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What the Birthday Says

By Anne Cauquelin

Looking closely at ordinary things, the things that happen all the time, at the world as it goes on—is always strange. Generally “we see nothing there,” “we read the surface” or we see what we thought we should see. And so the birthday. What could be more ordinary? All of us have celebrated a birthday many times; some celebrate every year. And what does a birthday say? It says “candles” (commonly: one candle for each year), it means ritual also (repetition, habit), eternal recurrence (the year completes a cycle and comes back to its starting point: a long cycle, a necessity,) and finally birth (one day, one time, some place: the moment, randomness).

It says all of this, but, between past and future, what the birthday does not say is that it is a statement of time gone by and a memory of a future that may or may not come to be: in short, a past future. An ambiguous formulation if ever there was one. Awkward. Shaky. Mixing up different times, both measured and immeasurable, of clear incertitude. And doing all this with a bang: a party. For my part, what interests me in the birthday and its attendant party is the idea of a birthday itself. Having a birthday? This is a truly strange idea to my mind; it’s complicated and slides from the hand even as you try to grasp it.

The Invitation, the Very Day

The day of the birthday is announced; one receives an invitation for the “very day.” And already there’s confusion: this invitation sets the birthday moment in motion, it predicts it, and the day is drawn, sketched out, in all its actual becoming. The invitation fixes the date, marks the place, the time. It constructs what will never be—the day itself—the mere (often noisy) echo of what was foreseen. With the invitation, the birthday, a particular date, is not yet present; it belongs to a realm of the “not-yet-existing” which is the mark of utopia. But if the birthday and the associated celebrations, as a kind of festivity, are still tied to the “not yet,” this “not yet” opens on the possibility that there may be no actualization, that everything will fall apart, that no one will show up, that an obstacle will arise. That the birthday and the party will be split. That everything will be cancelled. Yes, everything but the birthday itself.

Because, if the party is cancelled, the birthday takes place on its own, and will always already have happened, always already been real. It belongs to the physical realm of facts, tied to cyclical time, to the revolution of the stars. Nemesis is there: the year necessarily turns. Whether the party is rescheduled or cancelled, the birthday is there, even if the subject of the birthday dies “in the mean time.”

Yes, the birthday takes place, but in a kind of borrowed way, “in the mean time”—one before, one after, in ill-fitting clothes, floating. Hesitant, since it is always on the way, and only on the way to actually becoming, even at the minute it becomes present. “Today is my birthday.” The moment I speak this phrase, my next birthday—not yet existent—foreshadows itself, and at that time, one of the two protagonists, the subject of the birthday (me, for example) might be absent. Still, it will take place: it will be no one’s birthday, so to speak.

That the birthday may happen alone, in the void, with no living person it’s subject; that is a funny idea. So strange that not a single text references it. A footnote with no page above it. And curiously, it is onto this bizarre absence of person for his or her birthday that all the pretensions of this history swoop down.

What the Birthday Wants

History. Yes, since it itself “wants.” It wants pressingly, like a heavy load presses on a flimsy surface, cracks and shatters it with its weight.

It wants to exist in the now, beyond its mummification, to leave its millennia-old tomb. It wants to be, to be present, to bring itself up to the present moment, but how? The birthday and its invention are a beautiful subterfuge, perhaps an alibi. As soon as it comes back to the present, costumed in festivity, it gives itself over to spectacle, displays itself at its best. At least it thinks so. The witches of Goya, those simpering, made-up old women—there is the history of this history entire. They say “we are your past, you will not escape us, you are on your way to becoming like us; half dead, we are also your future, you who think yourself in the present.”

So, becoming present is an unheard-of wish. A miniscule moment of time, which is to say nonexistent, atemporal, the now undoes itself to the very extent it presents itself as the present; it is woven from memories and wishes. At the same time it is this wish that labours to give the celebrations substance, pulling events from the muck of the past and shining them up again, dusting them off, a way of creating a personal history, and of having one.

But what is having a history exactly? Is the answer provided by a date, a provenance, an inscription? Or by what comes to pass or doesn’t?

The Moment That Comes to Pass

“One day I waited for myself

I said to myself Guillaume it’s time you came. . . .”(1)

Who is Guillaume beyond being he who should come and is not there? He who calls Guillaume, is he himself Guillaume or a wish by Guillaume, a form not yet complete, a wish not yet fulfilled? He is through his own coming, like that much-anticipated present in which the aforementioned history, or the birthday and the very day, want to inscribe themselves. As if the present was a stable material, a page on which to write, a kind of clay that holds

imprints. Will he come, that Guillaume, to the appointment with himself? He invites himself without knowing if he will and whether the birthday he chooses for his new birth will take place with or without him. What comes to pass, we name "chance," tukon, randomness, let's say: moment. One must jump on it, strike while the iron is hot, nail it. It has nothing to do with a date, a day in particular, or a commemoration.

Waiting for the moment, and the moment itself is that part of time that owes nothing to history, and to the contrary refutes it, derides it. Caught in the prison of past birthdays, Guillaume waits for his time; he keeps his eyes peeled for an open window in his cell. Each thing has "its" time. The moment will not come without his waiting for it; and, contrarily, the repetition of the same is not without splendour or difference.

At the Same Time

Whether it's a mere formality or one prefers a spontaneous moment and party that denies the forced march of the world, a birthday is clearly a place in which the question of time shows itself. Its leading edge. Ordinarily, time is evoked in the course of things as the world goes by: age, epoch, the young, the old, what to do with it and how one must take one's time. Still, it is at its sharpest at that very moment one must celebrate one's own birth, whether as a repetition of a past event or in anticipation of its arrival.

And what do we celebrate? The fact of time as a certain order in the world, its rhythm: fife and drums. And, although in celebrations all order becomes disorder, noise, sparkle, a host of impromptu moments, there lingers in the background the memory of individuals I never was, -birthdays that are not mine, the strange mix of times from other worlds situated somewhere beyond this universe.

The Stoics thought of time like a pure fire; when it embraced the world, it put an end to past cycles—the universe came to pass anew, as a -present moment that knew itself as present. The present in its youth, a spark amongst the ashes, exploding and becoming celebration. One day, one hour, one single instant. In a so-called eternal recurrence, that defies time itself.

[Translated from the French by Peter Dubé]

NOTES

1. Guillaume Apollinaire, "Cortege", from *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*, tr. Roger Shattuck (New York: New Directions, 1971), 75.