If You Prick Us, Do We Not Bleed? No

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Dedicated to the living memory of Gilles Deleuze, a non-revengeful philosopher

Have we not eyes? No: “You have seen nothing in Hiroshima” (Duras); “but He charged them to tell no one what had happened” (Luke 8:56). Have we not hands [?] No — the man without hands in Bokanowski’s “L’Ange”. Organs [?] No — Daniel Paul Schreber “lived for a long time without a stomach, without intestines… without a bladder”; and for Artaud, “the body is the body/ it is all by itself/ and has no need of organs.” Dimensions, senses [?] Not, if one is a yogi who has achieved pratyahara, the withdrawal of the senses. Affections [?] No — returning from the battlefields of World War I, Virginia Woolf’s Septimus “could not feel.” Passions [?] Not, if we have achieved Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge. Fed with the same food [?] No: “there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake” (Dogen). Hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means [?] No, Judge Schreber is hurt and healed by divine rays. Warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? No: “Junkies always beef about The Cold as they call it, turning up their black coat collars and clutching their withered necks… pure junk con. A junky does not want to be warm, he wants to be cool—cooler—COLD. But he wants The Cold like he wants His Junk — NOT OUTSIDE, where it does him no good but inside so he can sit around with a spine like a frozen hydraulic jack… his metabolism approaching Absolute Zero” (Burroughs). — If you prick us, do we not bleed? No: during the fire-walking ceremonies of the South Indian community in Suva, Fiji, the participants
pierce their cheeks, foreheads, tongues, and/or ears, without any blood coming out. Was my video “ʿĀshūrā: This Blood Spilled in My Veins”, 1996, with its documentation of ritualistic bloodletting, a demonstration that Shiʿites too can bleed? If indeed a demonstration, it would be one only for the benefit of the Israelis and the Americans, so that they would be able to ascertain that we too bleed without having to bombard us in Southern Lebanon. I, a Shiʿite, certainly do not need such a demonstration since I already feel even the blood in my veins to be spilled blood irrespective of any wounds suffered in my life; since I already feel that I am bleeding in my veins. But “ʿĀshūrā: This Blood Spilled in My Veins” is not really a demonstration that if pricked, we do bleed: I am not a revengeful person. Already a certain disturbance is introduced in this formula by those who although they bleed, do so without being pricked or wounded: the stigmata of many saints and of many hysterics; the blood spilled in the veins of many Shiʿites. In Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice”, the lawyer informs the Jew Shylock that he is indeed permitted by the contract signed by his debtor Antonio to cut one pound of flesh from the latter’s body, but that he has to do so without spilling one jot of blood, otherwise he would be persecuted for the attempted murder of a Christian. The lawyer’s stipulation is a reminder to him that Antonio bleeds. This stipulation would imply that while specifying the contract, Shylock had become oblivious of the eventuality that if pricked, Antonio is going to bleed. Did I need to reach the latter part of the discourse of Portia-as-lawyer when she lists all the punishments that Shylock is to suffer to know that she is a revengeful person? Was it not enough her implying to Shylock during her defense of Antonio: “If you prick us [Christians], do we not bleed?”. Shylock’s desistance from making an incision in Antonio’s flesh to take one pound of it — in fear of spilling blood, and of possibly causing the death of a Christian — is still a revengeful gesture. Had Antonio started bleeding through stigmata, would that have stopped the revenge by reminding Shylock that Antonio too bleeds? Were the bleeding through stigmata to happen at places other than the contours of the area designated to suffer the incision, it would, on the contrary, be a revengeful gesture. Could revenge have truly been stopped? Had Shakespeare’s play proceeded not with the lawyer’s refusal of Shylock’s belated proposal to settle for money, and the subsequent revengeful long list of punishments, ranging from religious — conversion — to financial, imposed on him by the lawyer; but, to everyone’s surprise, including Antonio, with the latter’s sudden bleeding through stigmata at the precise contours of the area specified in the contract — whether in the manner of saints or hysterically — revengefulness on both sides could possibly have been
stopped. Antonio’s bleeding through stigmata at the precise contours of the specified area for the incision would have provided Shylock with the opportunity to take revenge since he could then have cut the pound of flesh and nothing would have incontestably proven that the spilled blood is from the wounds inflicted by him rather than from the stigmata (in this play where a woman and her maid assume the role of a lawyer and his subordinate, where Shylock’s daughter disguises herself as a man, etc., the blood from an externally inflicted wound would have disguised itself as blood seeping through the stigmata). The bleeding through stigmata at those precise areas would have made apparent to all those present, including Shylock and the lawyer, that Antonio does not bleed from the incision, that when pricked he does not bleed as a result of that. Such bleeding would have provided Shylock with the opportunity to take revenge, while taking away from him the revengeful logic of similarity. Would psychosomatic bleeding have stopped the Christian Phalangists, and their accomplice and overlord, the Israeli army, from massacring the Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila? I do not think so. If you tickle us, do we not laugh? I, for one, don’t, and not because I am depressed, but because all in all I find this historical period so laughable that were I to start laughing I am afraid I would not be able to stop. I remember how when high on marijuana my ex-girlfriend would giggle virtually at everything on and on. I have never had this kind of extended laughter on the few instances I smoked pot. Yet I am sure that were I to start laughing in this, my normal state of consciousness, my laughter would certainly eclipse hers. As for her, there was no danger of her starting laughing and not managing to stop, dying of it: she did not find contemporary societies that laughable. All I ask of this world to which I have already given three books is that it become less laughable, so that I would be able to laugh again without dying of it. And that it does this soon, before my somberness becomes second nature. This era has made me somber not only through all the barbarisms and genocides it has perpetuated, but also through being so laughable. Even in this period of the utmost sadness for an Arab in general, and an Iraqi in specific, I fear dying of laughter more than of melancholic suicide, and thus I am more prone to relinquish my guard when it comes to being sad than to laughing at laughable phenomena. The quite humorous thinker Nietzsche must have been living in a less laughable age than this one for him to still afford the sublimity of “To see tragic natures sink and to be able to laugh at them, despite the profound understanding, the emotion and the sympathy which one feels — that is divine.” In a laughable epoch, even the divinities are not immune to this death from laughter: wasn’t this according to Nietzsche why and how the gods died on hearing one of...
them declare that he is the only God (“Thus Spoke Zarathustra”, “Of the Apostates”)? At this point in history, can one still laugh on reading Nietzsche, Beckett, Bernhard? Have this age not stolen from us a major facet of these works: their humor? Can contemporary humorous people still find Richard Foreman’s work, or for that matter my early work, laughable — without dying of that? All funny people in laughable ages are not humorous enough; to find the most humorous people in such a period one has to look among the serious, who need this seriousness not to expire in laughter. In this respect, I reached a critical point on June 20, 1996. I was standing in a fairly long line at a counter at the Ralphs supermarket on Wilshire and Bundy, Los Angeles. The employee had just headed toward one of the far-off aisles to check the price of one of the items brought by a customer. Amidst the many magazines on the adjoining rack, I saw the current issue of “Time”. Its cover story was: “America’s 25 Most Influential People.” Flipping through the pages to get to the section in question, I was suddenly seized by an apprehension verging on anxiety: that starting to laugh on reading some of the listed names I would not be able to stop, even my aroused seriousness proving this time inadequate to do the job as a defense mechanism. Four months later, I still do not know whether the intense apprehension I felt then was warranted. But from that day on an even more heightened vigilance against starting to laugh has become one of the salient features of my life.¹ If you poison us, do we not die? No, we cannot die, whether because we have unfinished business (in a restrained perspective: old King Hamlet; or an extended one: the death and rebirth cycles of Hinayana Buddhism); or because we have become fundamentally liberated from any unfinished business, and now when in life are fully in life, when in death are fully in death, birth not leading to death, death not leading to life (Dogen’s “Birth and Death” [“Shoji”]). Were we only the living, who at some future date biologically die and are no more, there would be only the revengeful morality of identification — don’t we too cry, laugh, and biologically die, etc.? — to prevent us from murdering others and to prevent others from murdering us. What should persuade against murder is rather that we are mortal beings, hence already undead even as we live and that as undead we undergo every name in history is I. The revengeful rhetorical question “Don’t we too bleed, laugh, and (biologically) die?” should be replaced by “They can make us cry, laugh, they can kill us — that’s all.” The question that directly

¹It is still unclear to me why it was that this anomalous apprehension happened in this case and not say in response to the news that following the massacre of tens of praying Palestinians in the mosque in Hebron by a Jewish extremist a curfew was imposed on the Palestinian population of 130,000 rather than on the 450 Jewish settlers in their midst (arguably to guard against potential reprisals by the Palestinians); or on reading in the US mainstream newspapers that Iraq is “invading” its north.
follows the preceding ones from “The Merchant of Venice” is: And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? How insightful of Shakespeare to detect and intimate that such a manner of thinking that dwells on similarity is a revengeful one. It is revengeful neither simply because one can take revenge only on what has affections, senses, etc., i.e., on one who can be affected by the revenge, nor just because revenge is one more similarity — if we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that (Act III, scene I, 53-62); but as such. Yes, ultimately, every discourse that invokes a fundamental similarity is a revengeful one, is a discourse of revenge. Nietzsche writes somewhere that it is human to take revenge, inhuman not to take it. Wouldn’t that be also because humanism (don’t we too laugh, bleed, [biologically] die…?) is revengeful, even outside any wrong suffered, even or especially when it invokes a tolerant coexistence based on a fundamental similarity? And aren’t many of the aforementioned manners of saying No to such revengeful questions experiments in evading, undoing, the generalized revengefulness around? — unfortunately, in some instances failing and resulting in yet other kinds of revenge.


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