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## “Ma fu l’inganno disinganno”: The *Basso Buffo* as Philosopher

Eugene Clayton Jr. Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Spain.

...[T]he opposition or duality that constitutes the very heart (hidden or not) of comedy.  
And this is the duality of life and the signifier...

Alenka Zupancic, *The Odd One In*

Irony’s medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared.

Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

### **To Found the *Buffo***

Alessandra Campana has recognized the principle movement in comic opera: “in the *buffo* repertory the main task was to make the words understandable” (Campana 1991: 582). She is thinking perhaps of the patter song. This is to say, the *buffo* must need presume upon a minimal unintelligibility of and within the work, even perhaps of

incomprehensibility, not to speak here of the necessary difference between the two. The *buffo's* function, metonymic of the principle movement of comic opera itself, as a whole, is thus that of translation. It is the figure of the *buffo* who subverts and undermines the chain of signification. Indeed, it may even be the case the *buffo's* is an impossible task, that that which he would be made to translate is untranslatable, cannot be called across discursive fields, is an instance of the *differend*.

Schlegel's essay, "On Incomprehensibility", however concerns itself less with its nominative subject, transmuting by its end into a catalogue of ironies. Translation and irony destabilize the coordinates of signification, or rather, our coordinates within signification. Irony, the energy potential of signifier fission, installs doubt, inviting misunderstanding, misrecognition, *méconnaissance*: "Understanding would allow us to control irony" (de Man 1996: 166). There is another (con)text however in which Schlegel speaks of irony: the "Lyceum Fragments, No. 42": "There are ancient and modern poems that are pervaded by the divine breath of irony throughout and informed by a truly transcendental buffoonery. Internally: the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue, or genius; externally, in its execution: the mimic style of an averagely gifted Italian *buffo*". Split, conflicted, the *buffo* is that which, at one with the work, regards it from elsewhere, that part of the work without the work. We read a singular triadic constellation: philosophy-poetry-buffo: "Philosophy is the real homeland of irony . . . Only poetry can also reach the heights of philosophy in this way" (Schlegel 1971: 148).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, outraged, Ferrando has already vouched for the old philosopher Don Alfonso's vocation: "Scioccherie di Poeti!" The *buffo* names the locus of a negative movement: that which Hegel defines as "infinite absolute negativity" (Hegel 1998: 68).

Insofar as he is "exterior", outside of the system, he ethically attests to the fact that "[t]he whole is false" (Adorno 2005: 50), that "the whole is not totalized" (Derrida 1989: 74-7); this is to be read even at the level of typography, the parentheses: "(La commedia è graziosa, e tutti due fan ben la loro parte)". To wit, de Man tells us irony performs the "disruption of the narrative illusion, the *aparté*" (de Man 1996: 178). For Derrida, irony is introduced in "the defective cornerstone of the entire system": "As a cornerstone, it [irony] supports it [the system], however rickety it may be, and brings together at a single point all its forces and tensions" (Derrida 1989: 77). The *buffo* is the precise place within which deconstruction within opera will be possible and will always already have begun.

Presto il biglietto, or The Promise of the Letter

Negligent perhaps of chronological order, we shall perhaps make amends by tracing a certain generic development. Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* is notable for translating the opera, with relation to Paisiello's setting, from an *opéra comique* to an *opera buffa* by the introduction of the *basso buffo*. Taking up the Act I aria, "A un dottor della mia sorte", if truth is, as Lacan defined, the demand as articulated need, with the imperative, "Via carina, confessate", it is an unintelligibility, a total opacity which is desired: "un po' meglio a imposturar". It is not that Rosina dissembles as such, but rather than the dissemblance is so wanting as to be insulting, thus the adjectival qualification of, "della mia sorte". It is with this hermeneutical desire which is foreclosed that Don Bartolo is most precisely a Doctor. Hermeneutics is the production of misunderstanding. Don Bartolo is disallowed the dissimulation of the truth of her sexuation, can no longer deny her desire for recognition. Rosina thus in effect, sets herself up for failure as a certain success: "This botching (*ratage*) is the only way of realizing the relationship if, as I posit, there's no such thing as a sexual relationship . . . The object is failure (*un raté*). The essence of the object is failure" (Lacan 1998: 58). Rosina must confess insofar as, "[t]he truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power" (Foucault 1990: 58-9). Don Bartolo attempts to coerce a confession, to subject(ive) Rosina, and fails, precisely insofar as he is powerless, impotent.

At Don Bartolo's would-be injunction, "non me toccate!", we are hearing of course a translation of Jesus's words to Mary Magdalene, "Noli me tangere". Blanchot has read this phrase in advance of us. In pronouncing these words Don Bartolo has already acknowledged Rosina's turndown: "This Noli me tangere [. . .] is not the force of an interdict, but [. . .] the insistent, the rude and poignant affirmation that what is there [. . .] still withholds itself-- the rude and biting void of refusal--or excludes, with the authority of indifference, him who, having written it, yet wants to grasp it afresh by reading it" (Blanchot 1982: 24). He has already acknowledged her there-ness: "It's not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is *not* not at all there. She is there in full (*à plein*). But there is something more (*en plus*)" (Lacan 1998: 74). One should recall, per Lacan, woman is a symptom of man: "wandering around in search of something to attach themselves to . . . One can effectively claim that a woman who withdraws from sexual contact with men is a symptom at its purest, zero-level symptom" (Žižek 2008: unpaginated). Don Bartolo, as doctor, as an acknowledged

public authority upon a particular subject, as representative of a certain mastery, a reputation which presumes a dissemination of knowledge, is the writer. This is the reason for his specific outrage at Rosina's having written; she has upset his identity. Rosina, as the work which for him could be no more than something to be read, has now written herself. He has been dismissed, is no longer relevant. "He belong[s . . .] to the image, not the object, to what allows words to become images, appearances-- not signs, values, the power of truth" (Blanchot 1982: 24). This is why, as hermeneutician, he is excluded from the economy of the grapheme of which *Il Barbiere* is the allegory.<sup>2</sup>

"There is a work only when, through it, and with the violence of a beginning with is proper to it, the word being is pronounced. This event occurs when the work becomes the intimacy between somebody who writes it and someone who reads it" (Blanchot 1982: 21-2). This is the intimacy toward which *Il Barbiere* strives; this is precisely the reason Rosina is so desperate the Count receive and read her letter. The opera takes place, as is the case with most comedy, in the pre-ontic. Comedy concerns itself, not with stereotype, but with character: 'As Walter Benjamin has pointed out, the creation of a character does not rely upon any psychological analysis, it does not involve a person in all her "complexity," it does not seek to define a person by the multiplicity of her character traits, it is not a study that would make us understand the person's actions' (Zupancic 2008: 66).

### **To Read *Così fan tutte***

The *buffi par excellence* are to be found however in Mozart's output. Leporello for example suspends the narrative in his commentary asides, "Che titolo cruscanti! manco male che lo conosce bene", while Don Alfonso disrupts the illusion of consistency constitutive of narrative itself, even as, as the bass-line, he grounds it, as *grund*. The buffo works at the zero-level. *Così fan tutte* perhaps owes less to the wife-swapping of Boccaccio and Shakespeare, and more to Molière's *L'école des maris*, and *L'école des femmes*. The opera's subtitle, "La scuola degli amanti", thus occupying the requisite sublation.

The space of *Così* is that of the family romance: "The motive force behind this being his [the male child's] desire to bring his mother (who is the subject of the most intense curiosity) into situations of secret infidelity and into secret love-affairs" (Freud 1995: 388): The perspective of the opera is that of the male child. The quality of the

figure of the woman as mother however is presumed as “unalterable”: “Mater semper certa est”. Thus arises the certain paradox between confidence and distrust.

“Fidelity, the virtue of the poet, is faithfulness to something that has been lost. It imposes detachment from the possibility that what has been lost can be grasped here and now” (Adorno 1992: 116): From the outset, it is, ironically, solely Don Alfonso who, as philosopher-poet-buffo, has hitherto unspoken knowledge of this virtue, despite the women’s many protestations. The two couples can be faithful to one another only insofar as their respective partners have already been lost. In this way the other retains his or her freedom outside the economy of possession and ownership which characterizes capitalism. In its own way, *Il Barbiere* has too dealt with this problematic, for is the precipitous -- superimposing as it does the cantabile and the stretto-- cabaletta of the first act duet “All’idea di quel metallo”, viz., “Numero quindici a mano manca”, not a critique of the bourgeois ideation of love, betraying as it does the foundation of this *mauvais amour*: namely, that principle of capitalism, ownership? Count Almaviva’s conventional descant, “Ah che d’amore la fiamma io sento”, compensatory, offsetting, is merely a dissimulation of this capitalist will Figaro shamelessly rollicks: “Dele monete il suon già sento”. To love one as he is is ultimately to be disbelieving toward what this one could be. Thus love and money are both comprehended by the bourgeoisie as a privatization of property, depriving the other of (what could be) his own. Proudhonian economics: “La propriété, c’est le vol!” Rossini, unsparing, drives love back into the market-place.

The woman must be infidelious if she is to be loved. Freud tells us as much in his paper, “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men (Contributions to the Psychology of Love I)”: “the person in question shall never choose as his love-object a woman who is disengaged—that is, an unmarried girl or an unattached married woman—but only one to whom another man can claim right of possession as her husband, fiancé, or friend”. The subversive, economical brilliance of *Così* is to locate all and each these symbolic positions at the self-same locus: Ferrando and Guglielmo both split themselves. This is the import of the scene of revelation in which the two return as half-Italian, half-Albanian, half-subject, half-other. The split of the signifier as subject is here represented, allegorized: one is always already alienated from oneself. Truth, less a total absence of fiction, of untruth, is gleaned precisely from the dialectical juxtaposition.

Don Alfonso literally translates the two soldiers, Ferrando and Guglielmo, so as to make them unrecognizable, unreadable, in the sense of transformed in appearance as well as carried across the boundary of Italy as synecdochical of Western Europe in general: i.e., reinscribed. In his deconstructionist role, he will have, “dismantle[d] the metaphysical and rhetorical structures which are at work in [the text], not in order to reject or discard them, but to reinscribe them in another way” (Spivak 1997: lxxv).

The venture of the first scene is to stage the displacement of the libidinal into the economic. The seduction offered the women is meant to be an instance of “[t]he most elementary level of symbolic exchange [as] a so-called ‘empty gesture,’ an offer made or meant to be rejected” (Žižek 2009: unpaginated). Thus, less than the women being duped, it is the men who will, in having accepted that which was empty, null, have duped themselves. Thus we read the effects of the wager at both the imaginary and symbolic levels; if the male is concerned with the symbolic, the female is concerned with the imaginary, the duet which first introduces the sisters-- “Ah guarda sorella”--, only doing so insofar as they are mediated and captured by their lovers’ portraits. Indeed, this is the staging of that which Lacan, in his seminar on feminine sexuality, appoints “the aim of [his] teaching”: “to dissociate *a* and *A* by reducing the first to what is related to the imaginary and the other to what is related to the symbolic” (Lacan 1998: 83).

*Nota bene* however, Don Alfonso is not a cynic as transcendental position. This is most evident in the fact of which Žižek makes much ado: namely, that he is subject to his own duplicity.<sup>3</sup> He merely represents the movement of the infinite play of the signifier. This precise play within the play is, “meant to deceive no one except those who consider it a deception and who either take pleasure in the delightful roguery of making fools of the whole world or else become angry when they get an inkling they themselves might be included” (Schlegel 1971: 265). That is, Alfonso, as schooling philosopher, demonstrates the logic of *elenchus*, irony in the Socratic sense.

The opera opens with an absence: in the syllogism which the opera stages, we receive a missing premise. Comedy however would annul logic, would expose it as immaterial: “*Tai prove lasciamo*”. Comedy acknowledges logic only against itself, reluctantly, as, “[h]e who has laughter on his side has no need of proof” (Adorno 2005: 210). Or, it would found another, non-hierarchical, logic: “*Scioccherie di Poeti!*”: a non-sense.

The fact which *Così* makes us to confront is desire is always already formulaic, mechanized, regimented, caught within a series of conventions: “desire is of course

metonymical, it shifts from one object to another; through all its displacements, however, desire nonetheless retains a minimum of formal consistency, a set of fantasmatic features” (Žižek 1997: unpaginated). Desire is subject to the fundamental fantasy.

### **lo crepo se non rido**

We have throughout been speaking apophatically of the *dispositif*: the system’s “forces and tensions”, Don Bartolo’s injunction to confess, the economic, the libidinal, etc. *Così*, one should say, is the opera of the *dispositif* as, “a certain manipulation of the relations of forces[, of a rational and concrete intervention in the relations of forces] . . . always already inscribed in a play of power”<sup>4</sup>, in order to destabilize and upset them. Said has already approached the Foucauldian movements which animate Mozart’s works: “These operas [*Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*], in fact, are much more about power and manipulation than the directors allow; and individuality is reduced to a momentary identity in the impersonal rush of things. There is little room for providence” (Said 2006: 50). By “providence”, Said would mean that which Lacan calls the big Other; the symbolic function of the big Other is suspended (Zupancic 2008: 94). It is Despina who inhabits the *dispositif* as variously medical, legal, juridical, etc. For, as does *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Così fan tutte* hinges upon a contract, a reading of the law, of justice, recalling *The Merchant of Venice*. Despina’s is the superegoic injunction of, “Enjoy yourself!” Man for Despina becomes the signifier of its comedic substitutionality. The one no different than the other in the sense both bring, broach, and correspond to the nothing: “Han gli altri ancora tutto quello ch’han essi, un uom adesso amate, un altro n’amerete: uno val l’altro, perchè nessun val nulla”. Women for Despina are to be inconstant because they may suppose men to be so.

Life is not on the side of the signifier. The signifier which opposes life and constitutes the heart of the comedy of *Così fan tutte* is announced by the opening trio: *la fedeltà*, fidelity, constancy, insofar as these are constitutive of a certain ideology of the subject. However, “[w]e retain ourselves, our ‘fixed subjectivity’, only where we deny desire, only where we refuse to be taken outside ourselves” (MacKendrick 2004: 20). This refusal is precisely that which is being staged with Fiordiligi’s aria, “Come scoglio”; desperately attempting to attach herself to this fixity, this self-identity at the cost of her desire, she refuses to acknowledge the gap between the signifier and the subject (thus the over-literalization of the music, its harmonic stasis, etc.), within which comedy abides

and enjoys itself. Indeed, it is only via such desires that reason as freedom comes into its own: "What is the material in which the final end of Reason is to be realized? It is first of all the subjective agent itself, human desires, subjectivity in general" (Hegel 1953: unpaginated). The language which Fiordiligi reproves, "e non profane l'alito infausto deglio infamia detti nostro cor", is of course metaphoric, poetic, venerable; this is the purely ironic turn of the screw insofar as irony "foreground[s] the gap between the statement (its content, which is supposed to be universal), and the place of enunciation (which is supposed to always be particular), and this gap is used to 'prove' the impossibility (the internal contradiction) of universal statements or truths" (Zupancic 2006: 196). *Così* is the allegory of the process of desubjectification, arriving at floating, contingent identities.

Fifteen years on, with the premiere of *Fidelio* in 1805, we can read how this *dispositif*, how this liberated ideology of the subject has already relapsed. Leonore is defined and imprisoned by, is no more than the signifier "fidelity". Beethoven cannot abide irony precisely insofar as he is an ideologue. This points to *Fidelio's* inevitable failure as an opera, as well as to the fundamental distinction between the Beethovenian and Mozartean subject, in both the philosophical and musicological senses of the term.

Freedom is not a total disassociation from the historical, or what Hegel will call the positive. In any case, how would we recognize and read such an event? One is free only insofar as one recognizes, "the rules, rites, and institutions that are imposed on the individual by an external power, but that become, so to speak, internalized in the systems of beliefs and feelings" as such (Agamben 2009: 5-6). Thus the opera, concerned more with historical materialism, will not solve the historicist's demand, manifested as the critique of the falsity of the work's end, its hollow happiness: the facile charges of amorality, relativism, etc. This would be precisely to miss the point of *Così* as comedy, rather than as mere irony. In any case, the reconciliation scene is the logical *a priori* of classical comedic form itself, which necessarily must need presuppose "a place of reconciliation from which one could laugh" (Adorno 1992: 257). Following Zupancic's Hegelian reading of comedy, *Così* "reveal[s] the figures of the 'universal in itself' [which for us here means the teleology of the uniqueness of the love object, the ideology of which can be traced, at least, to Plato's *Symposium*] as something that is, in the end, utterly empty and contingent" (Zupancic 2008: 27).

The comic, to paraphrase Ionesco, offers no easy way out. Don Alfonso is a buffo philosopher precisely insofar as he refuses the demand for positivistic use value:



“Just as it [society] hardly tolerates anything radically different, so it also keeps an eye out to make sure that anything which is thought or said serves some specific change or has, as they put it, something positive to offer” (Adorno 1969: 153). The four—Ferrando, Dorabella; Guglielmo, Fiordiligi --, were always already free. The sole circumstance which had hitherto disallowed this realization was their figuration of the relation(ship) as abstract absolute, as “universal in itself”.

## To Conclude

The final tutti, a panegyric to reason, "e le vicende da ragion guidar si fà", thus should not be understood as reason in the sense meant by the Enlightenment (Foucault 1984: 32-50), but rather as, per Hegel, reason opposed to historicism<sup>5</sup>, reason as coterminous with reality: “Reason, or, insofar as it has activity and power of self-determination, as Freedom” (Hegel 1953: unpaginated). If tragedy is concerned with the historicist I, the I as situated by history, comedy is concerned with the I insofar as it is deictic, insofar as it is grammatological. This is precisely what and why Despina sings: “Scordiamci del passato. / Rompasi omai quel laccio, / Segno de servitù”; a “freedom whose self-consciousness reason is [. . . which] consciousness makes the individual comprehend himself as a person, in his uniqueness as a universal in himself, capable of abstraction, or surrendering all particularity, hence understanding himself as inherently infinite” (Hegel 1953: unpaginated). It is this reflexive movement ending in freedom which Don Alfonso and Despina actualize. The names eulogized in the opening scene—“La mia Dorabella”, “La mia Fiordiligi”--, no longer would signify a singular, unrepeatable, unique quality-- i.e., a particularity, a particular, concrete, finite, determinate locus--, but rather have revealed themselves as capable of reiteration: given a certain structure of desire, a certain staged seduction, the woman, as the Lady-Thing which is empty, will insist, as always a re(in)sistance, itself-- or vice versa (Žižek 1994: 89-112). The opera asks for a radical ahistoricity. This however, should surprise us not at all, for, “[e]ssentially the mode of the present, it [irony] knows neither memory nor prefigurative duration” (Derrida 1989: 83).

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The relation among philosophy, poetry, and negativity has been much discussed. Cf. Kristeva 1968: 36-63.

<sup>2</sup> For a reading of Figaro, cf., Žižek 2001: 109-110.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek has reiterated this point in several texts. Cf. Žižek 1996: unpaginated; Žižek 2006: 124; Žižek 2007a: unpaginated.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Foucault 1980: 196. The brackets enclose a phrase found in Agamben's quotation which I have not been able to locate in the original interview. Cf. Agamben 2009: 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> I am using historicism in Benjamin's sense of the word: "Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past . . . Historicism contents itself with establishing a casual connection between various moments in history" (Benjamin 1969: 262-3).

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