
Kookaburra

anti-tales of laughing doom

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GRETTA JADE MITCHELL

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Table of Contents

NOT A BACK STORY.....3
DEFINE: BLACK..... 17
NEGATION OF A NEGATION 33
ANTI-THEORY? 37
BLACK HUMOUR AS NIGHTMARE WORK 37

Thought need not be content with its own legality; without abandoning it, we can think against our thought, and if it were possible to define dialectics, this would be a definition worth suggesting.

The thinker's equipment need not remain ingrown in his [sic] thinking; it goes far enough to let him [sic] recognize the very totality of its logical claim as a delusion.

Theodor W Adorno

... to differ ... is not simply not to be like ... it is also not to be at all ... it is being nothing.

Achille Mbembe

of black humour [an interrogation]

NOT A BACK STORY

I was just sitting there reading —

Maldoror — says Nobody. Her posture is terrible, she might be slurring her words, she is definitely mumbling — or is that a Northern Australian drawl?

Would you shut up? Did I ask you to speak? Did I? Nobody gets a start but Bad Teacher doesn't look up from her iphone. We can't begin until Good Teacher gets here. She's always running late, the goody two shoes; she does it just to mess with me. *PSYCHE* — nay, *sike* — as the kids say these days.

Nobody shudders and thinks, ohhhhh yay — P S Y O P S.*

The room is badly lit. That is, over-lit with fluorescence. A cheap clockface on the wall says 8:19 in an analogue attempt at the real but the second hand isn't moving. Through the windowless wall the yonder outback sky is imagining one of those rare spring days — a beautiful day for the funeral of a youth where they're playing *Sleep* over the PA.

* Yonder in a grove surrounded with flowers a hermaphrodite is sleeping, slumbering deeply on the greensward, drowned in his own tears . . . people generally take him for a madman . . . Sleep on, hermaphrodite, awaken not, I implore you. Sleep . . . sleep forever. But do not open your eyes! (Lautréamont 69-74)

But that day will be a no-show show for Nobody. The last empty room, an echo of this one, somehow uncomfortably spacious like a relic of male-only philosophy at the chesterfield club with deliriously expensive brandy and calm desperate strippers who are, in turn, aware, all too aware, of their masters' desperation. Nobody starts to sweat surrealism, thinking: where am I? before realising the answer is (no doubt) irrelevant, so she starts to sweat nihilism and counting words instead of reading them. Three to go. Two, one.

Bad Teach sniggers at something on her device then starts to tear up. Cynicism and sentimentality go together like. . . [missing simile] She is too well-dressed, too well-put-together, too contrived — like she doesn't understand society is evil, like she just doesn't get that in true aesthetics there is always a kink, something off-kilter or out-of-place. And not just a hideous face reveal, something else misunderstood in its very essence — like essences? Maybe: the way some earthlings are truly unloved (but we love you), or the lyricism of form, the muttering suffering of poetry. No matter. She has her publications and she's standing by them.

The second hand is still. Standing still.

Sorry I'm late, darlings. Making a show of sweating on insignificancies, Good Teacher is always flustered; men like her that way. She thinks it shows eccentricity, not sexism. Holding a manuscript like a bohemian accessory because wasting paper is no worse than being indirectly accountable for a brown-skinned child badly buried in all those horrible plastic devices, obsolete, defunct, superseded, no she can't think of the word. I ran into someone above my pay-grade who demands I kiss their

arse every time I see them. It is a terrible burden, she sighs. What can one do? being good? She is the lead in her drama and the understudies are all after her job, her man, her office, her cross to bear.

Unlike Bad Teach who verges on psychopath, Good Teacher is pure sociopath. Basically, a walking women's magazine. Do they still print those? I'm asking you, Tiqqun. This season it's all about organics and micro-debt for slaves. Wait, she means the poor. Organic slaves. Hmm, whimsical. Paying back seventy-five dollars one cent at a time in excruciating handcrafts upsold through the sexual predators at Oxfam for seventy-five years, or however long slaves live for these days. Maybe not that long. Life expectancy and the cost of poverty is math and she's no good at math. Hmm, wistful. That'd go perfect in my kitchen.

Bad Teacher rolls her eyes but still doesn't look up from her iphone.

My mother was a teach—

Again, would you mind shutting up? This is not about you.

Nobody starts to cry. Tears fall but there is no sobbing: impassive sorrow? She walked into this room, into this review, into this critical self-evaluation, but she did not break dance of her own free will into existence. That sentence happened without her consent. She listens for the silent weeping of a tree somewhere vexingly pleasant, somewhere she once was, Tumbulgum or Tallebudgera Creek. It might be exhaustion. More likely, despair. Nobody wonders if she can conjure a brain tumour, or better — an aneurysm, just by thinking about it. An anteroom aneurysm. The tears stop. The shudders return.

Of what it doesn't know, but Nobody's body is guilty. Busted.

Bad Teacher's right, sweetie. This is not about you.

Then, why am I here?

A philosopher! Bad Teacher scoffs. For the first time she looks at Nobody and Nobody wishes she could go back to being neglected, shunned, ignored. I'm sure your Mumma is very proud. She laughs and laughs and laughs and laughs and abruptly — stops. We'll ask the questions, punk.

Do you know the term *fungible*, beautiful? counters Good Teach.

Vaguely nodding in assent, Nobody averts her eyes. So I'm not really Nobody, but Anybody?

Bravo! Bad Teacher slams her fist on the desk. A real intellectual! But again, shut up! We'll ask the questions. And you give me no choice but to mark here on your file: slow learner full stop and full stop insubordinate full stop.

Again Nobody's hands shake. . . on their own, nobody else's.

[In a faraway voice] Somebody, anybody? Good Teacher laughs amiably and looks pretty and pleased. She got to make a joke; it doesn't happen very often. If only her man had seen. But wait, she takes that back because Bad Teacher's jokes are always better.

So what exactly have you been doing for the last three years?

I thought this wasn't about me.

Impudence. Noted. Don't you ever get tired of juvenile delinquency?

Tutting her colleague Good Teacher says: it's not, sweetheart, not about you, but we still have to justify your existence.

There's a form for that?

There's several.

Ahhh, Mark Fisher: Neoliberalism is just de-centralised fascism. Like I said —

— yes, yes, you were sitting there reading *Maldoror*. Bad Teach says under her breath as she pretends to take e-notes with an apple pencil while producing vulgar porn memes about her students and big books under the finsta account @i.like.big.books —

And biting Nobody's reference, captions: As beautiful as the torture scene in *Les Chants de Maldoror*.

Nobody thinks: 'May he who thought he would be accomplishing an act of justice in asking some executioner to flay him alive, raise his hand. May he who would offer his bosom voluntarily to the bullets of death, raise his head with a sensual smile' (Lautréamont 221). She gets the feeling that whatever this scene is, it's not going to end well for her. This feeling, this sadness — like knowing your corpse will be left to rot in a room for months, potentially years — swerves toward the unironic, her idealism shimmering like an old-school madman. A wise woman once told her that perhaps in this final neglect she would prove paradoxically lucky and escape somehow the profiteering of

vulnerabilities. And she starts to feel a little better. Out of range, even though she's way too close, still within touch.

Can I have a smoke?

There's no smoking on government — I mean private university — grounds. Good Teacher goes as far as reporting the one Kaurna academic for smoking on grounds when most staff let it slide because —

Is this a prison?

Foucault would say so.

Then I should be allowed to smoke.

Would nicotine shut you up? Don't dare ask any more questions. Bad Teacher doesn't care who smokes or where so long as she gets a fully-stocked corporate card that includes alcohol purchases. That shit is expensive. Only the poor should have to pay for booze — like in a penal colony.

But this is not about Foucault. Nobody is dead serious.

The teachers look at each other and laugh. Each dreading this session in her own way — GT thinking it might damage her skin and BT concerned about another migraine, the lighting is always so bad in these rooms — but it looks like it will end up being a bit of fun.

Would you deny Socrates his hemlock?

Don't answer that. Bad Teach watches GT open her mouth. Don't!

Good Teach closes her mouth and sulks. She had something funny to say about Nietzsche's claim that all we need to know about Socrates is that he was ugly.

Speaking of hemlock, here swallow this. A vial is handed to Nobody; she drinks without protest.

Would you deny a toothache morphine?

Nobody wishes she was somewhere alone in the cancelled world with her books in the early twilight. The room is beginning to menace by its sheer concrete force. Why is there a sink in here? Am I underground or on the ninth floor? Where are the microphones? the cameras? are the besa bricks simulacra?

She thinks with uncanny ease.

Starting out, I thought maybe it was about surrealism, feminism, psychoanalysis . . . but it's not about that either. Nobody is troubled because she's already thought too much and with every thought there are further incriminations. If she's not careful she'll end up having to define Julia Kristeva's concepts — not one of her strengths.

To think is to be negative. That's it. That's why I'm here: to negate. I started my doctoral studies reading *Juliette* — de Sade of course second only to the class conscious darling, the lucid and mad, Jonathan Swift, in André Breton's *Anthology of Black Humour*. Everyday I'd carry that obscene hardback to kindergarten. Discreetly titled. The god-pushers with their miniscule bibles, illegally hawking North Terrace, mistook me for one of them: a sister. They assumed, of course (the worst of sins)

the heavy book I carried was the W O R D as I declined their offer of another picture-book pamphlet. One day in an antagonistic frame of mind I stopped and said I don't mean to be rude, I appreciate their offer of literature, but I was in no need of it because the devil lives in my imagination. And, by the way, did they low-key concur with Angela Carter, who, in her work on Sade, contends: 'all wives of necessity fuck by contract'? (11)

Laughing, slapping the nearest fellow on the shoulder with a sinister Australian jibe: can't you take a joke? I let 'em off the hook. And asked instead: why was it, according to their learned minds, that Cathy of the Yorkshire Moors — at cost of her very life — denied her crazy love for the darkling Heathcliff? Adding without pause: who among them — be honest — would turn down love in the name of class?

All she says is: I have a toothache.

Bad Teach starts the projector, downloads a powerpoint slide. Is that an image of waterboarding? or something less culturally imperialist, something less Americanised?

Oh you brought props! One of GT's guilty pleasures is *A Clockwork Orange*. Burgess's use of language as endlessly corruptible, second to few. But shame, when you write a book like that everything else you do or have done is going to be a glaring disappointment. Imagine if Joyce wrote *Finnegans Wake*[†] first.

[†] *de vulgari eloquentia*: or how to compose in the vulgar tongue?

Bad Teach pretends not to listen. GT shakes her head in pity for the child stars of Hollywood. She read a feature article about them once.

Nobody decides it's safer to go back to thinking.

Now I've turned down plenty of aristocrats, but I have loved not one of their shabby arses.

Carter's Sade —

is a 'terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerrilla . . . the connoisseur of [psychological] mutilations . . . performed in the name of love'. His porn is a 'model of hell' — sex in the 'context of an unfree society' (24-6). His 'satire [we'd supplement Carter's word with *humour*] . . . is far *blacker* [my emphasis] and more infernal than Swift's' (38). He understands art to be 'the perpetual immoral subversion of the existing order' (qtd. Carter 105). The 'black fairy tales' of this, her Marquis cum 'moral pornographer,' share a message: 'the comfort of one class depends on the misery of another class' (89).[‡]

Kiss my arse.

Concrete metaphor.

wakean words like: sodomy + misogyny = misodymite; hypocrit + cunt = cuntocrit; stalin + darling = starlin; sexist + women = woexist; carnival + ghou = carnivoul; sad + tearful = sadful

[‡] 'Kneel and face it; consider the honour I do you permitting you to do my arse the homage an entire nation, no, the whole world aspires to give it!'

Sade sometimes . . . says exactly what he means. (Carter 98-9)

Permanent Revolution.

Kiss my arse. Boris Johnson.

Carter's Sade functions as a series of manholes into the sewer of black humour: a black humour with class consciousness as its unclean waters.

— and — ho hum — after more than 1000 pages of torture and sex, I negated *Juliette*. I decided not to write pornography. Not one sex scene would make it into the thesis. (Sorry to disappoint, but you could always read ~~my Masters~~ . . . nevermind, I changed my mind.)

Anyway it's all just an elaborate sick joke played on the gaolers. Revenge with a pen. It pains me to know how much *sadism* is misunderstood. As if by some turn of facile irony, the Marquis has been — as in Breton's darkly funny reading of his will — utterly 'erased from the minds of men' (qtd. 'Anthology' 21) while condemned to remain an eternal household name, misconstrued. Suffer Citizen Sade, suffer this infamous fate! In a truly sadistic conception of sex and power, even the 'freest unions may contain the seeds of the worst exploitation' (Carter 24). Cross out *may*. Fifty shades of shit.

Nobody begins unconsciously to murmur her thoughts.

And it pains me no end to know how tirelessly everything is dumbed-down in the therapists' offices so assholes can feel good about their miserable shit. Hmph, overpaid neoliberal thought cops.

A scatological misanthropist! Bad Teach grins — the projector screen, waiting with menace — rare in the humanities, these days. Have you read Molière?

Nein. He's on my list, but —

Undisciplined. Bad Teach smirks at the intimation.

In tones of paternalistic exasperation, controlled and calm: have you tried not thinking like that, sweetpea? I love my therapist. She at least listens to me. GT is already falling behind, *becoming* the joke. But what if, say perchance, her therapist wasn't listening? what then? what if the attention was all just stock? stock responses? that any numbskull can learn in second year *sike*.

That's enough about *becoming*. BT enjoys her colleague's confusion and petty fear only to be overwhelmingly chagrined at the cuteness of the dumb cunt through it all.

Meagre signs of delight spark Nobody's eyes: last time I was coerced into speaking with a counsellor, I started reciting the passage of Lautréamont's in which Maldoror imagines the universe as anal.⁵ She sent me on my way saying she didn't get paid enough for this shit and handed me a 48hr med cert for the Arts Office that looked barely legitimate. That was the apex of my career as a pornographer.

⁵ O, if only, instead of being a hell, the universe had been an immense celestial anus! . . . Sorrow would not then have breathed into my blinded eyes entire dunes of flying sand; I should have discovered the subterranean spot where truth lies slumbering . . . (232) —

So don't come near me with any godforsaken Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. It's ideology for idiots! I mean, the ideology of the free individual — in which the individual is to bear the blame for their circumstance — is a direct cause of so called mental illness as far as I can tell. Just as the ideology of male supremacy makes men and boys suffer murderous psychoses. I mean, therapy as the healing tool of the illnesses of individual ideology is nothing but ideologies of the individual healing the illnesses of the individual. There is no negation, no *aufhebung* in this logic. No d-d-d-dialectic. It's just one big tautology. What if, what if? it's society that's sick? and what if, the more we talk about wellness, the sicker it becomes? Nobody looks at her trembling hands, androgynous and free of work. Mumbling, pardon my language. Humiliation rhymes with sublimation.

You finished? This is not going to be about you waxing gritty lyrical.

To GT: Can we get started? Bad Teach is both keen to begin and wanting it all to be over at the same time. These scenes are always the same. They're always about power.

Oh shit! Good Teacher is rummaging through her papers, through her feminine mess. I forgot the cable ties.

Please don't panic, and please pretty please for the love of goodwill don't perform it, says Bad Teacher. There's bound to be some behind the theses. We don't bother locking the cabinet anymore — now that nobody reads.

Now that Nobody reads, repeats Nobody. Changing the meaning completely without changing anything at all except capitalisation.

Magic, she thinks and smiles faintly as GT binds her, inner wrist to inner wrist.

It's real simple. Don't ever mock me again, bitch. BT's making a show of the fact that she understands there is no such thing as proper English.

Don't use derogatory names. Nobody is not a businessman.

You just need to tell us —

— wait! GT whispers something in BT's left ear.

Time is dead. If you're not at the table, you're the menu. Isn't that the saying? Hmph. Sooooo Juliettesque.

You just need to tell us —

where on earth you put our daughter and what song you can't listen to anymore.

Hurt.

Hurt? Oh, please. Hurt? Really? But we're just getting started.

Nine Inch Nails, or Johnny Cash?

That's two jokes for GT. Bad Teacher snorts before switching tone without warning like Menippean Discourse.

Let's start with hard definitions, shall we? I'm thinking we need to establish some common ground: concepts like thetic, like humour, the

list goes on, need to be clarified. Otherwise, this is just self-indulgent: a load of old codswallop.

Let's start with an easy one.

DEFINE: BLACK

Nobody considers a passive refusal: the 'I'd prefer not to' of Melville's *Bartleby*. Now a meme-worthy phrase thanks to that clever the spurious commie bastard who is the great salesman of Gen X philosophy, Žižek. But negates the negation. Why does she continue to engage? Because animals form attachments to their abusers? The library she loves — (she once treated so well, while everyone else, full of fear for the ancient cataloguing system, chose to neglect the interminably interred dive of dusty books) — has started sending her aggressive, threatening emails. The other day, a librarian even ridiculed the amount of books she had on loan. One Hundred and Thirteen. Once upon a time you could get lost in that library. It was like a semi-abandoned ant colony where art survived somehow dormant but alive under the weight of a thousand bureaucracies. Like everything else, now it's just a social façade and it stinks. The heating in winter is real though.

Black, says Nobody, her cable-tied hands on the table, is *not* a signifier of the race myth, but a colour-word: a mood or tone.

'... whiteness,' writes Stephen Biko, 'has always been associated with police brutality and intimidation, early morning pass raids, general harassment . . .' Likewise, this 'soiled' whiteness — fascistic, sexually creepy, and unrelenting — is 'a concept that warrants [nothing less than] being despised, hated, destroyed . . .' (64-5) I can't think of Biko without thinking of Treppie.

Who?

Treppie. His excursion to the library to read the dirty books.

What? What kind of word is that?

Marlene van Niekerk's Treppie from *Triomf*, you know Treppie? He who wants to kill himself laughing? Treppie. Who'd been dying ever since he was eight . . . the kind of dying you do twice (422) — my favourite character in all of literature. I have pages of handwritten notes beginning: Treppie says. . .

Treppie says

' . . . from subeconomic structures you get subeconomic sins' (288).

Treppie says

'The whole world is just names and nothing is what it is and everything's what it's not' (363).

Treppie says

'It cuts no ice' (28).

Treppie says

'If they have enough money for state murderers . . . then why can't they also pay state whores?' (47)

Treppie sa—

Enough! What kind of name is this? this, Treppie?

What BT means to ask is how is your idolatry of an obscure character with a nonsense name defining *black*? You will regret trying to trick us, Nobody. You were saying what *black* is *not* . . .?

Y'know? i'M SuMthINg oF wHitETraSh MySeLf!

Or, in other words, the symbol of my skin is monstrous. As not-black, I am a true figure of terror. Scary. And I come from scary stock. Like Treppie, a poor white — hillbillies with 'no music left in our bones' (van Niekerk 505) — demanding of the librarian all her dirty books.

Or, rather: Biko's Black Consciousness has at its heart a project of demystification. Hegemony is its main target. Fearlessness is its primary emancipatory means.

Who was it now? a black humour theorist? who described the kind of fear targeted by Biko's fearlessness as 'arse-out fear'? (My god, that's going to be a difficult reference to track down.) What a funny, terrifying image. Not an easy fear to overcome.

On that, GT sees her chance: in the introduction to a 1993 collection of Black Humour criticism, Alan R. Pratt contends: 'Black humor literature is similar to the literature of existentialism in that it begins with the same assumption — that the world is absurd . . . but rather than stoic resignation or heroic struggle, the black humorist tries to wrest laughter from our cosmic plight' ('The Nature of Black Humor' xvii-xviii).

The tonal contrast between existential fiction and black humour is a transformation of the 'absurd sensibility' from 'frightful and sobering epiphany' to 'ribald wit' and 'belly laughs' (xviii). And yet no critic is

satisfied with the label 'black humor', using the appellation with 'reluctance' to 'explain an attitude' (xviii), and most (Americans) agree the term has 'limited critical value' (xviii) while disagreeing on potential replacement signifiers none of which come close to the wide and lasting use of the blighted term: black humour (xviii-xix).

'And while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and traditions, black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses' (xix).

I can't engage with that.

Why not?

I can't because —

But you must.

I can't because I must.

Bad Teacher scoffs under her breath: hmph, Libertarians. Exactly how long have you been black pillled, Nobody?

You assume I'm libertarian because I'm gay? But, yes my rainbow is just shades of black pills.

Nobody can't decide whether to avoid eye-contact or to hold it until she transcends cringe like a prickly psychopath, so she closes apertures instead. Mad but harmless? Sad but gormless? Bad but makes sense? You decide.

You both already know I do the reading like any mediocre Australian arts student, otherwise I wouldn't be in this stitch up, and if it inadvertently helps the creative process then I consider myself blessed — none of this is going to change my class. So, academic argumentation just makes me weary, suicidally weary. Mine, yours, the best. There is nothing I wish to prove. So now I just look for the funny in the horror of being at odds. It's not my fault I was once good at school. A R T S C H O O L G R A D S C H O O L.

It's not my fault I'm black pillled.

Let's forget about that for now and get back to B L A C K . . . which you have not adequately defined, I might add.

Well, it's a B an L an A a C and a K. (Sorry, I couldn't resist that childish prank. Who is not an addict of one thing or another?)

Black Humour shares Biko's Black Fearlessness as Weapon Against Hegemony. Even though *black* is *not* —

I don't think you should be talking *hegemony* when you're struggling to define *black*. GT is convinced she is being helpful.

But *hegemony* is easy to define.

Again the teachers look at each other and laugh before BT stops — leans over the desk and punches Nobody square in the face.

Or Full Stop *humour*.

Yes, sweetie. We'll have plenty of time to talk about that problem.

Marx — Gramsci — pernicious social order — conditioned consent of the oppressed.

Look. BT feigns confoundment. I've knocked the syntax clean out of her.

Turgid signifiers — rats — names — wrong — joke — blatant — mendacious — sick —

'... hegemony . . . in the form of a *fetish* . . . zombification'.

— zombie zombie, Nobody cares about poor, poor Dolores O'Riordan,
dead in a motel room.

'... a regime of unreality' in which 'those who laugh . . . are not necessarily bringing about the collapse of power or even resisting it . . . they are simply bearing witness . . . that the grotesque is no more foreign to officialdom than the common man is impervious to the charms of majesty'.

'... laughter or mere indifference is blasphemous' (Mbembe, 'Postcolony' 81-7).

Nobody doesn't care about poor, poor, poor, poor, poor. . .
Sophiatown.

Treppie says

'give it a name like *Triomf*' (van Niekerk 126).

The teachers impatiently permit Nobody to recompose herself.

I've always held van Niekerk to be a genius. Would she ridicule that concept? nevermind, it's true of her: a mastermind. And Treppie is her ventriloquist v-v-v-virtuoso with an inimitable talent for obscene tirades and profound prosaic ditties about icecreams in the dirt. He never fails to move me to tears. Believe it or not, two geniuses I've met in my lifetime. Not bad for a chronically unemployed, cognitively impaired, stoner dyke from regional Queensland. Never fear, I'm sure I made a bad impression on my own private-lettered-backwoods-doyenne even though I still looked pretty good, then.

Nobody looks so sad as to be post-tearful.

There's a lot to learn about *black* from Treppie's provocative laugh, the laugh of the devil himself, a lot to learn from this abusive satyr, old and impotent before his time, who drives his nephew 'mad just by the way he says things' (142), who spits 'terrible Satan words' vile words like, 'Fuck shame . . . fuck forgiveness, fuck it right to glory.' But this isn't about South Africa, nor is it about hauntology: the . . . it spooks; therefore I am not.

Who's the other [ahem] *genius*?

The person reading this —

You, like Treppie, understand a boggy backroad called Kensington is an instance of hyperbolic dishonesty that permits, nay encourages, a general softening of critical readings of reality. A license to untruths of all kinds. You understand that the ground is made of lies. Say names.

Like Treppie, you smell a rat, the rats that run all through and piss and shit all over the foothill suburb in Adelaide called *Paradise*.

So you're saying Treppie defines *black* by *not* being black? Or what does whitetrash have to do with this? I'm lost.

It's because you try to separate everything.** To fight oppression we must first claim our oppression. That's why we witness the emergence of concepts like the *awkward* and *cringe* and why they function as oppressive forces — as if there's nothing worse than an awkward moment. Nothing funnier . . . even. As if there's nothing worse than a nobody claiming their status as nobody — sorry, anybody. And of course there is nothing worse, that is to say, nothing more awkward, because it is the beginning of all rebellion. Someone somewhere is not toeing the line. It's *awkward* mummy!

** Every state of things [says Theodor W. Adorno] is . . . tied to all others, touches upon all others, is touched by all others.

not only . . . machineries of production, distribution, and domination, but economic and social relations and ideologies are inextricably interwoven, and in which living people have become bits of ideology. ('ND' 267-8)

I could recite a poem of citations:

'seeming inevitability
and thus legitimacy of whatever is' (268). 'The *ratio*
turns into an irrational
authority' (261) . . . 'the word *life*
sounds
by now
like an empty consolation' (262) —
'all men are mutilated' (297). 'Conscience
is the mark of shame
of an unfree (275)
'society . . . its apologia
as threadbare,
as those who see through it
are certain
to die out'
(Adorno, 'ND' 268).

But I won't because it'll just remind me that I am certain to die out in a gruesome way and of course distressingly so as a victim of corruption. Under the library books trying desperately to keep warm.

Or, I could cite Franklin Rosemont's study on Jacques Vaché (whose *umour* without the *h* is a major precedent to Breton's thinking on *humour noir*) and say: Black Humour's approach begins with the demolition of 'established aesthetics', begins with the knowledge of the 'complete failure' and 'irrelevance' of A R T and A R T I S T S. It charges cultural capitalists with a deadening pretention that only adds to the 'monotonous misery' of life as alienation and exploitation (105). For Breton, Vaché 'kicked aside the work of art, that ball and chain' (qtd. 105). Prizing affects like 'exhilaration and/or consternation', Vaché sought a practice (of stunts) with the force to 'radically' alter everyday life (106).

Vaché the V A N D A L. Changing life with *umour*.

All clowns are philosophers, but not all philosophers are clowns (109).

Only the best, I would add. Diogenes: the only place to spit in a rich man's house is his face. Hegel: the contradiction of all things. You know *Phenomenology of the Spirit* is a mere preface to Vaché's *War Letters*? (110-1)

Black Humour 101 = learn how to attribute very little importance to all things.^{††}

And as a footnote: only one thing matters; learning to be the loser.

But I won't.

Because I can't separate the beginnings of my study on black humour from sitting there reading Lautréamont in a place of vast emptiness and horror black (I can never spell: diarrhoea) hangovers — not exactly *playful* — and 'well beyond the limits of fun' (Mbembe, 'Postcolony' 85) — nor from the Marquis, Carter and the Christian Brothers, nor from Josef Stalin . . . the list is extensive, sticky, and perpetually expanding.

A beautiful web spun out of the 'guts of modern brains' (Swift np). Home to a terrifying spider. The spider from Swift's 'Battle of the Books'. And 'to conclude at last in a cobweb . . . forgotten . . . neglected' . . . or 'hid in a corner' (np).

Unlike Juliette, I don't value reason as hustle. Unlike Justine, I don't value virtue or the appearance of. . . just making a good impression. I don't rate getting along in the labyrinth. The point of participating in the sewer cum labyrinth is to find an escape. (Am I right? Hear me down the back?) Not to get good at eating shit.

Am I unique in this way?

^{††} Vaché's great skill: ' . . . staunch upholder of playfulness, lawlessness and disorder, the Umourist acts and observes, but is neither "actor" nor "spectator." He is rather intruder, trespasser, agitator' (Rosemont 111).

There's nothing unique about Nobody. BT is right.

But what is right without might?

BT takes this as an invitation to abuse.

As she prepares her instrument . . . are they scissors? Nobody thinks: family, friends, vocations, loves: these spheres are not those in which we escape the concrete oppressive forces of capitalism (via abysmal simulacra of connectedness) but experience them at full force.

But says instead: the etymology of *black* negates any construal of *black* as beyond dialectics.

This does not escape my attention.

The English *black* is inherited from Germanic and cognate with the Middle Dutch and Old Saxon *blac* — *ink*.

There is a striking formal possibility that *black* and *blank* (ie. white) share a common base, dichotomous terms sharing signification: shining white.

Remarkable.

For *black* originated as a past participle (meaning burnt, blackened) of a verb meaning to burn (brightly). Connections are noted with the obsolete verb *blik* (to shine, glisten) and the Middle Dutch *blacken* (to flame, to burn) (OED).

So you burn so bright, you black.

Just how all youthful idealists become forty-year-old nihilists? Scoffs Bad Teach.

Nobody ignores the heckle. Despite these very spurious academic protests to the use of *black* as binary, and in antonymic relation to the racist veneration of all things *white* — if we don't say so ourselves — and hence connotatively negative, *black* continues to enjoy the ignoble associations of concepts such as darkness, melancholia, and death.

In general, 'comic, violent, experimental, and intellectual' *black humour* can be a misleading nomination but then again so are most 'literary terms'. It evades definition because . . . Proteus (Greiner 41).

Have you read *Ryder?* by Djuna Barnes?

Bad Teacher begins to rage. You, you, you, you, you. You reactionary little shit! I warned you not to ask any more questions.

Nobody starts rocking in her chair, chanting in a low bellow:
needsmanycomfortsfewneedsmanycomfortsfewneedsmanycomfortsfew
ewneedsmanycomfortsfewneedsmanycomfortsfew

Do what you will. I need to poo.

Shut up! Shut up!

Good Teach touches BT on the shoulder and says in a soothing voice. I'll do it. She takes the scissors from BT's hard grasp and walks to the opposite side of the table; she stands behind Nobody's chair.

Tell me Nobody, if 'there is no wayward individual', if 'there is no ordered society, no norm to deviate from' (Greiner 43) then —

Hang on a sec. Wait, says Nobody, is this going to be sexual harassment? If so, I should definitely be able to smoke. And laughs, laughs like Treppie himself, saying: my hair is incredibly heavy metal.

then — continues Good Teach, unflustered and determined to make her point, then — what is the catalyst of the 'perplexing mixture' of 'funny elements with a depressing theme . . . so vital to black humour'? (Greiner 47)

Ignoring the question, Nobody asks: can we play some music in here? You know, the Americans deployed heavy metal to torture Iraqis? Psyops at the disco . . . they call it *torture lite*: a menacing contradiction? And it sends you mad, they say. But if it's metal we must play. . .

You are not permitted to suggest your own interrogation material, says Good Teach shaking her head in a performance of astonishment.

Bad Teach and Nobody go: ha.

Jinx. So, Bad Teach leans over the table and palms Nobody in the forehead. Small harmless violence is humiliating.

Nobody laughs in red. Looking little better than dead she says, Australia is a very sad and violent and beautiful place. Australia is a very hateful place of stinge. Laughs again as says, I'm so cringe.

Good Teacher of a sudden realises the rough inmate haircut she is about to give Nobody won't serve its purpose of shaming and delousing

images of health from the criminal/patient because this nobody is either too far gone or too well versed (in what she doesn't know because her references are so few).

Nobody: comforts few, I need to poo.

Nevertheless, GT likes this part of the play, so with each cut she speaks assuredly in tones of soft modest majesty: in an essay on the black humour of *Nightwood* it is writ,

Three primary characteristics remain especially significant: extreme detachment on the part of the author; the comic treatment of horror and violence; and the disruption or parody of conventional notions of plot, character, theme, and setting. The result is highly conscious, unrealistic, militantly experimental comic fiction. (Greiner 45)

and as an aside low-key concludes that performing harrowing rituals of ostracism are even more fun when they're pointless.

But this is not about Kafka.

So we finally get to talk about Djuna Barnes? Nobody touches her newly savaged cranium. The cable tie scratches a scissor cut. She winces but only cerebrally. Are we laughing yet? or something much worse?

Out of nowhere, Bad Teach begins counting backwards from ten. By zero, Nobody is out.

The teachers leave the cell.

They don't come back for x number of days.

Some time after the teachers disappear, Nobody is de-robed, hooded in hessian, and dressed in a suicide smock by a research assistant who

is wearing a silken face mask. The research assistant enters the cell cyclically. Nobody can't track time but she always smells the assistant before she hears the lock. An altogether pleasant perfume that Nobody can't pick. It for sure isn't Nobody's favourite smell — decaying compost earthworm soil in the morning, cut grass in the afternoon, and burning redwood at night. It also isn't the cocktail of sewage and wood chip on the dust-storm wind.

Nobody doesn't consider appealing to the underling made of botanicals who waters and feeds her (not even to put some metal on nor to make an immodest request for cleaning materials: dettol and sugar soap or bleach if that's all there is — possible, it is, though difficult for some, to clean as an idealist, not a pragmatist; how? by taking time, taking time, and thinking elsewhere in impure tones of association — but this is not a gun club, not a gin club, and neglect smells like pipes on the rise).

Nary a word is spoken between the enemy alien and the subordinate who visits, I mean intrudes, I mean serves.

During her intern-ment, does Nobody smear shit on the walls like Julian Assange? No, because Nobody is underprivileged and thereby understands any putrid act against the cell that is to be her home — maybe forever — would only make her time here worse. It is her cell. She's the one who has to live here. Her droppings are skilfully placed in the bucket each day for the research assistant to collect with ease.

Nobody thinks, solitary confinement sounds like a card game.

NEGATION OF A NEGATION

black humour is not calling ace low but it is black humour is not satire not farce but it is black humour is not a belly-laugh despite new knowledge that shows depressive neuro-chemicals live in the bowels but it is black humour is not divine vulgarity but it is black humour is not parody but it is black humour is not cringe but it is black humour is not dropping dead from not laughing at your own joke but it is black humour is not what you think it is but it is black humour is not two hundred and thirty-eight words a day but it is black humour is not savage nor gallows but it is black humour is not melancholic misanthropy nor a shit-list written in a sad lyrical rage but it is black humour is not a hospital for the insane where Breton reads *Maldoror* aloud in the halls at night and doesn't laugh no not really but it is black humour is not horrible lucidity but it is black humour is not a frantic need for justice but it is black humour is not directions to servants but it is black humour is not selling the kids for food but it is black humour is not amusing murder but it is black humour is not the supreme law of unhappiness but it is black humour is not a text message that goes on forever but it is black humour is not saying to those who judge we care not for they judge poorly but it is black humour is not total neglect but it is black humour is not a prophet of chance but it is black humour is not mindless like a freight train on a windy night in the void but it is black humour is not three hundred and eighty-nine ways of despairing but it is black humour is not pretty poison but it is black humour is not a book illustrated by children for adults but it is black humour is not an important game through which nothing can be won and nothing can be lost but it is black humour is not meticulous rambling but it is black humour is not high tension but it is black humour is not admiring the spider the toad but it is black humour is not the planet's apparent blunder but it is black humour is not recalling a vandal with fondness and pleasure but it is black humour is not thinking up sinister projects against society but it is black humour is not the serene conscience of the bandit but it is black humour is not the dreams of an old dyke on death row but it is black humour is not a nightmare without sleep but it is black humour is not a foothold for criticism in its most useless and least scientific form: moralizing but it is black humour is not adapting extraordinarily badly but it is black humour is not geni(t)al buffoonery but it is black humour is not the devil freezing to death garbed in seven possum furs during a heatwave in port augusta but it is black humour is not a scientist's outrage over the devil's corpse and subsequent misgendering but it is black humour is not a broken nose that makes room for kisses but it is black humour is not a haphazard hypothesis but it is black humour is not a woman of letters but it is black humour is not indulging in a sick joke but it is black humour is not putting your fingers in the flames but it is black humour is not the devil (they/them) reading all your works but it is black humour is not commanding your eldest daughter to study philosophy but it is black humour is not a life-time of unemployment on the fact of her intelligence but it is black humour is not hiring a mad poet to kidnap her but it is black humour is not turning up to the wrong address after accepting a contract to bind and whip an old farmer at the whim of his fetish but it is black humour is not teeth to page dawn pale but it is black humour is not a grandmother who kills peasants in order to test virtue but it is black humour is not spitting on literature as a weird hobby but it is black humour is not staring pityingly into a mirror and quoting popeye but it is black humour is not hiding all the knives in the house but it is black humour is not a sorry looking budget but it is black humour is not a joke played by a terrible imagination but it is black humour is not an irresistible need for defiance but it is black humour is not begging the executioner to do you a favour but it is black humour is not surpassing all human ability to receive you but it is black humour is not a paranymp for the sunstroked and overworked kid but it is black humour is not the labour of a lunatic but it is black humour is not condemning the witness for the prosecution but it is black humour is not a regional gay bar called fires of hell but it is black humour is not drinking to the health of the departed but it is black humour is not a distinction between the bizarre and the strange but it is black humour is not the insults of poverty but it is black humour is not a distinction between the drunken stupor of a lush and a barbarian but it is black humour is not some apologies for dessert but it is black humour is not hearing falstaff say omg in a clueless tone but it is black humour is not disconcerting naïveté but it is black humour is not text only on the recto i mean verso but it is black humour is not eating your hand because you're hungry but it is black humour is not an abstruse pun explicated in an incomprehensible footnote but it is black humour is not freeing yourself of ethical mechanism but it is black humour is not the aristocratic pleasure of causing displeasure but it is black humour is not the art of playing hooky but it is black humour is not another off-sounding phrase but it is black humour is not alice in the void but it is black humour is not wondering if anything will ever sound right again but it is black humour is not sobbing while you sing but it is black humour is not completing a thesis and refusing to submit but it is black humour is not an hegelian attitude where possibility is just as terrible as reality but it is black humour is not forty-three minutes of ecstasy traded for a kingdom but it is black humour is not death as a melody but it is black humour is not falling like no other into the play of shadows but it is black humour is not running the poetic engine on the smell of an oily rag but it is black humour is not irritating slowness but it is black humour is not a profound and bitter philosophy without which you cannot reconcile social reality but it is black humour is not a revolver levelled straight across the page of beautiful poetry but it is black humour is not dirty dirty dirty empty

empty empty but it is black humour is not misunderstanding your own writing but it is black humour is not a stupefied look slack jaw and thinking but it is black humour is not pretexts difficult to invent but it is black humour is not nausea of words but it is black humour is not a lab jar note preserved in alcohol but it is black humour is not the promise of an abrupt end that never comes but it is black humour is not every possible consolation but it is black humour is not for the sake of the economy but it is black humour is not a surreal seesaw where a child promptly forgets family forgets propriety forgets society but it is black humour is not the violence of love but it is black humour is not annihilating yourself to become anew but it is black humour is not euphoria at the bridges of communication cut but it is black humour is not in the end preferring to be an intellectual rather than rich but it is black humour is not whiling away the next eternity with bad behaviour but it is black humour is not suggesting how harmless the jokes of a decent criminal can be but it is black humour is not an incorrigible artist but it is black humour is not a gaze marked by a fierce melancholy but it is black humour is not a cloaca sky but it is black humour is not collapsing into its own dialectical game but it is black humour is not the abdication of logical and ethical concepts but it is black humour is not a slew of the most audacious comparisons but it is black humour is not the demolition of anything solemn but it is black humour is not processes paling beside the image but it is black humour is not an ever-praising eulogy for the despised but it is black humour is not acknowledging your faults though refusing to make them graver with servility but it is black humour is not wondering why everyone is permitted to kill flies kill mosquitoes kill women but it is black humour is not forlorn jest but it is black humour is not ignoring your friends but it is black humour is not teaching students to read so well they rebel and stop reading but it is black humour is not a laughing goat but it is black humour is not weeping with your mouth or if that fails pissing your pants but it is black humour is not a warning that the passing of some form of liquid is required but it is black humour is not driving hypocrisy from your house but it is black humour is not to scorn accepted wisdoms in lyrics of force but it is black humour is not singing for the trees not for the fellow but it is black humour is not marsupial but it is black humour is not proving nothing on planet earth is laughable but it is black humour is not a double negative but it is black humour is not naïve nor profound but it is black humour is not forgetting the point but it is black humour is not a child misunderstanding head-in-the-oven suicides as death by burn but it is black humour is not harrowing screams but it is black humour is not canto six but it is black humour is not contentment not to write as others are content not to read but it is black humour is not eighteen sixty-nine but it is black humour is not vis-à-vis all of the above applying for an incapacity welfare but it is black humour is not lingering before bookshelves in search of a work yet written but it is black humour is not a model functionary and his grindr but it is black humour is not a spice for flavour nor the fat of the lamb but it is black humour is not smug initials but it is black humour is not taking your sweet time but it is black humour is not a sleepwalker on an important mission but it is black humour is not elbows on the table but it is black humour is not losing money coz you like the emotional thrill but it is black humour is not toothpaste at inflated prices but it is black humour is not an economy in decomposition but it is black humour is not burying the destitute by machine but it is black humour is not the perfume of the dead but it is black humour is not the complete solitude of malformation but it is black humour is not contradictory ends but it is black humour is not the rainforest from which coffins are made but it is black humour is not country where the mute is a prophet but it is black humour is not a way through a no-through place but it is black humour is not a scavenger of spite but it is black humour is not a skeleton key for those turned out but it is black humour is not the howl of peace but it is black humour is not a café where they pretend not to recognise you but it is black humour is not absolute non-conformism but it is black humour is not getting thrown a gold coin every sunday by ken bolton but it is black humour is not confounding chilling magnificent but it is black humour is not thoughtful mischief but it is black humour is not a transgendered god of puberty but it is black humour is not the arid path of emotional trauma on which sublimation flowers but it is black humour is not maybe not but it is black humour is not a professional revolutionary but it is black humour is not a displacement of psychic accent but it is black humour is not the loss of any chance of dominating suffering but it is black humour is not erotica with bad spelling but it is black humour is not a young man with a future but it is black humour is not singing your own death song but it is black humour is not a muse looking at your stinky trashed shoes and roaring with laughter all the way through your mediocre recital but it is black humour is not crazed with grief but it is black humour is not a graph that goes straight down straight down but it is black humour is not hunting down and killing the many forms of aspirant stupidity and egotism but it is black humour is not excelling in disorienting the self-satisfied and self-assured but it is black humour is not a terrorism of the mind but it is black humour is not highlighting banal threadbare conformity harassing that beast by removing it from the context of its sordid interests but it is black humour is not a needle shot from a gun but it is black humour is not a glow in the dark beelzebub but it is black humour is not nothing to get worked up about but it is black humour is not understanding all adults are children but it is black humour is not the analysis of words concluding that human descended from frog but it is black humour is not confounding both the simple and the wise but it is black humour is not a dizzying series of verbal equations presented as a sure and infallible key to life but it is black humour is not destined to win its writer only grave disappointments but it is black humour is

not a volume rejected but it is black humour is not causing a stir yet failing to find a publisher but it is black humour is not a paralysed hype-beast but it is black humour is not a bankrupt distributor but it is black humour is not making enough noise to have an article devoted to you called among the crazies but it is black humour is not pleasure at this critique that warns against a reading of your work but it is black humour is not sending thanks for rejection but it is black humour is not poetically dislocating language but it is black humour is not damage visited upon the mouth but it is black humour is not detuning the ocean but it is black humour is not all the shit jobs we do before being sent to prison but it is black humour is not then found innocent but it is black humour is not relying solely on luck but it is black humour is not a homeless person claiming they're sick of it sick of pleasure of jewels of travel of luxury and sometimes the clink of ice in champagne almost drives them mad but it is black humour is not some other whim but it is black humour is not the creation of a character that causes a war of generation against generation but it is black humour is not unconscientious objection but it is black humour is not art as a last resort but it is black humour is not a thrilling silence but it is black humour is not alas having no expectation of interesting you in what i'm about to say but it is black humour is not a live prop full of tricks to break the tedium of boring discourse but it is black humour is not an incurably serious turn of mind but it is black humour is not the fragrance of the meanest flowers but it is black humour is not inhuman solitude but it is black humour is not abruptly bursting into to tears at work but it is black humour is not liver but it is black humour is not a bit of irish soil but it is black humour is not an abandonment to vaudeville but it is black humour is not being booed in dublin but it is black humour is not a performance that ends in riot but it is black humour is not greeted with severe indifference but it is black humour is not a neo-kind-of-tragedy but it is black humour is not trying to kill your father but it is black humour is not baudelaire's practical joke but it is black humour is not entering a library and screaming after having killed my poor father but it is black humour is not the precipitate of a universal nightmare but it is black humour is not the reality of life but it is black humour is not a coming dawn: analysis never produces change but it is black humour is not non-verbal and lost in the mountains on the coldest night of the year but it is black humour is not ultra-concrete and hopelessly incantatory but it is black humour is not forced by economic factors to fail solely by the glory of your own genius but it is black humour is not the blazing imagination of people who interact with plants and creepy crawlies but it is black humour is not a great way to destroy your da but it is black humour is not overpriced danish butter on mouldy potatoes but it is black humour is not where you cracked a skull but it is black humour is not a woman of noted misbehaviour but it is black humour is not maybe worse than a dry hearth and a rebel woman and your cup at night but it is black humour is not casting a shadow on the yard with the dread of curse but it is black humour is not the lovely telling of a crime but it is black humour is not a mauled lion tamer but it is black humour is not a toothpick as a dying wish but it is black humour is not changing a minus to a plus but it is black humour is not literature after jarry but it is black humour is not flying a black flag from the arts faculty's roof but it is black humour is not art/life annihilated but it is black humour is not the revenge of the pleasure principle but it is black humour is not the liquidation of every noble sentiment every feeling of guilt every notion of social contract but it is black humour is not the final psychic appeal in the hands of the id but it is black humour is not giving destructive tendencies free reign but it is black humour is not the perfect anarchist except a man whence cowardice filth but it is black humour is not symbolic but it is black humour is not vulgar contagious emotions but it is black humour is not a stalinist poet but it is black humour is not pleading for the harshest punishment and the petty tasks of work for the dole but it is black humour is not die for the dole but it is black humour is not watching the brains fly around but it is black humour is not when the claret starts to flow but it is black humour is not numbered coffins but it is black humour is not the people's justice claiming yet another victim but it is black humour is not three cheers for our duty to be free rah rah rah but it is black humour is not the drills of freedom but it is black humour is not a guessing game who could it be when it's clearly a man known to the deceased black humour is not marching out of step in order to disobey together but it is black humour is not surrendering your weapon while striking a libertarian attitude but it is black humour is not fall out but it is black humour is not saluting a cleaner but it is black humour is not genuflecting before the junk shop doors but it is black humour is not precisely following the zigzags but it is black humour is not getting lost on your way to the hospital but it is black humour is not the hospital does not exist but it is black humour is not forgive this book but it is black humour is not asking where we might find a deep hole or next time try to act more like scholars but it is black humour is not the beast but it is black humour is not the light from another world but it is black humour is not jesus on a bicycle but it is black humour is not absolute innocence and power but it is black humour is not an automaton of the psyche but it is black humour is not a cosmic impulse but it is black humour is not method for weirdos but it is black humour is not vast arbitrariness but it is black humour is not bleeding over every page but it is black humour is not philosophically untenable but it is black humour is not remaining abnormal despite a decade of formal education but it is black humour is not completely imaginary constructions but it is black humour is not renting a broken house because of a river red gum out the back but it is black humour is not getting excited over a delicate frost but it is black humour is not doing your washing in the rain but it is black humour is not a sullen menacing attitude but it is black humour is not the impossible solidarity of outcasts but it is black humour is not the realisation that your life is richer now you're broke but it is black humour is

not a readymade target for the impatient fury of the guardians of conformity and taste but it is black humour is not anything but white trash lit but it is black humour is not a laugh that sounds like hail against a window pane but it is black humour is not enough of this i've got to piss but it is black humour is not are you going to finish that sentence but it is black humour is not three useless degrees but it is black humour is not fancy words for fucked-up things but it is black humour is not ten thousand five hundred and ninety nine words but it is black humour is not removing apostrophes because they look unwieldy but it is black humour is not becoming a fiction but it is black humour is not then disappearing into the gamut of problems this transforms into but it is black humour is not a suit of armour turned inward but it is black humour is not the rest is nothing but it is black humour is not hawking copies of your chapbook outside centrelink for twenty-five hundred bucks a-piece but it is black humour is not a solution to intellectual malaise from a different angle but it is black humour is not choosing insults as your favourite weapon but it is black humour is not objection as the total demand of apologia but it is black humour is not damning an artwork because it is not the ribcage of a pigeon but it is black humour is not some imagination rendering the safe writerly lane as demoniacal but it is black humour is not calling for disapproval but it is black humour is not challenging an aflw star to a fight and getting knocked out in the first round but it is black humour is not drunk but it is black humour is not being lost all trace of shortly afterward in the gulf of st. vincent but it is black humour is not rather ashamed of its whiteness but it is black humour is not the most preposterous fancies but it is black humour is not preferring a fight over literature any day but it is black humour is not speaking about literature nonetheless but it is black humour is not taking advantage to speak ill of at least two million living authors but it is black humour is not indulging in those ravages that jeopardize fortune and health but it is black humour is not a hundred times not but it is black humour is not wearing disease like languor but it is black humour is not carrying a massive book to a family reunion as weird flex but it is black humour is not andré breton taunting andré gide despite not owning a suit hard to believe nor andré from the song whose studio was burnt down by riot grrrls but it is black humour is not the capital questions of all time but it is black humour is not curiosity despite eight of nine lives done but it is black humour is not a veritable red-light district of the mind but it is black humour is not to innervate inanimate objects w/ your own sensibility but it is black humour is not a weft vibrating from the slightest touch end to end of wodliparri but it is black humour is not a book of war poems that refuses to burn revolutionary thought but it is black humour is not the highest branch on a lightning-struck tree named justine but it is black humour is not beautiful songs of an asylum but it is black humour is not ooze pale and defenceless but it is black humour is not good god hallelujah but it is black humour is not a rattling jaw but it is black humour is not rats lapping the blood that falls but it is black humour is not an anagram for antimasterpiece but it is black humour is not the canned crowd noise of canned chance but it is black humour is not symposia for the doomed but it is black humour is not a transformer for wasted energy but it is black humour is not plumbing for excess tears but it is black humour is not the misogyny of modern art but it is black humour is not id as stratum be it tissue bedrock social class but it is black humour is not mnemonics for amnesiacs and orphans but it is black humour is not crash landing softly on the compost of your psyche that decays in order to restore vitals depleted but it is black humour is not making the cut not that cut but it is black humour is not bravo bravo but it is black humour is not at the request of a doctor writing your date-of-birth not once but on again and again to the bottom of the page and then line drawn adding a fictitious sum but it is black humour is not the beauty of inaccurate mathematical figures but it is black humour is not brains for guts for brains but it is black humour is not black humour but it is black humour^{††}

^{††} 'negation of a negation' owes its production to Prof. Driver, who, during my pre-submission review, interjected after I had spoken, in a strange atonal mix of the vague and the stirring, as I am wont to do, in response to a question from the chair about my potential use of definitions saying I could only possibly approach definitions negatively. That is to say, *black humour is not this is not that not this not that*. . . anyway, Dorothy Driver asked if I was ever going to end that sentence because, she contended, *black humour is all those things*. I'd like to acknowledge her direct influence, here. Although, I can't say she'd approve. Further, most (but not all) of the phrases that run through 'negation of a negation' are taken from Breton's Anthology: his concise and lyrical introductions to each writer and of course the black humourists' primary texts.

ANTI-THEORY?

BLACK HUMOUR AS NIGHTMARE WORK

When the teachers return Nobody is at peace. The solitude has done wonders for her immunity despite the etiolation caused by an unholy vitamin d deficiency, a deadly d-deficiency not uncommon to the underrated and overshadowed prickles. Her will to live as captive despite the enforced sobriety is kicking along. Isolation has done wonders yes wonders for her conviction to abjure from appeal or appeasement. Thinking: will the teachers resume as characters of examination? as gaolers of interrogation? Can I conjure the 'angle of contestation' along which counter discourses travel? or will this writing become a 'bowdlerized popular distortion' that seeks to 'naturalize [black humour] for public and commercial consumption'? (Erickson 198)

Bad Teach kisses Nobody on the cheek and says, you look good; have you lost weight and gained words? Your hair looks wonderful.

Nobody thinks, heavy. And the acronym fgm for some unknown reason invades her psyche. A paronym to forgetting: without reading — she has survived solitary without reading.

Since losing her job her man her office her burden to bear, Good Teacher is changed. Nobody can tell by the way she is grimacing on the inside in a perpetual ha — the way she has forsaken the hara-kiri butterfly flirtation of circling the sons, circling, circling, circling the sons. Burning.

Nobody thinks, reverse metamorphosis is possible. Witchetty grubs are so handsome and so tasty.

Now a volunteer, now a non-payroll research fellow, Good Teacher wants to ensure Nobody is released. For she had a dream (nay, a nightmare), a nightmare in which she was the impecunious prisoner who underwent a brutal non-consensual haircut. Ammonium nitrate

was the only thing left to use as conditioner and a factory alarm sounds through eternity — on and on, even after she woke.

Kaboom!

Now Good Teacher wants to save her own soul by minimally improving someone else's degraded materiality. Her rejection is still far too fresh to make her understand most things. For instance, you only get emails about career prospects when there are none. If there were actual jobs, there'd be no need for the rhetoric of middle-men and bland career fairs where there isn't even a sideshow alley. No skinny clowns and fat acrobats, no aesthetics of incongruity, no children with purple hair and dirty lilac toes hawking mulberries and meth, no Gargantua flooding the world with piss, no scary wonderful women in caravans who they say can tell the future, no fast to follow the feast, no topsy-turvy, no Bakhtin, no Kathy Acker topless on a muscle-bike, no kisses behind the toilet block. Dear Nobody. . . but of course there are still conmen in suits with their consultancy firms and private security forces and when we go home without anything at all, Australian society offers us — creeps looking over the fence. Monitored, monitored, monitored. . . it gets wearisome, wearisome this life of perpetual danger.

K, then. Bad Teach hasn't lost any of her impatience. It in fact grows in equidistant opposition with each paycut. Last time we spoke, you failed to define *black*. All we got was a bogus discourse on white trash. So, what exactly have you been doing these last few months?

Nobody laughs silently like a revolutionary cum philosopher-gangsta on trial for human rights violations, laughs without making a sound, try to imagine Mandela in designer sunglasses as a villain (but, of course — *she* is) and says: thinking.

Thinking? Thinking? That doesn't count (words). Have you engaged with industry? have you been looking for work?

Would you mind re-phrasing the question?

Good Teach goes ha and contorts.

Shaking her head, Bad Teacher affects to make a note on her iphone but is distracted by a notification from her banking app.

The market down, today? yeah? is it feeling uncertain and anxious about the future? is it depressed, wracked with nervousness? Amused, Nobody grins without moving her mouth: I only feel buoyed when the market is down. Looking? you say, looking? looking for work? Now I'm not sure where work hides but I'm pretty sure it doesn't hide in the arts faculty or in solitary confinement. Looking for work? It's Nobody's turn to scoff, but I've been in segro.

That's no excuse. You have mutual obligations. Do you want to be poor forever? There's always something more we can take from you, Nobody. Your teeth, for instance. Your fingers. . . your clitoris. . . your ideas, too.

Your tongue —

Nobody says, whether or not I'm poor — that's not up to me. Whether or not I'm sad. . . Like I said, I've been thinking.

Good Teach: ha grimace ha.

Affection is budding in Good Teacher and Nobody doesn't trust it. Like a newbie to the hurt dialectic of humour, GT may as well have an anime avatar.

Nobody's intrusive thoughts turn to hentai. She murmurs, mercy.

But one can't charge a cartoon with rape. Can they?

Turning in slow motion to face Good Teach, Nobody smiles and says: my welfare is mine to waste on beer. Your alms cannot manipulate me, cannot make me feel bad. I am a weak and powerless creature and I'm down with that. The only tactical operations accessible to me are counter-strategies — confound the concerns, shift judgements ineluctably, lay waste to the ground, reveal the underlying illogic and

hence destabilise the ruling ideology of the rich (Erickson 202). In a neoliberal ideology of choice, are beggars the ultimate choosers? Who among you would love a loser? Once again we — the weak and powerless — only prevail through linguistic displacement (Erickson 203).

Correlatively, then: just as humour, in Freudian theory, displaces the psychic accent from pain to pleasure as it rids itself of pre-ordained and stock affects, as it disengages with the rules of response, as it reverses expenditure into savings. . .

Yes, yes. We'll return to this later. Bad Teacher is vexed. GT was not meant to be clever.

But minor rejection has done wonders for Good Teacher's intellect. Her sign is shifting from one meaning to another. . . incorporating ellipses, she has ceased trying to please men and their tables of self-righteous rigour.

Still Nobody is having trouble focusing. She might be thinking she can't believe that almighty slight occurred seven years ago, can't believe she was left mute in its wake with only the echoes of a shocking and debased internal dialogue, can't believe she didn't at least start a brawl (what was she thinking?), can't believe that until now she didn't realise when she was shown the torture scars of a refugee named Denizio as a child it was a funny lesson, or she might be thinking how she is starting to feel exactly the same as before all this began, vaguely anxious and vital with dread, but that would mean she learnt nothing, would mean black humour taught her nothing.

Nobody's nothing: a lesson.

Yes, thinking. Focus now. Thinking. . . if this is the final seven thousand words I'll ever write, if this is it, the last chapter of my student-hood, what do I need to say? I'm so sad I lost that outro. I can't find it

anywhere. My treatise on the ribcage of a pigeon.* Hunger was its theme.

But Good Teacher is here to help, here to help secure Nobody's release, because as a diehard centre-leftie she obstinately maintains her mistaken belief in freedom. Even though more often than not freedom is corseted — as fashion dictates. Even though freedom is now (has always been?) inextricably linked to the flag-fucking far right: ah yes, say hello to the fascists of freedom.

Where's Josef Djugashvili dressed poorly and in constant need of money when you need him?

With patience she asks, can you tell us a little more about your theory of black humour as nightmare-work?

Maybe, but first: has my time in solitary earned me the right to ask questions? I'm afraid it's all I have. I'm afraid it's the only way.

And afraid you should be because even though yes you are correct and yes time in solitary does earn you the right to ask questions, every question has its cost. And, seeing as you have no wealth and no income — we have other ways of making you pay, Nobody. BT can't hide her delight now that the time for empty threats has passed. She moves toward her victim professionally like all fascists. Fake smile, she is after

* imagine *black humour* to be the shards of broken windows smashed by a drunken fight, the jagged results of the violent boredom, the duress of poverty, in post-industrial late-to-the-party capitalism, or the graffiti, sometimes transcendental blague, other times brilliant bathos, more verdigris than verdant, more green rust than green dream, something that by all rights shouldn't exist but the image would feel incomplete if it didn't, oversexed and underfed, or also the angles, obtuse, caused by hungry insects and rot in the foundations as the structure tilts and skews but does not fall, the creaking of a condemned house at night, the death rattles of entire neighbourhoods, in a relentless final soiling of stink, redundant, the receipts of overpriced food, the work contract that says we aren't worth the price of keeping us alive, the song of the trap of the traps of the trapped, an ambiguous figure in the polluted mist reading Sade (see Zimmerman, 'Starting Points for Surrealist Practice and Praxis in the Dialectics of Cruelty and *Humour Noir*') or is it Djuna Barnes (see Bunzmann, 'Djuna Barnes' Queer Surrealism: An American Woman in Paris'; and Greiner, 'Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* and the American Origins of Black Humor') in whispers to some unseen presence, the ribcage of a pigeon, perishing not publishing the useless fictions of our errors.

all just doing her job. Like all private school pricks she wears her hatred on her mouth and is quietly proud to be an ‘artist who practices . . . art as a “business”’ (Kristeva, ‘Horrors’ 16).

Hey, you’re starting to remind me of Michaelia Cash. But that’s an aside. Nobody is fading. How is it possible to lose interest in your own demise? Do trees get so sad they die? At least time passes agonizingly and unhurriedly, dragging on the planets’ rotation, lessening — or is it multiplying? gravity. . . she cannot muster a response in terms of language. She cannot come to her own defence. She’s behaving like a guilty person. But then again it’s easy to look busted in a hessian suicide smock.

Nevermind. Good Teacher really is good now she’s had her first taste of worthlessness. Please Nobody, for mercy’s sake, please. Your life has value, your teeth, your fingers. . .

Prove it: pay me.

No chance. Bad Teacher doesn’t need xrays to perform extractions, mutilations, castrations, amputations. Mostly — except in those rarefied spheres where the experience of the patient is principal — xrays are ignored anyway, like theory, in favour of bad puns and rough plaster-work by nurses who believe it’s your own fault you broke your left hand, drinking and fighting like a colonial subject.

Question 1. If dreams are just shitty jokes? are jokes just shitty dreams? (shit rhymes with wit — shitwit) And if I’m failing in my quest for theory is it because I am relying too heavily upon conscious thought? If dreams are insufferably witty, what are nightmares? What becomes of humour when the censor is broken? when waking life is revealed in its true nightmarishness? What becomes of ‘the hidden joker deep in our psyches’ (Strachey viii) that sad-eyed clown, that truant of seriousness, who produces dreams and jokes when we don’t need their riddles anymore? If the condensation is on the windows in winter? where is the displacement? — in poor postcodes? five zero eight four they don’t love me anymore. . . does humour become not

funny? as it becomes black? as it becomes despair? Did you laugh at the look on the kid's face when he saw the Beirut blast? just seconds before the window exploded in his face? sooooo funny not funny as black humour (its nightmare work) becomes dialectical — that much is certain. Negate the affirmation affirm the negation negate the negation, but what if Freud and all speculative theorists are just rhetoricians? School yourself against me. Resist. It might be strange persuasion, but it is persuasion nonetheless. Do you write with more grace and force (same/diff?) when you have been critically distressed earlier that day? Do you write with more élan when your head hurts? in a precise neuralgic response to humiliating the only person you love? Have you ever woken an insomniac suffering ptsd who just dropped off into peace because you wanted to chat about negative dialectics and melancholic black metal before reporting your income (there was none) to DHSS? is that a joke or a dream? it's true. Exactly. What becomes of that hallowed passage from the preconscious to the unconscious (Strachey xi) of the joke-workers when the nightmare is waking life? Are the vague, the barely there, the elsewhere, are they to become the nightmare-workers of black humour. Not a Freudian élite (the in-crowd, the in-on-it crowd) nor a Bretonian supreme (revolutionaries of the mind) but a degraded few whose abuse and subjection killed the censor. What becomes of all this rhetoric when Freud never found or psychoanalysed a joker? (Strachey xii) And of the dream-work/joke-work structural analogy? what remains? when the structures are in ruins? If the condensation is a dirty bathroom, and steam bleeds the walls, do there repeat the imperfect cleansings of generations of the displaced? is a clean poor bathroom better than one that is filthy and rich? I repeat, the metaphors are all dead. And metonymy? Running away in broken (signifying) chains? What becomes of the irrelevance of content to joke-work (Strachey xiv)? what becomes of the primacy of the psychical mechanism to the funniness of humour when black humour is funny not funny? what becomes of our hubris? our cleverness? when the joke-work disturbs something fundamental and switches positive distinction into negative

niche? and hence from which we can take not even self-congratulatory pleasure? superfluous psyche — laughter. Chemicals? Mood? Debt? It's the economy, stupid.

Enough! Bad Teacher slices Nobody's left ear off with a scalpel. There is blood and warning: graphic content — (we can't spell when we write of these things).

For the sake of torment, or to teach her the difference between mourning and melancholia, Nobody's ear is preserved without refrigeration (smoking and curing are atavistic methods, salt, fire, and hanging). Good Teacher enjoys these pseudo-scientific or proto-homicidal roles now she is forced to question her virtue at the tables of phenomenology.

A grisly, witchy keepsake — all Nobody has ever heard dangles imperceptibly in the corner; thus not permitted to forget what Question 1 cost, her bleedings are badly bandaged.

Question 2. is that your answer?

Bad Teach signals to Good to hold Nobody's forehead from behind as she places her left foot on the seat of the chair and braces for an almighty struggle to dislodge a tooth that is not ready to be pulled. To remove that incisor, it takes Bad Teacher let's say 56 minutes of eternity — the pliers in their repetitive yank and shove scratch and graze Nobody's cheek and lips. Wounds are not always gaping, they can be abrasions.

Nobody doesn't get any laughing gas. The extraction is so prolonged, she begins to encourage Bad Teach. Come on, you can do this. Do you need a little break? Okay let's try again. Finally she is given some dirty looking gauze to suck.

The good tooth is washed by GT: the first in her collection of props to an unofficial children's game, and in Nobody's right cheek, the black tooth is firmly loose.

Question 3. [From one side of her mouth like a deformed Elvis Presley, bleeding and poor] is your joker stupid or naughty? And if repression is caused by education and civilisation what becomes of repression when education doesn't educate and civilisation doesn't civilise? Call me hostile, call me obscene, but I won't answer the phone. Just so you can tell me now that content matters? that an obscene dream is *just* an obscene dream? but your contradicting the entire thesis! ha. jokes, the comic, all pale now in the dark light of the pleasing distress of humour?[†] are you exhausted, yet?

[†] Vital to Breton's black humour are the speculative writings of Sigmund Freud. He employs the Freudian conceptual framework of the psychical apparatus even though he views the great tripartite demarcations of the *ego*, the *superego*, and the *id* as 'artificial' ('Lightning' xviii). In this sense Freud enables a surrealist theoretical practice that does not position itself as acolyte, maintaining reservations on the limits of the knowable while engaging nonetheless in the serious philosophical appraisal of aesthetic concepts.

In *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud demarcates *humour* from the merely *comic*. Due to his notion that direct suffering and pain are the point at which comedy ceases to work in the psychic apparatus, he is able to write:

Once some unintentional movement does harm, some stupidity leads to disaster, some disappointment causes pain, there is an end to the possibility of a comic effect, at least for the person who is vulnerable to such unpleasure, is stricken by it himself or has to share in it, whereas the behaviour of someone uninvolved shows that the situation concerned contains everything needed to make a comic effect. Now humor is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that disturb it; it acts as a substitute for the emergence of affect, it takes its place. (220)

Thus *humour* is viewed, in Freud as in Breton, as a movement of the psyche. It is not the ability to laugh at the disasters of which we are not involved, but, on the contrary, requires our immediate suffering and pain — *humour* requires trauma — because it is a protection against wounding: we laugh in order not to hurt. To laugh the laugh of comedy, at its most basic, then, is to laugh at others, while humoristic pleasure is a direct consequence of potential psychological pain, pain that is *displaced* by humour and its unique ability to arrest displeasure *in statu nascendi*. The value of this 'displacement process' is the splitting of self, a doubling that discharges the 'freedom' and 'power' to distance oneself equally from the *ego* and the 'world that holds it captive' (Erickson 211). It is, however, impossible to produce 'humorous displacement' with conscious thought because 'it is tied to the condition of remaining preconscious or automatic' (Freud, 'Jokes' 224).

Humour is not an act of will, it does not function in consciousness and therein lies the trick.

We just can't pigeon-hole you, exactly. It's what we do, teachers — good and bad — put things in pigeon holes. It's how we survive all these weirdos and resist all these normies.

The teachers eye Nobody with perplexion. She says, I feel your pain. You know as Kristevan strays, we dejects, have a very different bearing to the petted and the loved; we are unlike your usual student body; we carry an anti-posture of the shoooooooooed away. Kicked and kicking — but of course the more we 'stray the more we are saved' ('Horrors' 8).

Or, as destitute?[‡]

It makes us difficult to read, I guess.

So you're citing a critique of dialectical relations?

Nobody shrugs and says, whatever: my use of dialectics will never be dogmatic; it makes no difference if dialectical methods. . . and of course dialectics is more than method. . . makes no difference if dialectical methods are the correct approach to the dying world or the right way to go about dreadful knowledge or even if it's considered clever, of all things. Dialectics to me is: learning. Constant learning. And the verb *Aufheben*[§] is as dear to me as the heaviest guitars on

[‡] *Destituere* in Latin means: to place standing separate, raise up in isolation; to abandon; put aside, let drop, knock down; to let down, deceive. Whereas constituent logic crashes against the power apparatus it means to take control of, a destituent potential is concerned instead with escaping from it, with removing any hold on it which the apparatus might have, as it increases its hold on the world in the separate space that it forms. Its characteristic gesture is *exiting*, just as the typical constituent gesture is taking by storm. In terms of a destituent logic, the struggle against state and capital is valuable first of all for the exit from capitalist normality that is experienced therein, for the desertion from the shitty relations with oneself, others, and the world under capitalism. Thus, where the "constituents" place themselves in a dialectical relation of struggle with the ruling authority in order to take possession of it, destituent logic obeys the vital need to *disengage from it*. (The Invisible Committee, 'Now' 27)

[§] It might prove infelicitous to cite another thinker here given Hegel writes,

The only difference between being caught up in a system of opinions and prejudices based on personal conviction, and being caught up in one based on the authority of others, lies in the added conceit that is

earth under a once-in-a-lifetime sky of pagan constellations, their frightening brilliance. Cancel me. Forget me. Sublate me. Sink me below the horizon, never to be seen again. For I don't care if more advanced thinkers surpass me on their way to the void while I live through this sad cadetship in philosophy: to learn how to laugh, a dark nightmare laugh. I can't argue like a good student. I don't want to anyway. The truth is I don't even like TW Adorno. I find him creepy.**

Bad Teacher laughs. Me too.

Pause.

innate in the latter position. The scepticism that is directed against the whole range of phenomenal consciousness, on the other hand, renders the Spirit for the first time competent to examine what truth is. For it brings about a state of despair about so-called natural ideas, thoughts, and opinions, regardless of whether they are called one's own or someone else's, ideas with which the consciousness that sets about examination [of truth] straight away is still filled and hampered, so that it is, in fact, incapable of carrying out what it wants to undertake. ('Phenomenology' 50)

May you find subtle evidence of my understanding of Hegelian dialectics and despair in the whole of my textual production.

** See Elizabeth Lenk, *The Challenge of Surrealism*. In particular her correspondence with Prof. Adorno as a graduate student.

So this is the function of nightmare-work? to learn how to laugh? Good Teacher wants the joke to stop so bad she can't tell if she is genuinely intrigued or just going through the motions of pretending to be curious in order to manipulate the direction of the text.

Tick tock tick go the narrators' clocks.

No, my answer is: no. After demanding to know black humour's significance, the *why* of my project — it's true I came close like the first fateful loop of the blue planet in Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* when I was directed to Menippean Discourse and Kristeva's work on the *ambivalent word* and *dialogic discourse* via Bakhtin's discussion of polyphonic novels**** — before abandoning that quest as a nihilist

**** what is the ambivalent word?

In her reading of Mikhail Bakhtin's work, Julia Kristeva talks about three types of words. In contradistinction to the *denotative* word and the *object-oriented* word, she praises the *ambivalent* word. Both *object-oriented* and *denotative* words are univocal and *monological*, while the *ambivalent* word is *dialogical*. (I will return to *monologue* and *dialogue* shortly). The *denotative* word is the word of the writer that ostensibly provides access to direct and objective understanding. This *denotative* word attempts equivalence (as in realist description and epic narrative). The *object-oriented* word is the word of fictional characters. It also seeks direct, objective understanding but on a character's tongue (as in a character's speech). This *object-oriented* word is subordinate to the task of the *denotative* word of the writer and is both object and putatively objective. That is, it is the *denotative* word of a character when that character is under the control of the writer's masterplan. The *ambivalent* word, on the other hand, is the writer's use of the word of another. This *ambivalent* word retains the meaning it possessed prior to its appropriation and is also loaded with other meanings due to its new use. We have, thus, a word with at least two significations. We have the *ambivalent* word.

Aren't all words then *ambivalent*? Of course, all words are then *ambivalent*. But, most writing (in the name of definitions and descriptions, equivalence and rationalism) attempts to overcome the inherent

ambivalence of its word. This fascist attempt to control and force the *ambivalent* word into univocality is known as *monological discourse*.

Via Bakhtin, Kristeva situates scientific and historical discourse as *monological*, and also epic forms of narrative that attempt representative modes of description and adhere to some ethical writerly masterplan. These three discourses (knowingly or unknowingly) stultify their inherent *ambivalence* as word because they assume and submit to the rule of 1. That is, by assuming mastery over the *ambivalent* word, *monological discourses* inadvertently submit themselves to a higher mastery. What is the rule of 1? The rule of 1 is absolutism. It is the true/false code of 0/1. Whereas, the *ambivalent* word is a perpetual fight between 0/2. It is at least double and transgresses right/wrong answers. It is abusive praise, or praising abuse. It is a love/hate tattoo.

Monological discourse thwarts the undying persistence of the *ambivalent* word by self-imposing prohibitions in an attempt to seek and present final truth. It does not argue with itself, but presents understanding as either affirmation or negation, never both simultaneously. Even in the instance of citation, we find univocal use of another's word because *monological discourse* affirms or negates. End of story.

Dialogical discourse, on the other hand, embraces the *ambivalent* word. It is writing reading writing reading writing and is as such a process of productive annihilation. By

unleashing the power of the *ambivalent* word, it seeks affirmation and negation simultaneously and forgoes an absolute point of view. For Bakhtin, 'all who judge . . . are devoid of a genuinely dialogic approach . . .' ('Problems' 62). They are dogmatists wilfully ignorant — definitions and determinations do not exist, equivalence does not exist, even the equals sign does not exist. The *ambivalent* word is infused with dialogue, a microdialogue where every word is at battle, every word is interrupted by another voice (Bakhtin, 'Problems' 75). Alas, I've turned to another anti-definitional concept in order to escape the anti-definitional impasse of black humour criticism. You're in trouble now. I know, but I'm trying to correlate the infamous ambivalence of black humour with the *ambivalent* word of *dialogical discourse*.

For Kristeva, the only way we are able to escape social and psychic prohibitions enforced by *monological discourse* is through the poetic/dream logic of *dialogical discourse* and the *ambivalent* word. Importantly, the only place we find this emancipatory force of poetic logic is at the margins of recognised culture: like the flyblown margins where Dmitry Karamazov goes to think. For Bakhtin, the *ambivalent* word and *dialogical discourse* are the 'struggle against a *reification* of man [sic]; a truly dialogical approach fights against this '*reifying devaluation*' that permeates everything, everything. . . especially 'the very foundations of human thinking' ('Problems' 62).

As the potential redeemer of human thinking, *dialogical discourse* does not 'permit thought to stop and congeal in one-sided seriousness or in a stupid fetish for definition or singleness of meaning' (Bakhtin, 'Problems' 132). Thus we come to the polyphonic novel, that great choral vitality that could only come into being under the conditions of capitalism (19-20). I'm not going to speak of the polyphonic novel, but rather *menippea* — from which it owes much of its serio-comic tone.

what is menippea?

Menippean writing is the namesake of Menippus of Gadara, an Ancient Greek philosopher whose satires are all lost. Fittingly? And yet, this serio-comic way of writing has survived throughout history. Like black humour, it is dark and ludic at the same time. As a form of *carnivalized literature* (that is, writing that is a kind of bastard child of a dualistic carnival world-view where birth/death, feast/defecation, praise/abuse inhabit each other) it disturbs the political and

the social via a bold imaginative philosophy that is not only rebellious in content but also at the base level of structure and form. In doing so *menippea* destroys the logic of causality and biography, alongside dodgy concepts like merit and deservedness. Ultimate existential problems are favoured over the academic. *Menippea* is fantastic (let's say, surreal) and meta with a penchant for scandalous uses of language and scorn for manners and tact. Its characters do not coincide with themselves. It is the writing of wise fools, *déclassé* intellectuals, honest criminals. Its favoured sense is sound; we hear its voices rather than see its world. The writing seems less likely to be read than to be overheard (Emerson xxxiii) probably against the listener's will. Kristeva calls it a 'pavement of citations' that spans all formal and informal ways of writing ('Desire' 53). Bakhtin calls it *pure voice*. We do not see our hero, we hear her.

Bakhtin delineates the 14 basic characteristics of *menippea* —

- i. it is funny, though serious
- ii. it is unfettered by verisimilitude, though remains prose with 'extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention' ('Problems' 114)
- iii. it tests ideas and truth via the provocation of its characters on some kind of threshold
- iv. its setting is the slums; it tests lofty notions, philosophical ideals by situating them in the ghetto
- v. thereby stripping philosophy to syncretism (the *pro et contra*) of ultimate questions
- vi. it is a peasant arguing at the gates of heaven; it is the 'dialogues of the dead'
- vii. it takes an unusual point of view from where the scale of things radically change
- viii. day dreams, nightmares, psychoses of all persuasions, do not function as mere themes or prophecy but contravene the integrity of fate and identity as the characters enter a dialogic relationship with themselves
- ix. it is the writing of scandal, of contrariness, in constant violation of established norms, of behaviours and speech
- x. it is oxymoronic
- xi. it dreams of a social utopia
- xii. it encompasses a multi-generic approach to writing, often distancing

must for I was already treating language like mud — I'm starting to think. . . black humour may have no function, no function at all, and its laugh is not a laugh, not really. What if black humour is utterly pointless? beyond ratiocination? But, I have another question.

-
- xiii. and ironizing any ultimate authorial position via the parody of documents as such it is multi-styled and multi-voiced
 - xiv. finally, it is topical and of the present day; imagine if gonzo journalism had the soul of a tormented lover embroiled in a *mésalliance*

Kristeva takes from Bakhtin that *menippea* is 'structured as ambivalence', because it is literature becoming thought. Does it hate itself? because it can't escape itself as writing? Maybe. Further, she conceives *menippean* writing as an anti-cathartic 'political act' that has 'no fixed message'. She notes how dialogical writings are only tolerated by the middle-class and damned as 'unreadable' and 'ignored or ridiculed' ('Desire' 54-5).

In order to figure out what significance may hide in Kristeva's political act that has no fixed meaning, I'll now turn to a primary text other than my own, a text in which there is clear evidence of both the *ambivalent* word working as *dialogical discourse* and many of the characteristics of *menippea* observed above.

'have you ever thought of the night?'

After losing her straying lesbian lover, Robin, who likes to wander the streets at night getting up to god knows what, Nora visits Dr. Matthew O'Connor. As stated above the characters of *menippea* don't coincide with themselves. Matthew is certainly a character of this ilk. He is a strange doctor, indeed. Struck-off and poverty stricken, he is dressed and heavily made-up (as the woman he is) drinking and drunk in bed at 3am. When Nora finds him at home in a decrepit bedsit, the Dr. is both little red riding hood *and* the wolf. Entering this *menippean* slum where masses of books stacked almost to the ceiling are all water-stained and covered in inches of dust, to garner the wisdom of this fool, Nora feels as if condemned to a grave, a lofty grave six-flights up. There is a swill bucket by the head

of the bed 'brimming with abominations'. Nora has come at night in order to philosophise in a ghetto bedroom that is reminiscent of a boxing gym. Here is where she will contest the truth, enter the fight, of the high ideal of *love*. Why, where else would we have her go? As the Doctor quickly reminds Nora, the heart tumbles in a chest: one of the darkest places of all. (Barnes, 'Night' 68-70)

Putatively a dialogue between, the lovesick lover and the Doctor, the healer, Nora says nary a word as Matthew's *dialogical discourse* hits it stride. Besides the attributes of *menippea* noted above, Barnes's writing is also unfettered by verisimilitude. Even while setting the scene with a dense couple of pages before the dialogue starts, the narrator's prose is rich with the simultaneous affirmation and negation of the *ambivalent* word: rusty forceps, a broken scalpel, almost empty bottles of perfume, an 'abdominal brace, which gave the impression that . . . feminine finery had suffered venery' ('Night' 68).

Yet, it's when Barnes gives full reign to her *menippean* character that we begin to hear the startling range of combatting voices that is the product of *dialogical discourse*, struggling against any final truth, any congealment of thought into one-sided seriousness.

Dr. Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-the-salt-Dante-O'Connor lets loose with the voices of monks, of sailors, of addicts, of princes, of lovers, of the dead, of sleepers and dreamers, and the reason he 'knows everything is because he's been everywhere at the *wrong* time and has now become anonymous' (Barnes, 'Night' 71).

What we learn from the *ambivalent* word is that insults echo praise and back again. The sacred cows are already on their way to the slaughterhouse.

You do realise you just asked two questions? Bad Teacher can't determine what to take from Nobody next, what would hurt the most.

Oh, they don't count. Question 4. Why is there no children's day? like there's one for mums and dads? As a four year old I asked this of my grandparents who (is it worth noting?) were not blood relations and they said that every day was children's day. I didn't believe it then and I'm still not convinced. Will the valorisation of family ever end? Who among you, in spring, believes your father was a good man?

“Ho, nocturnal hag whimpering on the thorn, rot in the grist, mildew in the corn,” said the doctor. **“If you’ll pardon my song and singing voice, both of which were better until I gave my kidney on the left side to France in the war — and I’ve drunk myself half around the world cursing her for jerking it out — if I had to do it again, grand country though it is — I’d be the girl found lurking behind the army, or up with the hill folk, all of which is to rest me a little of my knowledge, until I can get back to it. I’m coming to something.**

Misericordia...”††††

(Barnes, ‘Night’ 77)

†††† have mercy (by the dagger)

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