An Interlude

In his essay "A History of 'Ludicrous,'" Matthew Kaiser writes:

> The history of the word "ludicrous" can be divided into three overlapping yet largely distinct periods. The first begins in 1619, when "ludicrous," a synonym at that time of "playful" or "sportive," appears for the first time in print. It ends in the mid-eighteenth century with the emergence of an intractable upstart: the current, derogatory meaning of "ludicrous," its only meaning over two hundred and fifty years later. . . . The second epoch in the history of "ludicrous" – the one hundred years or so between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries – is marked by an awkward, often unstable, cohabitation of the older playful sense of the word with its more recent pejorative one. To complicate matters, hybrid usage proliferates throughout this period. Having grown, by the early nineteenth century, into a complex, contradictory, slippery creature, "ludicrous" even accrues, among some intellectual circles, a quasi-philosophical luster. All the while its popularity as a pedestrian term of abuse increases – to the chagrin of its more etymologically sensitive users – at an unstoppable rate.[1]

There is a whole biography in this paragraph: the progress of "ludicrous" from a childhood stage of sport and play, to an awkward, unstable, confusing adolescence, to a grim adulthood in which joy, spontaneity, and subjective complexity is snuffed out so that the word may serve its Victorian function as "a pedestrian term of abuse." This narrative is, for Kaiser, a tale of survival, but not a happy one:

> Today, the lone survivor from the "ludi" clan, having grown increasingly bitter, "ludicrous" has lost the spirit of play that it was devised initially to express. In the mid-seventeenth century, however, literate English speakers could employ in conversation or in composition myriad "ludicrous" siblings: "ludible" and "ludibrious," "ludicral" and "ludification," "ludibry" and "ludibund," "ludificable" and "ludificate," "ludificatory" and "ludify."[2]

[1] Matthew Kaiser, "A History of 'Ludicrous,'" *ELH* 71, no. 3 (2004): 634. [2] Ibid., 640.

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The only member of the family to achieve posterity is the joyless one, the one that has been made a tool of discipline against the spirit of play that animates its kin. "Ludicrous" has survived by turning against its kind; it survives at the expense of their lives, their way of living.

The history of "ludicrous" Kaiser tells is a story of colonial discipline.

If we move back in time, we find not only a vision of the full "ludi" clan, in all its wonderful, mystifying ludifecundity, but an entire world animated by its collective energy:

> Ludicrous phenomena . . . belong to *mundus ludibundus* (the playful world): the experience of life through play, as play, in play. *Mundus ludibundus* is a world of pleasure-seeking: of children's games and joke-telling, of relaxation and sexual sport. It is a world of contests: on playing fields, in gambling houses, in classrooms. It is a world of deception: of wordplay and wit, of theater, of myriad arts of trickery. Seventeenth-century English-speakers bestowed the Latinate adjective "ludicrous," then, upon people, objects, and ideas which captured the ethos of *mundus ludibundus*.[3]

The *mundus ludibundus* was not "lost" but systematically tyrannized by "two opposed yet equally powerful regimes of discipline":

> The first consists of the beneficiaries and owners of statutory and parliamentary law: the landed gentry, the masters of the means of production, the forces of bureaucratization and surveillance, those with voices in Parliament, those whom legislation empowers rather than constrains. The second consists of their political and philosophical opponents, the forces of Enlightenment: the republicans, Jacobins, and radicals, the advocates of scientific rationalism and abstract systematicity, those who seek to replace the false laws of man with the true laws of Reason. Two competing visions of law, then, one rooted in property, the other in reason, together render illegitimate and discredit the forces of play, *mundus ludibundus*. Caught in the crossfire, play becomes politically suspect . . . where Enlightened thinkers recoil from the falsity and unreason of ludicrous phenomena, conservatives associate the ludicrous with chaos, disorder, and childishness.[4]

To refuse the authority of property and reason reproduced since the mid-eighteenth century is also to refuse the distinction between them. But what is embraced in this refusal? A right to play. A right to uselessness. A right to incomprehensibility – or what Édouard Glissant calls the right to *opacity* under the violent illuminations of colonial Enlightenment. A right to wildness. A right to sport and fun, free from the ever-present threat of harm. A right to take risks without having to fear for one's safety. A right to experience life as something more than the momentary eluding of death.

A right to inhabit the world in which such things are imaginable.

[3] Ibid., 637. [4] Ibid., 646–47.

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