On Parasitic Discourse in *Till Eulenspiegel*: Can We Take it Seriously?

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PRISCILLA A. HAYDEN-ROY

It is the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, parasitic, borderline cases which are «important» to me and are a source of many things, such as pleasure, but also insight into the general functioning of a textual system.¹

Thus Jacques Derrida characterizes his approach to language analysis in his response to the speech act theorist, John R. Searle.² Derrida’s «deconcentrating» stands in contrast to the approach taken in speech act theory (SAT), which concentrates on «ordinary» language and excludes what J.L. Austin, whose writings are considered the foundation of SAT, had called the «etioliations» of language:

As utterances our performatives are also heir to certain other kinds of ill which infect all utterances. And these likewise, though again they might be brought into a more general account, we are deliberately at present excluding. I mean, for example, the following: a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow and void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance – a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – not used seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the etioliations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances.³

Searle systematized Austin’s insights into ordinary speech, developing what he called a «taxonomy of speech acts», which defined the conditions that must obtain in order to produce a successful speech act. In the first condition for a successful promise Searle upholds the Austinian exclusion of «parasitic forms of communication such as telling jokes or acting in a play»: only then do »normal input and output conditions obtain.«⁴ Derrida criticizes this exclusion, protesting that parasitism constitutes not an exception to normal discourse, but the condition for the possibility of discourse in general. Parasitism, that is the »non-serious« citation
of »normal« discourse, is simply »the determined modification of a
general citationality – or rather, a general iterability – without
which there would not even be a ‘successful’ performative.«5

I have discussed these opposing views of parasitic discourse in
light of Till Eulenspiegel (TE) elsewhere,6 considering in particular
a typical »word-play,« where Till obeys the letter of his master’s
command, while performing something contrary to his will. The
master’s command, be it »sift in the moonlight,« »glue the boards
together,« etc., functions as a host for Till, who agrees to obey the
command, repeating its propositional content in the form of a pro-
mise. The conventional meaning is unambiguous, but Till construes
a non-conventional meaning, which is carried by the promise such
as a host carries a parasite. An analysis using SAT would simply
disqualify Till’s promise, because »normal input and output condi-
tions« do not obtain: Till’s promise exhibits precisely that »parasitic
form() of communication such as telling jokes« that Searle
excludes from the successful promise. But Demda argues that to
ban this sort of parasitism to »a kind of
ditch or external place of
perdition,«7 as SAT would do, exposes the ideological foundations
of this theory. SAT is merely a reproduction of the law it purports
to be analyzing.8 The conditions for a successful promise as Searle
defines them reproduce an »ethico-political« set of norms that are
imbedded in the conventional rules of speech. Derrida’s notion of
iterability, on the other hand, views parasitic, non-serious, anti-
conventional speech not as an exception, but as a fundamental
possibility of language. Intention and context relatively specify
meaning, concedes Derrida. »But this relative purity does not
emerge in opposition to citationality or iterability, but in opposition
to other kinds of iteration within a general iterability.«9 This means
that »‘non-serious’ [discourse], the oratio obliqua, [cannot] be
excluded, as Austin wished, from ‘ordinary’ language.«10 Till’s
parasitic use of language is part of ordinary language; it constitutes
a modification of the general iterability that makes language
possible in first place.

The distinction between what we designate as conventional
language and its parasitic, non-serious usage nevertheless remains
meaningful. The conventional meaning that solidifies within a soc-
ociety provides a relatively dependable, consistent communicative
tool which, when reiterated by members of this society, is cons-
stantly understood by all to mean approximately the same thing.
Parasitic use does constitute an exception to the convention, and
for this reason Till’s parasitic language seems funny. By laughing
readers indicate they have discovered the joke, the parasitic meaning hiding within the host of conventional language. Their laughter reinforces the boundaries between conventional and non-conventional language; it flags the parasitic usage with a »non-serious« marker. Laughter thus is a sort of banishment from serious discourse. Till's counterparts within the narrative also eventually discover the parasite; they, too, take measures to banish the parasite from their home, usually not by laughing at him, but by driving him from the premises. Both responses, I would argue, derive from a sense of the normativeness of conventional language. And both retrace the same boundaries SAT relies on in defining the conditions for successful speech acts. Laughter, banishment, the exclusion of parasitic language in SAT – all three reflect the perspective of an inside group as it defines itself in linguistic, social, ethical and political terms over against an outsider. That this activity is the prerequisite of language, of communication in general, goes without saying.

The issue we are addressing here, however, concerns how – or if – we can take non-serious language seriously, or even legitimate it. Derrida wishes to consider marginal, parasitic, borderline cases, because they give him »insight into the general functioning of a textual system.«11 If we simply identify and banish the parasite, we will end up retracing the boundaries of convention; if we look at the parasite as part of a whole system, then our perspective goes beyond that of the insider. This has direct implications for how we interpret TE. We can retrace the banishments as they occur repeatedly throughout the chapbook, and conclude that it was the author's intention to reinforce given values by warning against behaviors that invite infection and destruction of society. TE is a conservative admonition to uphold traditional corporative values. An impressive case can be made for this interpretation, particularly since with the discovery of Herman Bote as TE's author, we have the added support of authorial intention.12 But following Derrida we can pursue a different interpretive strategy, looking for insights into the general functioning of the textual system in TE at the point where his parasitism occurs.

Consider the 69th episode, where Till defecates in the »House of Purity,« the designation the bathmaster insisted be used for his bathhouse. Till appears to be following the bathmaster's convention when he says: »Daz diß ein Hauß ist der Reinikeit, daz ist offenbar, wan wir gon unrein harin und rein wider haruß.«13 But his interpretation of »purifying« involves cleaning himself both within
and without: by defecating in the bathhouse he removes his inner impurities, thus indeed becoming pure, as the bathhouse’s slogan promised. In the eyes of the bathmaster, Till has defiled the bathhouse. He has brought into the House of Purity what belonged outside, in the »outhouse.« In order to restore the boundaries of purity and impurity, he must banish Till and remove his excrement from within the bathhouse. But if we as interpreters are not too hasty to retrace this banishment; if rather than laughing at Till’s parasitism we allow it to stand alongside the »original,« then we begin to see the ambiguity of the concept of »purity.« The dizzying inversions of what constitutes »inside« and »outside« in this episode begin to expose the conventionality and violability of the »proper« boundaries, and what we see is the arbitrariness, the fragility of one of the most basic designations used to determine boundaries, the notion of the »pure.« The episode dramatizes what Derrida characterizes as parasitism:

The parasite is by definition never simply external, never simply something that can be excluded from or kept outside of the body »proper,« shut out from the »familial« table or house.14

Seen in this light, the episode does not merely reinforce existing boundaries, but rather exposes them as convention, as relative to one another, each depending on the other for definition. This is the first step in envisioning a different order. As Derrida says:

Once this parasitism or fictionality can always add another parasitic or fictional structure to whatever has preceded it ... everything becomes possible against the language-police; for example ‘literatures’ or ‘revolutions’ that as yet have no model.15

By taking the parasitic discourse »seriously,« i.e. by setting it alongside conventional discourse as part of the entire textual system, rather than banishing it, we are freed from the myth of ontological necessity that otherwise would anchor the status quo. Boundaries defining inside and outside become potentially fictional, capable of being draped with a new, equally relative, equally tropological meaning.

In the bathhouse episode we see this questioning of the concept of purity only as a fleeting possibility, which is quickly banished in the text through the action of the bathmaster (banishment of Till, removal of Till’s excrement). Moreover, the reader retraces the banishment with his/her laughter. Till’s nonconventional read-
ing of the term »purity« is so contrary to the social norm, that the reader cannot be confused by the semantic ambiguity Till wishes to generate. He or she laughs at what must be read as a joke, as non-serious, parasitic discourse.

In most of the episodes this is the case. However, occasionally the potential of relativization is explicitly realized within the text. Consider, for example, the 14th episode, where Till, complying with the request of the »best citizens of the city« of Magdeburg to perform a prank, promises to fly from the oriel of the city hall. The social convention defining Till as prankster, as outside the norm, is so strong that the crowd willingly suspends its knowledge of reality and entertains the fictive notion that a man can fly. Roles are inverted: the social outsider, the parasite of truth, suddenly becomes truth's proclaimer, while the crowd, now the fools, are banished to the outside. Thus Till proclaims before the gathered throng:

Ich meinte, es wär kein Thor oder Nar mer in der Welt dann ich. So sih ich wol, daz hie schier die gantz Stat vol Thoren ist.16

The inversion is only momentary: the perpetrator of the inversion abandons the scene (self-banishment of the outsider), while the crowd comes to terms with their shaken identity. Some restore order through verbal banishment: they curse the parasite. Others, however, laughing at the prank, concede: »Das ist ein Schalckßnarr noch, dann so hat er war gesagt.«17 The laughter and the designation of Till as »Schalckßnarr« restore the conventional relationship of inside and outside. But nevertheless, these people also recognize that the outsider in this instance assumed the privileged inside position of speaker of the truth. They are willing to relativize the conventional insider/outsider relationship, seeing themselves as the fools. Their perspective goes beyond that of the insider reinforcing conventional boundaries, and for a fleeting instant we see the possibility of a different order, a redefinition of boundaries.

Certainly the people in the narrative do not explore this possibility, and it would be greatly stretching the possibilities of the text to see here a basis for social reform or tolerance. They are willing to relativize their own position only after they have twice banished the parasite: once with their laughter, and again with the designation of »Schalckßnarr.« Nevertheless, they have, I would argue, taken the language of the parasite seriously, they have legitimated his words to the extent that they are willing to relativize conventional boundaries of truth and fiction, of wisdom and folly.

Derrida suggests that one gains insight into the total textual
structure by looking at its borders. Similarly, Till gives us insight into the structure of 16th-century society, his wanderings along the edge of various social groups tracing the dividing line between inside and outside. But the vast majority of episodes simply rehearse banishment again and again, and Till’s opponents never consider the possibility of relativization. Bote’s intention in writing the chapbook was admonitory. He wished to warn his society to be on their guard, lest their vices open a door to disorder and folly. By taking the parasite seriously, by emphasizing the relativizing potential in Till’s pranks, are we thus led (or misled) to produce a historically anachronistic interpretation of the text? If we want to interpret the text within its historical context, are we forced to give speech act theorists the last word, allowing authorial intention to determine the final, »serious« meaning of the text?

Derrida has criticized the notion of intentionality in SAT, arguing that it seals off the unconscious »by prohibiting that the Unconscious ... be taken seriously; up to and including its capacity for making jokes.«[18] he goes on to discuss Searle’s distinction between a promise and a threat, which rests on this exclusion of the unconscious and assumes the speaker of the promise/threat is aware of what the hearer wants, as, of course, is the hearer. But by introducing the unconscious, determining intentions becomes highly problematic:

And what if everything that is given to please or in response to a desire, as well as everything that one promises to give, were structurally ambivalent? What if the gift were always poisoned (gift/Gift) in a manner so as to prevent any simple logic (desire/non-desire, for example) from being able to decide, i.e. to distinguish between the two or to determine their meaning univocally?[19]

In the case of TE, perceiving this structural ambivalence brings us perhaps as close as possible to its »meaning« in the 16th century. Herman Bote found himself in the midst of social upheavals. The structures of society assumed to be stable, ontologically grounded, were proving to be violable and precarious. Bote consciously intended to reintegrate society with his chapbook by strengthening, through admonition, the traditional corporate nexus. This conscious intention is grounded in a subconscious fear that the nexus was merely an artifice lacking necessity, lacking ontological grounding. This fear is displaced and indirectly represented through the process of telling jokes about it – the 96 episodes constituting TE. Freud has shown the structural parallel between jokes and dreams,
the common source of both in the subconscious. He writes about the production of a joke:

We have an indefinable feeling ... which I can best compare with an 'absence', a sudden release of intellectual tension, and then all at once the joke is there.²⁰

Could not Bote's fears have slipped out in this moment of absence, of non-consciousness, in the form of the jokes he told? Consciously he intended to admonish his society for its weaknesses that invite social disintegration. But his pervasive anxiety releases, through the Till-jokes, the possibility of disintegration, so that the text begins to vacillate between the apparent serious intention of its author and the non-serious message his anxiety produces in the form of jokes. Social disintegration is portrayed as fiction and is banished repeatedly in the episodes, but fiction comes to assert itself as a fearsome, serious possibility. We must recall, too, that Till himself is a figure that vacillates between fiction and non-fiction: Bote is careful to give biographical data concerning his hero, but as Peter Honegger²¹ has pointed out, the author undermines the reliability of these facts with deliberate anachronisms. He does so further with explicit inclusion of material from other Schwänke, and with his suggestion that readers add their own episodes to the story.²² The work thus can never be completely trivialized as »mere fiction,« nor taken completely seriously as »historical fact.« By its author's own definition the work is meant to vacillate between serious and non-serious language, between truth and fiction. In his introduction Bote, writing anonymously, states that he wrote the book: »allein umb ein fröhlich Gemüt zu machen in schweren Zeiten.«²³ The alleged non-serious, entertaining purpose of the book is inseparably linked to the serious reality of its context, the »bad times« of social upheaval and uncertainty. The jokes were meant to serve as a release from the oppression of worry, they had a medicinal purpose. H.G. Schmitz²⁴ has suggested that works such as TE served to drive away melancholy; laughter replenished, according to Galenic understanding of the bodily humors, the sanguine moisture dried out by too much worry. Thus we see that a closer look at the historical context of author and text points to a vacillating quality, a »structural ambivalence«: whether it be the psychological ambivalence produced by Bote's anxiety, which expresses itself in the text in the vacillation between intentional and non-intentional messages; or the vacillation between a serious (historical) and a non-ser-
ious (fictional) narrative; or the structural ambiguity of non-serious ”entertainment“ whose purpose is to relieve the serious oppression of ”bad times.“ If we can make a case for this structural ambivalence within the work’s historical context, then it seems we can also justify ”taking seriously“ the jokes, the non-serious language in TE. Within the context of the 16th century we must concede that these jokes do not signal a revolutionary redefining of traditional boundaries. But they are symptomatic of the anxiety arising in the face of disintegrating corporative social bonds.

The question remains, then, why Derridean deconstruction seems to provide such a useful heuristic tool for analyzing the structural ambivalence of anxiety in TE. A possible explanation is that some parallels exist between the collapse of Western metaphysics as documented (or even celebrated) in Derrida’s writings and the social disintegration Bote witnessed in 16th-century Brunswick. While the one feels pleasure, the other anxiety before this collapse, both dramatize it textually with jokes, with parasitic discourse. By taking this language seriously, we, too, can perhaps gain ”insight into the general functioning of (both) textual system(s)“ – each within its historical context.

NOTES

1 Jacques Derrida, »Limited Inc a b c...,« Glyph: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies 2 (1977), 180.
5 »Signature Event Context,« 191.
6 »Till Eulenspiegel’s Transgressions against Convention: Interpreting the Parasite,« forthcoming in Daphnis.
7 »Signature Event Context,« 190.
8 »Limited Inc,« 240.
9 »Signature Event Context,« 192.
10 Ibid., 192.
11 »Limited Inc,« 180.
12 Peter Honegger was responsible for this discovery (Ulenspiegel: Ein Bei-

14 »Limited Inc,« 232.
15 Ibid., 243.
16 Dyl Ulenspiegel, 43.
17 Ibid., 43.
18 »Limited Inc,« 214.
19 Ibid., 215.
22 »Die Lesenden und Zuhörenden mögen gute kurtzweilige Fröden und Schwänck daruß fabulieren«; »Unnd ende damit mein Vorred und gib den Anfang Dil Ulenspiegels Geburtt mit Zulegung etlicher Fabulen des Pfaff Amis und des Pfaffen von dem Kalenberg.« (Dil Ulenspiegel, 7, 8).
23 Ibid., 7.

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