

Remarks on an Unknowing and Unforgiving Seriousness: A Reply to Alexander García Düttmann

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One of the assumptions I am trying to challenge in some recent work is the assumption that to treat literature or poetry seriously is to treat it *philosophically*, the assumption in other words that it is philosophy that bequeaths the requisite seriousness to any investigation or undertaking into areas or phenomena otherwise considered non-serious or frivolous, non-essential or intrinsically under-determined. When x comes to the attention of philosophy and is deemed worthy of that attention, it is being taken seriously. This is what being taken seriously means.

It is not simply a matter of seeking to challenge this assumption, providing a check to the arrogance underpinning it (arrogance is not always a sin), but rather of also beginning to try to understand it. For the thought that seriousness belongs to philosophy and that literature and poetry need to be brought within its remit is itself a function and product of literary history, literature's own history. Romanticism, modernism, certain strands of literary theory can each in their own ways attest to this and so to the impossibility of simply disentangling the literary or the poetic from a relation to philosophy and from this particular philosophical seriousness.

In the fall 2013 term at the University of Sussex we celebrated the tercentenary of the birth of Laurence Sterne with a daylong workshop on *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, the novel which arguably more than any other sets in motion a vertiginous play between the serious and the non-serious such that the reader can never identify a moment or a sentence where seriousness cannot be doubted and yet where even the most trivial and everyday exchanges and occurrences might serve as a candidate for a life changing significance. William Thackeray hated this absence of repose and protested the perpetual displacing of seriousness; for the very same reasons and in just these terms, Nietzsche applauded the novel seeing in Sterne the "freest spirit of all time."

For me, then, *Tristram Shandy* is an exemplary literary work. In its echoing, admiring and fragmented allusions to Locke it both serves as a lesson in how a non-serious literature intrudes on a serious philosophy and refers non-serious literature and serious philosophy to another literary-philosophical project, the serious attempt to narrate a serious life where the seriousness to be narrated and the seriousness that would narrate are perpetually interrupted by the quotidian and material expressions of what, for such a narrative and narrator, can never be taken seriously. In a life seriously frustrated by non-seriousness, do the incidental rewards and tranquilities, the friendships and conversations, count as serious or non-serious? Who can tell? Certainly neither *Tristram Shandy* nor Laurence Sterne, and nor perhaps their serious readers.

In this context I was especially struck by Alex's insistence that there is something problematic in the very idea of a philosophical seriousness, of a seriousness that belongs to philosophy by right and whose self-assurance and status cannot be gainsaid, something problematic in the idea that seriousness must at bottom be a knowing seriousness, a seriousness that knows itself, in the very awareness of its being serious, to be already on the right track, already asking the right questions, the right serious questions. I was also struck by the thought that this seriousness and knowingness might have to be re-evaluated, re-evaluated in terms of an unknowing seriousness that rather than straightforwardly announcing itself as philosophical

makes demands on philosophy and on the questions it formulates so confidently, the fundamental questions whose seriousness is somehow supposedly self-evident. But what questions are now to count as serious questions for us? And how are we to ask them seriously?

Alex's "Against Self-Preservation, or can *SCUM* be Serious?" moves between two invitations to take something seriously, an extract from Derrida's *envois* and Valerie Solanas's manifesto. In the course of this movement it teases out four questions the seriousness of which we are asked to reconsider, but which we cannot properly reconsider until the re-evaluation of the notion of seriousness, from knowing to unknowing. The four questions are as follows: 1) What can I do to avoid being crushed? (2) What do I judge to be important in my life? (3) How can I be old enough and young enough, old enough to be young enough? (4) How can I, how can creation, disclose eternity?

Some initial reflections. It is difficult to mark or announce the seriousness of a question, even more difficult, perhaps, for a question to assert its own seriousness. If such nods to the listener or reader are necessary, we might feel the question has in some sense failed. Think of the portentous desperation of the "this here now is serious" or the "I am being serious." If I have to tell you it's serious, the seriousness has not made itself felt. Alex might reply that we have not let ourselves feel the requisite seriousness. Our knowingness has protected us from a serious outside.

Consider the passage from Derrida and Alex's "what if we took it seriously." Well I might take it seriously in the context of a relation between lovers, and if I were the recipient of it, the seriousness would manifest itself in the intensity of an eroticised obsession—I would play along, enjoy and extend the obsession... But, if it were to break the rules we had implicitly or otherwise established, for a love affair is also always a regulated arrangement, it would become serious in another sense, the seriousness of something's getting out of hand or having to end or be ended, it would harden into a symptom. Pleasure, however ambiguous or strange, would turn into a non-eroticisable irritation, repulsion, fear, or ridicule. It would require a diagnosis. It would seriously require a serious diagnosis.

This twofold seriousness—the seriousness of the game or friendship or way of life, the seriousness required for all of this to continue, the seriousness that lets it continue, on the one hand, and the seriousness of the interruption or disruption on the other—belongs to the sense of the serious Alex associates with self-preservation, a seriousness in the pay of self-preservation and regulated by it. In other words, this twofold seriousness is the very knowing seriousness Alex wishes to re-evaluate so as to ask his own four serious questions.

Alex's essay, if I understand it correctly, argues for a seriousness that would not serve self-preservation, one that in countering such self-preservation resists reduction to a symptom, a death wish or destructiveness into the pathology of which we might be expected, seriously, to enquire. Alex hints at an aesthetic seriousness that falls between or somewhere away from these two options: seriously for-life, for one's own life with the critical and philosophical account of the self necessary to formulate and guide it, or seriously against one's life, with the need for some sort of therapeutic intervention. But what could count as another seriousness? What could it be? What could it entail?

Returning to the Derrida extract, I still find I can do no more than consider its status as a communication between two lovers for whom the appeal to an obsessive and absolute reconciliation rings true. To receive the other's words in this way is to receive them in their being erotically charged even perhaps to the point of an absolute transgression but where to the extent that it remains eroticisable also remains transgressive within the terms of the first

sense of seriousness. Well, Alex might say, that is enough, simply try to take seriously the fact that here someone is admitting to a desire to be consumed by the other, and in being consumed to die with the other, to be the cause of the other's death, to own it in and as the aftermath of their own dying. Take it seriously as an affirmation that supersedes self-preservation. Take it seriously *as* a philosopher not as an imagined lover and not as a diagnostician. And what would philosophy become and what sorts of philosophers would we become if we did so take it?

Alex's is an invitation neither to internalise (to appropriate) the other's words and wishes so as to let them serve myself and my self-understanding, nor to "treat" the words as evidence of the other's sickness or inability to preserve themselves. It is an invitation to step from the first knowing seriousness not to the second seriousness of therapy and diagnosis but to a third seriousness which, in its unknowingness and in its being unknown, makes demands on philosophy. How might a philosophy that begins to try to meet these demands be positively characterised? What might it do? Alex mentions "saintliness" and perhaps we can recognise an element of this in a certain Christian asceticism where one interprets the instruction to be like Christ and to be with the poor and the ill, the imprisoned and the mad, not in order to minister to them, to guide or treat them, but to be oneself poor, imprisoned and mad.

For the philosopher, Alex seems to prescribe or to dream of an acceding to the outside, where what elsewhere passes as the other's madness, the danger to the self (theirs and ours), becomes thought-provoking, becomes a way of addressing and preparing for a future to be accepted on its own terms. This outside might be a place or lack of place from which to re-encounter and re-read moments of a strange and heightened lucidity—Kant on the sublime, Spinoza's *sola*, beatitude and benediction, etc. Contact with such an outside need not be the inauguration of a saintly way of life but a moment where philosophy is forced to admit a possibility beyond self-preservation, an event that will say of itself and of us—"it is done," "it is over," nothing more, never again. Never again, where the finality finally also silences the positivity that for some still all too knowingly continues to resonate in that "again."

In relation to the possibility of such an event and of our thinking and being in contact with it, Alex would have us ask his four questions: 1) What can I do to avoid being crushed? (2) What do I judge to be important in my life? (3) How can I be old enough and young enough, old enough to be young enough? (4) How can I, how can creation, disclose eternity?

And then along with the saintliness and the philosophy, there is scum. There is Valerie Solanas and a manifesto. To Alex, she appears as an exemplary thinker of the outside, one who questions self-preservation and dares to ask the question(s) that presuppose and accept our being consigned to scum. She not only dares to ask these questions but also does so in the context of a manifesto that willingly and delightedly consigns us to scum, and some of us sooner than others. There will be nothing, or at least nothing worth preserving, but before then, before that inevitable coming to nothing, let us at least remove those who are incapable of accepting and befriending this outcome or result, those who are incapable of affirming the thought of our becoming nothing but scum.

And yet, however much I try, can I take Solanas seriously in Alex's third sense? I find it even more difficult here than with the Derrida passage. I cannot avoid and cannot conceive of avoiding the second symptomological inclination. What I hear and read always in this manifesto retains elements of a madness I cannot and have no desire to make mine. But forget me, can Alex really take Solanas seriously? Really seriously? Does Alex really succeed in having Solanas resonate alongside, say, Spinoza?

(Philosophers of scum—apropos of which, it is interesting to recall how disturbed Kant is in the 3rd Critique by the Spinozist acceptance of human life ending in scum.)

Fleetingly, Alex writes of Solanas's "unforgivingly funny" manifesto? Why the need for this qualification or judgment as though removing it from the disturbingly real call to real violence? Is it to assign the text to a genre (satire)? Is it to temper a realisation that the text stands in need of something like a diagnosis? But maybe this tempering is necessary, and if it is maybe it is a means (a necessary means) by which a contact with the outside (with *this* outside) is postponed, postponed or *aestheticized*. Such a small thing, but a means of signalling to the reader and of describing a step we never quite have to take when we seem to take these unforgiving writings seriously.

I am reminded of another extract from Derrida's *envois* referring to Jos Joliet's *L'enfant au chien-assis*: "What I have seen of it frightens me a bit, it speaks to me in another language but from so near."¹ With his concession and identification (Solanas's "unforgivingly funny" manifesto), does Alex not also declare what he takes to know of the text, namely its own knowing of unforgiving funniness (or non-seriousness)? And is this not a means of preserving a distance or of admitting that the proximity, if there is seriously to be one, remains alien, its language "another language?"

Finally, if what Alex would have us retain of Solanas's fantasy is her announcement of a beyond to self-preservation, an end to all human generation and increase, an end to all talk and hope of descendants and returns, then is it not the case that what is being announced is necessarily in the future? And does this final necessity not mean that we are dealing either with a purely formal, logical (trivial) truth or with an empirical prediction about the end of a species? Either we are to define an event, such that after it nothing more will ever be needed or possible, that is we designate an event as the final end and then say of it that there is nothing further beyond or after it, or we make a claim that such an event will occur, the content of the claim being that there will come a time when our species is extinct, when it is replaced or destroyed by technology. It is not clear to me how daring to think a future event with respect to either of these formulations counts as a difficult and new seriousness, even less how it "discloses eternity."

A long way away from Solanas and her daring acceptance of a catastrophe, might such extraordinary events not already have happened everywhere and always, and sometimes in the simplest of glances and gestures, fragments of thoughts and works, words and deeds, almost all of them forgotten and scarcely noticed in the forgetting? Why the weight of this singular and impossible-not-to-notice future, unbearable to the point of madness or murder? Why insist on tying significance, the seriously significant, seriousness itself, to this event and to the thought that is in contact with it? It may be that what is catastrophic is not the event itself but the hollow insistence on its futurity and singularity. Let it go, lose it, or, better, admit it was always lost, always lost and never going to happen.

But now I'm not thinking of Solanas and scum (and certainly not S.C.U.M). I'm not thinking of the scum that one day will be my remains and your remains, our remains, nor about the possibility of anyone or anything consuming them or not consuming them. I am thinking of philosophy as a serious attentiveness to what passes or to what can pass unremarked and undeclared, even here this afternoon and even just a moment ago, the sweet seriousness of the unexceptional. I am thinking of Alex's talent for such an attentiveness. And most of all I am thinking again of Shandy Hall.

With love.

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¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 211.