, it becomes divided, becoming lost in its constituent parts. So there is either the construction of 4 by the elimination of something else or the destruction of the 4 through the pronunciation of its constituent parts. The process itself almost seems to exist apart from us. Or, when connected to us, it is a distinctly instrumental process that allows us to make things less complex as a result of which we can more easily manipulate and act.

To be sure, in the case of  $2 + 2 \& 4$  there is also a difference when we reverse the direction of reading, but this is a difference in texture. The  $2 + 2$  is with the 4, or the 4 is with the  $2 + 2$ . We do not replace or equalize, we do not multiply, nor do we add up. We bring together, and in bringing together the question dawns on us: how are these three issues related? What do they do with one another, and how do they work in relation to us? Something is being brought

together that opens up both the relation between the issues we have before us and our selves, bringing all relations into play.

Every time I discuss the seemingly simple Deleuzian change of the '≡' into the '&', some of my interlocutors, in fact most of them, are at first puzzled and then start to smile. Apparently, there is not much fun in adding up, but there is evidently humour involved when we become related to things that are brought together and whose coincidence in relation to us provokes both intriguing questions and a heightened state of mind that can be sensed as a form of joy.

To understand Zdjelar's *Shoum* solely as a form of translation misses an important point. Translation cannot escape the logic of the  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Obviously any translation will be a form of bringing together, but the about-ness and replacement of things, and the reduction of complexity, is what is necessarily at stake. It is not for nothing that translation has been defined, for instance by Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger (and in their footsteps George Steiner) as a form of violence. Each word in every language has so many denotations and connotations, such multiple meanings, that there is simply no way of finding analogous words in another language. Consequently, translation has to equalize, and in equalizing reduce the complexity of the constituent parts. In a sense, the original words are destroyed, violently reduced and replaced, in order to construct a new text.

In the case of *Shoum* we do not see a translation in the making, but the coming together of two texts that are both developing and growing as we watch, read and listen. One text is presented in fragments and we can only hear it. We recognize a well known song by *Tears for Fears*, an English pop duo formed by Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith and popular for a relatively short time in the 1980s. Their song 'Shout' (1984), like the name of the band, seems to tackle the thematic of some kind of therapeutic problem or process. This is accompanied by the second text in *Shoum*, which we both hear and watch growing.

We see a hand writing a text, word by word, sometimes correcting what it has written, and trying again. We hear one voice, no, two voices, trying out what has been written down and discussing what should be written next. They seem to be singing the song by *Tears for Fears* but appear to be incorporating a new text that, intriguingly, relates to the original in a shifted way, namely acoustically. Thematically the shift could not be more radical. There is no hint of a therapeutic process. It seems more as if the people writing, discussing and singing are actually working. In that context it is remarkable how the new text does not consist of understandable words, either in English or in Serbian. It is built up with newly formed words. The

logic of the 2 + 2 & 4 is in play, and the result is both humorous and touching.

The etymological source of the word ‘humour’ is rather peculiar. In Latin, *humour* meant *moisture* and was part of the classical (then medieval and renaissance) ideas regarding the constitution of the human body. Taking his cue from Hippocrates, the second century Roman doctor Claudius Galenus defined the constitution of the human body as comprising a mixture of four types of humours, or moistures: black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood. In turn, he related these to the four elements: fire, water, earth and air. The mixture of the distinct elements would determine one’s character, or better still the state of one’s body and mind, of which there were again four major types. Surprisingly, there is no single character that might lead us to what we nowadays understand to be a humorous person. The only thing that seems have survived humour’s etymological journey is the fact that it still concerns a certain state of body and mind.

This state of humorousness can be specified in terms of a mixture of fun, joy, sympathy and wellbeing. The remarkable thing about today’s understanding of humour is that its ‘about-ness’ is not the issue. Whereas one can ask: ‘What are you laughing about?’ it is impossible to ask: ‘What are you feeling humorous about?’ In English, the verb ‘To humour’ means to gratify or indulge, which has little to do with the humour we are dealing with. Whereas laughter goes back to laughing so that consequently there can be an object one laughs about, humour, on the other hand, cannot be *done* or acted out. It cannot be manipulated, it is very hard to produce, it can only be brought into being. Accordingly, humour can be seen as a particular form of a *poiësis*, in that it does not concern the opening up of a new world, but the opening up of a world anew

*Shoum*, on a micro level, opens up a world anew.

## 2 Praxis

One of the vexing problems in the European tradition, according to Martin Heidegger, is the growing domination of *technè* – considered as art, as skill and as technique – over being. The primary cause for this, in his analysis, lay in the specifically metaphysical ground of European thought since antiquity, in the context of which everything had to fall under the aegis of some kind of *theoria*, or had to fit into

a teleocratic paradigm. Either we had to know what we were, essentially, or what essentially moved us, or we were obliged to always work towards something (a safer world, happiness, justice, wealth). In order to get out of the deadlock, action was called for, were it not the unfortunate case that deliberate action itself had become impossible. Whatever action was taken, it could never be in itself authentic, because it would be marked by a technical impetus. Dana Villa called it Heidegger's "siren song" when the old man at the end of his life stated, "no mere action will change the world". In order to find a way out Heidegger nevertheless abandoned his concern with authentic action, "preferring instead" Villa writes, "to rethink *poiësis* and action as a 'poetic revealing'."<sup>1</sup> One of the problems, however, with Heidegger's alternative was that he could only think *poiësis* as newness, a radical newness in the sense of an unavoidably violent disclosing (a *Gewalttat*) that opened up a world in its entirety and integrity. He could not deal with the messy plurality of praxis, nor was he able to think of *poiësis* in non-violent terms.

It is strange, with regard to all this, that Heidegger did not extensively consider music. But perhaps this is not so strange, considering he was a philosopher shaped by and obsessed with language. Still, music would have provided him with a rather straightforward alternative to the fundamental problem that concerned him. It is perhaps possible to define music in terms of truth, or essence, or a pure idea, fitting into some kind of *theoria* that would rule music's shape and content. This *theoria* would probably be some kind of mathematics. Such an option would ignore however, how music has a texture, a physical resonance and a materiality that affects us. Moreover, it is hard to define music, ultimately, in terms of its *telos*. It is more as if music constantly comes to us from some kind of future that intrudes on our present.

*Shoum* both affirms and works against this musical arrival from the future. The man writing down the text of the song is constantly lagging behind, unable to combine the acts of simultaneously listening and writing. Apparently restarting the music time and again, he nevertheless manages to complete the text so that he is able to sing the song himself, which is how *Shoum* ends. The text – language – now helps him to consider things from a starting point in the past. It consequently helps him to get to the desired end. Moreover, having gone through the song so many times we, both as listeners and as protagonists of *Shoum*, are pretty sure what is to come. The music has been historicized, has become repeatable.

Yet, the language that is produced does not consist in words that can be used instrumentally, aimed at some kind of understanding

or closure. Language itself has become musical. By now we know the music, but we do not know what word, as a sound, will come next. The forces from the past – from what has been written down or memorized – thus meet the forces from the future – from what we cannot know and what we await. These forces do not meet out of the blue, however. They produce a distinct attentiveness, a heightened awareness and a being in time that is the result of a singular praxis.

The focus of the camera upon the working hands, and the working hands only, bring back in mind Van Gogh's *Pair of Shoes* (1886), or better the manner in which these have been dealt with by consecutively Martin Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935), Meyer Shapiro *The Still Life as a Personal Object* (1968) and Jacques Derrida in *The Truth in Painting* (1987).

It is interesting to note that the entire history of the discussion on this painting circles around the notion of truth and authenticity. For Heidegger these shoes testify to a still authentic relation between world and earth; for Shapiro the issue is whose shoes they are; for Derrida the matter is art historians' nostalgic longing for a historical truth that can be reconstructed whilst the work itself travels through time.

In *Shoem* the hands are not indices to somebody who has to toil, although the hands might belong to someone who is used to physical labour – whether as a peasant, an artist, a motorcyclist, or as an intellectual taking care of their garden. We see the hands themselves toiling with a ballpoint, wrestling with the resistant material of language. This at-work-ness is a form of praxis that does not aim at representation or reproduction, in the context of which authenticity and truth could be at stake. It is producing plurality.

### 3 Parapoetics: being with things and the dent of expression

The hands holding the paper and writing down a text and the voices murmuring the text embody the opposite of the content of text. The text runs: "Shout, shout, let it all out, these are the things I can do without. / Come on, I'm talking to you, come on". In contrast, the voices of the people working with the song are far from shouting, as they focus on what they do not want to do without: the song. They do not respond to the person who boldly states that he is talking to them – and not merely because the speaker is not really talking to his listeners at all – but because their relation to the singing or speaking subject is of a different nature. Taken together, the visual focus

on the hands and the pen combined with the soundtrack – through which we hear the voices trying to figure out what to write down – can be seen as a clear index of what kind of relation is at stake.

If *Shoum* had simply shown the hands at work with one voiceover we could have thought of them as an organic, cooperative unit that was *working on* something. But the fact that there is a voiceover with two voices – combined with jump cuts to repetitions or renewed attempts, combined with distinct glitches that break up any formal unity – invites us to reflect. Instead of thinking of this cooperation in terms of its organic quality, it becomes more appropriate to think of it in terms of both brokenness and togetherness. And this in turn may bring us to a non-violent definition of *poiësis* in the form of what Hannah Arendt called “concerted action”.

The tendency to think of *poiësis* in terms of competition has been dominant in both literary studies and art history. *Shoum* shows the inadequacy of this way of approaching poetic making. The song that is produced anew here is not in competition with the Tears for Fears song, nor is it an imitation. It sticks to the original melody, obviously, but this fits within a vast poetic tradition of making new texts to accompany popular melodies. The melody becomes the affect-medium through which new texts may appear that escape competition precisely because they have been made to the same melody.

In this respect, and in terms of poetics, the way in which people have been dealing with such a melody becomes an icon for a mode of acceptance, of a *being with things* that is rather different from the obsession with replacement, hence destruction, and the violent opening up of the New. Apart from being humorous, *Shoum* is touching because it shows people intensely at work whilst being with things. This intensity is partly caught in the shape of the song itself. Whereas the Tears for Fears version of the song has exalted overtones – which are more accentuated in a clip in which we see the serious, suffering faces of the singers – we hear a rather grainy voice trying out the song in a self-concentrated and decidedly delicate way. Still, the intensity concerned is not predominantly traceable in the expression of the content of the new song or in the expression of its form. It is more tellingly traceable in the dent that the text makes on the paper, produced by the frantically working ballpoint.

One could speak of another form of parapoetics which does not concern the coincidental or accidental *poiësis* of someone using a language that is not her own. In this case the poetic act is not aimed at producing a dent. The dent was produced as a by-product that can be seen, however, as an independent form of poetic making itself. The subtlety of the lighting and the position of the camera in *Shoum*

bring this indentational expression to light. The political implication of this *parapoiësis* could be considerable, especially if one considers the fact that *Shoum* is looped. Having come to the dent of the text, the image becomes dark and we can only hear the voice that, so temptingly, starts to sing. Then the violence of expression breaks in, as Tears for Fears assume their original status in a therapeutically propelled passion. Still, that will only prove to be the beginning of a new attempt. We know, by now, what in the first instance started to dawn on us. We look again, like the protagonists trying to be with things, to see something grow that will appear in the light, like dents on a page.

—

<sup>1</sup> Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: the Fate of the Political*, Princeton University Press, 1996: 244 and 246.