

The Importance of Being Foolish

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Tim McDonough competently deploys several literary examples in order to bring to our attention the figure of the fool as pedagogue. This fool is nobody's fool. She is not "didactic," in the sense of presenting lessons forthrightly and head-on. Rather, this fool teaches much more on the sly, preferring to utilize strategies of indirection involving word games, humor, fun, satire, and all sorts of other cleverness to help the pedagogical medicine go down. Though he does not directly say so, the spirit of McDonough's piece seems favorably disposed toward the fool. Beloved icons such as Falstaff and Don Quixote are to be thought of as fools, as are various French brand-name philosophers like Derrida and Lacan. More, it is clear we are to understand that something exciting is going on with this fool, captured in McDonough's suggestive phrase "liminal learning," a phenomenon that seems to occur especially at times of ideological upheaval, where there is a break with the past, a change in the zeitgeist, solids melting into air.¹ From a pedagogical point of view, I think McDonough would have us admire this fool as being able to teach (in the success sense of teaching), where others less skillful would fail, perhaps due to a limiting didacticism, an obstinate propensity for unimaginative frontal assaults on the castle of learning. McDonough also implies that part of our admiration for the fool should be rooted in the fool's ultimate non-foolishness, in fact, a certain "seriousness," a "usefulness in achieving pedagogical ends." Nobody's fool, indeed.

I think this essay does a service in turning our attention toward the fool. In fact, it is tempting to want to extend the analysis beyond the canonical literary examples and into the realm of popular culture where, presumably, the bulk of the fool's transformative work upon the "current field of social action" would tend actually to be done. But before running much further with the idea, I would like to get clearer on a few things.

First, an admission: I like fun and fooling as much as the next philosopher. Yet I worry that when fun is given a "point" it so often ceases to be such. In a teaching context, it may devolve into a mere trick, a device whereby we slip by the unsuspecting student some bit of wisdom we cannot get across by other means. To put it pointedly, the success of such a lesson really depends on being able to *make* a fool of someone, in the sense that the learner does not know what is being done to her at the time it is being done. From a moral point of view, it seems to me that we always want our students at some point to be self-consciously *in on the joke*, a proposition rather different from one wherein the teacher takes on the posture of the consciousness raiser who never, really, laughs at herself — at least not at her current, superior self who is already gone through it all and already sees the obsolescence of the old ways. With such a mistakes-correcting air, the serious fool of McDonough's type seems unavoidably to instrumentalize students toward preconceived ends

which they themselves seem no more open to challenge and revision than those of the didactic sort. I have no independent argument against the having of preconceived ends in teaching, and in fact I would wonder if it is either possible or desirable to do without them. The point, however, is that their having them makes us wonder just how foolish these serious fools really are.

Consider another way of looking at it. Real foolishness, I would contend, has no small portion of the Dionysian in it. Dionysus, that god of unsettled bodily fluids and other sources of extreme human energies, would be hard pressed to appreciate a strategy whereby foolishness is to be deployed as a means to some superior (Apollonian?) pre-assigned end, whether it be syntactical disruption, social criticism, or, certainly, inculcating the “virtues needed for inquiry into power and ethics.”²² But real foolishness is surely much more like good music or fiction in that it sweeps you up, takes you away, and to a large extent does its *own* work on you. When you try to control it, to “use” it, particularly for some political agenda, the fun tends to cease. The fools I like are not those who trick me into seeing how benighted and pathetic I am — that is, those who aid in my painful climb upward toward the fool’s own higher wisdom — but those who invite me into *their* own craziness and frenzy. Anyone who has gotten extremely silly with small children knows what I mean. Someone may have instigated it (“let’s get crazy!”), but this frenzy-making is a very mutualistic undertaking that cannot be accomplished alone. This collective accomplishment can generate quite a bit of power in the right circumstances, a ersatz tornado of the Dionysian, infamously able to suck into its vortex even erstwhile reluctant onlookers. It can feed and build on its own momentum, given the right circumstances, becoming much larger than the sum of the individual participants (some of whom may drop off eventually even while “the foolishness” continues). I would go still further along these lines and say that real foolishness is always there, beckoning. But it is not something I can see how to tame and harness toward ethical or political ends without extinguishing or perhaps perverting it into something alien to itself. True silliness is notoriously heedless of serious stuff like ethics and politics; there is an aesthetic-kinesthetic irreducibility to it. It is nice when our ideological opponents are the butt of a good joke but, goodness knows, the joking can turn around on you on a dime. I would posit that, literally, *no good at all* comes from whipping a bunch of little kids into a high-foolish frenzy — no politics is achieved, no hegemonies are deconstructed — yet it is still an incredibly fun and worthwhile thing to do. Period. Fun can just be fun sometimes, and it is no less vital to human flourishing for that reason. The people who want always to find the “deeper” point should just lay off sometimes.

I also worry about certain implications of the fool’s historicity. The argument seems to be that these fools are particularly prone to arise during times of stress and change, periods during which there are “clouds on the horizon,” social upheavals in the offing, revolution in the air. But there are difficulties with this picture. The first of these involves avoiding errors of anachronism along the lines of ascribing to people of the Middle Ages the belief that they are living in the “middle” of something. It is difficult, even retrospectively, to locate any time in history that could

not be described as liminal, say, a period of calm, where big things are *not* happening, where nothing going on is important for the “field of social action.” I am not sure such a time has ever existed. But if not, where would one place the calm, static periods from which the liminal periods represent so many breaks? Do they correspond to the chapters of history books, that is, “The Renaissance,” “The Classical Period,” “The Reformation”? This is doubtful because, of course, the “periods” themselves are post hoc human constructs, functions of the ideas and interests of those who do the constructing, having no necessary reality for the actual persons who allegedly lived “in” them. Intellectuals and other fools disposed to see themselves in such grand epochal terms (as in, “The Postmodern Age,” “The Information Age,” or maybe “The Age of the Human Genome Project” or “The Designated Hitter Era”), are probably also susceptible to the hyperbolically false dilemma of seeing themselves as either in a time of upheaval or in a time of stasis where there is nothing new under the sun.³ The problem is that one can always find evidence for *both* pronouncements; we are, all of us, always living in times of upheaval *and at the same time* periods during which nothing seems really to have changed. Since it is always, everywhere present (and also absent), the notion of liminality provides no new information whatever for present purposes; it applies to all and none. It is therefore hard to see how the notion helps us identify fools.

In a way, however, this picture of fools for all seasons — for everyone and no one, one might say^d — might make sense for McDonough’s fools. For his serious type of fool would, I think, be needed in the calm, complacent periods every bit as much as in the times of social upheaval. One might even argue that during the upheavals, the fools are needed *less*, as the times themselves would tend to facilitate all the social-psychological transformations that fools are allegedly so good at catalyzing (for better or worse). When the ethnic cleansers round up my village, I am not sure that clever wordplay will get me very far no matter how it might play “formidably with the symbolic structures of meaning.” But, as McDonough might want to respond, maybe if the ethnic cleansers had encountered a few more salutary serious fools in their own upbringing, that is, fools who *were* playing around with the symbolic order, they might have been less likely to join up with the cleansers in the first place. Witness how fascists are notoriously unable to laugh at themselves, just as they are in a sense difficult to satirize because they are so often already their own satire (one thinks, for example, of Mussolini’s cartoonish bellicosity, the gigantism and maudlin volkishness of Nazi ceremony). The serious fools would seem to be most pedagogically effective where their pupils see themselves as comfortable, stable, and safe (like so many of our undergraduate students, actually.) Devices like irony and humor can indeed do some political work here. But that, of course, presupposes that there is indeed some political work to be done, and therefore some honestly arrived-at conviction that all the cleverness, the epistemological demolition has some moral point.

McDonough’s serious fools are, in the end, not so much true fools as they are earnest moral and political operatives. There is a bit of the commissar in them, which is what gives these serious fools their seriousness. As a liberal with a built-in suspicion of hidden agendas, I have less an argument against such fools than a

warning. I would want to encourage them to be honest and open about their ulterior motives, particularly insofar as they are teachers who don the mantle of public authority. A liberal society tends to require this because in a democracy political arguments over the basic questions of how and what to teach need to be decided according to an ideal of free and fair deliberation. Closest to my own heart, however, is the point that ensuring a certain openness vis-à-vis the various agendas of our serious fools will also help make the world safer for the real fools, the kind who will sing and dance and play just for the sheer joy of it.

1. An allusion to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; reprint, New York: Signet Classic, 1998).

2. The Dionysian metaphors are meant in the sense of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner* (New York: Random House, 1967).

3. J.W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought 1848-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 31. He notes: "One of the distinctive intellectual features of the early and mid-nineteenth century is a cultivated awareness of intellectual transition and changing cultural mood, considered not just, as earlier, as the succession of great epochs in the history of mind but in the fine grain of the transition of generations and even decades. Contemporaries, that is, began to see themselves under the sign of continuous intellectual history." This passage highlights the historical contingency of the awareness of historicity itself, a point to which a more thorough analysis of fools would have to be sensitive.

4. I am paraphrasing the famous subtitle to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Penguin, 1978).