

Laudatio T.C. Boyle

Dear T.C., dear fellow readers of T.C. Boyle, ladies and gentlemen:

The man in whose name this award goes today to the American writer Tom Coraghesson Boyle was a man of inspiring political thought, quick satirical wit and a wonderful ear for language. All these qualities T.C. Boyle shares with Jonathan Swift and for this reason alone T.C. quite deservedly receives the Jonathan Swift Award today and the only question that arises with this occasion is really: Why so late?

Well, it's only the third time that the Jonathan Swift Prize for Humor and Satire is awarded, and after the Wolf Haas and Eva Menasse, both witty and nimble with words, T.C. Boyle is the first recipient writing in a non-German language and also writing in the same language as the author in whose name the award is handed out.

Praising T.C. Boyle is easy. But in making me do so not in German but in English, the organizers of this award raise in me the feelings that Gustave Flaubert famously put into words when he wrote: "La parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendre les étoiles."

Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars. Die menschliche Sprache gleicht einer zersprungenen Pauke, auf der wir crude Rhythmen wie für Tanzbären trommeln, während wir glauben, eine Musik zu machen, mit der wir die Sterne rühren."

I'll talk more about stars in a moment, but let me confess first that in reading T.C. Boyle and the so-called translations of Dirk van Gunsteren a faint idea took hold of me germinating into a suspicion that lingered and very soon became a frightening certainty. I turned into a literary detective, a sleuth, a gum shoe and soon enough found evidence over evidence. Mustering all my courage today here this morning in Zurich and taking refuge in Martin Luther's famous statement "Hier stehe ich. Ich kann nicht anders. Amen" – "Here I stand. I can not help it. Amen. – I have to state trembling with trepidation: In reality, Dirk van Gunsteren is writing the stories and novels of T.C. Boyle. He does so in German and then translates them into English. The man whom I have met so often in Santa Barbara is just an actor. In retrospect, the clues are blatantly obvious and manifest. When the notion first came to me, I slapped my forehead and said: Elementary, Scheck! Of course that is the reason that T.C. always has time for an interview! That's also the simple explanation why he enjoys such tremendous success in German speaking countries, that solves the mystery why thousands and thousands fill the halls whenever he announces a reading and why T.C. Boyle has over the years become with such ease a household name to the Germanreading public. I mean: just look at the guy! Does T.C. look like writer?

Does this man in any way resemble the notoriously crumpy and ill-tempered authors we know? Not at all – T.C. is just to the contrary cheerful to the extreme, well-balanced and even-tempered: the very epitome of a guy with not a care in the world. And this, I'm sorry to say, is the very opposite of a writer, people notorious for having a chip in their shoulders, an axe to grind, old scores to settle. So please forgive me, T.C. Your bluff is called, your game is up, your hoax is uncovered, the big fat lie called T.C. Boyle the writer is herewith over.

Allow me both for practical reasons as well as in order to save the dignity of the occasion and the people involved to continue addressing Mister van Gunsteren and his front man Mister Boyle as the writer T.C. Boyle – in the same way that we have become used to in the past addressing Milli Vanilli as singers or the Piltdown Man as archeological fact.

Apropos big fat liars. It's time to talk about the man currently in the White House. In our last interview before the election in October 2016 T.C. Boyle was becoming sick of his double life and confessed to me that he had given up writing for sitting on the pier in Santa Barbara and hitting on the tourist for some change. T.C. claimed that he made more money this way than by writing – only now I realize the double entendre in his words. Is asked him what he would do if Trump actually got elected. In this case, T.C. replied, he would immediately run for office as literary tsar of the United States to be formally addressed as your Grace or your Highness, or more informally just as Master.

Well, Master Boyle, I think its high time for a literary czar in the United States. But whether we like it or not, T.C. Boyle and Donald Trump have more in common than one would like to think. Both are published authors, for instance, though not a lot of people seem to have read Donald Trumps second book after “The Art of the Deal” that put his name on the bestseller lists in the 80ies. “How to get rich” “Wie man reich wird” contains not only chapters with headings like “Bullshit Will Only Get You So Far “ but also a whole chapter in which Trump reflects on why he decided against running for President in the election in 2000. “Look Closely Before Changing Careers”, this chapter is called. “In 2000 I thought about running for president of the United States””, Trump writes and continues: “In politics, you usually have to watch your words. I'm too blunt to be a politician. Then, there's my long-held aversion to shaking hands.” Angela Merkel already got a taste of that. But Donald Trump continues: “There's a larger point here, beyond the obvious ones about not confusing your talent for office politics with a gift for electoral politics. Anyone with more than a little curiosity and ambition will at some point be tempted to try a different challenge on new terrain. Take the risk, but before you do, do everything you can to learn what you're getting yourself into, and be as sure as you can that you've got the right mind-set for the job.” In this case, I only wish the author would have read his own book and taken his own advise.

Would the United States be a better place if T.C. Boyle ruled the land as literary czar instead of Donald Trump. You bet it would! In another interview, T.C. confided to me that while politics didn't really interest him, he was confident to be able to solve most of the problems of the U.S. within a year if only he could seize absolute power and make people do what he wants them to do. The greatest problem facing mankind as a species, T.C. claimed, is global warming. Within five years, he would allow only hydrogen-powered cars. But T.C.'s in my opinion most alluring political plan is his take on the drug problem. T.C. suggested to legalize all drugs including Crack or cocaine and to actually sell them in then aptly named drug stores. The lesson learned during the prohibition between 1918 and 1932 on alcohol, T.C. claimed, was that the Mob satisfied the demand. The United States today is destabilizing the economies of Mexico, Afghanistan in order to satisfy the American demand for drugs to be sold on the streets. If drugs were sold in drug stores, nobody would have to slink in dark alleys in order to buy laced drugs from shady dealers. "There will always be addicts. This way the American government can at least tax the drugs and earn some money by this", T.C. argued. Also, he continued our talk on the pier at Santa Barbara, while both of us had the opportunity to acquire right here in Santa Barbara a magnum bottle of Gin and could in theory consume it right here on the beach and drink until we passed out, in all likelihood we would not exert this option but continue to be productive law-obeying citizens. One should let society decide how to deal with drugs and also open up the possibility to earn some money with them. The taxation by the state on alcohol being served in restaurants is probably 50 percent of the retail price." When I objected that his plan to legalize drugs might drastically reduce the US-American population, T.C. enthusiastically agreed saying that exactly this would be an added benefit.

Must I stress that for his comment alone T.C. Boyle more than deserves an award given out in the name of the author of "A Modest proposal"? Jonathan Swift suggests in his satire published in 1729 a strikingly simple solution for poverty among children in Ireland. "A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter." Swift continues: "I fortunately fell upon this proposal, which, as it is wholly new, so it hath something solid and real, of no expense and little trouble, full in our own power, and whereby we can incur no danger in disobliging England. For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, and flesh being of too tender a consistence, to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I could name a country, which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it."

Guess what country the Irish writer Swift could name ... This is a brilliant example of how an artist reacts to the impositions of politics and history. T.C. Boyle has just given us a nice example of writing in this satirical vein in his "Letters from America" written for a German radio station after the

election of Donald Trump. “Very exciting news”, T.C. begins. “I had the amazing opportunity to serve my country recently, having been whisked away to a secure East Coast location for the purpose of instructing a very powerful Washington figure in the basics of reading and comprehension. It seems he grew up spoiled and rich, willfully doing whatever he pleased, and he most certainly did not have the patience to attend classes or give his attention to anything as non-remunerative as reading and writing. (...) That’s where I stepped in. For the use of a black special ops helicopter and a modest fee of ten million dollars an hour, I spent a week at Camp David with him, laboriously reading through one book after another. We began with the Dick and Jane series, and he did seem to react favorably to some of the pictures, especially the ones that showed Dick crotch-grabbing Jane and Jane waterboarding Dick, but even when employing the stratagem of sounding out the words, I had difficulty in making him comprehend exactly what these actions implied in the ethical dimension. In fact, the term “ethical dimension” seemed to puzzle him. I am an educator, that goes without saying, and with a case like this you have to be creative. On the second day, I sent over to the Library of Congress for selection of the pornographic comics they curate there, and my charge and I spent a very encouraging five minutes or so sounding out the words in the balloons above the depictions of various sex acts between various sexes, species and extra-terrestrials, but even that seemed to tax him. Finally, on the last day, I got him a volume called *The Wit and Wisdom of Rush Limbaugh*, and though he couldn’t actually get past the first paragraph (who could?), he did seem to enjoy my reading portions of it aloud to him. Anyway, you win some, you lose some. I’ve already been invited back next month and I intend to employ two basic texts that may not simply improve both his vocabulary and comprehension, but help him strategize his domestic policy as well: *The House at Pooh Corner* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Wish me luck.”

One of the most convincing observations of Jonathan Swift is: “He was a bold man that first ate an oyster”. Following this culinary thread in the fiction of T.C. Boyle is a very fruitful endeavor. While T.C. Boyle is highly praised in the German speaking world for his novels, I think the short story writer T.C. Boyle is sadly underrated. One of my favorite stories of Boyle is “Sorry Fugu”, wherein a restaurant reviewer named Willa Frank, feared for her slating reviews, confides to a cook: “To like something, to really like it and come out and say so, is taking a terrible risk. I mean, what if I’m wrong? What if it’s really no good?”

So, let me take up the challenge of my colleague Willa Frank and answer the question: What do I like about T.C. Boyles fiction? „At an age when most young Scotsmen were lifting skirts, plowing furrows and spreading seed, Mungo Park was displaying his bare buttocks to al-haj’ Ali Ibn Fatoudi, Emir of Ludamar. The year was 1795.”

Some narrative styles are instantly addictive like crack. Such a narrative style is the mark of „Water Music“, T. C. Boyles first novel. The joy of discovery and weariness with our civilization, a criticism of imperialism and sheer awe of the diversity of cultures: this novel, a masterwork of postmodern writing, offers a cornucopia of heterogenic themes and embeds them in the unity of a satisfying piece of art– including even a legendary recipe for baked camel. A man writing in this style possesses a sense of humor, a predilection for breaking taboos and most of all: predilection for spinning a yarn. Also, he possesses either stupendous historical knowledge or the talent to fake it in a believable manner.

The sound that characterized T.C. Boyles debut novel was unheard of in 1982: „At this time in history the streets of London were as foul, feculent and disease-ridden as a series of interconnected dunghills, twice as dangerous as a battlefield, and as infrequently maintained as the lower cells of an asylum dungeon. It was pretty rough. Drunks lay sprawled across the footpaths, some dead and stinking and blanketed with crows. Whole families squatted on streetcorners and begged for bread. Murders were committed in the alleys.”

„Water Music“ started at the beginning of the 80ies a one man revolution in contemporary literature. A novel of adventure – adventures experienced both in mind and in flesh – “Water Music” is about an expedition to the sources of the Nile and the sources of literature. Full of wit, both funny and moving, “Water Music” is one of the truly unforgettable novels of our time.

„Water Music“ introduces us to three quite quirky characters: the historical Scottish explorer Mungo Park, who leaves his fiancé Ailie Anderson behind in Selkirk in order to look for the sources of Nile in Afrika. To Mungo Park's black guide Johnson alias Katunga Oyo, a Mandingo sold at the age of 13 into slavery first to America and then to England where he learns Greek and Latin, develops a taste for contemporary English literature and has to flee back to Africa when he kills a musician in a duel who has called him “a damned Hottentot nigger”. And then there's the third main character Ned Rise, a rascal, cardsharp and gin drunkard who organizes London's first sex shows for paying customers. „February, 1796. Wordsworth has been in and out of France and Annette Vallon, Bonaparte has put the screws to Babeuf and is vigorously pounding at Joséphine's gate, Goethe is living in sin with Christiane Vulpius, and Burns is dying. In Edinburgh Walter Scott fights a losing battle for the hand of Williamina Belches, while in Manchester a snot-nosed De Quincey wanders the streets and wonders what a whore is. In Moscow it's snowing. In Paris they're plugging holes with assignats for lack of anything better to do with them. And in Soho, at the Vole's Head Tavern, they're sucking and fucking. Onstage.

It's this literary voice, transcending time and space, hilarious, defining the panoramatically wide open historical horizons of this novel that make “Water Music” a classic.

“Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own”, Jonathan Swift famously remarked, While the

Swift Prize is explicitly awarded for humor and satire and the work of T.C. Boyle has a lot of that, I don't want to reduce it to this. One of the most moving of his stories is in my opinion "Chicxulub". In it

"And then there's Chicxulub. Sixty-five million years ago, an asteroid (or perhaps a comet – no one is quite certain) collided with the earth on what is now the Yucatán Peninsula. Judging from the impact crater, which is one hundred and twenty miles wide, the object – this big flaming ball – was some six miles across. When it came down, day became night and that night extended so far into the future that at least seventy-five percent of all known species were extinguished, including the dinosaurs in nearly all their forms and array and some ninety percent of the ocean's plankton, which in turn devastated the pelagic food chain. How fast was it traveling? The nearest estimate put it at 54,000 miles an hour, more than sixty times the speed of a bullet. Astrophysicists call such objects "civilization enders," and calculate the chances that a disaster of this magnitude will occur during individual's lifetime at roughly one in ten thousand, the same odds as dying in auto accident in the next ten months – or, more tellingly, living to be a hundred in the company of your spouse."

"The thing that disturbs me about Chicxulub, aside from the fact that it erased the dinosaurs and wrought catastrophic an irreversible change, is the deeper implication that we, and all our works and worries and attachments, are so utterly inconsequential. Death cancels our individuality, we know that, yes, but ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. „Die Ontogenese rekapituliert die Phylogenese.“ And the kind goes on, human life and culture succeed us – that, in the absence of God, is what allows us to accept the death of the individual. But when you throw Chicxulub the mix – or the next Chicxulub, the Chicxulub that could come howling down to obliterate all and everything even as your eyes skim the lines of this page – where does that leave us?"

"Promises and pie-crust are made to be broken."

"Books, the children of the brain."

We do, T.C., we do wish you luck.