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Terry's Manoeuvres

I first met Terry Hawkes in 1988 at a "Critical Theory Seminar" in Passau, Germany, organized by Manfred Pfister of the local university, Terry Hawkes and the British Council (yes, the British Council then did support such events).¹ The seminar was attended by German scholars (and one Swiss) and took place on premises overlooking the confluence of two great rivers, the Danube and the Inn, which regularly flood the city. As it was then common at conferences in Germany (it is no longer so), the Germans tended to stick together, and so I found myself joining the English speakers over meals, Kate Belsey, Terry Eagleton, Antony Easthope, Peter Widdowson, and Terry Hawkes. Those were heady days:² They had come over to tell us about the latest developments in Theory, in particular cultural materialism. I was tactless enough to ask them what they thought they had to teach the Germans, with their traditionally speculative bent. They did not really know, but seemed to be there to have a good time. They struck us Continentals as being characteristically English (even though Terry Eagleton would probably have disapproved, and Terry Hawkes would have wanted to question our concept of Englishness). I learned a lot and made contacts that have meant a great deal to me.

In 1993, at the ESSE conference in Bordeaux, Terry Hawkes delivered a memorable lecture on "The Heimlich Manoeuvre",³ as always witty, rich and closely argued. In it he used Freud's essay on the uncanny ("das Unheimliche") to suggest a kind of criticism that he came to call "presentist". I have never been drawn to Freud's ideas (but consider him a great essayist and mythopoet), and, in any case, as somebody in English studies, would have read Freud's essay in translation, in spite of my mother tongue. Tactless again, I went up to him to tell him that *heimlich* in German did not mean "familiar" but "secretive", and he reacted to this with a somewhat bemused glance (I wondered: What about his German?). Of course, I had made a fool of myself, as I soon noticed when returning to Freud's text: Freud spends long passages of linguistic argument justifying his strange use of the word. As a person with a literary mind, he obviously could not resist a possible pun.⁴ Ever since "The Heimlich Manoeuvre" has meant a great deal to me.

The Heimlich manoeuvre is only mentioned twice in the essay, but in prominent places, in the title and in the last sentence. As a title, it is totally cryptic; as a final point

it summarizes the argument in a metaphor. The procedure is one that had become characteristic of Terry's writing, the writing of somebody who is self-confident enough to know that he will be listened to. We know that there is a riddle, and that it is worth for it, after some surprising detours and reversals, to be solved.

Dr. Henry J. Heimlich, according to Wikipedia, is "an American thoracic surgeon widely credited as the inventor of the Heimlich maneuver, a technique of abdominal thrusts for stopping choking".⁵ He also claimed it to be effective with victims of drowning, but "it has never been established that the technique can remove water from the lungs. Instead, it may cause a victim to regurgitate and then inhale his or her vomit."⁶ I'll return to this.

Why would Terry introduce the manoeuvre? Partly, I am sure, he just could not resist going one better than Freud's pun on "heimlich", and he was happy to find a surprising reference to conclude his argument. Without going too much into unsavoury detail, we may ask ourselves, though, how fitting the metaphor is. Terry describes regurgitation as "the basis of a new beginning",⁷ but of course, it may also offer the possibility of continuing as usual. All this may seem marginal to the essay, but it concerns its substance: It is about ways of proceeding, not an intellectual position.

In "The Heimlich Manoeuvre" Terry offers what we may feel like calling a provisional credo, but he characteristically does so in terms of possibilities, of hopes. I have in mind a criticism not merely anxious to raise the spectre of the *unheimlich*, but also intent, not on nullifying it, but on somehow including and promoting it within the material it examines--indeed of openly scrutinising those elements that its initial impulse is to try to occlude or swallow (20).

And he goes on:

[T]he essence of a modern criticism will not involve the reinforcement of so-called transcendental standards or structures, or any of the other lineaments of a tired, not to say oppressive, scholarly tradition. It will rather call for a kind of principled and self-inventing betrayal of that tradition whose investigation of criticism's own presuppositions will wilfully promote what are, by traditional standards, bogus connections and parallels of the sort that I have been shamelessly deploying: their aim an expansion of the possibilities of our *use* of criticism as a material intervention into history, rather than the prosecution of what we misguidedly think of as scholarly 'facts' or 'truth' (20).

For Terry the position to be displaced was not philology, but the Leavisite tradition of "This is so, isn't it".

A criticism as sketched here will always be subversive if it is taken to its conclusion. By including the uncanny repressed by an established critical position, it will lead to a new position with its new uncanny, and so forth. And it is Terry's hope that this process will also clear space for the creative element of criticism. This criticism is not based on a stable ideological position, but does not hesitate to use elements of such positions in promoting its case. There is definitely something anarchist in it.

I have always been intrigued by Terry's fascination with the oral, as it shows in his book on *Shakespeare's Talking Animals*, his surprising inclusion of Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* in the *New Accents* series he edited,⁸ but also his frequent references to the popular (his use of Eliot on football fans in "The Heimlich Manoeuvre"), and his activities as a jazz drummer.

In the neat opposition between orality and literacy, as we find in Ong (and caricatured here), the written word stands for stability, even of meaning, and the autonomy of individuals expressing themselves. Words *state* (and as such may reinforce the "so-called transcendental standards or structures" Terry is rebelling against). Speech, on the other hand, stands for flow, for a community in conversation. Words *move* (and as such may change the world). It is not surprising that Terry Hawkes, precisely as a literary critic, should feel attracted by this.

Terry expresses his conviction that the kind of criticism he is encouraging will be "a material intervention into history". But the critic may find himself (as Terry certainly did sometimes) reduced to the role of the noble Shakespearean Fool, who questions the truth of those who claim to possess it but has little influence on the course of history.

Here I was going to write a grand conclusion, Terry style, introducing a metaphor: about how the rivers in Passau will rise again and flood the city, on how the Heimlich manoeuvre may help against choking, and in getting rid of "tired, not to say oppressive tradition", but not against drowning, the risk of no longer being heard in a deluge of consumerist arbitrariness. But then I read the conclusion of Terry's essay again and thought I better leave it. His manner of driving home a final point, protecting it against misconstructions, sharpening it on the way, is inimitable.

¹ Eight years later I was still involved in organizing a similar event in Solothurn, Switzerland.

² Many of us had been initiated by the books in the *New Accents* series, edited by Terry Hawkes (London: Methuen). He himself had contributed the first volume, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977), Catherine Belsey *Critical Practice* (1980), Peter Widdowson *Re-*

Reading English (1982), and Antony Easthope *Poetry as Discourse* (1983).

³ Published in revised form in *Shakespeare in the Present*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 6–22.

⁴ Interestingly, Freud, when discussing the word “unheimlich” in foreign languages, does not deal with their opposites. “Uncanny” is mentioned, “canny” is not.

⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Heimlich>, checked on 5 February 2015.

⁶ <<http://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/outdoor-skills/first-aid/Drowning.html>>, checked on 5 February 2015.

⁷ *Shakespeare in the Present*, 22

⁸ Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare's Talking Animals* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).