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and other stories

CÉSAR AIRA

Translated by Chris Andrews



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God's Tea Party

I

ACCORDING TO AN OLD AND IMMUTABLE TRADITION IN the Universe, God celebrates His birthday with a magnificent and lavish Tea Party, to which only the apes are invited. Nobody knows or could know, in those timeless regions, when this custom began, but it has become a fixture in the great year of the All: it seems that the patiently anticipated day will never come, but come it does, precisely on time, and the Tea Party takes place. It is said, plausibly enough, that the original reason for the ceremony was negative: the idea was not so much to invite apes as to not invite humans. Apes are a sarcastic joke, a kind of deliberate and spiteful (or, at best, ironic) slight on the part of the Lord, aimed at a human race that has disappointed Him. It may well have begun like that. But as soon as the arrangement was in place, it was accepted as an ancestral tradition, without a clear meaning, but saved from blatant absurdity by the hefty weight of precedent.

Traditions cannot be separated from the societies that created them. A community's traditions function like a sympathetic nervous system. They tend to be rather irrational, because their historical components were produced by an intricate web of causes that not even the most careful study would be able to disentangle. The case of God's Tea Party, however, should be simpler, because it's a tradition of the Universe, so there was nothing particular or historical about its origin; instead of a causal network, there was the gong of the absolute, no less. Yet, whether simple or difficult to grasp, its origin and reason for being remain obscure, perhaps just because the theologians never took the ceremony seriously, or were afraid of compromising their reputations by attending to something so grotesquely silly.

Nevertheless, to clarify, it can be said that it's not a natural occurrence like the spring thaw or an eclipse or the migration of ducks. It's a social event. It doesn't have to happen, should the Master of the house decide that He doesn't feel like having a Tea Party. Up until now, the custom has been observed and will, most likely, continue for all eternity. Even He respects the old established traditions, perhaps simply out of habit.

Like every social occasion, this one has its formalities. The first, which is really a *sine qua non*, is the issuing and distribution of the invitations. (This too could be different. Were the judgment to be rescinded or the sentence commuted one day, the guests might be human.) The invitations, addressed "To

Evolution," are automatically transmitted to the ape's instincts, like the sound of a doorbell. They are sent out all at once, en masse, and the operation may consist of no more than the divine enunciation of the word "apes." That is enough for all concerned to know that the day has arrived.

But what day is it? When does the uncreated Creator celebrate His birthday? Any time at all. It could be today. Except that "today" could be a lapse of countless eons or a slice of a microsecond—it depends what plane you're on—since His universe is a puzzle of days, hours, months, and centuries, all of different shapes and sizes, locked together in a polyhedron without end, on whose faces dawns and midnights, emptiness and plenitude, ends and beginnings coexist. Naturally, He who created time has the right to celebrate His birthday if He so desires. All the same, "God's birthday" has an odd ring to it, and the slight surprise provoked by the expression is the reason why the whole thing is so odd.

II

MORE THAN ODD, IMPOSSIBLE: A FIVE O'CLOCK TEA IMPOSSIBLY happening outside of time, in a realm of pure fantastic invention. Were a witness present, he'd see a sheer frenzy of senseless movement. The apes can't keep still. They leap up and down as if possessed, on their own chairs and those of

the others. Incapable of staying put, after barely a moment in one place, they're looking for somewhere new. They squeeze in wherever they can, and there's always a space, because the others keep shifting too. They are possessed, truly possessed, by an enthusiasm without object, as if they knew that, just for a while, eternity was theirs to play havoc in, and were determined not to waste the opportunity. With their giddy diagonal leaps across the table, they knock over cups, send the spoons and forks flying; their stamping feet scatter the pastries, their tails swipe at the cream-laden cakes and come away spotted with white. What do they care! Their faces, hands, and chests are sticky with cake, tea, crumbs, and chocolate. The cups of fine porcelain implode in their clumsy grips, and to counteract the scalding tea they splash themselves with cold milk. They're constantly fighting; there's always some pretext, and if they can't find one they go ahead and fight all the same. Sometimes it looks like a battlefield: they bombard one another with sugar cubes, spit marmalade, hurl trays of scones. Inevitably one of them rises above the melee by swinging from the chandelier, until he gets distracted, lets go, and comes crashing down in the middle of the table, devastating the china and scattering the confectionery. And how they scream! The racket is so deafening, a fire truck's siren would be inaudible.

Exercising His omnipotence, God pours tea into all the cups at once. And while He's at it, He repairs some of the breakages. In a circus like this, of course, His good intentions only aggravate the chaos, giving it a velocity it wouldn't have in the natural

order of causes and effects. The cataclysm becomes as inextricable as a tangled-up thread a million light years long.

And yet it's as if there were an order of ceremony, because every time God has a Tea Party, the same things happen. Every leap, every stain on the tablecloth, the trajectory of every slice of strawberry tart thrown from one end of the table to the other, exactly repeats what happened the time before and anticipates what will happen next time. The whole thing is identical. But there's really no reason to be amazed, because, after all, every event is identical to itself.

This identity explains why the party is repeated over and over. Without it, God may well have decided not to invite the apes to tea again, having seen what an awful mess they can make and just how badly they can behave. But yielding the initiative to the automaticity of the same takes all the risk out of repetition. The bad manners of the guests become a given configuration of reality, like a landscape. Nonetheless, the question of whether manners are subject to evolution does arise. Detached one by one from the apocalyptic block in which they manifest themselves at God's Tea Party, and isolated like signs, perhaps they could develop, becoming part of a story, and after a great many centuries or millennia, we would arrive at a divine, unprecedented spectacle: a gathering of apes sitting quietly around a table, lifting their teacups in one hand, their little fingers pointing at the surrounding void, dabbing at the corners of their mouths with napkins, perfectly demure and genteel.

III

THE PROBLEM OF THE BAD BEHAVIOR MIGHT BE DUE TO the fact that God doesn't preside. Or rather, He does and He doesn't. As we know, God is omnipresent, which turns out to be very handy for carrying out His functions, but it has the drawback of preventing Him from being visibly present in a particular place, for example sitting at the head of the table, keeping things under control. His absence (if His omnipresence can be counted as an absence) could be regarded as a discourtesy that legitimates all the subsequent discourtesies of his guests: a host who fails to turn up to his own party thereby authorizes his guests to behave as they like (this is the household version of the well-known saying "If God does not exist, everything is allowed.") But taking a wider view should allow us to see that His behavior is the transcendental form of the solicitude that characterizes the perfect host, who "thinks of everything" in order to guarantee the well-being of his guests, ensuring that plates, cups, and glasses are never left empty, all the provisions are of the finest quality, sweet and savory, hot and cold are balanced, the lighting and the temperature are just right, the tablecloth is well ironed and doesn't smell of mothballs, and the conversation never languishes or strays toward inappropriate topics. There are so many details to attend to! Only God could keep track of them all.

By making an appearance He could put a stop to the uproar, but if He were to be in one place He would cease to be in

others and would thus betray His essence. So one of the apes stands in for Him. This King of the Apes is a legendary personage. Nobody believes in his real existence, for good reason: he exists only for the duration of God's Tea Party. He does what God would do were He to take a fleshly form, but he does it as the misshapen caricature that he is. Standing on the chair at the head of the table, frantic and raucous, intoxicated by his own impatient and capricious majesty, he distributes punches and kicks, yells his head off, hurls everything within his reach, and in his determination to impose order ends up being the most disorderly of all. Sometimes he is so maddened by his own energy that he is the one who starts a new brawl or launches a new campaign of destruction, which he then insists on quashing with renewed violence. The other apes, displaying an atavistic respect that seems to have been instilled in them by the light of divine reason, refrain from challenging the king's authority (not that it has much effect on their behavior). Indeed, if Supreme Command is diffusely present everywhere, it follows that it must be present in the King of the Apes, and it could even be argued that, while remaining evenly distributed, it is, in a sense, more present in him than elsewhere. However mechanically or automatically God's representative is designated, a Will is involved, and Will is beyond the reach of calculation and conjecture.

The king is the one who shouts the most, and who shouts the loudest. He prefigures the invention of the loudspeaker. He would like to have a thousand arms, so he could slap all the guests at the same time. Still, he manages pretty well with the

two he has by leaping about unpredictably and keeping on the move. Apes are naturally endowed with exceptional agility, but he surpasses his physical limits. It's as if he were pure mind, and his mind is twisted and perverse, bitter and sadistic, sick with power. Like so many others, "he thinks he's God." He persecutes the slowest and most vulnerable apes, and especially the timid ones, at the bottom of the pile; he sprays lemon juice in their eyes, dips their fingertips into the boiling tea, plugs their ears with candy and their noses with marmalade, pushes silver spoons into their anuses ... In the breaks, he downs gallons of tea, to fuel his causeless fury. There must be something in that tea.

IV

ON ONE OCCASION A CURIOUS BEING INTERRUPTED God's famous Tea Party. As a rule, people who join a gathering to which they have not been invited try to go unnoticed; they don't draw attention to themselves; they keep a low profile and try to blend in. That's the interloper's logic. It doesn't always work, and some adopt the opposite strategy: assuming they'll be found out sooner or later, they decide to make it sooner and justify their presence by being "the life of the party."

In this case, the intruder apparently chose the first approach, for which she was unsurpassably equipped by her natural attributes. For a start, she couldn't have been smaller, because she

was a subatomic particle. One of those pieces of a part of an atom that were left over when the Universe was formed and have been floating about ever since. To her the Void and the All were one; she roamed them both, in free fall, idle and unattached.

Millions of galaxies had seen her go by; or hadn't, but she'd gone by all the same. A well-informed observer would have been able to recognize her as an archaeological trace of the dimensions that had ceased to exist, or one of time's wandering milestones, or a messenger from the origin. Her tiny little body, on which not even the finest brush could have inscribed a single letter, nonetheless contained a long history. The most advanced cyclotrons would have been required to decipher that diminutive hieroglyph, but the eminent scientists who operated those costly instruments were busy with more important and beneficial projects. In any case, it would have been hard for them to capture or even locate her, because there were no maps showing her trajectory, and she didn't draw attention to herself. Discreet to the point of stealth, she slipped away quietly; before she'd finished arriving she was gone. She was there and not there.

The same was true of her path. It couldn't really be called capricious because all things obey the laws according to which they were created, but when a thing is as small as she was, literally off the scale (when, that is, it exists on a plane that is prior to measurement), there's no predicting which way it will go, or when. To give an idea of her size (although it's an inconceivable idea), if you took as many of those particles as there are atoms

in the Universe and stuck them together, they still wouldn't make up the volume of an atom.

This intensified tininess gave her a quality that would have been extraordinary in a normal-size being: she didn't need to change course and never bumped into anything because she went right through whatever happened to be in her way. It would be misleading to liken this to a bullet's trajectory because she made no holes; she didn't need to. From her point of view, solid bodies were not solid. The atoms of a stone, which to us seem so tightly packed, were, for her, as far apart as the sun and the moon. So she glided through a meteorite of nickel and iron as a bird crosses the blue sky on a spring morning. She traversed a planet without even noticing. With the same oblivious fluidity, she passed through an atom. Or a sheet of paper, a flower, a boat, a dog, a brain, a hair.

For the particle, there was no such thing as a closed door. So to find her appearing (as it were) at a party to which she hadn't been invited, or at all the parties, could hardly come as a surprise. She was the prototypical interloper. Her gate-crashing was systematic, unstoppable, and supremely elegant. So many might have envied her! All the outcasts, the embittered, the paranoiacs, eaten up by jealousy, left at home alone while the others gather to enjoy themselves in the glittering salons of the Universe. But the envious would have had to consider the price the particle was paying: diminution, insignificance. Was it worth it, under those conditions?

V

AND EVEN GRANTING THAT NO SPACE WAS EXEMPT from the little wanderer's intrusions, it's still hard to accept that she could have snuck into the most exclusive gathering of all: God's Tea Party, the legendary party held to celebrate His birthday. It was a bit too much, even for her. Not just because the whole point of the gathering was to exclude the uninvited, but also because it was governed by an absolute. It was, in other words, a kind of fiction or artistic construction, and as a result each of its details, whether big or small, subtle or crude, had to correspond to a meaning or an intention. And the particle was not a detail in a story; she didn't contribute any information or advance the plot: she was an accident and nothing more.

On the other hand, it was bound to happen. Because the particle was one of a countless multitude, falling through the Universe. That's why it's called a "rain of particles," and although the analogy is misleading (this "rain" is falling in all directions, and never ends, and doesn't wet things), it does at least quash any hopes of detailed monitoring, because even the briefest local shower is composed of more drops than anyone could count, let alone name. And since these particles are so numerous and intrusive, why should it be surprising to find one passing through the scene of God's Tea Party?

Perhaps it wasn't an exception. It hasn't occurred to anyone to look into this question systematically, but it's entirely possible that particles are attracted by parties. Why would that be

strange? Or to put it the other way around: parties may well be a natural sieve for particles. (The resemblance between the words is not a mere coincidence.)

Coquettishly, the particle identified as a geometric point, which meant that her manifestation in reality was linear, because over time a point will always trace a line. And since a line is the intersection of an infinity of planes inclined at different angles, when this line entered God's Tea Party, something like a windmill of superfine screens appeared, screens tilted at various, changing angles, over which the apes went slipping and sliding, tumbling over and getting up, finding themselves somewhere else altogether, climbing a slope only to realize that they were actually descending, or whizzing down a slide that, to their surprise, was going up. Since there were so many planes, it was very rare for two apes to be on the same one, which didn't stop them fighting—on the contrary. Their leaps became multidimensional, as if they wanted to jump through spaces that space did not contain. Suddenly they would discover that the floor beneath their hairy feet was also beneath the feet of an ape on the other side, defying the law of gravity. Or the space across which they stretched their extralong arms, reaching for a profiterole, was narrowed by the pressing in of two spaces from neighboring planes, squeezing the arm into a superthin ribbon. Or the tea they spilled flowed upward, downward, sideways, backward, and forward, like a thousand-pointed liquid star. All this intensified their silliness and drove them crazy; they treated the phenomenon as a theme park specially built for

their amusement, and that's when chaos *really* began to reign. They started moving like wonky robots loaded with explosives. They jumped in all directions, put their hands and feet in the tea and their tails in the pompoms of Chantilly cream on the cakes; they yelled as if competing in a noise contest, choked, vomited, and crawled under the tablecloth, sending the dishes flying, as you can imagine.

It was amazing that such a tiny being could produce such far-reaching effects. The particle seemed to be everywhere at once, although, of course, she wasn't. At each moment she was in one place only, but present there as a cause, so her effects were simultaneously present in many other places, and while they were still being produced, she was already generating new planes and scrambling the apes into new configurations. The size of a cause doesn't matter: a cause is a cause, whether big, medium, or small. Even when it's the cause of madness.

VI

WITH ITS BAROQUE LAYERING OF NECESSARY ACCIDENTS and accidental necessities, the Tea Party was, it seemed, complete both as an event and as a symbol. The birthday was duly celebrated, and rather than passing unnoticed, the date was marked, if not with the ecclesiastical pomp that might have been expected, at least with the animal (not to say bestial) energy and joy of the primitive and the authentic.

But, driven on by an obsessive perfectionism appropriate to His status and function, God wanted to add one last stitch, or sew on a final button, and tie off the end of the thread. He still had to give the particle an origin. He had to make her come from somewhere. Or, to put it more precisely, he had "to make her *have* come from somewhere." This was a preliminary task, which should come as no surprise, since all God's tasks are preliminary; otherwise, the completeness of His world would be compromised. It wasn't a problem, given His habitually bold approach to space and time. The problem came afterward, as we shall see, not that it was really a problem (partly because for Him *before* and *after* had no meaning).

God's Tea Party would have been incomplete without the story of the particle. Because the Party was a story, and every story is made up of stories, and if it's made up of anything else it ceases to be a story. We will never know whether it was a weakness on God's part, one of those forgivable little vanities, or a matter of logic, but He dearly wanted the birthday party to make a good story, a "once upon a time," every repetition of which would be a perfectly accomplished rehearsal. He couldn't allow the anonymity of the furtive interloper to spoil everything.

The nature of the object meant that his work was already half done: it couldn't be hard to find the origin of a particle because the word itself indicated that it was part of something. All He had to do was find that something, or invent it. God had made far more arcane discoveries, in the course of His long ca-

reer. How many times had He found a needle in a haystack, just to satisfy His creatures' appetite for metaphors or proverbs!

In this case, it could have been anything, literally, and more than literally: the particle could have come not only from a material object but also from an event, a lapse of time, an intention, a thought, a passion, a wave, a form . . . By virtue of its size, it belonged in the primordial roundabout, from which the paths of mass and energy depart, with their respective mutual metamorphoses. The particles were at the heart of the action. Which didn't mean that the origin of this one in particular had to be sought exclusively at the beginning: she could have emanated from any state of the Universe, even the most recent. The infinitesimal birth of that nosy little globule could have taken place in a flare from the surface of Alpha Centauri or a pan used to fry a dove's egg in China, in a child's tear or the curvature of space, in hydrogen, blotting paper, a desire for revenge, a cube root, Lord Cavendish, a hair, or the unicorn . . . The catalog that God had to flick through, so to speak, was inordinately long. Not for the first time, it was borne home to Him that omnipotence is limited by *l'embarras du choix*. Words were his only guides in that great chaotic enumeration. At bottom, it was a question of language. There weren't any things in reality, only words, words that cut the world into pieces, which people end up taking for things. God didn't need to use words Himself, but when He had to intervene, when, as in this case, He wanted to imprint something on human memory, He had no choice but to take part in the linguistic game. He regarded it as a challenge.

It was quite a bit harder for Him than it would have been for a grammar teacher, because He had to consider all languages, living, dead, and potential (each of them carved the world up differently, and, viewed from above, their coincidences, divergences, and overlaps formed a superintricate patchwork).

Cutting to the chase: it has taken longer to formulate the problem than He took to solve it. As if He'd pressed a button, the particle had her birth certificate, which also served as an invitation to the party, to which she would return for her debut. And here, the Creator made an exception: He who keeps no secrets kept one on this occasion. He didn't tell anyone what He had chosen as the particle's origin. And that, ever since, has been the profound little mystery that runs through God's Tea Party.