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Pleasure, Reality, the Novel and Pathology

(Commentary to Zygmunt Bauman: *Freudian civilization revisited*)

In his paper Zygmunt Bauman stresses the fate of the reality principle. But to raise that question is implicitly to raise another: what of the pleasure principle? After all, the two operate in a dialectical tension both in the constitution of social subjects and in cultural forms. This paper takes that observation as its point of departure. It seeks to ask a question of the contemporary relationship between the reality and the pleasure principles, and it does this by following through on Bauman's allusions and by offering a reflection on the cultural form of the novel. The novel is the great drama of the psychological and historical consequences of the dialectic of reality and pleasure.

According to Freud, the pleasure principle is desire for immediate gratification (Freud 1984: 275). It means the avoidance of the need for deferred gratification and is incompatible with long term security. Consequently, even if the pleasure principle is a primary psychological force, it is not at all dominant: 'there exists in the mind a strong *tendency* towards the pleasure principle, but that...tendency is opposed by certain other forces or circumstances, so that the final outcome cannot always be in harmony with the tendency towards pleasure' (Freud 1984: 278). If it is allowed to run without check or constraint, the pleasure principle can be dangerous. If immediate gratification is the sole aim, then no attention will be paid to the risks that are presented by the resistance of external things. This means that the pleasure principle, 'from the point of view of the self-preservation of the organism among the difficulties of the external world...is from the very outset inefficient and even highly dangerous'. Freud continued: 'Under the ego's instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the *reality* principle'. The reality principle implies the renunciation of immediate gratification and indeed even the acceptance of displeasure, in the attempt to secure greater pleasure in the longer run (Freud 1984: 278). In short, life involves the striking of a balance between pleasure and reality, and it can be argued that the tradition of the novel, at least in its European form, is a sustained and socially contextu-

alised treatment of the tension between the pleasure and the reality principles.

Milan Kundera suggests that the novel emerged in the seventeenth century at the historical moment when, 'God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguishing good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning' (Kundera 1988: 6). God was the guarantee and authority of a reality principle that sought to establish criteria for the restraint and constraint of the pleasure principle. But if the novel emerged in the wake of the disappearance of the common sense acceptance of this reality, it follows that the novel as a cultural form is initiated also in a moment when the pleasure principle was emancipated. The novel appeared in the moment when, 'the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parcelled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world' (Kundera 1988: 6).

What Kundera calls the Modern Era is *after* the preceding reality principle in two ways. First, the old haunted the Modern as nostalgia and safety in such a way that it became the desire of backward-looking pursuits. Second, the Modern Era was *after* in the sense of sequence; the Modern Era was what came next. But precisely in order for the Modern Era to possess the solidity that might make it identifiable it had to possess its own reality principle. The tradition of the European novel tells a story of the emergence of that reality principle.

Kundera argues that when the novel emerged with Cervantes there was acceptance of, 'the world as ambiguity'. The dominant principle within the condition of ambiguity required that subjects were, 'obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths...to have as one's only certainty the *wisdom of uncertainty*' (Kundera 1988: 6-7). This is the reason why: 'The early European novels are journeys through an apparently unlimited world...They exist in a time without beginning or end, in a space without frontiers, in the midst of a Europe whose future will never end' (Kundera 1988: 8). In this moment of emergence there

is little by way of a solid and reliable reality principle, a situation that is expressed extremely clearly in the adventures of Don Quixote, turning the world to whatever he determined. But the history of the novel is a story of the disappearance of possibility 'behind those modern structures, the social institutions: the police, the law, the world of money and crime, the army, the State' (Kundera 1988: 8). Consequently, the contemporary novel that stands in line with Cervantes is haunted by desertion by Don Quixote.

The novelistic form developed two *genres* to deal with the process in which institutions emerged which established a solid reality in a context that had been initially imagined as a place of open adventures.

First, there was what might be called the *genre* of *entrapment* and it is represented in Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*, novels like *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary* and, later, the work of Kafka. According to Kundera, novels of this kind are all passengers on a train of History that is experienced as increasingly beyond subjective control. In the world of the all-dominant reality principle life is biologically safe, but subjectively annihilating. The second *genre* is one of *acceptance*. It has its clearest expression in the *Bildungsroman*. *Buddenbrooks*, to which Bauman refers in his paper, is an example of the *genre*. Novels in this *genre* focus on the growth of the central character; this growth might be moral and spiritual or simply physical, but it is connected with the achievement of an increasing maturity through the growing ability of the central character to balance his own pleasures and desires with the rules and expectations of a solid external reality. Maturity is the ability to defer immediate gratifications, and this is tied to the presumption that pleasures deferred are much greater and more rewarding than pleasures gained. In the *Bildungsroman* then, the pleasure principle is controlled by reality in a way that allows for a well-balanced life. What both *genres* share is an assumption that there is a hard world of external referents which either demand acceptance or which crush. They share a reality principle.

The reality principle of Kundera's Modern Era was founded on what Bauman would identify as the 'Trinitarian world'. Bauman says that: 'For two hundred years the world was occupied with making the control of human movements the sole prerogative of state powers, with erecting barriers to all the other, uncontrolled human movements, and manning the barriers with vigilant and heavy armed guards' (Bauman 2002: 284). Bauman takes this argument in the direction of an analysis of the modern state as an agency that sought to manage space, but his argument can be expanded in a way that is compatible with the tradition of the novel if 'human move-

ments' are seen as being both spatial and imaginative, both geographical and existential. If this expansion is accepted, then the two hundred year period to which Bauman refers becomes the same as Kundera's Modern Era, and the concern of its reality principle was to erect barriers against unauthorised human movement (and here that movement is being seen as internal as well as external). The barriers against unauthorised movement thus become institutional, spatial and psychological all at the same time.

But what is the 'trinity' to which Bauman refers? It consists in mutually supporting identifications of the nation, state and territory. The identification and occupation of a definite *territory* gave a foundation to the nation and boundaries within which the movement of subjects could be controlled. The *nation* justified the limitations of territory and identified it with the ostensibly natural legitimation of soil (that is, territory) and, as the human expression of that soil, race, language or ethnicity. Finally, the *state* policed the boundaries of the territory and defended the nation from the threat of incursion of false-claims makers (Bauman 2002: 288). This *institutional* trinity can be identified with the psychological form of the super-ego as defined by Freud: 'It is in keeping with the course of human development that external coercion gradually becomes internalised; for a special mental agency, man's super-ego, takes it over and includes it among its commandments'. The super-ego is the external internalised, and 'strengthening of the super-ego is a most precious cultural asset in the psychological field. Those in whom it has taken place are turned from being opponents of civilization into being its vehicles' (Freud 1985: 190). The super-ego makes its subjects the carriers of History in and of themselves. The super-ego creates within the subject boundaries and therefore a sense of the territory of the self, it enforces the external by linking it to a more or less naturalised sense of identification and, finally, it polices the relationship and attitudes of the subject in relation to the external reality which is now moralised as 'civilisation'.

However, the trinity that Bauman points to – with its correlate in the super-ego – can only be seen with such clarity because it has been fractured by the forces of globalisation. The Modern Era sought a stability that in material terms meant the development of capitalism within a national-territorial base and its expansion into other territories only to the extent that profit could be repatriated or raw material exploited. Yet according to Bauman: 'The way in which the world economy operates today...as well as the exterritorial economic elites who operate it, favour state organisms that *cannot* effectively impose conditions under which the economy is

run, let alone impose restraints on the way in which those who run the economy would like it to be run' (Bauman 2002: 165). In other words, the globalisation of economic activity implies the fracturing if not indeed deliberate destruction, of the institutionalisation of the reality principle that was defining of the Modern Era. Similarly, if the super-ego emphasised a lack of movement (the tying of the subject as a productive unit to a specific place of production), national belonging (the tying of production to purported naturalisations of identification in order to generate common interests against competitors) and state authority (where state institutions became the agencies of the welfare state, a kind of 'helper of last resort'), then it too is fractured by the forces of globalisation.

Globalisation has meant the collapse of the reality principle of the Modern Era, and the present moment can be identified as one of an *interregnum*. As Antonio Gramsci said in a different context, but nevertheless extremely appositely: 'the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously...The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' (Gramsci 1971: 276). The 'morbid symptoms' that presently prevail are those of a pleasure principle that is unrestrained, and it is possible to identify five main clusters of them.

First, the release of the pleasure principle can be seen in the emergence of 'extreme sports' and medically risky sexual practices where immediate sensual gratification is identified as more valuable than any concern with biological survival. The extreme sports are now a staple of globalised television, and the emphasis on sexual practice that is oriented purely towards pleasure in the present can be found in the novels of Michel Houellebecq (for example Houellebecq 2002).

The second symptom of the interregnum is the evident pandemic in the West of clinical depression. Dorothy Rowe follows the lead of Epictetus and says that depression is caused not by things themselves, but by our cognitions of those things (Rowe 2003). Here the point is of course that if the reality principle of the Modern Era has collapsed and not yet been replaced with another, or others, then the very recalcitrance of the external world will necessarily mean that its things (other people, institutions, material goods) will not be amenable to subordination to the pleasure principle alone. Consequently, a gap will emerge between the external world (which in as far as it is enduringly recalcitrant will become apprehended as an objective and naturalised 'always out there' that threatens), and cogni-

tions informed by the immediacy of the pleasure principle. That gap is the source and the place of depression.

The third symptom is *obsession*. This heading contains a number of different practices but what they all share is a concern on the part of the subject to find something with which to identify, be that 'something' a celebrity, another human being or a kind of expertise. Again, sexual activity can be included under this heading, as well as emergent cultural activities such as stalking and serial murder (for stalking see Nicol 2006). As a symptom of the interregnum, obsession represents a more or less desperate attempt to find something with which identification might be possible. However it is interesting to note that invariably the referent with which identification is intended is invariably constructed as little more than the human as an object. This leads to the hypothesis that obsession is a contemporary version of alienation. Perhaps this is the nub of how obsession can continue over time and, indeed, become *obsessive*. The referent for identification is subsumed to a pleasure principle that it nevertheless always escapes or never satisfies (because the desire of obsession is identification with a human other, but the obsession itself objectifies the other and thus alienates both them and the obsessive from their humanity). The pathology of obsession is the extent to which the pleasure principle can be all consuming (in a kind of inversion of the world of Kafka) to such an extent that it has to *consume* the referent (in an act of murder, for example).

The fourth symptom follows from obsession and involves *collecting*. Anything can be collected; sexual conquests, the works of a musician or author, toys, whatever. As a symptom of interregnum, the concern is to create referents of identification that enable the construction of a kind of *cocoon*. This cocoon operates as both a barrier against reality and as a sphere in which pleasure is reflected back on the subject. Collecting works all the time that there are new things to collect, but in this way it is completely dominated by the culture industries which at once manufacture the contents of the cocoon (here it is possible to think of such things as the endless supply and production of Star Wars toys and artefacts) and manipulate its supply and price. As such the collecting symptom becomes pathological because it requires engagement with a world outside of the cocoon precisely in order to provide the capital that the collecting requires. The pathology consists in the inability to see reality (including others) as an external referent and, instead, its reduction to a means to a pleasurable end (and end which the culture industries however ensure can never be achieved; perhaps collecting is, then, the contemporary version of the *Bildungsroman*, perhaps the moral hero has been replaced with the Han Solo

enthusiast). Put another way, perhaps the reality principle has become a marketing tool.

The fifth symptom is *infantilisation*. Benjamin Barber argues that because all of the needs of the sufficiently affluent have now been met, capitalism can only reproduce itself with the stimulation of immediate consumer *wants* for unnecessary products. The best way of achieving this is by infantilising consumers and making them live in and for the *now*, like children. This means that the pleasure principle has to be unrestrained or, more precisely, restrained only by capitalist production. Infantilisation is literal in that marketers are increasingly focusing their attention on children, but it is also metaphorical. According to Barber consumers are infantilised by 'capitalist consumerism' that nurtures 'a culture of impetuous consumption necessary to selling puerile goods in a developed world that has few genuine needs' (Barber 2007: 81). What Barber calls the 'infantilist ethos' inverts the Protestant Ethic which he sees as the heroic founding principle of American capitalism, and it stresses the easy over the hard, the simple over the complex, and the fast over the slow. 'As the Protestant ethos once shaped a culture conducive to work and investment, the infantilist ethos today shapes a culture conducive to laxity, shopping, and spending', he says (Barber 2007: 116). This ethos does however offer the chance of a kind of identification in that the subject becomes subsumed under the brands and devices that she or he possesses. But the pathology within infantilisation is that, as the word itself implies, it allows subjects to believe that they are not responsible for themselves, for their relationships with others or, for that matter, the wider environment. Once again, as with the symptom of collecting, infantilisation means that the subject identifies with the things that are produced by the capitalist culture industries in the circumstances of globalisation, and not with the world of other human beings. Once again the core of the pathology is alienation.

The novel is a key site in which the psychological consequences of the dialectic between the reality and pleasure principles are played out. All the time it maintains a focus on general issues the novel will increasingly explore the pathologies which reflect the dilemmas caused for social subjects by the assault that globalisation has launched on the reality principle in which it was formerly possible to trust.

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