

## On the Boasting Character of Wilson Yerxa's Drawing

ALCESTE

That all the horrors which a heart can hold  
Have nothing to compare with your dishonour;  
That fate and devils and the wrath of Heaven  
Never produced a creature so perverse.

CELIMENE

A pretty compliment. I like it vastly.

Molière, *The Misanthrope*

My friend, Wilson Yerxa, physiognomically resembled Rafael Nadal (my hero when my constitution still allowed me to play tennis with kids in my age) in his youth according to an old picture he showed to me, told me that slam dunk is bad when I asked him to talk about his images on basketball: the one I am speaking of is two pieces of paper clothespinned together with a sequential narrative, from top to bottom, of 1) [bird-eye view] a player putting a big (approximately three times bigger than the player's head) ball downwards into 2) [side view] a huge basket with [bird-eye view] the probably same player with limbs spreading, shrinking even more, being fully caught in that net like a fly and the ball falling off and shrinking a bit too. I could not remember the exact wording contributing to that badness but I believe it was mostly a moral judgment. We can take "pretentious" or "over-ambitious" as if it was the word. I think the reason why my memory gets so vague is that he more or less swallowed his critique when he enunciated it. The boldness of this judgment made him less confident. Nevertheless, I burst into laughter at that very moment, which might be an approval of his moral earnestness. Before I start writing this, I searched a tiny bit about slam dunk.

I watched a video uploaded by the NBA official account on YouTube called "Best Dunks Of The 2021–22 NBA Season" (while I played it I was also forced to watch the Air Force recruitment ad many times). When the current Laker LeBron James crushed those defenders and "hammered" a ball into the basket of the Cavaliers — his former club, one of the commentators said "OH — MY — LORD" twice and the stadium was hyped. LeBron stood in front of the camera receiving his team's and fans' celebration. Maybe the only people who

did not express their feeling of being impressed were his opponents: they just wanted to get the ball to continue the match. I wonder who Wilson is and who I am if we draw an analogy between our interaction and that marvelous dunk with its reception. He might be the opponent of every dunker. The method he employs to block dunkers is to make them look awkward and helpless. And I am impressed by his defense as an audience (hopefully I am not the only one). But why I am using the word “defense”? Has any dunker attacked my balding (still like today’s Nadal) and pale (contrary to Nadal) drawer friend in the first place? It is Wilson that initiates this attack just like a dunker: a dunker slams downwards from a whatever moral high ground and his opponent should take his education: no dunk anymore. And I am again impressed by his attack as an audience, though the celebration out of my frail body sounds ridiculous compared with the one from that stadium. But why I am assuming my laugh is an approval of his condemnation? Is my laugh not actually a ridicule of my friend? Maybe Wilson should stop making this kind of image for it is stinkingly moralistic and reactionary (according to Nietzsche’s usage of that word). I will come back to this point later.

I am surprised that in fact slam dunk used to be illegal in the NCAA and high school sports. Multiple reasons are speculated for this ban: 1) risk of injury, 2) being regarded as a skill-less move, 3) benefiting certain tall players (this one even includes some conspiracy theory regarding racial motivations), 4) showing off and provoking the opponent, 5) disrespecting the basket a.k.a. breaking it...Among those reasons, we can roughly categorize them into two groups: physical concern [1, 2, 3, the “breaking” part of 5] and moral concern [the conspiracy part of 3, 4, the “disrespecting” part of 5]. It turns out that many people including professionals used to have troubles with slam dunk. Wilson is not alone, which actually makes his judgment less impressive for me briefly: he is in no way a Don Quixote. Nonetheless, my research tells me, that Wilson’s concern is not out of nowhere, in other words, rather objective.<sup>1</sup> To be precise, however, it is objectively only “historically” since this ban has been lifted for fifty years. Today, dunk might not be regarded as a major cause of injury, a lot of skillful dunk moves are developed, being tall is hardly a problem, players are used to dunk which means they would not be necessarily provoked, and baskets and backboards are much stronger than before. There should be no reasonable justification for Wilson’s indignation. He probably is a reactionary sluggard in nature with incurable resentment towards beautiful sportsmanship and cheerful spectatorship.

But is there anything wrong with a critique of “pretentiousness / over-ambitiousness”? Don’t be pretentious / over-ambitious — is that not a sound suggestion? It is so sound that it almost sounds silly. The expression of a sound suggestion, however, is a condemnation of dunk. Can we say that the soundness of the moral excuses Wilson from his cynicism and this mockery is just a metaphor serving as a means for teaching? Or, on the contrary, does that whole

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1. Cf. Hegel’s criticism on irony, ego and subjectivism in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 64–69.

expression of a moral in the end ruin the teaching because of its absurdity? i.e., can a moral be taught through absurdity (which is a fruit of nihilism if not the cause of it)? Yet, why is this even a problem? Should we not just laugh over this little drama since it is nothing more than a harmless joke?

Wilson might be a joker (if we take the literal meaning of this word) but he is also a troubler. Although a basketball professional or fan might never take his didache seriously, I am deeply troubled by this image for it is an exemplar of the discrepancy between a physiological means — that specimen-like (due to the player-fly analogy) image — and a theological end — “Boast no more” (Psalm 75:4). This discrepancy is very much based on my reading of Leo Strauss’ reading of the Greek joker Aristophanes’ *Peace*:

...we see that in the light of the Aristophanean comedy, natural explanations, being explanations in terms of the nondivine and hence low (like Socrates’ explanations of thunder and lightning) appear to be the comic equivalents of theological explanation. Given the reciprocity of nature and convention in regard to laughter, this also means that theological explanations are the comic equivalents of natural explanations. One is thus led to wonder whether comic equivalents par excellence or in the strictest sense occur at all outside the region within which *theologia* and *physiologia* diverge. From the point of view of the Aristophanean Socrates the answer must be in the negative. The laughable is the defective of a certain kind. Given the variety of views as to what constitutes shortcomings, a man is most clearly laughable if he pretends to have an excellence while in fact he has only the corresponding defect, i.e., if he is laughable according to his own admitted standard. Hence pretense, affection, or boasting become the preferred theme of comedy. Now if Zeus, who claims, or on whose behalf men claim, that he is the father of gods and men, that he is most powerful and wise, and that he deserves the highest veneration, does not even exist, as Aristophanes’ Socrates indeed asserts, he is the greatest example of boasting that can be imagined. His case is the most perfect case of contrast between claim and being; he is the absolute subject of comedy; the comedy par excellence is the comedy of the gods.<sup>2</sup>

To make this quote relatable, I will take the fifth reason for the dunk ban as an example: disrespecting the basket a.k.a. breaking it. This expression needs to be explained in detail. I first read the part before “a.k.a” — disrespecting the basket — on the Chinese wiki page of slam dunk. With a normal level of empathy, I could not understand how you can disrespect the basket — a hardly feeling object. Then I read “dunk will break the basket”. I think breaking something might be an expression of disrespect so I connect these two part with “a.k.a”. Physiologia is clearly about physics: breaking the basket. Theologia is

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2. Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 143.

vaguer but we can secularize it into morality: disrespecting the basket. Why is it funny?<sup>3</sup> It is because it is not so smooth to deduce disrespect from destruction as we usually think.

Wilson's case is more complicated since the already puzzling pair — physiologia and theologia — become attributes of another difficult pair — means and ends. To be clear, I did not get Wilson's moral critique of dunk firstly: I begged his explanation. It is at most an awkward image. That seemingly phenomenological description in the beginning is already contaminated by ideology: "being fully caught in that net like a fly". Did I see a fly before Wilson started to talk? I could not remember [although an image of a fly did remind me of a specimen thus science/physics. An image of a fly divides into two associations: a moral one and a more neutral one.] Here is an attempt to translate this ideologized part back into a rather brutal fact: the body of a dunker layered under a net (if the pronunciation of "dunker" is not itself a bit too funny to be neutral). We might say this brutal fact (I will return to the materiality of this image soon) is the physics of this image. This physics is not an end-in-itself, for Wilson did not tell me "Just appreciate and think no further" when I asked for an explanation. This physics is used to convey a teaching — "boast no more" — which targets the primal sin — pride — in our great Christian tradition. Then we might say, this whole thing is indeed a joke because it is also not so smooth to deduce the teaching of "boast no more" from an image of "the body of a dunker layered under a net"[people might even feel sorry for the presumably "boasting" dunker for being caught since dunk is indeed a cool move for a general audience — the teaching is only possible when it is fired with some private malice], while what makes it troubling is the danger of the inversion of means and ends: the high-minded proposal, which should be an end, serves as nothing but the fuel of the production of the physics which constitutes in the end a joke. And we shall never forget how close theologia is related to teleology as physiologia to technology.<sup>4</sup> I am almost going to say Wilson's critique of dunk is the comic equivalent of any artistic critique of anything if any artistic critique of anything is not already the comic equivalent of the non-artistic critique of anything although "the weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of weapons..."<sup>5</sup>

To be precise, dunkers are not boasters for they show off by their real deeds/beings. Thus Wilson might not be a dunker but for sure a boaster be-

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3. I worry you would not feel this funniness thus could not really understand my reasoning. [And it turned out that Wilson found this passage not so intuitively laughable.] If you don't laugh at my jokes elsewhere, I almost feel nothing. But I am intensely nervous about the common laughability of this example. I might be worrying that the truth value of my argument will be missed here while my other jokes are merely my trying to please. The psychology of that I could not elaborate here though.

4. Another way to express the physiologia-theologia and means-ends structure in this case can take the advantage of the structure of content-form: physiologia (dunker caught) - theologia (no more boast) is the content and means (drawing on paper) - ends (moral teaching) is the form. Here I am considering the possibility of another kind of formalist criticism.

5. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/df-jahrbucher/law-abs.htm>. Note: my use of "critique" here is more negative "criticism" than neutral "review" but we shall not ignore the atmospheric negativity in every review-like critique.

cause he bosses around things he is not necessarily a part of to act in and makes “moral claims” of them by making art — not spectacular / delicate / beautiful / cool sculptures / paintings / performances / films / anything but pieces of crappy paper thus very much like mere claims (thus Platonic to some extent) — and claims that those “moral claims” are good by judgments made with his mouth or, more importantly, by merely keeping making those claims addictively. In our particular image, compared with dunkers, Wilson himself should be the first to be criticized for his being pride incarnated (though for some reason I can easily see the dunker in the image as Wilson who does have an idea<sup>6</sup> called “puke on my own journey” serves as a self-criticism a.k.a. confession). It is even very hard to tell if his physics or critique of dunk is out of righteousness or jealousy of dunkers’ income, fame, or physique. But according to Strauss again, “everyone who excels in any way, who is ‘something special’ and therefore is held to ‘wish to be something special’ is a boaster.”<sup>7</sup> Even if Wilson is nothing more than a joke, it is a joke deserving somebody’s contemplation even if this somebody is another joke if not less than a joke: I am a believer in the labor<sup>8</sup> theory of value of Marx if not of those Junkers or physiocrats. And Wilson, in the end I wish to treat him justly, apparently is rather a gay scientist than a moralist if you remember I am dealing with even only one particular perspective of the one of three (I guess) part of his basketball series and I don’t even know if he speaks to anybody about his moral. Yet, since the Gay Scientist mentioned at the end of the second paragraph is one of the biggest moralists, perhaps Wilson will be one inevitably, and it is just so difficult to distinguish truth from pleasure (or joke) for better or worse. Be that as it may, I shall end up this writing — as congratulation to his graduation — with three anecdotes related more or less to my dear friend Wilson:

1. I asked him what beauty is. He told me it is “people helping each other” and the natural beauty is mostly cheating while I was thinking about the natural beauty of my unrequited love.
2. In *Memoria* by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, in the middle of the film, the protagonist Jessica who had exploding hear syndrome went to a rural hospital. When the doctor recommended Jesus rather than Xanax to Jessica, the audience burst into laughter: physiologia and theologia diverged. If Zeus is a boaster, then Jesus must also be one, which perfectly explains the laughter. But at that very moment, I was strangely not only scared but also cheered up by the possibility of Jesus being real: he resurrects in every laughter (sometimes sounds despicable including this time) on him. This part of Apichatpong if not the rural doctor, or even if not, the very zealous rather than cool Jesus, reminds me of Wilson, so I asked him to watch this film.
3. After her suggestion was gently turned down by Jessica (while explicitly

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6. He told me the original is dismantled so the only leftover is the idea.

7. Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 313.

8. If intellectual labor is counted and if my writing is not less than intellectual labor.

laughed out by the audience from the “New Rome”), the doctor recommended the modern artist Dalí and Jessica wondered if Dalí would not choose to take drugs like Xanax. Dalí is a cool dunker without a doubt, and he had played chess with maybe the greatest dunker Duchamp. Wait, Duchamp is actually more a boaster than a dunker: he is involved more in claims than in deeds. Anyway, after Wilson’s final review (our equivalent of thesis defense), he told me how this great boaster, according to Thierry de Duve’s *Kant after Duchamp* — mocked and manipulated another artist — Luis Elshemius — and made him into a pathetic joke. And I, feeling the enmity emitted in the atmosphere, with my extreme Oedipus complex and indignation (which decreased tremendously after I read that book), replied: Duchamp is going to hell (“hell” in the strictly Christian sense) — a claim sharing the very spirit of Wilson’s critique of dunk: dunker is going to be caught. But what did I really claim by sending Duchamp to hell? “I should never mock and manipulate people even make art like Duchamp.” Probably. But am I not just jealous of the ableness (including being able to mock and manipulate), social circles and even the trust fund of Duchamp? Probably. But even the jealousy — a sentiment that has its root in the request of justice — shared by me and my friend, would lead us to make a decision (respectively, of course) — wrong and strong? (paraphrasing Mr. Pope.L) — about our lives and art and this decision is nothing but a seriously comical equivalent of the Last Judgement.