Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7

Lydia L. Moland *Editor*

All Too Human

Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Nineteenth-Century Philosophy

Springer

Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life

Volume 7

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ISSN 2352-8206 ISSN 2352-8214 (electronic)
Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life
ISBN 978-3-319-91330-8 ISBN 978-3-319-91331-5 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018946644

Cover illustration: The “Free at Last” sculpture stands in the midst of Boston University’s Marsh Plaza, and is a memorial to the life and work of BU’s most famous students of philosophy and religion, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Editor's Acknowledgments

I owe thanks to several institutions and individuals who made this volume possible. The Colby College Center for the Arts and Humanities gave me the opportunity to coordinate "Comedy, Seriously" as its Annual Humanities Theme in 2012–2013. My thanks to Kerill O'Neill, director of the center, and the many faculty members and students who participated in that year-long exploration of all things comic. Special thanks to my colleague Dan Cohen, a philosophical humorist if ever there was one, for co-teaching a seminar on the philosophy of humor with me and co-sponsoring a conference on that theme as well.

Many thanks to Professor Paul Katsafanas of Boston University for co-sponsoring the conference on which this volume was based as part of his Workshop on Late Modern Philosophy in 2016. Thanks to the Boston University Center for the Humanities and Lori Kletzer, then provost of Colby College, for contributing funding for that conference. Thank you to Professor Christopher Ricks for his opening lecture on Sterne that weekend. And many thanks to Professor Allen Speight for encouraging me after the conference to undertake this edited volume.

My own research on humor received generous funding from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst. Their support allowed me to spend time at the Freie Universität Berlin where I benefitted from the hospitality of Professor Georg Bertram and the collective wisdom of his research colloquium. I am also grateful to Professor Klaus Vieweg at the Universität Jena for his exceptional work on this topic and for his invitation to share my research in Jena as well. My early thoughts on humor benefitted from audience feedback at conferences hosted by the European Society for Aesthetics, the American Society for Aesthetics, and the American Philosophical Association.

Bernard Prusak planted the seeds of my thinking about comedy philosophically many years ago. He also contributed his invaluable editing skills to this volume. Marty Tropp introduced me to teaching Bergson at my first job. Michael Prince devoted a weekend to helping me understand Sterne.

I am deeply grateful to my husband, James Johnson, for his unwavering enthusiasm throughout the years I have dedicated to this project. I have also benefitted from his expert editorial insights. And I would like to offer personal thanks to Luke Moland and Mel Conner. Both inspired an ongoing fascination with all things humorous and a lifetime interest in laughing more.

Most of all, I am grateful to the authors of this volume's chapters, each of whom have embraced the almost comically difficult task of writing seriously about laughter with grace and insight: and, yes, with humor.

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Taking Laughter Seriously in Nineteenth-Century Philosophy

Lydia L. Moland

Abstract Philosophers in the nineteenth century took laughter and its related concepts very seriously. Most philosophers before this period treated laughter as tangential to philosophy's core concerns, but beginning with Kant's immediate successors, the family of concepts relating to the laughable—including comedy, wit, irony, and ridicule—took on new significance. They went from describing something derivative about humans to telling us what we, in the most basic sense, are. Well-known philosophers such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche offered substantial treatments of these topics; they were also taken up by lesser-known thinkers such as Rosenkranz, Solger, Jean Paul, Bahnsen, and Bergson. The nineteenth century also saw the introduction of humor in particular as a new and distinct aesthetic category. For several philosophers of this period, humor described nothing less than the relationship between the human and the divine and its implications for how humans should live. It described our awareness of our finitude—our fallibility, our petty concerns, our meaningless obsessions—and the amusement tinged with melancholy this awareness elicits. Despite this wealth of theorizing, the nineteenth century is often neglected in studies of the philosophy of laughter and humor. This essay introduces a volume of articles intended to remedy that neglect.

Keywords Nineteenth-century philosophy · Humor · Comedy · Laughter · Irony

In my experience, the very idea of a volume on laughter, humor, and comedy in nineteenth-century philosophy makes people laugh. Philosophers in general are notoriously serious. Nineteenth-century philosophers in particular scowl at us from their portraits, jowly and joyless. The fact that the most famous philosophers of this period were German—by reputation that most serious of peoples—only heightens the hilarity. But why is this funny? Why, exactly, does the thought of Hegel,

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_1

Schopenhauer, or Nietzsche pontificating about laughter make us laugh? With that question, the philosophy of laughter, or at least the laughable, has already begun.

Of the three standard explanations for why humans laugh—the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory—the incongruity theory offers the most straightforward answer. Made famous by Kant, this theory suggests that we laugh when there is a disruptive mismatch between our expectations and reality. The idea of this volume is funny, on this account, because our image of dour men in high collars is in tension with the idea of laughing itself. But several of the historical figures represented in this volume would have contested the claim that philosophy and laughter are incongruous. This is not because they were not serious or did not take themselves seriously. They were and did. To the contrary, it is because each of them took some aspect of the laughable very, very seriously. Unfortunately, the idea of taking the laughable very, very seriously is itself funny. It is, again, incongruous. The situation is already bad enough, but in the case of humor, the incongruity is also deadly: philosophizing means analyzing, and we all know that analyzing a joke kills it. "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog," E.B. White reportedly claimed. "Few people are interested, and the frog dies of it."[1]

Chaos can also be funny. Think of the climax of a Three Stooges sketch or a mouse loose in a classroom. The status of the family of topics under consideration in this book is undeniably chaotic. How are we to differentiate meaningfully among comedy, humor, irony, wit, mirth, the laughable, the ridiculous, the amusing, the funny, the joke? Can we distinguish jesting from kidding or teasing from mocking? What about parody and folly? Why do we describe something as funny both if it is amusing and if it is strange, otherwise known as the difference between "funny ha-ha" and "funny-huh"?[2] Why do we laugh both in joy and in scorn? What are we to do with the overlapping and sometimes contradictory connotations of this range of words in different languages?[3] Any attempt to bring order to this chaos will likely end in absurdity. Perhaps laughter defies explanation and should be left well enough alone.

But philosophers are famously incapable of leaving well enough alone. And here another danger looms. At the end of the nineteenth century, philosopher Henri Bergson suggested that roles, especially professional roles, are fertile territory for comedy since they cause people to act like machines. The accountant who cannot stop counting or the assembly-line worker who cannot stop assembling are stocks in comic trade. The philosopher who cannot stop explicating the inexplicable will be no exception. For this reason, too, a philosopher defining laughter risks being laughable.

The risk of ridicule has never stopped accountants from counting or assemblers from assembling, however, and it has not stopped philosophers from philosophizing about laughter, either. But the nineteenth century in particular saw a decisive shift.

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[1] The provenance of this quotation is disputed, but an early version appears in White and White (1941).

[2] See a discussion of this distinction at Hurley et al. 2011, 28.

[3] Ibid., 29–32.

Beginning with Kant's immediate successors, the family of concepts describing the laughable—including comedy, wit, irony, and ridicule—transformed from an amusing philosophical diversion to being existentially central. They went from telling us something derivative about humans to telling us what humans, in the most basic sense, are.

In addition, the nineteenth century saw the introduction of humor in particular as a new aesthetic category, distinct from comedy, wit, and related concepts. For many philosophers of this period, humor described nothing less than the relationship between the human and the divine and so had distinct implications for how humans should live. It implied our awareness of our finitude—our fallibility, our petty concerns, our meaningless obsessions—and the melancholy this awareness elicits. It also evoked the gentle amusement that can counter this melancholy.

Despite the fact that thinkers of this period pioneered the understanding of humor as an aesthetic category and elevated related terms to new philosophical heights, the nineteenth century is essentially neglected in humor studies. Few of the philosophers included in this volume, excepting perhaps Schopenhauer and Bergson, are included in standard anthologies or introductions to the topic.[4] This volume aims, then, to fill a significant gap in humor studies by highlighting some of its original theorists.

In this introduction, I first give a brief account of key moments in the history of the philosophy of laughter, isolating common themes that laid the groundwork for nineteenth-century theories. In Sect. 1.2, I summarize Kant's revolutionary repositioning of aesthetic experience and Friedrich Schiller's claim that art could cure modernity's ills. Sect. 1.3 identifies themes that set the stage for humor's emergence as an aesthetic category, including the immense popularity of Laurence Sterne's writings in Germany. This background allows us to turn, in Sect. 1.4 and 1.5, to considering how the essays in this volume enrich our understanding of laughter, humor, and comedy in the nineteenth century. Examining the philosophers in question through this family of concepts also illuminates their philosophical commitments in unexpected ways. Together, these thinkers and their theories deepen our understanding of ourselves as creatures who laugh.

1.1 Themes in the History of Laughter from Plato to Hobbes

The history of western philosophy, traditionally understood, begins with Socrates. The history of comedy as a dramatic subgenre often begins with his caricature. The play *Clouds*, a paradigmatic example of Athenian "Old Comedy" written by playwright Aristophanes in the fifth century BC, features among its protagonists a parodied Socrates corrupting the youth and denying the existence of the gods, the very charges of which the real Socrates was later convicted. A popular account of *Clouds'*

[4] See for instance Morreall 2016, 2009, 1987 and Critchley 2002.

debut describes Socrates himself in the audience, standing up in order to allow his fellow citizens to identify him as the play's comic villain.

But according to Plato, Socrates himself was suspicious of laughter's proximity to our baser emotions. Malice, Socrates suggests to his interlocutor in the *Philebus*, mixes pleasure with pain since the "malicious man is somehow pleased at his neighbor's misfortunes." Our laughter at the ridiculous, by comparison, is often our response to our friends' lack of self-knowledge—our reaction to their belief that they are richer or more handsome or more virtuous than they are. When we laugh at our friends for these misjudgments, we take joy in their unfortunate self-ignorance as well as signaling our knowledge that they are too weak to retaliate. Such laughter is, Socrates concludes, "surely wrong" (Plato 1995, 48–50).[5] In *The Republic*, Socrates suggests that the guardians should laugh sparingly; in *Laws*, he recommends that comedy should be regulated for the good of the city (Plato 2016b, 388e, Plato 2016a, 816, 935e).

Aristotle's writings on comedy have been, famously and tragically, almost completely lost.[6] In the fragments that remain, Aristotle argues that in contrast to tragedy's imitation of people who are better than average, comedy is imitation of people who are worse than average (Aristotle 1987, 1149a1132–1144). The ridiculous, as a category, is related: it involves a mistake that is bad but not "painful or destructive" (Aristotle 1987, 49a34–35). But Aristotle also comments in the *Nicomachean Ethics* on the value of what we might now call a sense of humor, encouraging wit as a balance between "buffoons" who laugh at everything and "boors" who laugh at nothing (Aristotle 1999, 1128a1110–1128b1128). Despite comedy's encouragement of laughter at our inferiors and our levity when we encounter the mild mistakes of the ridiculous, laughter in measure can contribute to ethical life.[7]

Many centuries later, Descartes' discussion of laughter in *The Passions of the Soul* included a physiological analysis. Laughter consists, Descartes says, "in the fact that the blood which proceeds from the right orifice in the heart by the arterial vein, inflating the lungs suddenly and repeatedly, causes the air which they contain to pass out from them with an impetus by the windpipe, where it forms an inarticulate and explosive utterance." This strange physical phenomenon can be triggered, he continues, by "the surprise of admiration or wonder" combined with joy; or, by contrast, when "some slight emotion of hatred, assisted by the surprise of wonder" causes the spleen to drive blood towards the heart (Descartes 1911, §124). "Experience also causes us to see," he continues, that there is "always some little element of hatred, or at least of wonder" in laughter. Descartes further admits of a laughter that "accompanies indignation" and that proceeds "from the joy that we have in observing the fact that we cannot be hurt by the evil at which we are indig-

[5] Translation as appears in Morreall 1987, 10–12.

[6] This loss was made famous in Umberto Eco's novel *In the Name of the Rose*.

[7] Amir cites sources showing a more nuanced discussion of laughter among ancient philosophers than is possible in this brief introduction: see Amir 2014, 78.

nant." Laughter of scorn, he continues, is "joy mixed with hatred"; laughter in ridicule, by contrast, "is useful in reproving vices" (Descartes 1911, §§127, 178).[8]

Thomas Hobbes is credited with the first articulation of "the superiority theory" of laughter.[9] Hobbes claims that among humans, "sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (Hobbes 1968, 125). We laugh, then, when we suddenly become aware of our superiority to others, often when we witness their ignorance, weakness, or failure.

In each of these theories, laughter is a mixed phenomenon, demonstrating some blend of pleasure and pain or joy and hatred. Although each of these philosophers found it necessary to include some account of its nature, laughter plays no major metaphysical or epistemological role in any of their theories. Lydia Amir has recently shown, however, that Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury in eighteenth-century England, began to integrate humor into a conception of a full human life. Shaftesbury did not use humor as a synonym with the funny as we frequently do now. As an extension of its classical etymology (which I detail in Chap. 2), humor instead meant a kind of cheerful equanimity pursued through reasoning. Shaftesbury also used it to describe, Amir argues, "an atmosphere of tolerance that invites the other's opinion" and allows for civilized conversation and debate. Humor was, then, a mark of rationality: "[r]eason equals taste and taste equals cheerfulness" (Amir 2014, 78).[10] Nineteenth-century German theorists of humor take the word in other directions, but Shaftesbury's emphasis on equanimity is a recognizable part of humor's philosophical legacy.

1.2 Kant, Schiller, and the German Age of Aesthetics

Although, as we have seen, some kind of contradiction is often credited with producing laughter, the first official incongruity theory of laughter is generally attributed to Kant. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant claims that we laugh when we witness "the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing." To illustrate, Kant asks us to imagine the following:

[8] Descartes' comments on laugher are excerpted in Morreall 1987.

[9] The relief theory is the third and final standard theory of laughter. It is generally attributed to Sigmund Freud, whose twentieth-century writings place him outside the scope of this volume. See Freud 1963 and 1987. Morreall, however, discusses Shaftesbury and Herbert Spencer as offering earlier articulations of the relief theory. See Morreall 2009, 15–23.

[10] Amir credits Spinoza's discussion of *hilaritas*, or cheerfulness, with inspiring Shaftesbury on this topic. She also differentiates between "humor" and "good humor" in Shaftesbury's greater theory. See Amir 2014, 69ff.

> The heir of a rich relative wants to arrange a properly solemn funeral for him, but laments that he cannot get it quite right, because (he says), "The more money I give my mourners to look sad, the merrier they look." (Kant 2000, §54)

If we laugh at this anecdote, Kant says, it is because we first worry about the relative's failed attempt to honor the deceased: we become tense, expecting the worst. We then realize that the tension is caused by his self-negating plans: of course the more money they make, the more cheerful the mourners will look. The heir's incongruous goals cancel themselves out and are transformed into nothing.

Kant's analysis of laughter is, as it stands, underdeveloped; it owes its persistence to crucial amendments by Schopenhauer and later theorists who increased its plausibility.[11] But Kant's contribution to the development of concepts like comedy and humor in the nineteenth century is due less to his theory of laughter and more to his general elevation of the aesthetic to the realm of freedom. Aesthetic experience, Kant claims, is a result of the "free play" of the faculties, moments when conceptual necessity is suspended. Such experiences allow humans to sense their essence as free beings. Because our freedom in turn facilitates our morality, beauty is itself a "symbol of morality" (Kant 2000, §59).[12]

Kant devoted little attention to the consequences of this view for art itself. But the implications of his theory proved revolutionary for his successors, launching a generation of philosophizing about art that some have called the German Age of Aesthetics. Since moral freedom is, in Kant's view, humans' highest achievement, the elevation of aesthetic experience to a kind of freedom elevated it in turn to an entirely new status. For the playwright and theorist Friedrich Schiller, for instance, Kant's theory meant that art was no longer relegated to the pleasant, amusing, or edifying. It was a way to experience freedom itself.[13]

Art's new status granted higher prestige to particular art forms as well. In the waning years of the eighteenth century, Schiller for instance argued that tragedy shows humans' ability to act on reason against their instincts and so gives evidence of our freedom from our physical limitations. Tragic heroes, he then claimed, were sublime. Comic characters, by contrast, were beautiful: confident and at ease, exhibiting an effortless cheerfulness. Comedy in fact expresses

> the supreme goal of human striving: to be free of passion, to look around and into oneself always with clarity and composure, to find everywhere more chance than fate, and to laugh more about absurdity than rage and whine about maliciousness. (Schiller 1943ff., 20: 446/1993, 209)[14]

The claim being made on comedy's behalf here is profound. Comedy is not only entertaining or cheering. It isolates nothing less than the "supreme goal of human

[11] One of the more recent developments of this theory, which attempts to explain incongruity from an evolutionary and cognitive perspective, is Hurley et al. 2011.

[12] Helpful explications of Kant's claims on this topic include Allison 1990, Ginsborg 1990, Guyer 1997, Zuckert 2007.

[13] For more on Schiller's views, see Beiser 2005 and Moland 2017.

[14] Citations to Schiller's works are to the German edition volume and page number, followed by the English translation page number.

striving." Comedy tells us something about who we are and, just as importantly, who we ought to be.

1.3 Alienation, Art, and Humor: Post-Kantian Aesthetics and the Sterne Revolution

The beginning of the nineteenth century was characterized by three phenomena that frame the contributions to this volume. The first is an enduring feeling of alienation that plagued young, post-Kantian thinkers. The Protestant Reformation had claimed to liberate believers from superstition but had left them vulnerable to isolation and self-doubt. The Enlightenment had achieved recognizable progress but at the cost of disconnecting humans from tradition, nature, and society. Kant's critique of metaphysics had declared the "thing in itself" inaccessible to human knowledge, depriving us of ultimate certainty about the world. The ideals of the French Revolution had ended in homicidal fury, exposing fault lines in the narrative of human improvement. Reason, together with the self-consciousness it encouraged, seemed to have burdened humans forever with a division from their natural selves. Schiller's despairing diagnosis of this division in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* rang too true for many of this generation. There Schiller mourned that modernity's excesses had condemned half of humans to follow "crude, lawless instincts"; the other half demonstrated nothing but a "repugnant spectacle of lethargy" (Schiller 1943ff., 20: 320/1993, 96).

The second phenomenon is the belief, also articulated in Schiller's *Letters*, that art could help overcome this division from our natural selves. Beauty is "triumphant proof that passivity by no means excludes activity, nor matter form, nor limitation infinity—that, in consequence, the moral freedom of man is by no means abrogated through his inevitable dependence upon physical things" (Schiller 1943ff., 20: 397/1993, 164). This hope resonated powerfully through the generation that followed. Schiller's young admirers, among them several represented in this volume, rushed to reorient many philosophical fields, including metaphysics and epistemology, around the importance of beauty in general and art, especially poetry, in particular.

The third phenomenon is British novelist Laurence Sterne's introduction of humor as a new aesthetic category. Humor in Sterne's writing meant not just the cheerful equanimity described by Shaftesbury but, as I detail in Chap. 2, a gentle amusement at a character's eccentricities. Sterne's 1759 novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* was full of eccentrics, and their popularity made Sterne an international sensation. His writings were quickly translated into German and achieved unprecedented popularity both among the general reading public and among Germany's writers and thinkers. Lessing said he would trade years of his life for more of Sterne's writing; Herder wrote to Hamann that he could not "read him-

self full" of Sterne.[15] Goethe claimed that Sterne's influence on him could not be overestimated.[16] E.T.A. Hoffmann announced the foundation of an "invisible church" whose credo, likely inspired by Sterne, would be "fantasy, irony, and true humor."[17]

1.4 Humor and the Human Condition

German philosophers soon joined their literary contemporaries in noting humor's new significance.[18] In Chap. 2 of this volume, I take up Hegel's attempt to incorporate humor into his philosophical system and argue that humor plays a markedly different role in that system than does comedy. Hegel (1770–1831), clearly influenced by Sterne, differentiates between instances of humor that do not reflect philosophical truth in his sense (which he calls "subjective humor") and those that do ("objective humor"). When humor functions best, it reveals nothing less than a particularly modern consciousness of the human as divine, inspiring us to find the infinite in the everyday and so recognize ourselves as the source of spiritual meaning. The surprising examples of objective humor Hegel discusses provide ample evidence that Hegel did not equate the humorous with the funny. Humor does not prompt the guffaws of comedy but only amused acknowledgement of our own humanity.

The existential nuances of humor were also taken up by lesser-known authors of Hegel's generation such as Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger (1780–1819). Solger, as Paolo Diego Bubbio argues in Chap. 3, developed a sophisticated metaphysics of double negation that suggests that humor is a response to the world's ironic structure.[19] Both humor and irony, for Solger, are metaphysical categories. They track our understanding of the relation between the infinite and the finite; they consequently reflect our status as humans and our understanding of the divine. Solger's denial that a complete reconciliation between the finite and infinite is possible produces a melancholy worldview and also provides a tool, Bubbio argues, for analyzing modern art.

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[15] See Thayer 1905, 29. Other Sterne devotees included Thomas Jefferson (Burstein and Mowbray 1994), the young Karl Marx (Hadfield 2017) and Nietzsche (Iser 1988, 126).

[16] Quoted in Thayer 1905, 98.

[17] Quoted in Kremer 2009, 45.

[18] Amir makes a convincing case that nineteenth-century musings about humor echo the earlier writings of Johann Georg Hamann, who claimed that humor involves the "coincidence of opposites" contained in theology and that humor and irony are "epistemologically necessary for apprehending God" (Amir 2014, 87). Humor "opens the individual to paradoxical truth, thereby preparing the way to the truth of the Incarnation" and allows us to "laugh at all human attempts to scale the heavens with unassisted understanding" (6). Amir primarily focuses on Hamann's relevance for Kierkegaard, but she also suggests, as is confirmed by essays in this volume, that his ideas are easily recognizable in several other nineteenth-century thinkers as well.

[19] For another recent discussion of Solger's significance, see Rush 2016, 198–211.

Alone among this first group of theorists, Jean Paul Richter (1763–1825) attempted to practice the humor that he preached. As William Coker shows in Chap. 4, Jean Paul cultivated a persona that both amused and mystified his contemporaries. His fiction rivaled Sterne's in its eccentric excesses; his theoretical writings, like both Hegel's and Solger's, make clear that humor is a way of grappling with our finitude in the face of the infinite. Jean Paul's novels' byzantine plots, Coker argues, are multi-layered commentaries on the incommensurability of the self that set the stage for early Romanticism as well as for theorists of modernity from Theodore Adorno to Slavoj Žižek.[20]

In his essay on Hegel's devoted student Karl Rosenkranz (1805–1879), C. Allen Speight (Chap. 5) reminds us that the visual also can be laughable. Rosenkranz was concerned to develop an aesthetics of ugliness: to determine why ugliness can be aesthetically interesting and what that interest says about the definition of art more broadly. Rosenkranz systematically enumerated the many subforms of ugliness, including the exaggerated physical incongruity that explains why caricatures make us laugh. Speight considers Rosenkranz' views in light of the robust popularity of caricatures during this period. He ends by examining the ethical issues raised by caricature, emphasizing Rosenkranz' hope that it can ultimately enable self-critique by facilitating better knowledge of who we are in contrast to who we aspire to be.

Many definitions of humor are tinged with a melancholy born of humans' struggle to comprehend their own finitude. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) famously expanded this melancholy to a full philosophy of pessimism. But Schopenhauer, too, thought carefully about laughter, developing, as Robert Wicks demonstrates in Chap. 6, a more sophisticated incongruity theory of laughter than did Kant. Wicks ties Schopenhauer's comments on humor to his early comments on music and illustrates why Schopenhauer defined humor as a species of the laughable that includes seriousness. Schopenhauer, too, interprets humor as fundamentally responding to questions about the value of humanity itself, concluding that human existence should be seen as a farce that can only evoke pity. Wicks also sets the stage for comparing this pity with Nietzsche's triumphant laughter.

It is impossible to read Frederick Beiser's account in Chap. 7 of the mostly forgotten philosopher Julius Bahnsen's life (1830–1881) without pity. Bahnsen was clearly miserable, and his pessimistic philosophy, inspired by Schopenhauer, reflected his conviction that this misery characterized the entire human condition. Concluding with his fellow pessimists that it would be better not to have been born, Bahnsen exposes the tragic essence of human life but nevertheless suggests that humor can be an existential defense against inevitable despair: a small but effective rebellion against the senselessness of existence. Uniquely among thinkers in this

[20] Jean Paul is almost entirely neglected today, but his influence during and immediately after his lifetime was enormous. It extended also to music: under his inspiration, "humoresque" came to mean a genre of music characterized by whimsy and caprice. The composer Robert Schumann, who wrote several pieces in this genre, for instance claimed to have "learned more counterpoint from [Jean Paul] than from his music teacher" (Reiman 2004, 2).

volume, he gives no explanation for why this might be, perhaps recognizing the futility of such explanations as part of the futility of life in general.

1.5 Humor from Content to Form and Back Again

A preoccupation with humor did not make this first group of nineteenth-century philosophers themselves humorous. With the exception of Jean Paul, their treatments of humor and its related genres are earnest and systematic. A major break occurs with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) whose writing begins to match form with content.[21] Irony and humor, in other words, explode into Kierkegaard's writing itself. The text can no longer be taken at face value; it demands that we not take it seriously. That, on another level, is its very serious point. Kierkegaard's highly charged, multi-layered use of humor merits two essays in this volume. In the first, Marcia Robinson (Chap. 8) explores Kierkegaard's use of humor and irony against Danish Christianity. Robinson suggests that Kierkegaard's role as a "Socratic gadfly" to Christendom shows him to be instantiating Hegel's idea of a romantic humorist, perhaps even by modeling his writing on Laurence Sterne. Despite Kierkegaard's famous disagreements with Hegel, Robinson argues that Kierkegaard's response to his Hegelian teacher Johan Ludvig Heiberg shows him to be attracted to Hegel's concept of an anti-aesthetic aesthetic, indeed using it as a "strategic gateway" to Christianity.

John Lippitt (Chap. 9) instead draws our attention to the importance of yet another concept in humor's constellation, namely jest. Kierkegaard, he argues, used jest to help reveal the limits of humans' earnestness and to inspire a humility that facilitates contentment with our finitude. Kierkegaard encourages us to learn from simple stories, such as the parable of the lily and the bird, how to recognize our inevitable anxieties without being debilitated by them. The resulting humility is part of the infinite resignation that in turn is necessary for faith. The "forgivingness" we learn to extend towards ourselves and others through such stories and through our resignation is tinged with a melancholic realization of our imperfection and is thus reminiscent of humor's indication that we are all too human.

Matthew Meyer (Chap. 10) turns to the philosopher who gave "all too human" its most famous philosophical connotations, namely Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Nietzsche was also a thinker in whose work form and content merged: Meyer in fact suggests that, given structural similarities with Old Comedy, Nietzsche's 1888 works should be considered a Dionysian comedy, as opposed to earlier works that are modeled on tragedies or satyr plays. He traces the importance of laughter and its connection to power in Nietzsche's works, showing laughter to be an important corrective to the temptation of pity. Nietzsche admired Old Comedy in particular, delighting in the vitality and unmasking of pretentions that Aristophanes brings to

[21] Recent discussions of Kierkegaard on humor and irony include Rush 2016 and Amir 2014.

the stage. Old Comedy for Nietzsche, as for Hegel, celebrates humans' understanding of themselves as the creators of their own truth after the death of their gods.

Nietzsche died the same year that Henri Bergson (1859–1941) published his slim volume *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Bergson does nothing to replicate the synthesis of humorous content and form that Jean Paul inaugurated and Nietzsche perfected; his prose returns us to the sober and the conventionally philosophical. But, as Russell Ford shows in Chap. 11, this makes his philosophy of laughter no less existential. Bergson is best known for his pithy definition of the laughable as "the mechanical encrusted on the living" and for his claim that the resulting laughter is a social corrective, aimed at encouraging more adaptive, flexible human life. But whereas this analysis would suggest that laughter is a joke played on our fellow humans, Ford shows that a larger joke emerges when we take into account Bergson's later metaphysics. There we find that the *élan vital*, the "life drive" underlying reality itself, uses laughter to inspire humans, unbeknownst to us, to achieve a more joyful and creative social order.

1.6 Conclusion

With Bergson's contribution, nineteenth-century philosophizing about humor came to a close. The philosophy of laughter since the nineteenth century has also been rich in refinements of old theories and developments of new ones.[22] As new academic societies and journals suggest, humor is now frequently the general heading under which the all terms related to laughter are gathered.[23] Humor so conceived has taken on a new and startling prominence in our society, with ever more people turning to late-night comedy for their news and internet humor for their entertainment. Understanding why this is, and what its consequences are likely to be, is a topic worthy of continued study.[24]

The essays in this volume remind us that beyond its contemporary ubiquity, humor has long been a prism through which we contemplate what it means to be human. With striking consistency, nineteenth-century philosophers identify us as fallible, divided creatures who, recognizing our limitations and the incongruities those limitations cause, can find joy in our limitations as well. There is indeed great incongruity in the human condition: our lofty ideas often jar painfully with our lowly reality. Humor, comedy, and their related forms are ways we acknowledge

[22] For a sampling of these, see Morreall 2016, 2009, 1987. See also Plessner 1970, Berger 1997, Critchley 2002, Heller 2005, Zupančič 2008, Weitz 2009, Hurley et al. 2011.

[23] There is now an International Society for Humor Studies, an American Humor Studies Association, and an International Association for the Philosophy of Humor. The latter promises the imminent launching of a journal dedicated to the philosophy of humor. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* has recently devoted an issue to philosophy and comedy: see especially the excellent introduction by Russell Ford (2016).

[24] For commentary, see Colletta 2009, Becker 2011, Shifman 2007.

this: a fact that explains why, as earlier philosophers also noted, there is something melancholy in our laughter. But there is also a power in our ability to overcome our melancholy with amusement at our own predicament. A certain rationalist conception of God suggests that since he is omniscient, nothing can be incongruous to him.[25] He is not suspended between heaven and earth and so cannot share our melancholy. But neither, under this description, can he feel the gentle self-mocking or the raucous hilarity that lightens it. In other words, he cannot join in our all-too-human laughter. And wouldn't he, then, be lacking some of our joy?

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[25] I am grateful to Dan Cohen for our discussions of this possibility.

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Chapter 2
Reconciling Laughter: Hegel on Comedy and Humor

Lydia L. Moland

Abstract Hegel's philosophical system turns to a species of the laughable at three critical junctures of his dialectic: comedy appears both at the conclusion of classical art and of Hegel's discussion of poetry, and romantic art ends with humor. But we misunderstand these transitional moments unless we recognize that Hegel did not use comedy and humor synonymously. Comedy refers to a dramatic genre with a 2000-year-old history; humor was a relatively recent aesthetic phenomenon that had become central to philosophizing about art in Hegel's generation. Hegel also differentiated between subjective humor, which he associated with the novelist Jean Paul's eccentric excesses, and objective humor. Focusing on the surprising examples Hegel offers of objective humor— from epigrams to Persian poetry to the obscure novels of T.G. von Hippel—I argue that we better understand Hegel's "end of art" thesis by tracing ways both comedy and humor can end. By understanding those endings, we also come closer to imagining how art can continue.

Keywords Hegel · Humor · Comedy · Sterne · Aristophanes

"In general," Hegel observes in his lectures on aesthetics, "nowhere can more contradiction be found than in the things that people laugh at" (*Ä:II*, 528/1200).[1] What humans find funny would seem, then, to be an unpromising topic in a rigorously systematic philosophy. Nevertheless, Hegel—a systematic philosopher if ever there

[1] The work known as Hegel's *Aesthetics* is a compilation of Hegel's lectures published by his student Heinrich Gustav Hotho in 1835. Philological issues undermining the authority of Hotho's edition have been well known for several decades, prompting some scholars to defer instead to more recently published student notes from individual lecture cycles. See Gethmann-Siefert 2005, 17–18 and Moland 2017, 561–2. The available editions of student lecture notes are Hegel 1995, 2003, 2004a, b, and 2017. In this essay, references to the standard version of Hegel's lectures on aesthetics are abbreviated *Ä* followed by the German page number (Hegel 1970) and then the English page number (Hegel 1975). References to lecture notes by his students are indicated by publication year; translations of these texts are my own.

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_2

was one—analyzes genres we usually associate with laughter at three critical junctures of art's conceptual development. Comedy is the last form of classical art and the last subgenre of poetry; romantic art, by which Hegel means art after the birth of Christianity, ends with humor. Hegel scholarship, insofar as it deals with these components of Hegel's aesthetics at all, often implies that the terms comedy and humor can be used interchangeably.[2] My argument will be that this implication is misguided. At the very least, it neglects to acknowledge that while comedy had a two-thousand-year-old history already in Hegel's lifetime, humor was a relatively new phenomenon with a unique aesthetic derivation. My aim is to ascertain whether, despite these different histories, comedy and humor serve a similar function in Hegel's philosophical scheme. The conclusion, I think, is mixed. Seen from one perspective, comedy and humor have little in common. This is especially true of what Hegel calls "subjective humor," a subgenre he dismisses as failing to be art at all. But in his last lectures on the philosophy of art, Hegel imagines an art form he calls "objective humor" that, while still differing significantly from comedy, shares with it some important similarities.

The significance of any given concept in Hegel's philosophy is intelligible only in terms of his greater system. Comedy and humor are no exceptions. In previous publications, I have given a reading of Hegel's philosophical system as it relates to art generally and as it concerns comedy in particular.[3] I will briefly summarize those arguments in this paper's first and second sections, then turn to a closer analysis of humor in Sect. 2.3 and 2.4. There I detail humor's unique history and attempt to account for the somewhat baffling examples Hegel offers, including Persian poetry, Goethe's *West-östliche Divan,* and the obscure novels of T.G. von Hippel. In the paper's conclusion, I will also speculate briefly about what differentiating comedy and humor can tell us about Hegel's famous "end of art" thesis by showing how each in its own way can resist that end.

2.1 Hegel's System and Art's Mission

Hegel's philosophy is, at its foundation, a philosophy of reconciliation. Hegel claims that the true is the whole, but that the whole—in order to be complete—must also include division. The division cannot, however, be sustained but must be reconciled again with the whole. This dialectic does not suggest that division is negated within the whole; it is rather preserved, making the whole itself richer and more complete. The progression from simple unity to division and then to their fuller unity is one way Hegel characterizes what he calls the Idea. Humans are capable of

[2] Exceptions include Pillow (2000) and Rutter (2010). I discuss comedy as a subgenre of poetry in Moland, forthcoming.

[3] See Moland 2016, 2017. Some of the following discussion is summarized from Moland 2016. I contextualize the claims made here and in previous publications within Hegel's entire philosophy of art in Moland forthcoming. For another recent analysis of Hegel on comedy, see Donougho 2016.

conceptualizing the metaphysical truth of the Idea, Hegel thinks, through three modes of reflection: art, religion, and philosophy. Art is unique among these modes of reflection in that it attempts to articulate the Idea sensuously.

The details of this metaphysical vision play out across Hegel's vast system. For the purposes of this essay, two of its major implications are relevant. The first is that there is no "given": no reality that exists independently, waiting for humans to discover it. Humans instead help shape the world, both transforming and being transformed by their surroundings in the process. Once humans recognize this, they no longer think of themselves as separate from the world but as reconciled within it. The second regards humans' relation to the divine. Hegel suggests that early humans, originally at one with their surroundings, postulated the divine as separate from them, occupying a distinct sphere and issuing unconditional commands. This is a paradigmatic instance of unity being ruptured by division. Ultimately, Hegel thinks, humans will recognize that there is no transcendent, independently-existing divine but that they themselves are authors of spiritual meaning and the source of their own norms. This realization allows us to see ourselves, this time consciously, as part of the whole. We also, in becoming conscious that we are authors of our own norms, become self-determining and free.

Art, Hegel thinks, can help us understand both of these implications. It can model for us our participation in the construction of reality. It can also help us achieve the understanding of ourselves as the authors of spiritual meaning and the source of normativity. Art's mission is, in Hegel's view, to help us realize these truths. It should, then, be judged by its ability to convey them sensuously.

2.2 Comedy and the Collapse of the Classical World

In the fifth century BC, Hegel suggests, humans made significant progress towards a true understanding of the divine. Instead of imagining their gods in animal or monstrous forms, as had, for instance, the Egyptians, ancient Greeks gave their gods human shape. In the same era, humans' sense of subjectivity developed and became prominent. By subjectivity, Hegel means a sense of self that transcends social roles and results in independent moral conviction. Socrates gave voice to this new subjectivity by demanding "to be free not only in the state, as the substantial whole, not only in the accepted ethical and legal code, but in his own heart" (*Ä:II*, 118/510).

In response to this new consciousness, Greek culture began to produce two new dramatic genres, namely tragedy and comedy.[4] In their paradigmatic instances, these plays depicted a social unity disrupted by subjectivity and then the reestablishment of that unity. They were, then, embodiments of the Idea. Hegel singles out Old Comedy, a form perfected by Aristophanes in the fifth century BC, as achieving this embodiment most brilliantly. Among Old Comedies, Hegel's favorite example is

[4] For my thoughts on Hegel's differentiation between ancient and modern tragedy, see Moland 2011 and 2016.

Aristophanes' *Clouds*. There are, I have argued, three principal reasons for this. First, *Clouds* masterfully portrays the unity of unity and division. Its main protagonist, Strepsiades, disrupts the ethical whole by attending Socrates' academy in the hopes of learning to evade his debts. Antics and hilarity ensue until his goal is finally thwarted, at which point he cheerfully burns the academy to the ground. In so doing, Hegel suggests, he negates the negation he had introduced and reinstates the ethical whole that now, given his disruption, includes division. Second: the Socrates of *Clouds* suggests that there are no gods, leaving humans responsible for their own norms. The play thus conveys Hegel's philosophical conviction that humans are the source of the divine and hence the source of normativity.[5] Third: for all its scatology and lasciviousness, Old Comedy also takes up what Hegel calls substantial themes: it asks how humans should relate to the divine, how they should govern themselves, and what it means to be free.

Hegel is much less impressed with Old Comedy's successor, so-called New Comedy. In these slightly later dramas by Menander, Plautus, and Terence, there is little evidence of substantial themes such as religion or politics. Plots instead turn on domestic conflict: lovers' quarrels, disobedient children, servants' petty plots against their masters. Such dramas fail on all three counts. They fail to portray the unity of unity and division; they do nothing to advance humans' concept of the divine; they neglect substantial topics. Satire, which also developed in Old Comedy's wake, likewise does not depict a return to unity but rather preserves a division between the way the world is and the way it ought to be. The satirist, Hegel says, "clings discontentedly" to disharmony and so "produces neither true poetry nor true works of art" (*Ä:II*, 125/514).

To this already over-determined analysis of art in ancient Greece, Hegel adds a world-historical dimension. The classical Greek worldview, he reports, was originally predicated on a deep harmony between individual and society and on inherited divine law. The nascent subjectivity depicted in both tragedy and comedy signaled the decline of this worldview. Ultimately, the institutions of ethical life should incorporate subjectivity, integrating individual humans' critical capacities into institutions such as the family, civil society, and the state. But Greek laws and norms proved themselves unable to accommodate subjectivity; internal tensions grew, as did vulnerability to external threats. Comedy had, Hegel suggests, been both a symptom and a catalyst of this decline. Eventually, in its wake, the beautiful harmony of Athens was lost forever.

The classical worldview was followed by Christianity's triumphant articulation of metaphysical truth as Hegel understands it. Through its assertion that God has become human, Christianity radicalizes Socrates' claim to have the divine within him. In Jesus' death, resurrection, and return to his disciples in the form of the Holy Spirit, Christianity also confirms the possibility of the divine presence in *every* human. Christianity achieves "the reconciliation of God with the world and therefore with himself" (*Ä*:II, 127/530). The consequences of Christianity's rise for art are profound. Christianity's claim that Jesus was a historical figure—not just a god

[5] See also Schneider (1995, 86).

in human form but an actual embodied human—means that art can no longer be the source of religion. Humans will no longer look to myths and poets for religious truth; they will look instead to history. Art "ends" here as a primary conveyor of a civilization's truth.

But even after losing its earlier significance, art continues to track humans' attempts to articulate the truth. In response to the claim that the divine is within humans, art's primary subject matter shifts. Instead of focusing on the exploits of gods, humans become increasingly attentive to their own subjectivity, and the "history of feeling (*Gemüt*) becomes infinitely rich" (*Ä*:II, 138/525). This attention to the subjective is Christianity's defining characteristic, and its consequences shape what Hegel calls the romantic era.[6] At its outset, Christian art still portrays the extraordinary, albeit the human extraordinary in the form of martyrs' suffering or the adventures of chivalrous knights. But as their newfound spiritual authority slowly penetrates human consciousness, humans' attention turns to everyday human existence as the locus of spiritual meaning. "*Humanus*," as Hegel somewhat ironically puts it, becomes art's new "holy of holies" (*Ä*:II, 237/607).[7] Art begins to portray "the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates"; the artist "acquires his subject-matter in himself... nothing that can be living in the human breast is alien to that spirit any more" (*Ä*:II, 237/607). What is taking place here is nothing short of a redefinition of the divine. The divine is no longer an external being; it is to be found in humans and their activities. Hegel claims that art is "one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit" (*Ä:I*, 21/7). Artistic expression post-Reformation begins to bear out Hegel's claim that these three—the divine, humans' deepest interests, and spiritual truth—are one and the same.

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[6] Within this era, Hegel discusses one period in which comedy explicitly resurfaces, namely in late Renaissance parodies of medieval chivalric poetry. Both Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, the examples Hegel cites, take the crusades as the point of departure for their comic escapades. This is no coincidence: the crusades, Hegel says, were themselves a self-negating enterprise since they sought a geographical location for a religion that by its own definition needed none. The comic potential provided by this self-negating goal is then amplified by the mismatched means and ends of protagonists such as Don Quixote. Other similarities with Old Comedy are also notable: like Strepsiades, Don Quixote remains at least provisionally cheerful when his aims fail; he also negates his own rebellion at the end, renouncing the reforms he endeavored to enact.

Cervantes' novels also resemble Aristophanes' comedies in that they reveal the contradictions in a dominant religious worldview. *Clouds* exposed the gods as humans' creation; Don Quixote's fantastical adventures disclose the crusades' contradictory claims. By extension, on Hegel's view, they also expose the Catholic Church's illegitimate monopoly on truth. As Hegel points out elsewhere, Cervantes' era was shaped in other parts of Europe by the Reformation's claim that each individual has direct access to the divine, unmitigated by church authority. This again counts as progress for Hegel since it more closely correlates to his version of metaphysical reality: spiritual truth is not to be found in external authority but in our own recognition of divinity within us.

[7] Donougho (1982) traces Hegel's use of this phrase to Goethe.

2.3 The Dissolution of Romantic Art: Objective Imitation and Subjective Humor

Despite this conceptual progress, humans' focus on themselves poses two significant threats to art. The first recalls the point at which Old Comedy's focus on substance was replaced by New Comedy's domesticity: art lapses into prosaic imitation, recounting humans' everyday affairs without signaling a deeper spiritual meaning. As an example, Hegel singles out Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, in which "police, law-courts, the army, and political government replace the chimerical ends which the knights errant set before themselves." The hero no longer struggles to vanquish dishonorable villains but rather finds himself opposed by "the will of a father or an aunt" (*Ä:II*, 219/593). The culmination of this struggle is equally anti-climactic: in the end, the hero "gets his girl and some sort of position, marries her, and becomes as good a Philistine as others" (*Ä*:II, 220/593). Such art, Hegel suggests, fails to take humans' spiritual status seriously since it depicts a protagonist's quest for meaning as only an apprenticeship to bourgeois domesticity.

The risk of imitation is evident also in the visual arts. Genre painting—in which anything, including "grapes, flowers, stags, trees, sandhills... horses, warriors, peasants, smoking, [and] teeth-extraction" can be the subject of art—is Hegel's example here (*Ä:II*, 226/598). Such art risks portraying the world as existing independently of humans and only observed and imitated; it does not show them in a mutually determining existence with the world. Hegel ultimately, as we will see, acknowledges that in the right hands, such apparently trivial content can indeed be an appropriate subject matter for art. But insofar as art "reverts to imitation of nature," it is "unbeautiful and prosaic." Therefore, Hegel says, "the question soon arises whether such productions in general are still to be called works of art" (*Ä*:II, 223/596).

The second, dialectically opposed risk for art at this stage is what Hegel calls subjective humor. Here some historical context is necessary to define first humor in general and then subjective humor in particular. In referencing humor, Hegel refers to a relatively new aesthetic category that had been imported from England only in the eighteenth century. In ancient and medieval physiology, "humor" referred to bodily fluids sometimes believed to determine a person's character (making her melancholic, sanguine, etc.); it later was used to designate moods in general (in the sense of being in a "bad humor") and especially their changeability (still captured by our description of someone as "moody"). By the mid-sixteenth century, humor's unpredictability hardened into a character trait and pejoratively designated eccentricity and deviation from social norms. But with political liberalization in seventeenth-century England, humor's fortunes turned. Eccentricity came to be seen as a positive character trait, necessary to emergent political freedom. A good government tolerated and even promoted the "varied richness of human nature," and the English were encouraged to ensure their freedom by cultivating quirks and foibles.[8]

[8] See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "humor," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie,* s.v. "Humor," Preisendanz 1977, 7 and Thayer 1905, 8.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* gave this positive eccentricity aesthetic embodiment. His characters' preoccupations and foibles—their famous "hobbyhorses"—earned Sterne a cult following first among English and then among German audiences. Sterne's popularity was such that some German authors claimed their own works had been translated from the English in order to assert common heritage with Sterne and boost their sales.[9] Sterne's books were hugely admired not just by the general public but by German literati such as Herder, Hamann, and Lessing, the last of whom claimed he would happily give years of his life to Sterne in exchange for Sterne's promise to continue writing.[10]

There is little question, then, that Hegel would have had British humorists as one reference point for his own discussion of humor.[11] Hegel also clearly recognized that subjectivity verging on eccentricity was one of humor's defining characteristics. In humor, he writes, the "stark subjectivity of the artist himself" is displayed, and "what matters is not the forming of a finished and self-subsistent work, but a production in which the productive artist himself lets us see himself alone" (*Ä*:II, 229/600). Shandy as Sterne's narrator certainly bears out this description: the winding of a clock, the parson's dilapidated horse, and the theological implications of pre-natal baptism are only connected through Tristram Shandy himself. Shandy's chapter-length interruptions of his own narrative likewise make the narrator, not the plot, the book's primary subject. Hegel is admiring of Sterne, describing him as able to use trivialities to suggest a "supreme idea of depth," showing an "inner connection" of everyday things that "must lie all the deeper and send forth the ray of the spirit in their disconnectedness as such" (*Ä*:II, 231/602).

Hegel also praises one of Sterne's most successful heirs, the German author T.G. von Hippel. Hippel was a Königsberg civil servant (and former student of Kant's) who published *Careers in an Ascending Line* (*Lebensläufe nach aufsteigender Linie*) anonymously and serially between 1778 and 1781. (In one of the more bizarre

[9] One reason sometimes cited for Sterne's popularity is that Germans longed for the personal freedoms Sterne's quirky characters enjoyed, against which the "sterility of German life" and lack of political freedom in Germany compared unfavorably. See Thayer 1905, 8. See also Vieweg et al. (2013).

[10] See Thayer 1905, 40.

[11] Treating comedy and humor as different aesthetic categories in light of this history is not tendentious on Hegel's part: several of his contemporaries wrote of humor in similarly philosophical terms, generally agreeing that the modern age had given birth to humor as a way of expressing humans' new subjectivity. Novalis described humor as "a result of the free combination of the conditional and the unconditional" and claimed that "through humor, the particular conditional achieves general interest and receives objective worth." Friedrich Schlegel wrote: "Humor deals with being and nonbeing, and its true essence is reflection." Karl Solger claimed that in the "infinite variety" of humor "the most sensuous and secular often contains all the force and significance of the divine." See Mohr 2007, 304; Schlegel 1971, 206; Solger 1984, 135–6. For a comprehensive treatment of this topic, see Preisendanz 1963 and Preisendanz and Warning 1976. These and other authors, such as Heinrich Heine and E.T.A. Hoffmann, who philosophized about and through humor would merit further study in English-language scholarship. See also Paolo Diego Bubbio's chapter on Solger in this volume.

literary intrigues of the late eighteenth century, speculation that Kant had authored significant parts of *Lebensläufe* at one point became so intense that Kant felt it necessary to publish a disavowal.[12]) *Lebensläufe* certainly rivals Sterne's novels in length, in its protracted digressions, and in the relative insignificance of its plotline. Hippel also sometimes disrupts the narrative to rebut his critics or introduce new "documents" such as diaries, letters, or overheard conversations.[13]

Lebensläufe is also, to continue the comparison, full of eccentrics. Foremost among these is the death-obsessed count, known as the *Sterbegraf*, who invites the mortally ill to die in his castle, spends his days discussing the afterlife with them and is, when possible, present at their deaths. The narrator's visit to this macabre fortress (where, among other things, the count sleeps in his coffin) occasions almost 200 pages of reflection on death and its significance, the count maintaining all the while that death is to be embraced as life's natural companion. "Death and life here cohabitate, like man and wife," the count claims: "they are one body, united, and that which God has joined together should no man put asunder" (Hippel 1828, 131). Such eccentricity, obsessions, and digressions, Hegel apparently thinks, also achieve a "supreme idea of depth."

But as much as Hegel admired Hippel, he was openly critical of another of Sterne's German heirs, namely Jean Paul Richter. Jean Paul's novels, like Sterne's, include protracted digressions and subverted narrative authority. Jean Paul occasionally appears in his own novels, sometimes accompanied by characters from yet other novels who are themselves writing novels otherwise attributed to Jean Paul. He recounts his struggles with writing, confidingly divulges his (fictional) sources, and complains about his reader's snoring.[14] In a fictional lecture that concludes one of Jean Paul's essays, every audience member save one leaves in disgust; the remaining audience member is himself a character from Jean Paul's novels (Richter 2013, 382, 336).

Jean Paul was explicit about subjectivity's central role in his novels. In his theoretical work *Preschool for Aesthetics (Vorschule der Ästhetik)*, Jean Paul writes that the humorist must reject all elevated perspective and embrace the standpoint of the "I": "Every humorist gives the self the leading role; if possible, he parades his personal relationships on the comic stage, even if only to annihilate them poetically" (Richter 2013, 336). No detail of the subject's life is too small to be considered: the resulting minutiae produce what Jean Paul calls the "inverted sublime." By this he means that whereas the sublime confronts us with the majestic and, by comparison, awakens our awe at our own rational powers, humor exposes the eccentric trivialities of everyday life and asserts meaning in the face of their apparent meaninglessness.[15]

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[12] This disavowal was entitled "Erklärung wegen der v. Hippelschen Autorschaft." See Beck 1987, 102–103.

[13] See Czerny 1904, 71 and Beck 1987, 12.

[14] See Casey 1992, 6 and Dale 1981, 304.

[15] See Casey 1992, 30.

Whatever the virtues of Jean Paul's theory of humor, its practice left Hegel impatient enough to coin a new phrase with which to criticize it. In contrast to the "true" humor of Sterne and Hippel, Jean Paul according to Hegel accomplishes only a "subjective humor." The subjective humorist, Hegel complains, concludes that any reflection on any topic can be art, provided it is woven together by *his* subjectivity. Such an artist employs "subjective notions, flashes of thought, [and] striking modes of interpretation" with the goal of "destroying and dissolving everything that proposes to make itself objective." His art is "only a sporting with the topics, a derangement and perversion of the material" in which "the author sacrifices himself and his topics alike" (*Ä:II*, 229/600–601). Such subjective excess cannot, on Hegel's view, be art since it makes no effort to reconcile human and divine.[16]

If the question, then, is whether comedy and *subjective* humor are synonyms in Hegel's view, the answer is clearly no. While humor, like comedy, portrays the protagonist as powerful and free, making the whole world an expression of his subjectivity, it offers no concluding synthesis of subjectivity back into the whole. While Jean Paul's eccentric characters may make us laugh, their incongruous and self-indulgent aims do not culminate in reconciliation. His works thus fail to express the Idea and so fall short of true art. "We cannot call humorous works artworks," Hegel says in 1826: "This is the collapse of art, and it is primarily [through this development] that romantic art, already only a loose connection, comes apart." After art disintegrates into imitation on the one hand and subjective humor on the other, it seems there is nowhere further for art to go, and Hegel announces that art at this point simply "peters out" (Hegel 2004b, 153).

2.4 The Persistence of Art: Genre Painting and Objective Humor

But in the case of both genre painting and subjective humor, artists can, it seems, evade this fate. In the case of visual art that risks being only imitation, Hegel cites Dutch masters such as Vermeer who transform the everyday by imbuing it with spiritual meaning: such an artist's "subjective vivacity" "breathes life" into his topics, infusing them with "spirit and heart" (*Ä*:II, 224/596). The resulting art "can make significant even what it is in itself without significance, and this it does through this fidelity and through the most marvelous skill of the portrayal" (*Ä*:II, 225/597 ff.). In other words, the care and skill with which Vermeer portrays prosaic scenes

[16] Accounting for Hegel's preference for Hippel over Jean Paul is sometimes difficult. A survey of the secondary literature reveals critics praising Jean Paul for reasons resembling Hegel's praise for Hippel and criticizing Hippel for faults Hegel attributes to Jean Paul. Jean Paul's theoretical works show him to share some of Hegel's basic commitments, such as the realization that modern life requires an exchange of religion's certainty for human-generated meaning. The root of the disagreement, as William Coker points out in his contribution to this volume, was likely Hegel's emphasis on reconciliation as compared to Jean Paul's insistence on incommensurability. For further discussion, see Beck 1987, 10, Koepke 1988, 194, Vieweg 2005a and 2005b.

shows these objects to have value through what they convey about humans' creation of spiritual meaning.

Vermeer's still lifes, Hegel for instance says, embody the Dutch national character: the Dutch are "a nation of fishermen, sailors and burghers" who "have attended to the value of what is necessary and useful in the greatest and smallest things." As Protestants who wrung independence from "the Spanish temporal power and grandeur," the important thing for them "is to get a sure footing in the prose of life, to make it absolutely valid in itself independently of religious associations, and to let it develop in unrestricted freedom." "Through their activity, industry, bravery, and frugality," the Dutch have attained a "pride in a cheerful daily life. This is the justification for their choice of subjects to paint" (*Ä*:II, 226/598). Vermeer's paintings, in other words, do not simply depict ordinary objects. They convey the Dutch Protestant assertion that the divine, far from residing in Spanish Catholic grandeur, is found in everyday human activity. They convey, in short, the fact that the human is art's new holy of holies; by sensuously expressing the unity of human and divine, they fulfill art's mandate. Hegel concludes that "[i]n view of these aspects we may not deny the name of works of art to the creations in this sphere" (*Ä*:II, 224/596).

Just as artists such as Vermeer could rescue art from being mere imitation by expressing national character through everyday objects, Hegel suggests in his 1828 lectures that subjective humor can also find a corrective.[17] Hegel calls this new aesthetic genre *objective* humor. Several Hegel commentators have been, for various reasons, unimpressed with this term and its significance in Hegel's system.[18] I want nevertheless to take it seriously by analyzing how it might achieve the sensuous depiction of the Idea where subjective humor failed.

Like the visual artists who transform everyday scenes into still lifes rich with significance, humorists can rescue their craft by making clear how they both transform and are transformed by the object. Here is how Hegel characterizes objective humor:

> [I]f this satisfaction in externality or in the subjective portrayal is intensified... into the heart's deeper immersion in the object, and if, on the other hand, what matters to humor is the object and its configuration within its subjective reflex, then we acquire thereby a growing intimacy with the object, a sort of *objective* humor.... a sensitive abandonment of the heart in the object. (*Ä*:II, 240/609)

[17] Deciphering what Hegel meant by humor has been simplified greatly by the recent publication of the 1828–29 lecture notes taken by Hegel's student Adolph Heimann. See Hegel 2017, 127. See also Rutter's citation of another as yet unpublished version of the 1828–29 lectures at Rutter 2010, 230.

[18] Rutter catalogs some of this discontent at Rutter 2010, 229. Terry Pinkard writes that "objective humor" is "almost certainly the wrong term to use" and suggests instead that we think of what Hegel refers to as a kind of "ironic intimacy" (2012, 179–80). It seems to me, by contrast, that for reasons described below, Hegel's desire to distinguish this kind of humor from Jean Paul's makes "objective humor" exactly the right term. Given Hegel's much different attitude towards irony, associating objective humor with irony would also, I think, be misleading. This is not to deny that Hegel's definition and criticism of irony as the Romantics understood it is tendentious and almost certainly unfair. See for instance Rush 2016, ch. 2, although I disagree with Rush's conclusion that Hegel means to include romantic irony under the heading of subjective humor (192).

This admittedly opaque description suggests that subjectivity is still a defining characteristic in objective humor: the artist's heart must be "deeply immersed" in its topic, and the object must be "configured within the author's subjective reflex." What the author thinks and feels will remain essential. But unlike subjective humor, objective humor takes the object as its point of reference. It then explicitly shows how the artist brings her subjectivity to bear on the object, interpreting it such that both she and the object are transformed through the artistic process. The result is not capricious, as was subjective humor, but shows the "inner movement of the spirit devoted entirely to its object and retaining it as its content and interest."

To illustrate this new category, Hegel first contrasts objective humor to ancient Greek epigrams. Another brief foray into the literary context of Hegel's day is helpful here. Epigrams generally are pithy, often wry poetic reflections on universal human themes that originated in ancient Greece and evolved into pointed satire during the Roman Empire. At the time of Hegel's lectures, they had recently been taken up with great enthusiasm by his peers. One exchange is particularly illuminating. In 1771, Lessing published an essay entitled "Various Remarks on the Epigram and the foremost Epigrammists" ("*Zerstreute Anmerkungen über das Epigramm [und einige der vornehmsten Epigramisten*"]) in which he argued that epigrams consist of two parts: the first must excite our expectation, the second must deliver a resolution or explanation (Lessing 1973, 427). Here is an example:

> The Evil Wife
> At most, one single evil wife here in this sad world lives
> The problem's this: that every man believes that wife is his. (Lessing 1961, 15)

We are initially puzzled by the possibility that there could be only one evil wife in the entire world: our puzzlement is relieved when we realize that the epigram's perspective is the point of view of individual husbands, not an impartial census.

In essays written in 1785–6, however, Herder offered a contrasting definition. Rejecting Lessing's two-tier conception, Herder suggests that the essence of the epigram is in its tone and its ability to draw attention *to the object*. Through epigrams, "otherwise dead objects receive voice and life": we are able to "feel with and through [the object] so that it can speak in and through us." The feeling that inspires epigrams "distributes humanity to everything: everything that surrounds humans, what gladdens or torments them, what teaches or serves them" (Herder 1957, 46–51). The subject matter of epigrams, in other words, need not be momentous or even noble. Herder's own epigrams for instance draw depth from trees, stars, and wine.

Hegel's description of objective humor resembles Herder's modern analysis of epigrams. Objective humor, Hegel suggests, also achieves depth through triviality; it draws out meaning by directing our attention to minute details *about the object* (hence, apparently, *objective* humor). It does not just say "in general terms what the object is," as, Hegel claims, in the case of ancient Greek epigrams. Instead, objective humor adds "a deep feeling, a felicitous witticism, an ingenious reflection, and an intelligent movement of imagination which vivify and expand the smallest detail through the way that poetry treats it" (*Ä:II*, 240/609). In doing so, it also reveals

something about the humorist's relation to the object: "what is especially at stake is that the heart... shall be entirely absorbed in the circumstances, situation, etc., tarry there, and so make out of the object something new, beautiful, and intrinsically valuable" (*Ä:II*, 241/610). Perhaps objective humor resembles a kind of modern epigram in which this careful mix of subjectivity and objectivity is made apparent to the reader.[19]

Hegel gives two further examples. The first is Petrarch's love sonnets. Again we might be puzzled: it is not immediately clear what about a love sonnet is humorous or how a fourteenth-century author can be a model for contemporary art.[20] But if we take Hegel's earlier characterization of the humorous—a "supreme idea of depth" and "inner connection" shown through triviality—we can perhaps make sense of Hegel's choice. In the sonnet, the author is immersed in thoughts of his beloved. His attention to her particular characteristics may seem subjective and the traits he praises contingent. But his attention shines a new light on her, illuminating her in ways that are not only about her but also about him and, most likely, about love and life in general.

As a foundation for his next example, Hegel briefly characterizes ancient Persian poetry.[21] Persian poets imagine god's presence in all things, enabling them to engage in "the most blissful and cheerful intimacy with objects in nature and their splendor" (*Ä:II*, 475/369). The "Persians and Arabs in the eastern splendor of their images, in the free bliss of their imagination which deals with its objects entirely contemplatively," he says, are "a brilliant example" of objective humor (*Ä:II*, 241/610). He then turns to a contemporary work inspired by this aesthetic tradition, namely Goethe's *West-östliche Divan* (*West-east Divan*). The *Divan* is a lyric cycle first published in 1819. Inspired by and modeled on the work of the Persian poet Hafiz, it is a long, many-faceted reflection on the love of a man, Hatem, for his beloved, Suleika.[22] Hegel calls the *Divan* "the highest accomplishment of poetry" (Hegel 2004b, 197).[23] He describes Goethe as immersing himself in the objects

[19] As we will soon see, Hegel praises Goethe's *West-östliche Divan* as a paradigmatic example of objective humor: Rutter describes the *Divan*'s stanzas as being able to "stand independently" as epigrams (2010, 235).

[20] Hegel's reference to Petrarch at this late stage of romantic art's conceptual progress is, in my opinion, evidence that the developmental story of art—from symbolic to classical to romantic—given in Part II of Hegel's lectures is not primarily chronological. Art ends conceptually in imitation and subjective humor, but resources for overcoming this development existed long before. I make this argument more comprehensively in Moland forthcoming.

[21] Hegel also discusses Persian poetry at *ÄII*, 473ff/368ff.

[22] Apparently these characters represent Goethe and Marianne von Willemer, a woman with whom Goethe had a particularly intense relationship during this time (Rutter 2010, 238). Hegel also in this context briefly mentions the poet Friedrich Rückert, another of his contemporaries, who was best known for his translations of Indian and Arabian poetry. Rückert's own poetry was deeply influenced by his interactions with those cultures and by Goethe's *Divan* as well.

[23] In the 1828 lectures, Hegel differentiates the *Divan* from an earlier poem, "*Wilkommen und Abschied*," which he says has only prosaic content and so presumably does not count as an instance of objective humor. Rutter gives an analysis of Hegel's criticism of this poem at Rutter 2010, 232 as well as an effective model for reading the *Divan* as an example of objective humor at Rutter 2010, 241ff.

described in the poems, seeking ever more vivid ways of describing them, using contrasts to unearth new insights about each. Among this metaphoric richness are meditations on love, history, nature, and religion. In one of the *Divan*'s poems, for instance, Goethe calls his own songs "[p]oetic pearls, which the mighty surge of your passion cast upon my life's deserted shore." He exhorts his beloved to "[t]ake them on thy neck, to thy bosom—raindrops of Allah, ripened in a modest shell," thus investing his songs with images of pearls, the ocean, a necklace, his beloved's bosom, and divine rain (*Ä:I*, 477/370). This new imagery enriches his creation (namely, the songs) by affiliating them with natural objects; it simultaneously intensifies our appreciation of the natural phenomena in question, and prompts reflection on love and divinity.[24]

What appears to strike Hegel about these poems is that Goethe's comparisons are eccentric and subjective, but they also put the objects concerned at the forefront. The rampant subjectivity of Jean Paul's indulgences has been tamed; despite the rich ambiguity of Goethe's references, deeper themes, not just Goethe's idiosyncratic desires, hold the poems together. Goethe achieves a blend of imitation and subjective humor not unlike the Dutch genre painting that allows us to witness the artist's both transforming and being transformed by the object.[25] Such poetry elevates objects while acknowledging that it is humans' interest that elevates them.

In articulating this truth, objective humor achieves several of art's main objectives. "The universal need for art," Hegel suggests, "is man's rational need to lift the inner and outer world into his spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self" (*Ä:I*, 51/31). Art should "strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness," showing that the world is not alien to us, waiting to be discovered, but that our reflections and activities help create that world. Objective humor is the unity of unity and division: the poet recognizes the object as other, but she does not leave it in this state of division. She unites herself with it by representing it poetically and allowing it to transform her as well. Kirk Pillow puts it this way: "[B]y illuminating our shared universe of meanings, intervening to critique harmful patterns of association, and inventing new metaphors to challenge self-understanding," the aesthetic reflection prompted by objective humor "can bolster, if not the necessity of our world, at least the cognizance of our participation in it" (2000, 229).

Benjamin Rutter argues that we find another theme from Dutch genre painting in the potential of objective humor. Goethe's *Divan* shows us, he argues, how "the Persians teach Goethe to find his satisfactions in the making of the poem itself," to exhibit his "skill as skill" in much the same way that Dutch masters brought attention to their subjectivity through their portrayal of objects (2010, 232). This means that

[24] Gethmann-Siefert, as Rutter points out, interprets humor as a "form of self-reflexiveness." Insofar as intensive interaction with the object prompts new knowledge of the self, this may be true, but I agree with Rutter that Gethmann-Siefert's analysis generally is too focused on the historical significance of Goethe's engagement with a foreign culture. See her comments in the introduction to Hegel 2004a, b, xxviii.

[25] Rutter in fact calls objective humor "genre painting in words" (Rutter 2010, 222).

as in the case of genre painting, the seams, as it were, in objective humor are allowed to show: we are not fully absorbed in the work but remain aware of the artist who is bringing the object's meaning to our attention. There is no claim that the object is being fully described or the subject is fully expressing itself. Humans, we remember, are the ones who can conceptualize the unity of unity and division. The objective humorist assists in this conceptualization by depicting a unity but allowing us to be conscious of the division within this unity.

What these examples share, I think, is the artist's awareness of herself in a mutually formative relationship with others and her surroundings. The object has no meaning independent of the artist, but the artist's work is also formed by the object. The artist is not attempting to convey already-existing spiritual meaning she discovers outside herself; neither is she allowing her own subjectivity to dominate. Instead she is investing the object with spiritual meaning *and* letting the object transform her in the process. The fact that this spiritual meaning comes not from an external deity but from her own interaction with the object means that objective humor expresses the unity of human and divine or, more accurately, their identity. It is, then, a sensuous expression of the Idea.

2.5 The Future of Art: Modern Comedy and Objective Humor

With this philosophical and historical background in place, we can return to and modify our original question: what, if anything, do Hegel's descriptions of comedy and *objective* humor have in common? The answer, I think, is that they both successfully portray the identity of human and divine in sensuous form. Aristophanes' *Clouds* sensuously embodies the claim that humans are the creators of their own gods and so, in Hegel's dialectical sense, unified with them. Objective humor portrays humans as recognizing the spiritual meaning they generate in cooperation with everyday objects, thus modeling the unity of unity and division that characterizes the Idea.

But this shared characteristic does not differentiate comedy and humor from anything else Hegel counts as art—the Egyptian pyramids, Raphael's Madonnas, Shakespeare's dynamic protagonists. Each of these, with varying degrees of success, also expresses the Idea in determinate form.[26] And beyond this most basic characteristic, comedy and objective humor have very little in common. Unlike Aristophanes' plays, Hegel's examples of objective humor are not funny; they do not depict protagonists negating their subjective aims and addressing substantial themes; in fact, they do not involve protagonists at all.

Comedy and objective humor also do not signal the same kind of civilizational transition. While Aristophanes created comedy by depicting the contradictions that

[26] I present an argument for this claim in Moland forthcoming.

led to a worldview's decline, objective humor does not, I think, suggest a similar collapse in Hegel's own generation. Instead, I see objective humor as an aesthetic characteristic that can, and perhaps even must, be a common component of art in the contemporary world.[27] In order to articulate the self-understanding Hegel thinks modern humans have achieved, art from now on will need to depict humans as the co-creators of spiritual meaning. Works that fail to do this will lapse into a kind of non-art by being sentimental, anachronistic, or blandly imitative. But works that succeed will articulate a higher truth and allow humans sensuous access to that truth.

Modern comedy faces different risks. Hegel is in fact generally pessimistic about comedies in the romantic era. They are, he complains, too much like New Comedy: they endlessly replicate meaningless domestic quarrels, mirroring humans' petty concerns back to them without offering deeper insight. They also, he continues, are no longer cheerful. Aristophanes' Strepsiades invites the audience to laugh with him at his foolish exploits. Molière's Tartuffe, by contrast, takes his aims seriously. When they fail, we cannot laugh with him but only at him. Main protagonists in modern comedies are often only the butt of jokes, mercilessly mocked with no possibility of redemption. Nevertheless, hope remains. Shakespeare's comedies, Hegel suggests almost as an aside, indeed exhibit a "beneficent disposition, assured and careless gaiety... exuberance and the audacity of a fundamentally happy craziness" (*Ä:*III, 572/1236).[28] He unfortunately does not elaborate, but it may be possible to interpret *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*, for instance, as depicting the unity of unity and division, arguing for humans' responsibility for their own norms, and addressing substantial themes. Insofar as this can be achieved and emulated, comedy too can be part of art's future.

The different ways in which both humor and comedy can fail allow us to consider what a comparison of comedy and humor can tell us about Hegel's "end of art" thesis. Art in Hegel's system, I think, ends in several ways. Most significantly, it ends when Christianity locates divinity in history rather than in art. But it regularly ends in less profound ways by resorting to simple imitation (New Comedy, romantic fiction, genre painting), indulging in excess subjectivity (subjective humor) or preserving division (satire). These smaller endings are in fact found throughout Hegel's theory of art; different genres present different possible endings.[29] But whenever a

[27] If Hotho is to be believed, Hegel says as much: "Yet such an intimacy [of objective humor] can only be partial and can perhaps be expressed only within the compass of a song or only as a part of a greater whole" (*ÄII*, 240/609). Although his understanding of what Hegel means by objective humor differs from mine in significant ways, Kirk Pillow also suggests that Hegel's isolating objective humor as an aesthetic phenomenon is "remarkably prophetic" since it is a feature of artworks ranging from Robert Altman films to Thomas Pynchon novels (2000, 296–7).

[28] Knox translates "*Wohltätigkeit des Gemüts*," which I have translated here "beneficient disposition," as "good humor." Given Hegel's particular definition of humor, which would not entail the sense of "*Gemüt*," a modified translation seems in order.

[29] Symbolic art ends when it becomes too imitative in descriptive poetry or too pedantic in didactic poetry (*ÄI*, 541/43/421–424); classical art ends when its sculptures too closely depict everyday human activity and it becomes simply agreeable (*ÄII*, 106/500); dramas of Hegel's generation cease to be art when they are too naturalistic or too allegorical (*ÄII*, 225/597).

genre ceases to articulate the profound unity at the heart of Hegel's idealism, art again reaches an end.

There is, then, to my mind little question that comedy and humor should be treated as distinct aesthetic phenomena in Hegel's system. They cannot be reconciled in laughter. But insofar as we laugh at Strepsiades' self-negating aims or smile in recognition of a poet's evocation of the divine in the everyday, both comedy and objective humor can enable us to experience the unity of unity and division. In so doing, they reconcile us with the truth as Hegel understands it, and they contribute to that truth becoming whole.

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Chapter 3
It's Tragic, But That's Great: K. W. F. Solger and Humor as the Key to Metaphysics

Paolo Diego Bubbio

Abstract In this chapter, I address the original and thought-provoking theory of humor advanced by Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger (1780–1819). After having briefly contextualized Solger within the romantic/idealist era to which he belongs (Sect. 3.1), I provide a very essential account of his metaphysics (Sect. 3.2), as it is only against the background of his "kenotic" metaphysics, centered on the notion of double negation, that Solger's aesthetics in general, and his theory of humor in particular, can be appreciated. Then, I consider Solger's philosophical dialogue *Erwin*, focusing on the inter-related notions of "ridiculous," "humor," and "wit," and interpreting them in the context of his general theory of irony (Sect. 3.3). Finally, I draw a comparison with Hegel in relation to the possibility of a post-romantic art (Sect. 3.4), remarking both similarities and differences between the two thinkers and, with reference to recent scholarship, advancing the hypothesis that Solger anticipated a conception of humor that is at work in the twentieth century "modernist" approach to art.

Keywords Solger · Comedy · Humor · Wit · Irony

3.1 Introduction

Once there was a man who could talk to God. "God," he asked, "how long is a million years?" God answered: "In my frame of reference, son, it's like a minute." The man then asked: "God, how much is a million dollars?" God answered: "To me, it's one cent." So the man asked: "God, can I have one cent?" "In a minute," God answered.

There is a sense in which this joke reflects Solger's conception of humor – for reasons that will become clear in the next two sections. But who is Solger, and why (and to what extent) is his thought relevant for a theory of humor?

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_3

Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger (1780–1819) was a German philosopher active during the "golden age" of German Idealism. A well-known academic and thinker during his lifetime, his fame was quickly obscured, after his premature death, by that of the other "giants" of the German Idealist tradition – most notably Hegel, who was 10 years older than Solger, but whose academic career had initially progressed more slowly; actually, Solger's support was seminal for Hegel to be appointed at the University of Berlin (Reid 1997, 256).

Something of Solger's character and general attitude can be ascertained from an anecdote from his early youth reported by Hegel in the introduction to his own review of Solger's *Posthumous Writings*, which had appeared six years after Solger's death. Hegel recalls:

> For a long time Solger called himself by the formal form of address, '*Sie*' [the formal "you"], with his younger brother, which in their childish quarrels often gave their relationship a comical solemnity. With his early talent for cutting out animals and human figures from paper, [Solger] knew how to entertain [his brother] often. Whenever his brother, however, pestered him on this subject at an inconvenient time, [Solger] tended to make a very serious face and reject his brother's inadmissible demand with great vehemence and call out "Do you, sir, think that I have nothing else to do but cut out dolls for You?" (Hegel 1828/1990, 207/267, translation modified).

Hegel comments that "this seriousness which destroys itself in itself, the triviality that takes itself seriously" was destined to follow "Solger's consciousness throughout his entire life as the principle of irony" (Hegel 1828/1990, 207/267). Hegel is right in highlighting the negative dialectic of self-annihilation, which is effectively the drive of Solger's conception of humor, as it is presented in his work *Erwin: vier Gespräche über das Schöne und die Kunst* (*Erwin: Four Dialogues on Beauty and Art*), published in 1815 and one of Solger's only two works that were published during his life (together with the *Philosophische Gespräche* [*Philosophical Dialogues*], published in 1817). It is on the *Erwin*, therefore, that we will focus in order to provide an account of Solger's conception of humor. There is, however, a problem: as it happens for all the other thinkers of the romantic/idealist era, Solger's aesthetics is heavily grounded on his own metaphysical conception, to the point that it would be extremely difficult, or even impossible, to grasp his theory of humor (with all its rich implications) without first engaging with this metaphysical conception. Therefore, the next section will be devoted to a brief overview of Solger's understanding of (metaphysical) reality – a distillation, as it were, of his major philosophical insights. I invite the reader to be patient: the next section might seem to have little to do with humor, but according to Solger humor is possible (and even required!) precisely because our world is *ironically* structured.

3.2 It's Tragic, It's Beautiful

Solger shares with most of the other thinkers of the idealist era a fundamental concern: the relation between the infinite (God, in the theological register) and the finite. Solger, however, maintains that the infinite constantly limits itself in the

finite; hence, the creation of the finite (world) is the result of an act of relinquishing, an alienating itself from itself (*Entäußerung*) of the infinite. Furthermore, the infinite realizes itself only through this act of alienation. Thus, Solger endorses a *kenotic* conception of God and creation, as the existence of the finite world is made possible by such withdrawal and self-negation (because the infinite loses its absoluteness in the process of creation).[1] Since the finite has been created through a relinquishing of the infinite, the finite is the negation of the infinite; but then the infinite too is the negation of the finite. This double negation (negation of the negation) represents the backbone of Solger's metaphysical conception.

Some readers might find this account inherently contradictory, and they would be in good company: Hegel (1828/1990, 238/292), for instance, is quite concerned with the contradictory nature of Solger's line of argument. Solger insists that the self-negation of the infinite is radical and absolute. But then, he tells us that the infinite manifests itself in the world – which might lead one to wonder how it is possible that the infinite manifests itself if it previously denied or even annihilated itself. As I argued elsewhere (Bubbio 2014, 51), the reader could feel disorientated, and could be tempted to dismiss Solger's reasoning as simply lacking in basic rationality, in the way that a person attending a play who sees a character unquestionably dead in the first act then reappearing on the stage without any explanation could understandably be tempted to leave the theatre. However – and this is the point – this "worldly logic" does not apply, in Solger's view, to the infinite, as its ontological reality *ironically* transcends finite logical categories. In human terms, it is contradictory – but this contradiction is actually what drives the universe.

What has been said so far represents a reconstruction of the fundamental metaphysical structure of the world, as considered *sub specie aeternitatis* – that is, from the point of view of the infinite. However, if considered from our point of view (the point of view of finite human beings), the becoming aware of such a fundamental dynamic (double negation) is what fundamentally drives knowledge and our entire spiritual life. Solger writes: "when we become aware of the eternal and of the truth in ourselves, we do nothing but dissolve this appearance in its nothing (*offenbart sich das Wesen als solches, oder wird wirkliches Wesen nur dadurch, daß es dieses Nichts aufhebt oder vernichtet*)" (Solger 1826, 31). When we realize that the finite is real because of the self-negation of the infinite, then our finite nature (the "appearance") is revealed for what it really is, that is, the negation of the infinite. Such realization also presents an important implication: if the finite is the negation of the infinite, it follows that the negation of the finite is (through a negation of the negation) the *affirmation* of the infinite: one *completely negates* the other as its nothing ("*das Eine das Andere gänzlich als sein Nichts aufhebt*") (Solger 1826, 172). The possibility of a connection (but not a unity, which remains in Solger's view

[1] The term "kenotic" derives from the Greek word *kenosis*, meaning "emptiness." The use of the term in connection with a sacrificial dynamic dates back to Philippians 2:7, where, to describe the incarnation of Christ, it is said that he "withdrew" or "emptied himself." The notion of kenosis was introduced in German philosophy by the work of the mystic Jacob Böhme. See Ravera 2000 and Bubbio 2014.

unachievable) between the infinite and the finite is therefore possible through an active negation of both "poles" of the relation: from the point of view of the infinite, through a revelation of the infinite in the finite (a revelation that is also a negation, because only by negating itself can the infinite manifest itself in the finite); and from the point of view of the finite, through an active endorsement and *display* of such mutual negation. Solger's thought is dialectical, but the drive of such dialectic is a double negation that cannot be overcome in a superior *Aufhebung* (at least not in the Hegelian sense – more on this in the final section), but only endorsed and displayed. How?

In order to answer this question, we should first pause and recall that the infinite, for Solger, realizes itself only in its surrender (*Entäußerung*) in the finite, through its self-negation; it follows that there cannot be any knowledge of the infinite "in itself," but the infinite can only be grasped in its annihilation in the finite. A glimpse of the infinite, therefore, can be achieved not through an overcoming of the finite, but rather, through a full, *ironic* acceptance of the finitude (in which the infinite constantly dissolves).

We now start to see that *irony* (*Ironie*), for Solger, is primarily a metaphysical category; it is also, as we will see in detail in the next section, an aesthetic category, but only insofar as it is grounded in Solger's metaphysics. The aesthetic experience, in other words, is for Solger one way (possibly the best way, among those that are available to us) through which we can grasp this profound metaphysical truth: it is because of that double negation that all aesthetic experiences are accompanied by melancholic feelings (Mueller 1941, 220); what we are really experiencing, in fact, is the infinite – the essence (*Wesen*) or idea (*Idee*), all terms that Solger uses to refer to the infinite – necessarily dissolving in the finite, because its very appearance in the finite also implies its inevitable dissolution. "We are not sad because we see passing things pass," Mueller explains, "but it is infinitely sad to see that this mortality is an ingredient function of the idea itself; because beauty includes appearance, it therefore subjects itself to the lot of all earthly creatures, to the brutal march of fate" (Mueller 1941, 220).[2]

Solger's alter ego in the *Erwin*, Adelbert, proclaims: "This unity of essence and appearance, when it comes to perception, is beauty" ([*D*]*iese Einheit des Wesens und der Erscheinung in der Erscheinung, wenn sie zur Wahrnehmung kommt, ist die Schönheit*) (Solger 1907, 116).[3] Real beauty is always, for Solger, artistic beauty,

[2] If a reference to popular culture is allowed (something that, I think, Solger would have liked), consider the song "When I'm Sixty-Four" by The Beatles (written by Paul McCartney). When I listen to it today in 2017, my aesthetic enjoyment is accompanied by some melancholic feelings; such melancholia, however, does not derive from the mere fact that the song was written by a young man in his twenties, who is now in his seventies and has therefore already passed the age he was referring to in his lyrics; but it derives, more poignantly, from the realization (which is only triggered by the fact mentioned above) that beauty, in order to appear, needs to subject itself to the fate of all finite things.

[3] All the quotes from the *Erwin* are from Solger 1907 (facsimile reprint: Solger 1970). If a quoted passage is included in the few excerpts translated into English in Solger 1984, I use this translation and provide the page number of the German edition (Solger 1907) followed by the page number of

because it is generated by the artist, who opens herself up to "the idea," allowing it to express itself – and dissolve – in her own creation. Beauty is the pure form of finitude. Hence, it is also "a revelation of God in the essential appearance of things (*eine Offenbarung Gottes in der wesentlichen Erscheinung der Dinge*)" (Solger 1907, 116). But how can we facilitate the appearance of beauty?

Recall, once again, that infinite and finite are ontologically intertwined in a metaphysical structure governed by the double negation. All finite things exist because the infinite has withdrawn, negating itself. Therefore, they preserve, *via negationis*, a bond with the infinite. It follows that "individual things and events mean more than they seem" (Mueller 1941, 220). What the artist is called to do, therefore, is to reveal this "concrete unity" – which is a negative unity, always transitory and destined to fade, but which for a moment shines as beauty.

Art is, therefore, always allegoric or symbolic, because the work of art is a finite object that refers and relates to the infinite. However, while allegory for Solger – as pointed out by Gadamer – "creates this meaningful unity only by pointing to something else" (Gadamer 2004, 64), the symbolic refers to "an existent in which the idea is recognized in some way or the other" (Solger 1829, 127). A work of art is symbolic insofar as it points to the infinite or, better, to its *negation*, which made possible its own existence as finite thing. "The symbol," Adelbert/Solger claims, "is neither an arbitrary sign, nor yet an imitation of an original, from which it would be absolutely different, but the true revelation of the idea (*die wahre Offenbarung der Idee*)" (Solger 1907, 219/428).[4]

In the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Solger points to ancient Greek tragedy as the prototypical form of symbolic art (although in the *Erwin* he argues that symbolic art takes a slightly different form in modernity – more on this in the next section). In Greek tragedy, the hero suffers and struggles with fate; his death, which usually coincides with the culmination of the tragedy, is regarded by Solger as the point when the hero reaches a fleeting understanding of the "negative unity" between the finite and the infinite: Solger calls it "the divine idea (*göttliche Idee*)" (Solger 1829, 125). "In the tragic," Solger explains, "the idea manifests itself as existence through annihilation (*Vernichtung*): in fact, as it removes itself as existence, it exists as idea, and both are the same thing. The succumbing of the idea as existence is its manifestation as idea" (Solger 1829, 311). The idea is embodied in the hero, or – which is the same – the hero is the symbol of the idea; but the idea can fully reveal itself only with the end of such transitory unity, through the annihilation of its vessel: that is, through the death of the hero. How *ironic*!

We will deal with Solger's conception of irony in the next section, as it effectively represents the peak of his theory of humor (broadly conceived). Here,

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the English translation (Solger 1984). When a single page or page range is given in a citation, this is the German page number or page range and there is no published English translation available for the passage quoted. In those cases, the translation is mine.

[4] Solger's conception of the symbolic is close to the "figural interpretation" theorized by Auerbach (1984). Elsewhere I have argued that Hegel too endorses this interpretative approach. See Bubbio 2017: 68–78.

however, it is important to remark the peculiarities of Solger's conception and the distance that separates such a conception from other (more popular) accounts of irony advanced by some of Solger's contemporaries, which could, prima facie, hold a resemblance with Solger's one. I am referring to the notion of "romantic irony" advanced by the so-called "Jena circle" – particularly by Ludwig Tieck and the Schlegel brothers.[5] Their view of irony was based on a daringly extreme interpretation of Fichte's idealism. Friedrich Schlegel, for instance, argued that the finite, which is posited by the absolute I, has to be denied in order to accomplish a dialectical overcoming of finitude: in Schlegel's own words, irony is "self-creation, self-limitation and self-destruction" (Schlegel 1991, 4–5; see Szondi 1986). Once created, the single work of art represents an obstacle for the infinite creativity of the artist; hence, it needs to be somehow "annihilated" and overcome in another work of art. In Solger's eyes, this conception was marked by "absolute individualism" and "psychological subjectivism" (Mueller 1941, 225). Therefore, Solger rejects this view in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, in the *Erwin* (where such a Fichtean/Schlegelian position is impersonated by the character Bernhard), and very explicitly in his review of August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*.[6] On the grounds of the very brief sketch of metaphysics that I provided in this section, it is not difficult to understand why Solger does not like such a romantic conception of irony. The I, for Solger, is not the absolute I of Fichte, but it is radically finite; the world is not posited by such an I; and finitude cannot be overcome. The essence of tragedy, for Solger, is not represented by a Promethean affirmation of the hero against his fate, but rather – even more ironically– in his death, which symbolically represents the destruction of the infinite in the finite. Solger writes:

> We see the heroes ruined (*irre*) for what is noblest and most beautiful in their purposes and their feelings, and not only because of their outcome, but also as regards their sources and worth: what thus lifts us up is the destruction of the best as such, yet not merely by way of taking refuge in an infinite hope. (Solger 1826, 513)

The emphasis here is not on the heroic death of the hero, but on the double negation of the idea, which is first denied as (infinite) idea when it is embodied (first negation), and then denied as concrete existent when its vessel is destroyed (second negation). However, this double negation is precisely the revelation of the idea. Such sacrifice (*Aufopferung*), Solger writes, "is the highest token of our superior destination" (Solger 1829, 97–98; see Bubbio 2014, 47ff).

As we have seen, there is no reconciliation in Solger's aesthetics of tragedy. The truth of the tragic resides "in the consciousness of the sunset of the idea in the singularity of human existence" (Pinna 1994, 195). There is no consolation *from* the tragedy, but "[t]he consolation (*Beruhigung*) is the tragedy itself" (Solger 1829,

[5] For an introduction to the notion of romantic irony, see Furst 1981.

[6] Solger's choice of August Wilhelm Schlegel as main polemical target is somehow bizarre, as it was rather his brother Friedrich Schlegel who had advanced a robust theory of irony. Rush (2016, 206) writes that "Solger wants to find more in A. W. Schlegel than Schlegel provides on this issue."

312). Irony and the tragic are the two fundamental forms of beauty; beauty is, essentially, the celebration of the tragedy of finitude, and – even more poignantly – of its *ironic* contradiction.

3.3 *Erwin*: Through the Looking Glass?

Solger engages the general topic of humor in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, which were published posthumously in 1829; it is, however, in the *Erwin* that he provides his most extensive treatment of such topic. Structured in four dialogues – according to Solger's principle that only the dialogue is "living philosophy" – the *Erwin* features four interlocutors. The first is Erwin: this young man, after whom the entire work is named, is eager for knowledge and beauty, but he is still inexperienced and naïve. The second, and most prominent, character is Adelbert, a wise mature thinker and Solger's *alter ego* in the dialogues. The other two characters, Anselm and Bernhard, give voice to the two most popular philosophical positions in Solger's time, namely, Schelling's philosophy and Fichte's philosophy (the latter in the "popularized" and "romanticized" version of the Schlegel brothers) respectively: they frequently raise objections to Adelbert's arguments – objections whose fallacies and shortcomings are promptly exposed by Adelbert. In particular, both Anselm and Bernhard constantly try to "displace" beauty away from the appearances of finite reality. On one hand, for Anselm, in Platonic/Schellingian fashion, "beautiful things are not beautiful as such, but they merely express a superior and higher beauty with respect to concrete nature" (Solger 1907, 7); on the other hand, the "Fichtean" Bernhard tries to "reduce" beauty to a preparatory moment of morality, in the unifying horizon of the activity of the I (Solger 1907, 56–59; see Ravera 1994, 317). The young and naïve Erwin is not convinced by such explanations, as he cannot dismiss the feeling that makes him love the concrete things that he encounters in the finite world as such, as finite things, and not merely as pale copies of an absolutely transcendent reality or as signs of the moral activity of the I. It will be up to Adelbert to show that Erwin is not mistaken.

The point – as Solger explains in the *Nachgelassene Schriften* (Solger 1826, 249ff)– is that finite things (including human beings) cannot "pull themselves out" of that relation which is their own existence; as Pinto puts it, we cannot "turn this mirror, which they themselves [the finite things] are, and see what is there beyond the mirror" (Pinto 1995, 102). In Solger's esoteric and cryptic jargon: the being of a thing "is reflected in its non-being," and it is not known in itself, but only "its own reflection through the other things" is known (Solger 1826, 249).

The *Erwin* represents the application of this apparently obscure principle to the question of beauty and art. Unlike Lewis Carroll's character Alice, *we* cannot go through the looking glass of the finite to see what is beyond that glass – because we *are* that glass: the only way in which we can know the world (and ourselves), is by looking at how we are reflected in other finite things.

In the *Erwin*, Solger provides a complex articulation of the human faculty that potentially allows us to grasp such knowledge and realize beauty – which, we should remember, is the "unity of essence and appearance, when it comes to perception" (Solger 1907, 116). This faculty is the imagination (*Phantasie*), which is to be distinguished from the "common imagination" (*gemeine Einbildungskraft*): while the latter merely oscillates between essence and appearance, real imagination actually realizes the *unity* of essence and appearance. Adelbert/Solger then distinguishes between proper imagination, which he calls "imagination of imagination" (*Phantasie der Phantasie*, Solger 1907, 360), and the "sensibility [or sensuousness] of imagination" (*Sinnlichkeit der Phantasie*, Solger 1907, 321). As pointed out by Pinto (1995, 145), the relation between imagination and sensibility is similar to that between symbol and allegory, which we addressed in the previous section: imagination develops the opposition between the infinite and the finite, the universal and the particular, starting from the "unity of the idea," whereas in the sensibility the ideas are found in reality, and reality itself is treated as an idea (Solger 1829, 187–189). In the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Solger summarizes in a few paragraphs the account that Adelbert slowly develops in his conversation with Erwin: the mid-point between imagination and sensibility is the "artistic understanding" (*künstlerischen Verstand*, Solger 1907, 364), or "understanding of imagination," the place where it is possible to grasp the transition of the idea into reality and of reality into the idea (Solger 1829, 187; see Pinto 1995, 145). When, in sensibility, the concept becomes the mood or tone (*Stimmung*) itself – then we have "what we define as humor" (Solger 1829, 188). Even the understanding of imagination has two directions: the symbolic direction, which "represents the concept as real," and which Solger identifies with "contemplation" (*Betrachtung*), and wit (*Witz*), which "overcomes the oppositions of the idea." Solger concludes: "Both are subsumed as absolute act in the central point through irony (*Ironie*)" (Solger 1829, 189). In the remaining part of this section, we will limit our analysis to three central notions, as they are presented by Solger in the *Erwin*: the ridiculous, humor, and wit.

The ridiculous (*das Lächerliche*) is the lowest level of humor (broadly conceived), and yet it is already an expression of the paradox of beauty, as beauty could not subsist without the fleeting and passing appearance that is its vessel. Even beauty, Adelbert explains, "cannot escape our miserable needs and miseries" (Solger 1907, 181). Thus, the ridiculous is a "contradiction" that is found "not in the understanding, but in the imagination"; for the latter, however, "the contradiction is always at the same time complete agreement" (Solger 1907, 181). This means that we are not talking about the "evil laughter" that finds satisfaction in ridiculing the shortcomings of other individuals; rather, we are referring to the pleasure that we feel when we laugh "over everything that is temporal and over ourselves, because for us the nothingness and the essence become one and the same" (Solger 1907, 182). In other words, we see "the temporal and fugitive to be one with the essential," and thus "we can laugh over our temporal nothingness" (See Mueller 1941, 221); such laughter is like "a refreshing dew from heaven" (Solger 1907, 182). The joke that I used to open this chapter is an elementary form of the ridiculous in this sense. We smile when we listen to the joke because we identify ourselves with the man

who is talking to God; we sympathize with, and at the same time we pity, his "miserable needs and misery" (that is, his greed), and eventually we are reminded of, and we laugh over, our temporal nothingness, as it is compared to the eternity of God. We can appreciate here how the ridiculous is already a form (albeit still an unrefined one) of irony, as Solger conceives it: a display of the tragic collision of the temporal and finite with the eternal and infinite.

Humor, considered in the specific meaning that Solger attributes to it in the *Erwin*, is a step forward in this direction. When "all that is divine," that is, infinite, appears to the human being "in the realm of perception and feeling, with the result that the nature of his imagination is constantly disrupted, fragmented into a thousand different tendencies of sensuous drives and feelings, whereas on the other hand everything he has perceived and felt has any value for him only because it suggests the divine nature appearing in it" (Solger 1907, 350/135), we find ourselves in the presence of *humor*: the English term is used since England is – as Adelbert/Solger remarks – "the country where it is most widespread" (Solger 1907, 350/135). Humor is a form of sensibility, not of the understanding: "For what strikes us first in humor is just this inexhaustible totality of the sensuous, the common and the low" (Solger 1907, 353/136). Adelbert/Solger cites the works of Friedrich Richter, better known by his *nom de plume* "Jean Paul," as instances of the humorous, and endorses Jean Paul's view that humor is "the sublime turned upside-down, or a finite applied to the infinite" (Solger 1907, 352/136).

Conceived in such a way, humor is not the mere ridiculous, nor "a partial foolishness" (Solger 1907, 351/135), but rather "the revelation of divinity itself" in the fabric of finite things, which are dealt with "in their own particularly but, at the same time, related to the universality of the idea" (Camparsi 2008, 81). In humor, as Erwin remarks, "the most sensuous and secular often contains all the force and significance of the Divine" (Solger 1907, 352/136): as such, it is a form of divine *revelation*. Despite his general endorsement of Jean Paul's conception of humor, Adelbert/Solger points out that when Jean Paul maintains that through humor "it is not the individual who is made ridiculous, but the entire finite world," his account is shown as "too limited": "For it cannot be a matter of the absurd (*das Lächerliche*) alone," he continues, "but rather of a state in which the absurd and the tragic are still bound up in each other and not yet distinct" (Solger 1907, 354/137). Through humor, the divine and the temporal world are shown as intertwined, even blended: for this reason, "in humor everything is to be found in one great flux, and everywhere opposites flow into one another, as they do in the world of common appearance" (Solger 1907, 354/137). Thus, in real humor, the ridiculous achieves a higher status, which derives from its proximity to the divine; the closer it gets to the divine, the more it is nuanced with melancholy, for the gap between the earthly and the divine is highlighted; likewise, the closer the divine gets to the ridiculous, the tragic nature of the gap between the earthly and the divine trespasses into absurdity: "Everything is equally significant and equally insignificant, and what is represented is by no means simply the finite, as Jean Paul argued, but at the same time the idea itself" (Solger 1907, 354/137). One can think of Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* as a fitting instance of Solger's conception of humor. The two characters on

stage are apparently concerned with very mundane tasks and trivial needs while they wait for the mysterious Godot, but their situation is meant to refer to a universal existential condition; in the play, the absurd and the tragic are really bound together and they are even undistinguishable, and everything is effectively equally significant and equally insignificant: not merely the lives of the two characters, but even the earthy and finite itself – to use Solger's jargon –are shown in their futility.[7]

The reference to Beckett's play, although anachronistic, seems very much in line with the trajectory that Solger envisages for modern art. Erwin draws a distinction, which is promptly endorsed by Adelbert, between ancient art and modern art. Both are symbolic, but "in modern art, at the point where the reality is traced back to the thought, it is the elaboration of detail that is most prominent" (Solger 1907, 353/137); and later on, when Erwin cannot hide his shock at the realization that "humor should turn everything to nothing, including the idea" (Solger 1907, 354/137), Adelbert tells him that humor "is almost the only thing in the modern world which will protect art, sensuous art most of all, from degenerating into mere gross flattery of the senses" (Solger 1907, 355/138). We will come back to this point in the next section, in the context of a brief discussion of whether Solger had effectively anticipated a trend in modern and contemporary art; but first, we need to address an additional and very important component of Solger's conception of humor broadly conceived: wit.

Wit (*Witz*) is, as the reader will recall from the introduction to the present section, one of the directions of the understanding of imagination – the other being contemplation (*Betrachtung*). Wit is, specifically, the "ability of the intelligence" to bring about the process of unification of the understanding with the self-contradictory sensible intuition (*Anschauung*) – that is, the contradiction between the finite and the infinite that we have seen at work in humor, so that "its subject matter, which at first appeared only as particularity, is revealed in an unexpected way to be the intuition realized, and to be essentiality" (Solger 1907, 368/138). Adelbert/Solger distinguishes real wit from the "false wit," which is "the kind that has no intuition at all, such as should leap forth like a hidden spark from the depths of our mind at the reconciliation of opposites in the intelligence" (Solger 1907, 369/139). "A practiced intelligence, one-sidedly intent upon it," Adelbert/Solger explains, "will easily produce the reconciliation" between the finite and the infinite; but "it does not strike the flame which must both consume and transfigure everything; instead, the opposites lie side by side, flat and lifeless, so that when they meet there is not so much a reconciliation as a breakdown, and we recognize this false wit from the flaccid coldness which is its true inward characteristic" (Solger 1907, 368/138). Here one can think of those works of literature (or even philosophy!) that strive to create amazing literary effects by colliding what is highest and what is lowest; but in so doing, what they achieve is *merely* the literary effect, not the actual "stroke"

[7] It might even be argued that the two characters of *Waiting for Godot* represent the encounter between the infinite and the finite: Vladimir frequently discusses religious or philosophical matters, whereas Estragon "belongs to the stone" and is mostly concerned with mundane things. Cf. Kalb 1989, 43.

that sheds sudden light on the tragic irony of the relation between the finite and the infinite. Therefore, Adelbert/Solger clarifies that wit "cannot be restricted only to that area where the comic (*das Komische*) alone is to be found," because "it can equally have a tragic or a sublime effect." What really characterizes true or "universal" wit is the "aspiration towards universality," which is the expression of those "great modern works" where reality is "sacrificed" to that "fate which rules over all" (Solger 1907, 371/140).

If we have followed Adelbert/Solger so far, it is likely that we too, like Erwin, find it "rather difficult to break away from the usual way of thinking about wit, which we tend to recognize only in a single, unexpected stroke or flash" (Solger 1907, 371/140). The notion of wit had been already addressed by Friedrich Schlegel, who had defined it as the possibility to create similarities between independent and diverse objects. However, Adelbert/Solger uses the term to refer to something more complex and specific: wit represents the possibility of grasping reality not in the concept, but in a "constellation," or maze, of meanings (see Storace 2011). As Adelbert/Solger explains elsewhere in the *Erwin*, in the work of art each thing "loses its own individuality of being in unending mutual involvement and the reciprocal influence of things" (Solger 1907, 392/149), thus allowing this unity of meaning to appear in a "concrete universal" (Mueller 1941, 218). It is against this background that the function of wit should be evaluated. The work of art focuses on one individual "thing," or person, or situation; and then it uses that "thing" as a mirror in which all the other "things" (and persons, and situations) are ironically reflected. In Solger's own words "a stroke of wit can be conducted like an electric current through an entire world, as it re-energizes the immediate connection to the inner intuition in every link of the chain at the same time" (Solger 1907, 372/140). Adelbert/Solger mentions Shakespeare and Cervantes as "great masters of this manner," but Beckett's work, exemplified by *Waiting for Godot*, can also be counted, I think, as an instance of this use of wit.

Now we have all the elements to really appreciate the extent to which Solger's conception of humor (broadly conceived) is grounded on his metaphysics, of which we have provided the briefest of accounts in the second section. The "true realm of art," Adelbert/Solger claims at the end of the *Erwin*, is the "moment of transition in which the idea necessarily perishes"; it is "the place where wit and contemplation, each striving against each other simultaneously to create and destroy, must be one and the same." It is, in other words, the place where the artist manages to show the mutual involvement of things in the concrete universal, in which the infinite is continuously embodied in the finite and there dissolves. The gaze of the artist, "[t]his penetrating glance, that hovers over everything, annihilating everything, we call irony" (Solger 1907, 387/146).

In a circular fashion, we are back where we started: double negation. The finite negates itself to make room for the infinite, and the infinite negates itself to become embodied in the finite. Irony and humor (broadly conceived, that is, encompassing the ridiculous, proper humor, and wit) are the two sides of the same coin: "Irony is revelation looked at from the point of view of the idea, humor is revelation looked at from the point of view of temporal sensibility" (Camparsi 2008, 81). The work of

art is the place where this dynamic appears in all its tragedy and in all its beauty. A work of art that exemplifies Solger's conception of humor is, according to Camparsi (2008, 83), Vincent van Gogh's *Chair*. This painting of a common chair represents very well "the humorous contrast between the partiality of the particular and the totality of the universal." Unlike a photograph, which returns only that individual chair, the artist here was able to use that particular chair as representing the *idea* of the chair, not in the traditional Platonic sense (whereby the chair would represent an alleged archetypical chair), but rather as the mirror, as it were, where all the other things in the world are reflected: "Van Gogh surely recognized the chair as a phenomenon among others, but the fleeting moment of the observation has been enlightened by imagination, so that its artistic contemplation could grasp, through the stroke of *Witz*, the beauty of the eternal moment of the idea, which has poured all its own essence in the particular humor of the painting" (Camparsi 2008, 83). While I think that Van Gogh's *Chair* is indeed a good example of Solger's conception of humor, here I want to mention another work of art that, in my view, can be regarded as taking Solger's conception of humor and irony to the extreme: René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*. The picture shows a pipe; below it, Magritte painted the words *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* ("This is not a pipe"). This might look like a contradiction – when I look at the picture, I effectively see the image of a pipe. However – and that is the point – it is just the image of a pipe, not the real object that we call "pipe." From a Solgerian point of view, we might say that Magritte has ironically unveiled and taken to the extreme the humor that permeates any true work of art: artists can indeed try to capture the unity of finite and infinite in their work, and can even be successful in their endeavors; but precisely when they succeed, the idea perishes: "this is not a pipe," just an image; and yet, in that fleeting moment when beauty appears, a true work of art allows us to see a glimpse of the fabric of the world, that is, the ironic unity of finite and infinite.

3.4 *Ceci n'est pas Hegel*

Solger's metaphysics is centered on a double kenotic dialectic: the kenosis of the infinite (God) that withdraws in order to create the finite (world); and the kenosis of the finite, which negates itself to make room to the (infinite) idea. Solger's aesthetics in general, and his conception of humor in particular, are built on this kenotic dialectic. It is important to emphasize this connection between Solger's metaphysics and his aesthetics; without such connection, in fact, Solger's negative dialectic could be interpreted as an instance of the romantic conception of the irreconcilability between the finite and the infinite (see Pinto 1995, 158n). Solger's kenotic or ironic dialectic is, however, the expression of a conception that is much more profound: it is the idea that only through a relinquishing of one's self it is possible to grasp a glimpse of the fabric of the world (what we call "knowledge"); and that art, through a recourse to the faculties of imagination and sensibility, can bring about works where such glimpses are ironically or humorously represented – thus

reflecting our metaphysical and existential reality. As such, and as remarked by Pinto, Solger's ironic dialectic could also be defined with the Hegelian expression "dialectic of love," insofar as in such dialectic the absolute is "free from and in the relation to the being that it itself establishes"; the absolute is indeed "abstract," but only because it literally "abstracts itself," or pulls itself, out of the concrete relation that it itself establishes – but without positing itself, with such a move, as the opposite of the concrete (Pinto 1995, 59).

The reference to Hegel is all but marginal here. Hegel respected Solger, and his review of Solger's *Posthumous Writings* shows a real engagement with Solger's philosophy. As it often happens with reviews, however, Hegel tends to emphasize the aspects of Solger's thought that he finds less convincing, or dubious, or even illogical. We cannot consider Hegel's critique of Solger here, as this would go beyond the purposes of this chapter[8]; it is sufficient to say that while for Hegel dialectic is primarily the transfer from alterity to identity, for Solger dialectic is essentially the transfer from reason "to its other" (Bubbio 2014, 58), to something that is "external" to human consciousness (Hegel would say to human spirit). From this angle, Solger's philosophy is not a full idealism, but rather an "idealistically-grounded realism" (Heller 1928, 203). This is also reflected in their respective conceptions of negation: Hegel's negation is a determinate negation, which is overcome in a sublation (*Aufhebung*); Solger's negation is absolute and irreversible (see Pinto 1995, 45). There is no reconciliation in Solger's metaphysics, and therefore such reconciliation is absent from his aesthetics as well: the truth of art essentially resides in the becoming aware of "the sunset of the idea in the singularity of human existence" (Pinna 1994, 195); and humor, broadly conceived, is not merely a technique, but the natural form in which this content is displayed.

On such grounds, there is no doubt that Hegel's review, which tends to present Solger's thought as anticipating Hegel's own conception of dialectic, provides us with a misleading interpretative perspective (Pinna 1994, 227), and most of the recent secondary literature tends to revise such perspective by clarifying the peculiarities of Solger's philosophy; however, it is also a mistake to emphasize only their differences, to the point of playing down or even ignoring their similarities (cf. Ravera 2000). As I showed elsewhere (Bubbio 2014, 70–85), the kenotic dynamic is also central to Hegel's philosophy, although for Hegel it is mostly related to his conception of recognition (*Anerkennung*); and such kenotic dynamic has implications for Hegel's aesthetics as well. In fact, as remarked by Pippin, the notion of *Entäußerung* ("surrender," but also "externalization"), which is Luther's translation for kenosis, plays a crucial role in Hegel's philosophy[9] and has implications for his aesthetics as well: Hegel frequently claims in the *Aesthetics* that "the 'need' for art springs from a need of human subjects to be able to 'externalize themselves' in the public world and so to be able to recognize themselves in the world and in objects and in the other humans which confront any subject" (Pippin 2008, 397); Pippin

[8] For a comparison between Hegel and Solger, and particularly on their respective conceptions of determinate negation and absolute negation, see Bubbio 2014: 49–57.

[9] I argued for this thesis at length in Bubbio 2014: 70–85.

also emphasizes that for Hegel "in art (as well as in religion and philosophy) this externalization and self-recognition concerns 'the highest things'": such highest truth is "the idea," which "in his remarks on Solger, he [Hegel] calls simply and somewhat unhelpfully 'infinite absolute negativity'" (Pippin 2008, 397), that is, the Idea's activity "in negating itself as infinite and universal as to become finitude and particularity" (Hegel 1975, I:68). This dynamic is not inherently different from that which grounds Solger's conception of humor.

The greatest distance between Solger and Hegel resides in the crucial role that Solger attributes to irony, considered as the necessary condition for any significant work of art. As pointed out by Rush, however, if we narrow "Solger's claim to cover what was for him contemporary art," we can then argue that "Hegel's lectures on aesthetics seem to present a similar view" (Rush 2016, 205). After all, both Solger and Hegel are critical of "classic" romantic irony: Solger, as we have seen, endorses a more profound conception of irony, an *objective* (rather than subjective) irony that, it might be argued, is just "the category of objective humor in Hegel […] under a different name" (Rush 2016, 205).[10]

Consider the passage of the *Erwin* where Adelbert/Solger addresses the characterizing features of modern irony. While "in ancient art it is present more unconsciously, and, like wit, lies in the things themselves," in modern art "the irony bears the consciousness within itself, and perhaps this is why it does not appear so easily as a natural presence in the objects represented by modern art" (Solger 1907, 390/148). This idea of irony "bearing the consciousness within itself" is peculiarly close to some of the characteristics that Hegel seems to envisage for a post-romantic art.

In the last decade, both Pinkard (2007) and Pippin (2008), two of the pioneers of the so-called "revisionist" or "post-Kantian" interpretation of Hegel, have addressed the theme of a Hegelian "post-romantic" art along similar lines. For Hegel, in fact, one of the main characteristics of modernity is that the individual's states of mind or "moods" are always accompanied by consciousness: each individual possesses an "infinite subjectivity" – and modern art is a reflection of that. The clearest example of this dynamic can be retrieved, according to Pinkard, in modern dramatic art, where the characters "are engaged in a kind of social dance in which they not only worry about what they in fact feel, but also worry if what they feel is real, worry about how they *should* feel, and constantly offer explanations to each other about all these things in an effort to determine what it is that is going on 'within' themselves" (Pinkard 2007, 19). From a different angle, Pippin (2008) addresses modern art in a very similar fashion. It is true that Hegel interprets romantic art as "a record of the experience of both the need for the externalization of the inner experience," which is typical of modernity, "and of the inadequacy of any external corporeal form to bear such a meaning," and that Hegel "interprets this limitation of romantic art as a kind of final revelation of the limitation of art itself" (Pippin 2008, 414). Yet, Hegel does allow some forms of "postromantic arts," such as a new form of modern comedy, centered on objective humor; moreover, Pippin argues that Hegel's aesthetics contains the premises that can lead us to imagine post-romantic art, insofar as

[10] For an extensive comparison between Hegel and Solger on aesthetics, see Linden 1938.

"Hegel's failure to imagine a postromantic form of art (an outer form for a postromantic understanding of freedom) is just that, a failure of imagination, not a systematic or necessary exclusion" (Pippin 2008, 415n44). Pippin identifies in literary modernism, rather than in the abstract figurative arts, the form of post-romantic art that best corresponds to the need of Hegelian aesthetics. In Pippin's view, in fact, the novels of Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Robert Musil[11] offer a "historically distinct representation of human subjectivity" that is expressed in "unprecedented relations of social dependence and independence" that require "a distinct aesthetic form, with shifting, unstable and highly provisional points of view and constant experimentation" (Pippin 2008, 416). Although Pippin does not explicitly list humor as a component of the modernist approach, I think it is safe to say that a conception of humor and irony not dissimilar from that which is presented by Solger, in a more radical fashion than by Hegel, is effectively at work in most of the modernist works.

With this short Hegelian digression, I do not mean to downplay the differences (both metaphysical and aesthetic) between Solger and Hegel. Solger's philosophy heavily relies on a dual dialectic, a double (absolute) negation, which is never overcome in an *Aufhebung*; and his aesthetics, centered on a radical conception of irony, reflects this lack of an *Aufhebung*: the gap, or, better, the rift between the finite and the infinite is never overcome, not even in religion and philosophy. *Ceci n'est pas Hegel*. Magritte presents us with a picture of a pipe, and remarks that "this is not a pipe"; and yet, looking at that picture with the awareness that "this is not a pipe" tells us *something* about the actual pipe, of which we see only a representation. Similarly, when we look at the similarities between Hegel's and Solger's glimpses on post-romantic "ironic" art, we need to remind ourselves that Solger "is not Hegel"; and yet, looking at Hegel with the awareness that "this is not Solger" tells us *something* about Solger's account of humor. First, it reminds us of the centrality of the kenotic movement – a movement that is present in Hegel as well, but that in Hegel remains somehow hidden in his jargon and hyper-logical arguments, whereas Solger addresses it explicitly in poetic and, at times, quasi-mystical tones. For Solger, the kenotic movement is applied to the dialectic between the finite and the infinite, a dialectic that is so radical and tragic that rightly deserves to be referred to as "conflict." Second, looking at Solger vis-à-vis Hegel tells us that for Solger, as well as for Hegel, we have to find the meaning of that conflict in ourselves (Mueller 1941, 217) – and for Solger, art and humor play a fundamental role in such discovery. Third, and most importantly for our purposes, it tells us that Solger, unlike Hegel, thinks that such quest for meaning should be conducted not through "universal relations" – "philosophy," Solger writes "does not consist at all in universal relations" (Solger 1826, 167) – but rather through *individual* relations – looking at individual things, and using each individual thing as a mirror to see the relations among all other things. Using more ordinary language, we might say that, for Solger, it is in our everyday encounters and relations that we are required to look for

[11] According to some scholars, Samuel Beckett can be considered a modernist – or even the last, and most extreme, modernist. See Cronin 1997.

meaning, in the contradictions of what we call "reality." This is what humor, broadly conceived, is for Solger. Hence, humor has a lot to do with what we are, and with the meaning of our existence. We might even say that humor is, after all, the meaning of existence itself.

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Chapter 4
Jean Paul's Lunacy, or Humor as Trans-Critique

William Coker

Abstract The foremost theorist of humor in the German romantic period and one of its most popular novelists, Jean Paul Richter developed a poetics of antithesis at odds with the harmonious dialectics proposed by many of his contemporaries. In narrative form, characterization, and figuration Jean Paul insisted on deepening antitheses rather than seeking reconciliation. Cultivating the incommensurate, his novels give form to his definition of humor as "the inverse sublime," placing Jean Paul in a line from Kant through Kierkegaard and on to Kojin Karatani and Slavoj Žižek. This essay traces the origins of Jean Paul's style in his reception of Kant, Rousseau and the French Revolution, all of which to him signaled a clash between human finitude and the infinity of desire. Tracing this clash in formal and thematic features of Jean Paul's major *Bildungsromane*, the essay elucidates what is at stake in his enigmatic claim that literature represents "the only second world" (i.e. the world of the resurrection) "in the first one." Unlike Friedrich Schiller and the Jena Romantics, Jean Paul's version of "aesthetic education" grounds the authority of literature on its ability not to synthesize polar opposites, but to let each pole critique each other mutually.

Keywords Jean Paul · Žižek · Humor · German romantics · Incommensurability · Epigram · Sublime

Jean Paul is one of few nineteenth-century German theorists of humor whose life and work were, in the pedestrian sense of the word, humorous. During his one year in Weimar, the eccentric novelist cut a decidedly comic figure. Stories abound about the odd behavior of this writer, whose conscious play-acting ran counter to the "noble simplicity and silent greatness" (*edle Einfalt und stille Grösse*) of the Weimar

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_4

establishment.[1] In a letter to Goethe, Friedrich Schiller commented that Jean Paul appeared to have "fallen from the moon" (Goethe 1961, 114). He was, in other words, a lunatic.

What made Jean Paul appear crazy to the Titans of Weimar was as much a matter of social performance as literary principle, and indeed in Jean Paul's life and writing these two matters are inseparable. The many anecdotes about his encounters with other writers play a significant role in the creation of the persona "Jean Paul," a textual creation very much like that of Lord Byron or Jorge Luis Borges. Born Johann Paul Friedrich Richter in the provincial backwater of Wunsiedel in 1763, he created the pen name Jean Paul as a double homage to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and to the Apostles John and Paul (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 176).[2] The jarring hybridity of the half-French, half-German name was deliberate, as was the mixing of the sacred and the profane.

Richter's pen name bears witness to a literary and performative style devoted to playing up contrasts and contradictions in a quixotically comic quest to work through the traumas of Enlightenment subjectivity through writing. His *oeuvre* comprises both a pinnacle of German romantic attempts to articulate a "literary absolute" and a high-spirited exposure of that project's inherent limitations. In what follows, I will trace Jean Paul's humoristic style on the levels of rhetoric, plot and self-conscious theory. In all three dimensions, Jean Paul's writing revels in the tension between irreconcilables in search of an effect he defines as the inverse of the sublime, and which comprises his answer to the problems raised by Rousseau and Kant and a subtle alternative to the romantic program of Schlegel, Novalis and Tieck.

4.1 The Split Begins: Kant and Rousseau

Jean Paul came into his own as a writer at a time when German intellectuals were beginning to recoil from the violent outgrowths of revolutionary fervor across the border in France, while their own country remained politically divided, largely feudal and unevenly touched by the project of enlightenment. In the aftermath of the Parisian Terror, thinkers like Friedrich Schiller were beginning to explore indirect paths to emancipation through the detour of the aesthetic and in cooperation with monarchical power. Though Schiller's classicism, Jena Romanticism and post-Kantian idealist philosophy differed widely and inspired extensive polemic, one

[1] This formula for the aesthetics of ancient Greek sculpture, coined by J.J. Winckelmann in 1756, was one of the most often cited passages in the later eighteenth century and subsequently became a shorthand to describe (and oversimplify) the ethos of Goethe and Schiller's Weimar (Pfotenhauer 1993, 48).

[2] All citations from Jean Paul refer to the 2000 edition edited by Norbert Miller and include the volume number in Roman numerals followed by the page number. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, I will omit "Jean Paul 2000" in consecutive citations. All translations of Jean Paul are my own.

common characteristic of these three attempts at an auto-critique of Enlightenment was their attempt to overcome binary oppositions through mediation and synthesis.

This drive to harmonize developed in response to Immanuel Kant, the thinker of critique and antinomy, for whom the gap between "nature" and "freedom" may be bridged aesthetically, even while the distinction between "private" and "public" uses of reason reinforced obedience to authority as the condition for emancipatory thought to flourish. What is less obvious is how the dialectical patterns of thought worked out in the era of classicism and romanticism also constitute a response to the writer whose utopian stridency may have most inspired the French revolutionary Terror, namely Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau's work is no less riven with antagonism than Kant's, with ramifications both aesthetic and political. His writing appears equally devoted to the promiscuous power of the imagination and to a stern moralism that he associates with republican virtue. Running like a fault line through Rousseau's *oeuvre* is a conflict between poetry and philosophy not unlike that experienced by Socrates, with whom he identifies in his breakthrough essay blaming the arts and sciences for modern unhappiness. In *Emile,* Rousseau ascribes the psychic imbalance characteristic of modern society to the growth of the "imagination," the same force from which his own work derives (Rousseau 1984, 44). Yet the genre of the novel gives Rousseau the means to resolve or repress this dilemma. He justifies his novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloïse* with the claim that "Great cities must have theaters; and corrupt peoples, novels" (Rousseau 1997, 3). In the guise of the tutor-narrator of *Emile*, he plays an elaborate game with his pupil and protagonist, restraining the growth of Émile's imagination by controlling his experience—thus rendering his own literary imagination the vehicle of virtue rather than its foe (Coker 2009, 398–9).

The conflict between the infinite desire manifest in the imagination and the constrained possibilities of fulfillment preoccupies Rousseau as centrally as the conflict between "nature" and "freedom" exercises Kant and his German successors. While the German thinkers seek to overcome their conflict through conceptual mediation, Rousseau endeavors to resolve his in narrative strategies of containment proper to the novel. Jean Paul responds to both projects through a novelistic style that everywhere heightens contradictions rather than harmoniously resolving them. His is an aesthetic of the incommensurate, best characterized by the term he defines as an inversion of romanticism's signature break with harmony and measure: the sublime. Jean Paul calls this inversion "humor" and characterizes it as a distinctly modern aesthetic value.

4.2 Jean Paul and Philosophy: The Modernity of Humor

The concept of humor entered eighteenth-century German letters from the English novel, particularly those by Laurence Sterne, but like every other aesthetic concept quickly found its way into the whirlpool of philosophical reflection. Jean Paul lays out his theory of humor in the humorously titled *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, which Paul

Fleming has provocatively translated as "Preschool of Aesthetics" (Fleming 2006, 5). This translation suits the playfulness of the text even if it exaggerates somewhat the childlike connotations of the word *Vorschule* itself. However playful Jean Paul's writing remains, he places his discussion of humor squarely in the terms of philosophical reflection advanced by both Kant and Hegel.

The generic contours of Jean Paul's corpus already reveal philosophical ambition. By his own account his *oeuvre* consists of novels of three different types, plus treatises on poetics, pedagogy and, to a lesser degree, political and theological matters, all in keeping with the program of late Enlightenment intellectuals such as Rousseau and Pestalozzi. Although completed works like the pedagogical essay *Levana* answer to the generic expectations of their time, Jean Paul's works also contain an array of supplements including prologues to prologues and such add-ons as the *Komischer Anhang zum Titan* ("the comic supplement" to the *Bildungsroman Titan*), itself a cluster of smaller narratives without other interconnection besides their titular attachment to the central novelistic text.

It is in one of these supplementary texts, "the history of my prologue to the second edition of *Quintus Fixlein*" (*Geschichte meiner Vorrede zur zweiten Auflage des Quintus Fixlein*), that Jean Paul's theoretical engagement with humor begins. In this "history of his prologue," the traveling Jean Paul confronts an "art councilor" (*Kunstrat*) at the entrance to a small town in his Fichtelgebirge homeland who rejects humoristic writing out of hand, since there was no such thing in antiquity. Jean Paul reflects "that humor…is only the fruit of a long-developing culture of reason, and that it must grow to maturity as the world ages, just as with the growth of an individual" (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 27). The stakes are already set for Jean Paul's theoretical discussion of humor as characteristic of romanticism, which is to say, modernity.

By calling humor "the fruit of a long cultivation of reason," Jean Paul connects it to the faculty with which Kantian critique identifies the infinite: "reason" (*die Vernunft*) as opposed to "the understanding" (*der Verstand*). He laments that critics of his time, whom he somewhat anachronistically calls by the eighteenth-century term "judges of art" (*Kunstrichter*), can neither enjoy nor analyze humor adequately (IV: 27). Though Jean Paul would later polemicize with Kant, this early text nevertheless shows his thought moving along Kantian paths, indeed remaining closer to Kant than the Jena Romantics who signposted their allegiance to the sage of Königsberg at every step of their journey, and who made it a program to overcome the limits of Kantian critique with Kant's own materials.

In introducing "the concept of humor" in the context of the *Vorschule,* Jean Paul dives right into the Kantian problematic of finitude. Like Kant, he ascribes infinity to "reason" (*die Vernunft*) and asserts that "the understanding" (*der Verstand*) knows only "finitude" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 124). "Comic" (*komische*) literature, dealing with the object-world, can only contrast finite to finite; the infinity of subjectivity, which Jean Paul has defined as the domain of romantic literature, appears off limits to it (V: 125). If this is so, then "the comic" cannot become "romantic," yet the intersection of the comic and the romantic is precisely where Jean Paul wants "humor" to be. Kai Rugenstein, who understands Jean Paul's "infinite" in terms of

an ethical universality which the finite human subject can grasp but not put into practice, argues that the modern discovery of this subjective infinity is what enables "comedy" to become "humor" (Rugenstein 2014, 40–1). Jean Paul's association of "humor" with modernity, as opposed to an antiquity that knew only the comic, anticipates Hegel, who establishes the same formula in his *Aesthetics*.

In the *Vorschule* chapter on "humoristic subjectivity" Jean Paul writes, "I split my *I* into the finite and the infinite factor, and derive the latter from the former" (Jean Paul 2000: V, 132). Humoristic subjectivity stages a confrontation between the "finite" and "infinite" sides of the self—Kant's empirical and transcendental ego—instead of letting the former be absorbed in the latter, as in Novalis's ambition to "get a grip on the transcendental ego" (*sich seines transzendentalen Ichs zu bemächtigen*) which the Jena romantic even announces as "the goal of education (*Bildung*)" (Novalis 2006, II: 418).[3] This absorption of the empirical ego by the transcendental ego would yield a pure poetry of subjectivity unstained by the flaws of specific subjects: poetry, not of the subject, but of the pure conditions of subjectivity. Jean Paul critiques this pure poetry as Kant had critiqued pure reason.

Humor matures along with reason as the subject becomes conscious of the gap separating his infinite and finite selves: this is how Jean Paul understands Kant's splitting the human subject between "the realm of freedom" and that of "necessity." The place in Jean Paul's theory where freedom and necessity intersect is "wit," also an aesthetic value imported from Sterne's England. Where Samuel Johnson had described "wit," in a discussion of the metaphysical poets, as "the most heterogeneous ideas…yoked by violence together," Jean Paul extolls wit as "the miracle-birth of our Creator-I (*die Wundergeburt unsers Schöpfer-Ich*)" (Johnson 1906, 34; Jean Paul 2000, V: 171).

Never averse to Christological figures, the former theology student completes this witty analogy with a full-blown metaphorical trinity: "and here the Holy Spirit, the third representation, which emerges as a third person out of the relation between the first two is…a miracle-birth (*ein Wunderkind*)" (V: 171). Every conjunction of two unlike things bound together by a metaphor or other figure of speech has, as a third term, the new unity implied by the comparison, contrast or equation: the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son of the first two terms. It is a clash of incommensurables such as that between the Hebrew God and the mortal Jesus that gives birth to the "spirit" evident in any witty comparison. Paradoxically, the Trinitarian analogy also underlines the limits of comparison: like mortal flesh and Godhead, the two terms remain radically distinct even after they have entered into a momentary unity through the relating power of the metaphor.

As Jean Paul intimates in his witty epigram linking the discovered relation between any two terms to the Holy Spirit, setting unlike things in relation is the substance of "spirit," both the origin and activity of human subjectivity. The poet lives out this practice to an intensified degree, thus providing a concentrated display

[3] A comparable expression of the ambition of "early Romantic" synthesis can be found in Friedrich Schlegel's assertion that "intellectual intuition is the categorical imperative of theory" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1978, 107).

of the activity that characterizes subjectivity as such. Jean Paul thus presents one version of a romantic ideology of art privileging the poet as an exemplary subject. Yet his argument problematizes another such romantic argument privileging poetic subjectivity, based on reflexivity. Already in the *History of my Prologue* Jean Paul pokes fun at the Jena Romantic pretention to "potentiate" everything to the point that poetry becomes a window onto pure subjectivity, as opposed to a subject encountering objects. Specifically taking aim at the notion of "the will to will," (*das Wollen des Wollens*), the prologue's narrator denies that there can be a "poetic representation without material," any more than "a pure thought without material," a possibility Kant had ruled out of bounds in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 26).[4]

Reading Jean Paul is a good antidote to poststructuralist clichés about language only representing itself. Insofar as Schlegel anticipates the poststructuralist movement, Jean Paul criticizes both contemporary and future Schlegelians by returning them implicitly to their source of inspiration: Kant's critiques. Though Jean Paul did not see himself as a Kantian, in the *Vorschule* Jean Paul effectively transposes Kant's critical schema onto the terrain of poetics. Where Kant's critiques had criticized two standpoints on the mind, Jean Paul criticizes two standpoints on poetry: in both cases, naïve empiricism and self-deceived idealism. Unlike Fichte and the Jena Romantics, Jean Paul's writing circles around something wholly other, which resists the subject's claim to autonomy, yet also paradoxically makes autonomy possible. Thus Jean Paul qualifies the crucial romantic category of play with the assertion that "one plays around earnestness, not play" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 444).[5] Because the Jena Romantics claim to absorb everything into their literary absolute, they end up just writing beautiful words, which Jean Paul likens to shimmering snow (V: 443–4). The subject has no substance without a relation to the object-world, so writing that tries to be about the subject alone ends up being about nothing at all: "poetic nihilism" (V: 31).

Rather than overcome the split between self and world, Jean Paul's poetics acknowledges the self itself as split. He comes close to the psychoanalytic equation of subjectivity with a wound, and even to Žižek's reformulation of this idea in the language of ontology: that the subject is a "gap" in the structure of being. "Man is the dash in the book of nature," writes Jean Paul (I: 8), who states of poetry that "like Achilles's lance, it must heal all wounds that it inflicts" (V: 35). The similar German quotation that Žižek takes as definitive of subjectivity, "only the spear that smote the wound can heal it," comes from Richard Wagner, who incidentally may have chosen Bayreuth as his home base as an homage to the city's other well-known inhabitant, Jean Paul (Žižek 2015, 136).

[4] Jean Paul had leveled this accusation against Schlegel in particular (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 1145).

[5] The difficulty of translating Jean Paul's claim that *Um den Ernst, nicht das Spiel, wird gespielt* stems from the spatial dimensions of the preposition *um* ("about, around"). The sentence indicates that seriousness is the purpose or goal of play, but also suggests that play encircles or rotates around seriousness.

For Jean Paul, theory does not complete or even supplement poetic practice but is always part of it: hence the narrative and figurative style of the *Vorschule* and the poetological excurses that turn up throughout his fictional works. Yet the authorial personae do not turn the narrative into a solipsistic hall of mirrors—even if this is the intention of the narrator in the satirical *Clavis Fichtiana*, a text designed to dramatize Fichte's ego-based philosophy—so much as acknowledge that reality is always stained by the position the subject occupies within it. The stain induced in various novels by the presence of the character Jean Paul or other authorial personae is there to maintain the subject-object antithesis rather than let the fictional world be swallowed up in the integral whole of the subject, as for instance in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

Jean Paul is a resolute dualist where the Jena Romantics tend toward monism, and his dualism enters his prose even on the sentence level: the structure of Jean Paul's "likenesses" (*Gleichnisse*) is a jarring hybridity like that of his name. What Jean Paul calls a *Gleichnis* frequently takes the form of an epigrammatic statement, whether terse or comically drawn out, that brings together two very different entities on the basis of a surprising similarity. As in a metaphor, one of the terms of the comparison is sometimes left implicit, as in the aphorism, "Man is the dash in the book of nature," in which the illegible gap or merely conjunctive space between two terms or clauses in a sentence without subordination is parallel to the place occupied by the human in the non-hierarchical ordering of beings in the world (Jean Paul 2000, I: 8). By contrast, one epigram that makes both terms explicit is the following: "The freezing of people begins with epigrams, just as the freezing of water with icebergs" (V: 202). This epigram against epigrams hints at latent tension between epigrammatic rhetoric and the larger narrative form in which it is embedded. While the novel opens the reader's emotional pores after the fashion of the pre-romantic cult of sensibility, the epigram seals them again in a return to reason. The epigram is condensed, the novel sprawling. Jean Paul's art oscillates from one to the other.

4.3 Polarity: From Plato to the Novel

While all of Jean Paul's fictional works contain epigrams, the novel *Flegeljahre* is epigrammatic in its innermost structure, exploring polarity on the level of character-constellation and plot as well as rhetoric. The novel's plot makes heavy use of the motif of the double: both protagonist and narrator come in duplicate. It narrates the childhood and early education of the twins Walt and Vult, whose names not only sound alike but convey, through abbreviated German and Latin phrases, nearly identical meanings: *Gott walte* and *Quod Deus Vult* (Jean Paul 2000, II: 600). Walt's quest is to live up to the terms set in a will left behind by a man named Van der Kabel, which he needs to satisfy in order to come into the deceased's inheritance and then take on his original name, Friedrich Richter, just as he had taken on the name Van der Kabel on coming into his own inheritance (II: 578–86). In this way

the novel plays with the idea of poetic tutelage, reflecting obliquely on its author's own unfinished project of becoming "Jean Paul."

Throughout the novel, Walt counterpoints the narrator's novelistic prose with pithy epigrams in a free-verse style that he claims to have invented, and which the novel's characters call alternately *Streckvers* and *Polymeter*, contrasting German and classical models for poetic invention (II: 622). The epigrams in *Flegeljahre* consistently hinge on a striking alternation of opposites. While the master of the epigram in Jean Paul's own time was Georg Lichtenberg, another paradigm for epigrammatic thinking is Plato. Of special interest to Jean Paul's writing is an epigram ascribed to Plato by Diogenes Laertius on the beauty of the boy the poet calls Aster (star): "Star-gazing Aster, would I were the skies, / To gaze upon thee with a thousand eyes" (1995, 302–3).[6] This poem provides a paradigmatic example for the double structure of the epigram, bringing together irreconcilables, otherworldly transcendence as symbolized by the stars of heaven and the this-worldly beauty of a boy named "star," on whom the philosopher-poet looks down from his imaginary perch in the sky. This epigram sets the agenda for Plato's philosophy in the poetic medium that his metaphysics will have to disavow.[7] This poem, along with an accompanying poem also dedicated to Aster, tantalizingly present Plato as both a victim of unrequited love and a *poète manqué* seeking to sublimate both romantic and poetic failure in an anti-poetic philosophy. The poems thus figure in the romantic quest to overcome Plato in nominating poets, not philosophers, the "unacknowledged legislators of the World" (Shelley 1977, 508).

Jean Paul seems to be thinking along the same lines when he names the poetic anti-philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder his generation's successor to Plato. He does this with encomia to Herder in both *Flegeljahre* and the *Vorschule* (Jean Paul 2000, II: 625, V: 58). The novel's praise of Herder comes with symbolic emphasis on stars, implicitly in allusion to the epigrams to Aster (II: 625 ff.). Jean Paul was not alone in his fascination with the founder of western metaphysics, whose apotropaic gesture against poetry takes place within a wholly poetic *oeuvre*. As with other romantics steeped in the Platonic contradiction, Jean Paul's veneration of Plato is fraught with implicit tension. Yet Jean Paul's way of working out this tension, unlike Percy Shelley's, takes novelistic form. If Plato is the philosopher of polarity, for whom all earthly things and actions remain shadowed by heavenly archetypes, Jean

[6] The Greek reads as follows:

ἀστέρας εἰσαθρεῖς Ἀστὴρ ἐμός: εἴθε γενοίμην οὐρανός, ὡς πολλοῖς ὄμμασιν εἰς σὲ βλέπω

[7] Romantic fascination with the reversals implicit in this epigram are not limited to Jean Paul: see Percy Shelley's ironic allusion to the poem in an infernal vision of Plato as a slave of passion in "The Triumph of Life" (Shelley 1977, 462; l. 254–9). Shelley translated the accompanying poem, which serves as epigram to his elegy "Adonais" (390).

ἀστὴρ πρὶν μὲν ἔλαμπες ἐνὶ ζῳοῖσιν Ἑῷος,
νῦν δὲ θανὼν λάμπεις Ἔσπερος ἐν φθιμένοις.

Shelley's version reads: "Thou wert the morning star among the living / Ere thy fair light had fled; / Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving / New splendor to the dead" (390).

Paul develops the novel as the genre most fit to explore polarity in a way that turns Plato on his head, or, as the case may be, sets him back on his feet.[8]

Plato's dialectic is teleological, subordinating the world of appearances to the world of Ideas, even while the former remains the medium in which the latter may be glimpsed or, as Socrates puts it in the *Meno*, "recollected" (Plato 1997, 883). In multiple senses, Jean Paul's novels bring higher and lower worlds into a confrontation without resolution or *telos*. In the *Vorschule* he lays out a tripartite typology of the novel based on the relative concentration of "high" and "low" elements in both a social sense and in terms of philosophical theme. Here he adopts his terminology from Renaissance painting, designating three different modes of modern art. Just as Hegel will soon single out Dutch painting as a paradigm of modern "humor," so too does Jean Paul designate novels like his own *Quintus Fixlein,* which focus exclusively on demotic, small-town concerns, as "Dutch." The "Italian style," meanwhile, characterizes *Bildungsromane* about the education of aristocrats and dealing explicitly with sublime philosophical themes, such as his own *Titan*. The "German style," finally, brings together both "high" and "low" motifs and characters (Jean Paul 2000, V: 253–5).

One of the "German" novels is *Siebenkäs*, published in 1800, shortly before Jean Paul got to work on the *Vorschule*. The title character is a Jean Paul-esque humorist caught tragically in the prosaic world of marital life. This protagonist is a "lawyer for the poor" (*Armenadvokat*) who compulsively amuses himself with witty likenesses (*Gleichnisse*) of the type Jean Paul celebrates in the *Vorschule*, and which proliferate in his own authorial discourse. His persona thus combines passion for linguistic mischief with a submerged social dimension: solidarity with the dispossessed, much noted by such contemporaries as Ludwig Börne of the radical literary movement "Young Germany," even if this solidarity rarely, in Jean Paul's fiction, reaches the level of explicit political advocacy. Siebenkäs's wife Lenette, whose portrayal borders on misogyny, cannot transcend the domestic life and meets her husband's flights of fancy with incomprehension.

Realizing how agonizing this particular marriage of opposites has become for both his wife and himself, Siebenkäs liberates his wife both from conjugal misery and the shame of divorce by faking his own death. Having subsequently "resurrected" out of the town's eye, he forms a bond with a young woman more in line with his way of life and thought. Siebenkäs's new love, Natalie, is English; she comes from the land of Sterne.

The themes of death and resurrection are central as well to two excurses Jean Paul has dropped mysteriously into the middle of his novel, without in any way integrating them into its narrative structure. The first of these was destined to make

[8] Some critics read into this tension the entire problematic of the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns. Peter Horst Neumann notes the proximity of Walt's *Polymeter* to the Greek Anthology, which Herder had translated (Neumann 1966, 20–24), and Wulf Köpke argues that Walt's poems and their cool reception by the town's cultural authorities thematize the humoristic "collision" between classical Greek form and modern/romantic interiority, which condemns the poems to failure in the eyes of their pedantic judges (Köpke 1990, 51–2). Their judgment in turn exposes "the impossibility of poeticizing bourgeois life" (54).

Jean Paul's reputation in France, as translated by Germaine de Staël in *De l'Allemagne* and later taken up by the Symbolists: the "Speech of the Dead Christ from Atop the Cosmos, Saying That There is no God" (*Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei*) (Jean Paul 2000, II: 266–71; De Staël 1959, 286–90). This text not surprisingly established Jean Paul to his French readers as the prophet of atheism (Pichois 1963, 255), a misleadingly one-sided impression, given that the pages immediately following narrate a rosy counter-vision purporting to expose the *Rede* as a bad dream (II: 272–6).

With or without its piously optimistic twin, the *Rede* sets before its readers a hermeneutic puzzle not unlike that offered by the parable of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. How do we integrate the surreal nightmare of cosmic emptiness into the mundane story of a collapsing marriage in a small town? Does the statement made by either of the dream-texts that intrude upon this novel apply to the novel itself as some sort of interpretive key? These are not the protagonists' dreams, neither are they asides delivered self-consciously by the novel's third-person narrator. Rather, the narrative voice of the two visionary excurses hints at a self-enclosed narrative persona, as it were, unaware of the novelistic plot he or she is interrupting.

The intrusion on the novel of the twin dream visions opens up an opposition between two different registers in the symbolic theme of "resurrection," between Firmian Siebenkäs's tragicomic mock-death and reawakening as Natalie's lover on the one hand, and the specter of the Dead Christ haunting a cosmos that has been emptied of messianic promise on the other. The latter vision is a reversal in and of itself, but when set against the earthly ploy of the devious "advocate for the poor," a further opposition comes into view: namely, between visionary earnestness and the play of small-town life (or the inverse: visionary play versus the earnestness of the everyday). In short, how does the cosmic vision of the dead Christ relate to the pedestrian story of Firmian Siebenkäs? It is unclear in what way the devious maneuvers of a witty but impoverished townsman relativize the terror evoked by the vision of an undead Christ living out his anguished realization that the Father has forsaken Him.[9]

These two registers do not point to a higher fusion, any more than the nightmare vision of the dead Christ and the beatific one that follows it form some higher synthesis. There is no unity of belief and unbelief on Jean Paul's agenda, nor is there a fusion of the cosmic and the everyday. In this "German" novel, "Italian" high seriousness and "Dutch" low comedy merely coexist, and though each may comment obliquely on the other, they do not become one or lead to a higher synthesis. Moreover, theological earnestness shines through fictional play as something the latter cannot wholly absorb, yet which has no other form of presentation beside the fictional and metaphorical. One is not the *telos* or concealed truth of the other.

[9] Incidentally, Jean Paul gave an epilogue to *Die Unsichtbare Loge* the title "Seven Last Words" (*Sieben Letzte Worte*), traditionally a designation of Jesus's last utterances before his crucifixion, which include, "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" (I: 463–9).

4.4 Suspension of Disbelief: *Die Unsichtbare Loge*

The confrontation between heaven and earth comes to a head already at the beginning of Jean Paul's first novel, *Die Unsichtbare Loge,* which is also the first text he signed with his pseudonym. As in Rousseau's *Emile*, the narrator is the educator of the young male protagonist of this *Bildungsroman*, Gustav; the tutor-narrator's name is Jean Paul. Unlike Émile, however, Gustav has had an education of sorts before he enters the narrator's tutelage, and in the first part of the novel Jean Paul narrates his pupil's prior history, as well as his parents' courtship and early marriage.

In a parodic allusion to such heroic myths as the *Nibelungenlied*, Gustav's father has won his mother at a game of chess with her cagy father, who has never before been defeated by a suitor. There is, however, a further condition put on the marriage by the protagonist's prospective grandmother, a fervent Pietist: the couple must submit to a strict Pietist education for their first born-son at the hands of a local divine, who will take care of the child for the first eight years of his life in an underground cellar on the family estate. During such time the parents may visit their child only while he sleeps, so as not to interfere in the tutor's training. The child is not to make his parents' acquaintance until he has completed his course of study, which Jean Paul calls a "subterranean pedagogicum" (I: 52–56).

This bizarre scheme receives a further, Platonic, twist in the way Gustav's initial tutor, called "the genius" or "the guiding spirit" (*der Genius*, German/Latin for δαιμων), frames it. He tells his tutor that the cellar in which they are living is earth, the one lamp hanging from the ceiling the sun, and the world above the cellar heaven, to which Gustav will ascend when he "dies" and becomes an "angel," like all those currently dwelling there (I: 57). After eight years of schooling in music, drawing and religion, the tutor tells his pupil he has earned the privilege of resurrection, leads him up the staircase, and opens the door to the afterlife. The *Genius* disappears and Gustav's heavenly, that is, earthly life begins. His first gesture is to point ecstatically toward the shining sun and cry out, "God is standing there!" (*Gott steht dort!*) (I: 63).

If young Gustav mistakes the human world for a divine one, he is not alone. In the *Vorschule* Jean Paul himself calls poetic writing (*Poesie*) "the only second world" (that is, the world of the resurrection) "in the first one." *Poesie* "paints on the curtain of eternity the coming drama; it is no flat mirror (*platter Spiegel*) of the present but rather the magic mirror of the time that is not" (V: 447). Elsewhere in the same text he *describes Poesie* as "this sun-drunk world of wonders where godly forms (*Göttergestalten*) walk upright and blessed" (V: 39). These characterizations uncannily anticipate Theodor W. Adorno's program, laid out at the end of *Minima Moralia*, which calls for philosophy to

> contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption.... Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be... as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because

> consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite (*zur Spiegelschrift ihres Gegenteils zusammenschießt*). (German edition: 334)[10]

Jean Paul's "magic mirror" anticipates Adorno's "mirror script" not only in terms of one figure, but in total. In fact, as a commentary on his own *oeuvre*, Jean Paul's characterization of "poetry" (*die Poesie*, which includes prose) makes sense only in connection to Adorno's characterization of philosophy; the world Jean Paul depicts in his fictions is nothing if not "indigent and distorted," populated by penniless schoolteachers and "lawyers for the poor" as well as pompous courtiers who use copies of the stoic classics to beat their wives. If the standpoint of poetry lets resurrected humanity shine through empirical humanity, it is not by reason of a beautifying varnish but rather as an effect of total juxtaposition achieved by "poetry's" encyclopedic resurrection of the actual. The messianic light is an effect of fictionality as such, not an illusion added to things by naïvité.

Gustav undoubtedly *is* naïve, but in a way that calls to mind Lacan's famous dictum that "only those not duped, err" (*seuls les non-dupes errent*). Just after Gustav's ecstatic emergence, the narrator reflects for a moment in the future anterior about what the experience will have meant to an older Gustav at some point in the future. He imagines Gustav looking back at that moment in mournful memory of "a long-lost eternity" (Jean Paul 2000, I: 60). Eternity is a big thing to have lost, and requires restitution of a spiritual nature, which the novel amply provides.

Years after his formative experience of emergence into the earthly world, the mature Gustav writes a letter to his (now former) tutor Jean Paul explaining what the experience means to him. Having long since learned the truth about the purported "second world" in which he lives, Gustav is not disillusioned, but grateful. He gladly ascribes the progress of his moral education to the love nourished in him by his earlier tutor for the solar center of divine humanity, as well as his subsequent learned ability to distinguish it from the physical sun (I: 355–60). In an excursus, Jean Paul extolls Gustav as one of a select group of "higher people" (*höhere Menschen*) capable of living out transcendent values in a fallen, sublunary world (I: 221–4). Gustav has internalized the fictional scheme he learned from his tutor and transformed it into an ethical program.

A spiritual enrichment or even conversion due to the transformation of loss into memory is familiar from the romantic crisis-lyric: Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Hölderlin's "Andenken" are canonical examples. In these poems, the poet reconstitutes himself as a creative subject or even founder of a community by absorbing a painful loss (Hölderlin 1951, 189; line 59).[11] "Recollection" or "internalization"—etymologically the word *Erinnerung* points to both meanings—transmutes experiential loss into aesthetic gain. By novelizing this model in the example of Gustav, Jean Paul combines it with another, more socially ambiguous,

[10] For the original, see: Adorno 1951, 281.

[11] Hölderlin's poem "Andenken" closes with the well-known enigmatic statement that "but what is lasting the poets provide" (*was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter*), establishing poets as founders (*Stifter*) of a communal legacy (Henrich 1997, 255).

phenomenon, which Slavoj Žižek has recently called "fetishistic disavowal," and whose Lacanian formula is "I know very well, but nevertheless" (*je sais bien, mais quand même*…) (Žižek 2008, 250).

Žižek illustrates this phenomenon in his early book *They Know Not What They Do* in a long gloss on a Hopi religious ceremony as explained by the anthropologist Octave Mannoni. The Hopi children grow up attending festivals in which mysterious men dance in masks, and are said to be the gods themselves, who have come down among the people. At a certain initiatory moment, the men remove their masks and reveal themselves as ordinary men of the community. Instead of the ceremony inducing a traumatic loss of faith on the part of the children, it teaches them to impute a spiritual meaning to the dance, as the masked men become representatives of a higher spirit that can make itself visible to the people only symbolically. In Žižek's terms, the spiritual power of the dance now resides in the mask itself, not in anything the mask purports to conceal. The newly initiated tribesmen and women have made the transition from naïve belief to "symbolic commitment." Both organized religion and "traditional authority" have been born (Žižek 2008, 245–9).

Jean Paul's novel stages this process as the origin of literature itself: an *as if* in which the narrator and his readers lodge a symbolic commitment. The world as it first appears to Gustav, a "realm of wonders in which men and women walk upright and sacred," is literature itself, "the only second world in the first one."[12] Another German writer to attempt a poetic theology in this way is Friedrich Hölderlin. As revealed in the elegy "Bread and Wine" (*Brod und Wein*), the remit of modern poetry begins when "the Father turns his face away from the people" (*als der Vater gewandt sein Angesicht von den Menschen*) (Hölderlin 1951, 94; l. 127). With the death of Christ, the ancient world's final demigod, the age of the heroes comes to an end and with it the plenitude of a world that mortals share directly with the gods. Naïve belief gives way to symbolic commitment as the poet steps forth to fill the void left by the gods in a posture of vigilance, resolved "to remain awake at night" (91; l. 36).

[12] The scene of Gustav emerging from the cave has become a battleground for critics seeking to define Jean Paul's "humor" by contrast with the Schlegelian notion of "romantic irony." Herbert Kaiser takes Gustav's conversion very seriously, commenting that "[h]umor does not actually kill finite life, but... transfigures it, in that it suspends the earthly positing of the finite as an absolute—in the idea, that all life is life from the sun of God.... Humor... annihilates the finite, in order to create it anew in the light of the idea. Gustav's 'death' is his resurrection into the this-worldly" (Kaiser 1992, 26). By contrast, Paul Fleming reads the episode satirically, emphasizing the pleasure resulting from Jean Paul's narrative subjecting Platonic transcendentalism to the "magic mirror of fantasy" (Fleming 2006, 39–40). Fleming stresses the delight both Gustav and the reader experience when earth is substituted for heaven, not the way the ideology of earth-as-heaven informs both Gustav's ethical development and Jean Paul's consistent characterization of his poetics. To my mind, each of these critics settles for one moment of a polarity that would be more productively read dialectically, as a clash between infinite Idea and finite reality in which neither emerges unchanged, and whose only resolution comes in the form of a self-conscious *as if*. It seems to me that Kaiser sides with heaven and Fleming with earth because neither is troubled by the narrator's complicity with the transcendentalism that the novel's plot has exposed as fictional play; the dialectical view imposes itself the moment one considers the narrative voice to be constitutive of meaning.

While Jean Paul and Hölderlin converge in their framing of the poetic vocation, the difference in genre and tonality between Hölderlin's elegiac lyric and Jean Paul's novels could not be starker. This difference is what Jean Paul calls "humor." For Hölderlin the task of "remembering" or "internalizing" the naïve plenitude of childhood or pagan antiquity sanctifies the poetic vocation as a symbolic commitment, and Jean Paul effectively novelizes this formula, investing it with the humorous ambivalence typical of the novel as a genre. If humor is the "inverse sublime," as Jean Paul claims in the *Vorschule* (Jean Paul 2000, V: 125), then humor dominates his novelistic discourse just as the pathos of the sublime pervades Hölderlin's caesuras.

4.5 The Sublime, Humor and Modern Dialectic

Jean Paul shares with Hegel the historical scheme assigning comedy to pre-romantic—that is to say, pre-modern—literature, as opposed to humor, which is specific to modernity. Also modern is the sublime, which did not figure in ancient Greek aesthetics until Longinus appeared in the Alexandrian era. For Kant, the sublime plays a key role in inscribing the ethical subject's autonomy, marking the correspondence between "the starry firmament above me and the moral law within me" precisely on account of the incommensurability of that starry heaven—or gigantic mountain, or crashing wave—and the empirical self that it dwarfs (Kant 1977, VII: 300–1; X: 184–5). It is by overpowering the senses that the awesome natural sights provide a negative imprint of that other self, the self of reason, itself not open to representation.

The poetry of the sublime is thus an allegory of autonomous subjectivity, which opens its practitioners to the allegation aimed at Romanticism since John Keats characterized William Wordsworth as a poet of the "egotistical sublime" (Keats 2009, 295). Yet not every romantic-era treatment of the infinity of ethical subjectivity is celebratory. Rousseau located the origin of the mind in the explosive expansion of "imagination," which I have elsewhere labeled "a structure of comparison by which desire can realize its infinite nature, always transcending finite givens" (Coker 2009, 397). This implicit infinity of human desire, which cannot be satisfied by a finite world whose possibilities of fulfillment it continually outstrips, is analogous to the infinity of reason that Kant locates in the "kingdom of ends," a dimension invisible to the senses, whose only approximate image is in overpowering natural forces. Yet for Rousseau, the subject's infinity, cultivated by culture, is the source of unhappiness in the modern and enlightened world.

In an authorial soliloquy in *Emile*, Rousseau narrates the emergence of the "imagination" as a catastrophic event in the history of human consciousness. The widening gap between desire and fulfillment accompanying the expansion of imagination in the maturity of individuals and civilizations spells defeat for "happiness": "the nearer we are to pleasure (*jouïssance*), the further we are from happiness"

(*bonheur*) (Rousseau 1984, 44).[13] Jean Paul implicitly counters this pessimistic judgment in the *Billet an meine Freunde*, yet another prologue to the prologue of *Quintus Fixlein*, in which he gives his readers advice on how to be "not happy, but happier":

> I could never report more than three ways to become, not happy, but happier. The first, which leads upward, is: to drive so far out over the cloud of life that the whole world with its wolfs' dens, ossuaries and lightning rods seems to lie far beneath one's feet, shrunken like a little kindergarten.—The second is, to fall directly down into the garden and make yourself so at home in a furrow there, that, when you look out of your warm lark's nest, you also don't see any wolfs' dens, ossuaries and rods, but just ears of corn, of which each is a tree for the nesting bird and an umbrella and parasol.—The third and last—which I consider the hardest and cleverest—is to alternate between the first two. (Jean Paul 2000, IV: 10)

Jean Paul's program for increasing wellbeing without attaining "happiness" amounts to a preference for *jouïssance* over *bonheur*: exuberance in poetic excess rather than the containment sought in self-denial and classical balance. His eudaimonistic formula is to go back and forth between two extremes, the encyclopedic bird's eye-view and blind "nesting" in the immediate. The two do not form a synthesis. Rather, greater wellbeing is to be found in the transitions. In this passage Jean Paul provides a model of what Kojin Karatani has more recently called "transcritical" thinking: letting each side of a polarity critique the other mutually (Karatani 2005, 1–25). Slavoj Žižek has since absorbed this model into a new way of thinking about Hegel's dialectic, just as Žižek's own style resembles Jean Paul's in its drive to juxtapose seemingly incompatible domains and point out concealed similarities. This style is nothing if not humorous.

4.6 Bayreuth versus Jena: The Polemic with Early Romanticism

Jean Paul's *Vorschule* stages a transcritical evaluation of two schools of poetics, which he calls "poetic materialism" and "poetic nihilism" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 31–40). Through this mutual critique of the two stances, Jean Paul advances his own poetics of antithesis just as Kant had advanced his "transcendental stance" in a confrontation between empiricism and rationalism. Through the structure of his treatise, he implicitly promotes a Kantian poetics at odds with the "literary absolute" through which the Jena Romantics sought to supersede Kant—even while dissenting from specific Kantian statements, calling Kant's definition of beauty circular or despairing over his placing immortality off limits to human reason (V: 40–41; VI: 1211 ff.).

In the *Vorschule* Jean Paul contrasts himself to the Jena Romantics in terms legible to contemporary trauma theory. He recognizes subjectivity as a wound, both smitten and cured by poetry, whereas Schlegel and Novalis want to "rip off the

[13] In French: Rousseau 1995, 304.

bandage from the wound like a bond" (V: 31). Jean Paul privileges "earnestness" as the motive for "play," insisting that the ongoing dialectic between them will never reach a resolution. For Jean Paul the clash between opposites is an endless process of mutual appropriation, and in this he resembles contemporary dialecticians who break with earlier models of dialectic as a closed teleology.

Jean Paul's religious resonances appear in the context of the polemic with Jena Romanticism with its tendency to subsume "religion" into the dissolving energies of the "literary absolute." When Friedrich Schlegel declares "religion" the core of all human creativity, what he has in mind can hardly be the specifics of Christian revelation (Schlegel 1971, 241–2). Philipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy characterize the "religion" of which Schlegel speaks in his 1800 *Ideas* as "art itself…considered as the *representation* (absolute, without remainder) of the truth" (1978, 203). In the Jena Romantics' flirtation with "religion," Jean Paul perceives the hubris of a poetic subject that insists on containing not only the entire world, but also the infinite.

What is lost in this romantic game is the Judeo-Christian element of antithesis, the encounter between incommensurables that happens in prophecy and in the person of Jesus. Yet Jean Paul has gone one step further in proposing as the mirror of the "second world" of the afterlife a literary discourse marked off by the bounds of human finitude and overtly not "serious." Hence Friedrich Richter's pseudonym, which humorously brings together apostolic monikers with linguistic hybridity, and the fictional persona "Jean Paul" in whose voice all of the high-flying theological-poetical assertions resound.

Jean Paul sounds most like Schlegel when praising the subversive power of "wit" (*Witz*), descendent of Giambattisto Vico's *ingegno* and engine for finding similarity in the dissimilar (Vico 1976, 313–4). Yet Jean Paul sets "wit" into a tripartite relation with *Scharfsinn*, the power of making distinctions, and *Tiefsinn*, the quasi-mystical perspective from which all things are alike. Difference comes into being against a background of indifference. The God's eye view of *Tiefsinn* is what enables *Witz* and *Scharfsinn* to profile each other (Jean Paul 2000, V: 171–2). It establishes the difference between difference and identity, as a vertical dimension enabling the horizontal play of difference in every witty comparison. The contemporary whom Jean Paul most resembles here is Schelling, even though the two traded barbs about which man's *oeuvre* the purportedly all-creative *Geist* found it most excruciating to write.

In a hint at the aleatory nature of his own writing as an ever-shifting web of analogies and likenesses, Jean Paul calls "wit" the "anagram of nature" (V: 47). He links an absolutized "wit" to the community of women in Plato's Republic, the Last Judgment and the French Revolution. The common link is "leveling" (47). This judgment is itself an example of wit yoking together seemingly unlike things on the basis of a concealed and surprising similarity, the more outlandish the wittier. With its attention to the French Revolution it competes with Friedrich Schlegel's designation of that event along with Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as the three formations encapsulating "the tendencies of the age" (Schlegel 1971, 190).

Jean Paul's employment of figuration is performative: he defines wit with a witty epigram, metaphor with a metaphor. In the former, the performativity also serves as irony, foregrounding the differences that separate phenomena that wit would like to see as similar. By besting Schlegel in a contest of wit—Jean Paul's epigram is wittier than Schlegel's precisely in being more of a stretch—the one-time clown of Weimar also points to the limitations of his own vision in ways that would never occur to the Jena Romantic, high priest of his own seriousness even where he pretends to humor.

Another focal Romantic value, bequeathed to the Jena school by Schiller, is "play." Jean Paul works through this term in a playful epilogue to the *Vorschule*, in which his experimentation with narrative authority continues. The last three chapters of the text are "lectures" positioning the theorist-narrator Jean Paul as a lecturer to a university audience. The last of these lectures, the "Cantata-Lecture" (*Kantate-Vorlesung*) has an audience of one: Albano, the protagonist of Jean Paul's signature *Bildungsroman*, *Titan*. The lecture bears the very early-romantic-sounding title "On Poetic Poetry" (*Über die poetische Poesie*)," but it is the wayward student who takes the position suitable to Jena adherents of "the literary absolute," proposing "an organic synthesis of the old realism and the new idealism," which his lecturer rejects as another version of "poetic nihilism" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 443–5). In the rest of their dialogue, Jean Paul insists on duality and antithesis, in opposition to his pupil and protagonist's longing for resolution and harmony.

While Albano defends "play" and "freedom" as final goals for poetry, Jean Paul insists on qualifying these values as paths of orbit around something absolute that lies outside of poetry, and indeed of human subjectivity itself. Like the two terms of a metaphor or the empirical and transcendental ego, "play" can exist only in relation to something that it is not; Schiller's fantasy of a human life redeemed by play finds its inherent limit. In a footnote, Jean Paul comments that "Schiller's play drive (borrowed from Kant) divides into a material and a formal drive, and the final synthesis will always be lacking" (V: 444 fn.). Play, the great mediator, to which Schiller looks for an embodiment of human freedom, is itself an unresolved play of antitheses. Driven on by its own contradictions, play circles "earnestness" like a moth around a flame.

4.7 Conclusion: Is there a Politics of Humor?

On the one hand, Jean Paul's writings are an example of romantic poetry transmuting loss into wisdom, conjuring presence from absence and pleasure from pain in the transfiguring mirror of poetic form. On the other hand, they call attention to the artificiality of this operation, puncturing the surface of aesthetic ideology. As we have seen, Jean Paul exposes this formula as a species of what Žižek, following Jacques Lacan, has called "fetishistic disavowal." Yet Žižek contends that this disavowal leads to the formation of "traditional authority"; its immediate context in his work is not literary but political (Žižek 2008, 249).

There remains the question of the implicit politics of Jean Paul's aesthetic dissonances. As is the case with many German romantic figures, the political question is a complex one which cannot be answered with reference to content alone. Though Jean Paul's "Italian" *Bildungsromane* narrate the moral development of autocratic minor princes, his contemporaries could read between the lines to infer a revolutionary and republican sensibility. In a eulogy he delivered for Jean Paul in 1825, Ludwig Börne proclaimed him "the poet of the lowborn…the singer of the poor," as well as "a priest of justice" (*ein Priester des Rechts*) and "the Jeremiah of his captive people," who "sewed the seeds of German freedom for our grandchildren" (Börne 1964, 787–799). Jean Paul was one of very few authors of the time who never recanted his youthful enthusiasm for the French Revolution. As a spokesman of the radical Young Germany movement, Börne saw Jean Paul as a prophetic figure heralding a revolution to come: "he waits patiently at the gate of the twentieth century for his people to come sloughing along behind him" (789).[14]

No doubt Börne's image of Jean Paul owes much to the pedestrian thematics of the latter's "German" and "Dutch" novels as well as the promiscuous mixing of high and low registers so shocking to classical standards of taste and decorum that even Friedrich Schlegel found it excessive (Schlegel 1971, 232). These poetic features of his work arguably reflect the class dynamic implicitly at work in their production. As one of Germany's first writers to live predominantly by the proceeds of book sales, unlike Wieland, Schiller and Goethe with their courtly patronage, Jean Paul occupies a special position within the bourgeois revolution on the level of his writerly practice.[15]

Though Karl Marx appears not to have much known or enjoyed Jean Paul's writings, the latter's response to Weimar has awakened sympathetic responses from later Marxist tradition. East German academic Wolfgang Harich devoted a book-length study to Jean Paul's critique of Idealism and hailed the novels as a realist "poetry of revolution" satirizing nascent bourgeois types, declaring his *oeuvre* an unexplored resource for "the spiritual heritage of the Left" and even the workers' movement (Harich 1974, 8, 552). Harich's appreciation of Jean Paul, whom he thinks Marx shortchanged out of distaste for Jean Paul's "utopian socialist" admirer Börne, thus derives more from thematic than formal considerations (Harich 1974, 554). More fruitful for our purposes may be Walter Benjamin's appraisal of Jean Paul as "the greatest allegorist among the German poets (*Poeten*)" (Benjamin 1978, 166). Benjamin characterizes Jean Paul's poetics as an exposure of the "injunction" that Weimar classicism posed to the German bourgeoisie, namely "reconciliation with feudalism through aesthetic education and in the cult of beautiful semblance" (Benjamin 1991, 415).

[14] Translation cannot really capture the tone of Börne's lovingly frustrated evocation of the German people: "er wartet geduldig an der Pforte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts, bis sein schleichend Volk ihm nachkomme" (Börne 1964, 789).

[15] For more on Jean Paul's relationship to the book-market, in historical context, see: Ludwig Fertig 1989, 93–117, esp. 104–8.

Terry Eagleton is thinking along the same lines when he relates Friedrich Schiller's ideal of "aesthetic education" to Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony." Though Schiller's praise of the all-mediating "play drive" opens onto a utopian vision of a world beyond constraint or alienation, it also provides a model for integrated capitalist subjectivity—of a person who loves his job, say—and is more specifically useful to the truncated subjectivity of a bourgeoisie that would not manage to remove the monarchical state until after World War I (Eagleton 1990, 102–120).

It is this ambivalent psychic balance that Jean Paul's dissonant aesthetics disturbs by inserting a strong dose of incongruity into every witty comparison, fusion of transcendence and immanence, or marriage between mind and body. Just as Adorno sought to expose the "tears and ruptures" of the world in the hope that such "consummate negativity" might coalesce into "the mirror image of its opposite," so too does Jean Paul explicitly offer his writing as a placeholder for future redemption: "a figured curtain" adorned with images of "the coming play" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 447). For both Adorno and Jean Paul, unresolved "negativity" is an allegory of reconciliation. As a professed Christian and avowed opponent of the Idealist cooption of religion, Jean Paul sometimes places this promised reconciliation in a physical afterlife. Yet some of his more attentive readers, from Börne to Benjamin and beyond, have had no difficulty displacing the divine utopia onto a secular future.

Jean Paul is a forerunner of those thinkers in contemporary critical theory who see dialectic as a sharpening of antitheses rather than a harmonious resolution. In this he is not alone in the nineteenth century: Kierkegaard, who brought "humor" to the attention of philosophers, similarly emphasized gaps, borders and the *salto mortale* between irreconcilables. Witness the similarity between Jean Paul's definition of humor, before whose eyes "everything is the same and nothing" (V: 125), and Kierkegaard's insistence that "you are always in the wrong before God" (Kierkegaard 1987, 346). Like his Jena Romantic peers, Jean Paul delights in comparisons between earthly things, engaging his readers in the endless play of similarity and difference; but radiating through the horizontal plane of comparison is a vertical dimension in which all things are found lovably wanting.

Yet this vertical dimension does not reveal itself simply in the earthward gaze of one looking down from the heavens. Not for Jean Paul is the presumption of having already arrived at the standpoint of the infinite, such that finite things become mere playthings of a self-sufficient subject. Jean Paul's "humor" does not usurp the position of "the old theology…looking down from the celestial world at the earthly one," which from such a perspective just "passes by, small and vain" (*zieht klein und eitel dahin*) (V: 129). Yet neither does it look up uncomprehendingly at the vastness of the cosmos, feeling sublimely overpowered. Jean Paul's thought-figure for the trans-critical perspective of humor is more difficult than either of these positions. Referring to a "bee-eating" bird known well known to contemporary encyclopedists (Encyclopædia 1817, 156–9), Jean Paul compares humor to "the Merops bird, which turns its back on heaven while nevertheless flying in that direction," all the while "drinking the nectar *upwards*, dancing on its head" (V: 129).

The resemblance to Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" does not help much without an awareness of the polemic that each image carries out with alternate versions of heavenward progress. Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* flying backward, a "wind from Paradise" caught in its wings as the ruins of history pile up progressively before its eyes, repudiates the social-democratic promise of linear progress toward a readily imaginable future (Benjamin 1977, 255); Benjamin teaches instead the imperative to redeem the ruined past through revolution, an act whose outcome is always uncertain. More subtly, Jean Paul's polemic in the image of the "Merops bird" is also against a form of progressivism: the asymptotic approach to infinity that the Jena Romantics saw both in the divagations of irony and in the ongoing project of a "universal poetry" in step with the "tendencies of the age" (Schlegel 1971, 174).

Having only the finite in view, humor reveals the infinite in its gaps and fissures. At the same time, it stands to reason that as the bird of humor flies backward and upward, more of the finite world comes into view, enabling the humorist better to "measure out the infinite by means of the finite and connect them" (Jean Paul 2000, V: 128). Indeed, the tendency to pile on material is evident in Jean Paul's writing from its very beginning: in the "notebooks" (*Merkblätter*) in which the penniless young Friedrich Richter compiled long lists of words, expressions and figures of speech copied out of other texts. These expressions then spread throughout the writer's later works, informing many of their "likenesses" (*Gleichnisse*). Reading the novels against the background of the *Merkblätter*, one sometimes gets the impression that one is witnessing the birth of narrative out of the spirit of parataxis.

Yet such additive procedures ultimately resist totalization. Legible in Jean Paul's *oeuvre* is not so much an actually or even potentially existing totality of spirit but rather a catalogue of confrontations between subject and world, and in each one the passionate demand for that which others in his time took poetry itself already to actualize: freedom. It is why his novel *Titan*, conceived as his programmatic response to the year he spent in Weimar and one of few major works Jean Paul regarded as "finished," closes not in the past or even future indicative, but the imperative: "awake, my siblings!" (*wacht auf, meine Geschwister!*) (III: 830). Not content to offer the pleasures of the imaginary, Jean Paul's *oeuvre* also demands symbolic commitment. This is the peculiar challenge it poses to its readers, both aesthetically and politically.

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Chapter 5
Caricature, Philosophy and the "Aesthetics of the Ugly": Some Questions for Rosenkranz

C. Allen Speight

Abstract This article explores the distinctive artistic form of caricature and the philosophical treatment it receives in the work of Karl Rosenkranz (1805–1879), who gives it a central role in the context of his remarkable book *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* (*Die Ästhetik des Hässlichen*). Rosenkranz' legacy on this score is not much discussed (certainly in Anglo-American philosophical circles), but its importance for the development of post-eighteenth-century aesthetics—in particular, for an aesthetics that stretches beyond the conventional concerns with the beautiful and the sublime—can hardly be overstated. After a presentation of Rosenkranz' project on the aesthetics of ugliness, this article examines his take on caricature and its relation to philosophy (as well as philosophy's relation to caricature), and then takes up some pressing contemporary questions that arise for caricature's use of stereotypes.

Keywords Caricature · Ugliness · Rosenkranz · Hegel

In the context of a volume devoted to the topic of humor and philosophy in the nineteenth century, it would be hard to ignore the importance of the art of caricature, which particularly developed and thrived in this period, or the work of the nineteenth-century idealist philosopher Karl Rosenkranz (1805–1879), who takes up a number of forms of humor, with caricature as the ultimate moment of his remarkable work *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* (*Die Ästhetik des Hässlichen*). Rosenkranz' legacy on this score is not much discussed (certainly in Anglo-American philosophical circles), but its importance for the development of post-eighteenth-century aesthetics—in particular, for an aesthetics that stretches beyond the conventional concerns with the beautiful and the sublime—can hardly be overstated.[1] Yet a contemporary

[1] *Die Ästhetik des Hässlichen* has recently been translated in full into English (Rosenkranz 2015). More broadly, the status of the ugly in aesthetics has provoked a number of reflections (Eco 2011; Adorno 1997; Goodman 1976; and Bayley 2013, among many others) which it would be interesting, if space allowed, to compare with Rosenkranz' views.

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_5

encounter with Rosenkranz' work raises some pressing questions about how to think about such difficult aesthetic topics as caricatures that use racist or sexist tropes or that portray religious figures and symbols in a way regarded by some believers as blasphemous. In what follows, I want to sketch briefly Rosenkranz' project, his take on caricature and its relation to philosophy (as well as philosophy's relation to caricature) and then look at some of the thorny questions that remain for a treatment of these issues.

5.1 Karl Rosenkranz and *The Aesthetics of Ugliness*

Although not well-known even among many students of German philosophy today, Karl Rosenkranz had a remarkable career among latter-day Hegelians in the mid-nineteenth century. Named to Kant's chair of philosophy in Königsberg in 1834 at the young age of 28, he was the author of numerous philosophical works, including his own *System of Science* (*System der Wissenschaft*) in 1850; the editor, along with Friedrich Wilhelm Schubert, of Kant's collected works; and responsible as well for several key publications which helped shape the contemporary understanding of Hegel's legacy—notably two biographies (*Hegels Leben* in 1844, still a trove of materials and reports used by Hegel scholars today, and *Hegel als deutscher Nationalphilosoph* in 1870). Rosenkranz' particularly strong interests in areas of what Hegel termed "Absolute Spirit" (art, religion and philosophy) led him also to publish in the philosophy of religion and in concrete topics in aesthetics and literary theory, including studies of figures such as Goethe and Diderot.

Originally drawn as a student at the University of Berlin to Schleiermacher's lectures rather than Hegel's, he came (partly through the influence of Henning, Hinrichs and Daub) to be a serious student of Hegel's works in the generation following the master's death.[2] David Friedrich Strauss counted him among the "Center," rather than among the "Left" or "Right" Hegelians; Rosenkranz' reply to the whole scheme of classification was the creation of a comedy, *The Center of Speculation* (*Das Centrum der Spekulation*), in which the goddess Minerva arranges a contest to determine (as it turns out, without success) who is most genuinely worthy of succeeding Hegel.[3] Politically, Rosenkranz was at least for a time involved in the post-1848 reform government in Berlin. Although some, like his contemporary Ruge, have attempted to portray him as a reactionary, more careful recent studies of his political engagement, for example by Margaret Rose, have linked him closely to progressive figures (Rose 2011).

In terms of his own work, it is for *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* that Rosenkranz is perhaps best known. Published in 1853, following his own *System der Wissenschaft*, *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* begins with a provocative question: "An aesthetics of

[2] An account of his experiences as a young student during this heady time in Berlin can be found in his memoir (Rosenkranz 1878).

[3] See Rosenkranz 1840 and also the discussion in Toews 1980, 203–4.

ugliness? And why not?" (Rosenkranz 2015, 25). Rosenkranz argues that if biologists must understand illness and ethicists evil, then philosophers of art must somehow come to terms with the ugly—as Rosenkranz calls it, "negative beauty." Beauty and ugliness are not, however, terms with equal weight in Rosenkranz' aesthetics: it is beauty which is the *self-sufficient* term in his view (it does not somehow *need* ugliness, even for variety's sake) and ugliness is *dependent on and relative to* beauty. (Unlike the Augustinian notion of evil, ugliness in Rosenkranz' view is not the mere absence of beauty, but rather a positive negation of it, one that turns against beauty in some way.)

Why should there be ugliness in art? If beauty is art's goal, as Rosenkranz thinks, isn't it a contradiction when we notice that art also produces ugliness? The answer to this question—premised on an important aesthetic starting-point for Hegel, also—is that art requires always a *sensual medium*. "Art indeed has of necessity a sensuous element—this is its limitation, against the freedom of the good and the true—but in this element it wants and should express the appearance of the idea in its totality. It belongs to the essence of the idea to leave open the existence of its appearance and thus to allow the possibility of the negative" (Rosenkranz 2015, 48). Against Hegel's portrayal of Greek art as the cynosure of shapely beauty, Rosenkranz notices how the Greeks themselves included such unbeautiful figures as cyclopes, satyrs and furies, as well as taking up harsh and repellent themes in tragic drama.

Rosenkranz' more particular philosophical stakes in this discussion make clear his connection to and difference from Hegel: on Rosenkranz' view, beauty is inherently connected to *freedom*, ugliness to *un-freedom*. "Freedom as self-determining necessity constitutes the ideal content of the beautiful" (Rosenkranz 2015, 58), whereas "[u]nfreedom as the lack of self-determination or as a contradiction of self-determination against the necessity of the essence of a subject gives rise to the ugly itself" (Rosenkranz 2015, 59).

Hegel had held that what is ugly, evil or repulsive could never sustain aesthetic interest on its own: "the purely negative is in itself dull and flat and therefore either leaves us empty or repels us, whether it be used as the motive of an action or simply as a means for producing the reaction of another motive… the devil in himself is a bad figure, aesthetically impracticable; for he is nothing but the father of lies and therefore an extremely prosaic person" (Hegel 1975, I.222). Rosenkranz accepts this much of Hegel: "[h]ell alone or even a devil alone" would not be aesthetically interesting to us," he agrees, and works which are "simply ugly" have been "unable to achieve the slightest popularity, whatever the exertion of spirit" (Rosenkranz 2015, 49).

But, against Hegel, Rosenkranz thinks that aesthetics *can* explore the relation between ugliness and beauty in a way that allows the relation of the two—and especially the reconciliatory aspect of the latter—to be employed. Given this inherent relation to beauty, Rosenkranz' aesthetics of the ugly has what some critics have seen as limitations in the intensity and range of its representations. While art "cannot avoid making ugliness" (Rosenkranz 2015, 48), the ugly which it produces "must be freed through art of all its heterogeneous excess and disturbing accident, and… submit to the general laws of the beautiful"; it is "not the ugly as such" that

causes our pleasure in a work of art, but "beauty overcoming its apostasy" (Rosenkranz 2015, 54): "an isolated representation of the ugly would contradict the concept of art" (Rosenkranz 2015, 51). (Rosenkranz' list of works that are simply ugly and therefore not capable of aesthetic appeal is interesting: "The French possess didactic poems concerning pornography and even syphilis, the Dutch, concerning flatulence and so forth, so that even the owners of such poems are ashamed to have them found in their possession" [Rosenkanz 2015, 49].)

These apparent restrictions on Rosenkranz' conception of aesthetically interesting ugliness stem in fact from a focus on the connection he sees between beauty and ugliness that he takes to be the aim of aesthetics: as Rose has argued, this is an aim not just of showing that aesthetics should concern itself with the *depiction* of the ugly but that it can offer something of a potential for *liberation* (Rose 2011, 240). In these terms, Rosenkranz' view has a number of interesting correlates in the history of aesthetics, including the distinct notion of a *comic* catharsis of the laughable that evidently underlay Aristotle's (now mostly lost) theory of comedy.[4]

Rosenkranz' concrete presentation of the ugly and its relation to beauty involves a development across three large modes: *formlessness*, *incorrectness* and *disfigurement or deformity*. In each case, he shows how the "rupture" (Rosenkranz uses here the familiar Hegelian term *Entzweiung*) involved in each of these modes might also allow some passage into the comical which could offer a "return" to the unity which must characterize a work of art. The underlying notion of art at work here is Rosenkranz' notion of art being determined by a "unity-in-difference" (*not*, *pace* earlier aestheticians, some kind of perfection); the upshot that follows from a consideration of these three modes of rupture within the overall unity is that comedy itself as the unity-restoring element of art is a creative artistic response to—and in fact would have been impossible without—ugliness in the first place.

And so in examining the formlessness of unending repetition, for example, Rosenkranz adduces examples of how repetition can, in the right circumstances, create a comic potential: Aristophanes in the *Frogs* has Aeschylus deliver a devastating criticism of his rival Euripides' lines by showing that the same silly phrase fits metrically at the end of many Euripidean lines. In considering various modes of stylistic and genre-related incorrectness in art, Rosenkranz argues that in the purposive hands of an artist it can prove comic: here he is attracted particularly to the famous menageries drawn by Grandville where, despite weird hybridizations of animal and human traits, one can discern a notably comic point, as in his remarkable sketch of humans with animal traits viewing a zoo full of animals with human traits (Fig. 5.1).

The final category of disfigurement or deformity (*Defiguration oder Verbildung*), to which he devotes by far the largest section of the book, Rosenkranz divides into the three further classifications of the *"mean"* or common (*das Gemeine*), the *repulsive* (*das Widrige*) and *caricature* (*die Caricatur*)—each of which moments is, in good German philosophical fashion, subdivided yet again at three additional levels. I won't bother here with a detailed laying-out of the entire substructure of these

[4] For the most complete attempt at a reconstruction of Aristotle's lost theory of comedy, which plays a role, among other things, in Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, see Janko's translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (1987) and Janko 1985.

Fig. 5.1 From J. J. Grandville, *Un autre monde* (Paris: Fournier, 1844)

modes of disfigurement,[5] but it's important to notice that, in the overall structure, Rosenkranz ingeniously (and intentionally in distinction from both Kant and Hegel) opposes each distortion with a *positive* aesthetic term: in the case of the mean, the

[5] Just to take an example in the first category: the mean includes the petty, the feeble and the low; the low the ordinary, the accidental and the crude; and the crude the obscene, the brutal and the frivolous.

sublime; in the case of the repulsive, the *pleasant*; and in the case of the caricature, the *beautiful*.[6] With an eye to our topic, caricature emerges as both a final and somehow synthetic category within this structure, which "sends forth the extremes of the mean and the repulsive, but in such a way that at the same time caricature allows us to look through to the sublime and the pleasant, the pleasant with the sublime, the mean with the sublime, the repulsive with the pleasant, and the nullity of the characterless void with absolute beauty" (Rosenkranz 2015, 118).

5.2 The Philosophy of Caricature

My focus in this chapter will be particularly on the role that Rosenkranz gives caricature in *The Aesthetics of Ugliness.* Rosenkranz wrote at a time when caricature had become a highly evolved European art, and clearly it was a topic to which he gave a good deal of attention, as attested by a note to the aesthetics section of his *System of Science* published 3 years before *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* appeared. Rosenkranz mentions there that he has for a long time been "collecting pieces" for an "atlas" that would help illustrate an *Aesthetics of Caricature* (a work which he ultimately never published under that name) with the intention of putting an "end to delicate sensibilities through the mediation of the visible" (Rosenkranz 2015, 305). It's in connection with this project of illustrating caricature that he makes the boldest claim for *humor*: it is "the *ultimate* in the metaphysics of beauty, because in my view humor, with divine cheer, *plays* also with seriousness, but in this play it can again run through all the steps of beauty up to the sublime" (Rosenkranz 2015, 305–6).

In what he does come to publish of his developing philosophy of caricature in the final section of the *Aesthetics of Ugliness*, Rosenkranz begins his discussion with the etymological origins of the word in the Italian *caricare* ("to overload," going back to a Latin word for "loading" or "charge"); the usual definition of caricature is therefore a form of "exaggeration of the characteristic." Although most accounts root the origin of caricature in an originally Italian artistic form, the German appropriation of caricature also has an interesting etymology, Rosenkranz notes: the German word for caricature is *Afterbildniss*, which stresses both, he thinks, the potential distortion in an image derived from (or constructed "after") something else, but also its potentially scatological origin (*der After*, as both Luther and Nietzsche were also eager to observe, being German for "arse").

Whether to his credit or not, Rosenkranz doesn't do much with the Germanic etymology, but he does question whether the notion that the exaggeration particular to caricature's Italian origins can simply be a form of distortion in size, either in the direction of enlargement or miniaturization. Swift's Brobdingnagians and Lilliputians, for example, aren't caricatures, he argues: "[e]xaggeration alone is an

[6] Thus, in contrast to Kant's opposition of these terms, Rosenkranz takes the sublime to be "one extreme" of the manifestation of beauty, "through which it turns into the infinite"; the pleasant is the other extreme, where beauty's manifestation is finite. "Absolute beauty" (Rosenkranz' term) is "just as much sublime as pleasant," and hence brings together both dignity and grace.

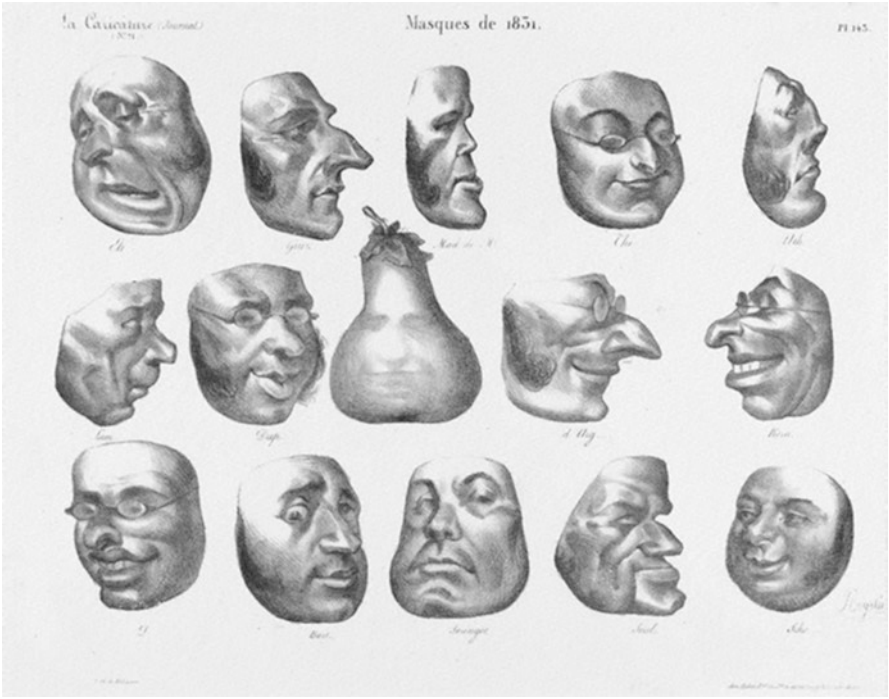

Fig. 5.2 From Honoré Daumier, *Mesques de 1831*, *La Caricature* (Paris, 1831)

indefinite, relative concept" that does not ground the notion of caricature (Rosenkranz 2015, 234).

Since the mere notion of exaggeration thus doesn't quite get us to a philosophical definition of caricature, Rosenkranz turns instead for the concept of caricature to his notion of the *unity* of an artwork as crucial to its beauty and to the *incongruity* in that unity which caricature creates. While the disproportion initially cancels our experience of the work's unity, it is distinctive of caricature that it forces us "subliminally" to perceive the proportional form against which it works [*Die Disproportion nöthigt uns, immerfort die proportionale Gestalt zu subintelligiren*] (Rosenkranz 2015, 234). The "secret of the generation of caricature," he holds, is the "false dependency on a moment of the whole," one wherein a certain harmony can nevertheless result: in caricature, "the crazy tendency… of one point creeps into the other parts as well" (Rosenkranz 2015, 234–5). (Daumier's caricatures are a good example: see Fig. 5.2.)

What emerges from this consideration of unity and incongruity is what Rosenkranz considers a better candidate for a philosophical definition of caricature: "the *self-destruction of the ugly* through the *appearance of freedom and endlessness* erupting from the *distortion of the ideal*." Rosenkranz' example: "An unpleasant physiognomy is as such not a caricature; but when a face seems to sprout forth as just one of its parts—when it seems to be all jaw, all nose, all forehead, etc.—there distortion arises; a person with a so-called strawberry nose makes us search, so to speak, for the other parts of his face" (Rosenkranz 2015, 118). This notion of the

self-destruction of the ugly is thus crucial to Rosenkranz' conception of the power of caricature. Caricature, he says (Rosenkranz 2015, 233), is "the peak in the conception of ugliness, but for that very reason, through its definite reflexive relation to the positive counter-image it distorts, it constitutes the transition to the comical."

In considering how Rosenkranz has articulated this definition of caricature, it's interesting to compare the (exceptionally brief) mentions of the topic in Hotho's version of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, where Hegel seems limited to a notion of "exaggeration" and "distortion" rather than the broader philosophical claim about caricature that Rosenkranz suggests. Nonetheless, it seems clear that Rosenkranz used this brief discussion as something of a launching-point for his more wide-ranging account of the significance of caricature. In the first passage, the notion of caricature comes up in the *Lectures'* discussion of A.L. Hirt's concept of the "characteristic": Hirt's definition is said to "cover caricature and the like, too, for after all what is caricatured may be a characteristic; only one must say at once on the other side that in caricature the specific character is exaggerated [*zur Übertreibung gesteigert ist*] and is, as it were, a superfluity of the characteristic [*ein Überfluss des Charakteristischen*]." Moreover, "caricature and the like may also be the characterizing of the ugly, which is certainly a distortion [*ein Verzerren*]…" (Hegel 1975, I.18–19).

In his account of caricature's aesthetic potential, Rosenkranz sketches the following elements of good caricature: it should be *playful* (and thus have a mischief about it, rather than a tendentious kind of malice); it should not be motivated by a "limited intention to annoy or injure," but should be sufficiently "*sharp and funny*"; and it should have an organic development that emerges from an *inner conceptual irony* (eschewing "symbolic padding" that prohibits one from holding onto "the point from which the distortion of the form departs, developing from the inside out as the real irony of the concept") (Rosenkranz 2015, 247). His "good list" of caricaturists who have achieved something like this playful and ironic sense of mischief includes (among others): Aristophanes, Menander, Horace, Lucian, Calderón, Shakespeare, Ariosto, Cervantes, Rabelais, Fischart, Swift, Boz, Tieck, Jean Paul, Molière, Voltaire, Gutzkow, Brueghel, Teniers, Callot, Grandville, Hogarth and Gavarni. (In terms of the individual forms of art in which caricature can appear, it's interesting to notice that Rosenkranz' list includes both visual and poetic arts, with a higher representation of poets.)

As many of Rosenkranz' examples from these figures show, successful caricature requires a concrete imagination, not merely an abstract point of ridicule: caricature

> no longer has its measure only in a general concept, but rather demands the determinate relation to an *already individualized concept*, which can have a very general significance, a great scope of application, and yet must come out of the sphere of mere conceptuality. The concept of the family, of the state, of dance, of painting, of greed, etc., cannot as such be caricatured. In order to see the prototype of the distorted image, there must step in between its concept and the distortion at least that individualization which Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason* called the *schema*. (Rosenkranz 2015, 235).

Although this point about individualization is true for all caricature, Rosenkranz nonetheless outlines three basic modes of the development of caricature that move from the most individual to the broader in scope: *portrayal*, *symbolization* and *idealization*. In *portrayal*, there is a limited focus on an individual in a way that risks being merely personal; caricature of this sort "seldom rises to cheer and harmlessness," Rosenkranz says. In *symbolization*, the caricature's distortion is already more general (Rosenkranz envisions here figures like "John Bull" that represent a nationality). But the highest form of caricature—*idealization*, which stretches to the *fantastic*—can involve an extraordinary freedom and boldness in its treatment of theme. It is this last form which Rosenkranz thinks particularly has the potential to rise to the highest level (he mentions Tieck, Jean Paul and the contemporary Viennese theater as particular examples). These issues of individualization versus abstract concern are of particular interest when Rosenkranz turns to an issue which may at first seem surprising for a discussion in the context of an aesthetic of the ugly: the caricature of philosophy itself, to which I will briefly turn before looking at some of the difficult questions that Rosenkranz' account raises.

5.3 The Caricature of Philosophy

Rosenkranz' philosophical treatment of caricature at the end of *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* contains a number of striking examples of figures from the world of philosophy. Given his position on the necessary individualization required for caricature, Rosenkranz stresses that if philosophy is to appear in caricature, the artist must focus on a particular philosopher such as Socrates, Rousseau or (yes, even) Hegel: "Philosophy, in general, cannot be caricatured, a philosopher on the other hand, very well" (Rosenkranz 2015, 236). If we look more closely at the role of these individual philosophers—particularly Socrates—in Rosenkranz' discussion, a question emerges about whether Rosenkranz sees a particular connection between philosophy and caricature as a mode of art.

The larger realm of education and culture offers much of interest to caricature, as Rosenkranz makes clear in his discussion of "involuntary" (as opposed to "artistic" caricature), offering a list from the "world of real phenomena" caricatures which include not only "knights of industry" and "eternally eighteen-year-old girls," but predominantly figures that are drawn from the pretensions associated with education and academic life: "precocious children, pedants of learnedness, pseudo-philosophers, pseudo-reformers of the state and the church, pseudo-geniuses," and "overeducated intellectuals." When he turns to philosophy more particularly, however, Rosenkranz focuses his treatment on Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates:

> Aristophanes in his *Clouds* ridicules non-philosophy, sophism, the unjust Logos. As [a] distorted image of the philosopher he deploys Socrates. This Socrates, who steals cloaks on the Palestra, who calculates the flea's leap, who teaches how to make the crooked straight, who in order to be closer to the ether, floats through the air suspended in his study, which is a cheese basket, who dupes his disciples, is indeed not the same Socrates with whom he

> celebrated enthusiastic symposia. But from one point of view he *is* the same Socrates, for his form, his bare feet, his staff and beard, his manner of dialecticking, all this Aristophanes has borrowed from him and thus created a real caricature… For Aristophanes, Socrates was the schema, the transition to poetic individualization. (Rosenkranz 2015, 236)

Notice that Rosenkranz here gives Aristophanes credit for holding *sophistry* (and *not* philosophy) up to ridicule, but that it is the individual figure of the philosopher *Socrates* who makes that artistic sketch stick in the public imagination: "Socrates possessed sufficient philosophy and urbanity [*Philosophie und Urbanität genug*] to attend the premiere of the *Clouds* and even to stand up in the theater, so as to make the comparison easier for the public" (Rosenkranz 2015, 236). Socrates' *appearance* in the theater emphasizes precisely an issue of philosophical perplexity that was of great concern for Rosenkranz (much as it was for Hegel as the author of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*): the disparity between the *essence* of (true) philosophy and its (necessary) *appearance* on the world stage, alongside many other rival and false claims of knowledge. "Caricature must represent the idea in the form of the non-idea, the essence in the perversion of its appearance" (Rosenkranz 2015, 247).

In his defense of caricature, Rosenkranz also mentions Socrates' famous comment to Aristophanes and the tragic poet Agathon at the end of the *Symposium* about tragedy and comedy:

> One hears caricature spoken of as if it is a very subordinate achievement of art, as if only minor talents could busy themselves with it and as if occupation with it must corrupt one's taste. This banal opinion only has a point with regard to bad caricature, for the good kind is in truth just as hard as—all that is good and beautiful. We have to consider that, as Plato says already in the *Symposium*, the best tragic poet is also the best comic poet, that is, that the comic and the tragic spout from the same depth of spirit and demand the same force. (Rosenkranz 2015, 247).

Rosenkranz (like Hegel) notices that it was Aristophanes above all who seems to have determined Plato's understanding of the task of characterization of Socrates *as a philosopher* in the dialogues. Even stepping away from the more mimetic tasks of the *Symposium*, in the legal forum of the *Apology*, it is the caricaturist who plays the role of the "first accuser" and only later do the aggrieved parties who actually brought Socrates into court get the opportunity to characterize Socrates. The trajectory of these claims about the caricature of philosophy point toward a concern that will re-emerge in the final section: Rosenkranz' notion that, in the end, caricature can offer a significant kind of artistic *objectivity*—above all in the potential it affords for putting the particular perspective of characters it treats in the light of the world around them.

5.4 (Aesthetic, Political and Religious) Questions for Rosenkranz' Account

As we've seen, Rosenkranz makes strong claims for the philosophical importance of caricature (and of caricature's role in shaping philosophical discussion), but there are aspects of his treatment of caricature that make contemporary readers pause. I

Fig. 5.3 From George Catlin, *Die Indianer Nord-Amerikas*, trans. Heinrich Berghaus (Leipzig: Carl Muquardt, 1848)

want to look briefly at two examples of Rosenkranz' treatments that have disturbed critics, one from visual art and one from poetry.

The first is a print entitled "Return from Washington" (Fig. 5.3) that appears in George Catlin's *Indians of North America*, which Rosenkranz discusses in the context of the point we noticed above about caricature's exploitation of differences in culture. Having insisted that "education delivers the most felicitous material for distortion in the imperfection of its beginnings or in the overripeness of its final stages," he takes up an example intended to show that caricatures can "often provide for us a very painful sight, in that we see how a strong, relatively beautiful existence is seized by a foreign cultivatedness, destroyed and miseducated into a horrible, ridiculous grimace" (Rosenkranz 2015, 249). His initial example is the rendering in the German translation of Catlin's book of "an Assineboine chief Wi-jun-jon, who came to Washington in the full regalia of his magnificent national costume" but returned from his trip to the nation's capital wearing a beaver hat, a gold-laced coat with epaulettes and new waterproof boots that "made his gait shaky and unsure":

> A large silver medal was suspended from his neck by a blue ribbon, and across his right shoulder passed a wide belt, supporting by his side a broad sabre. On his hands were a pair of white kid gloves, in the right he held a large fan and in the left a blue umbrella. In this fashion was poor Wi-jun-jon decked out on his return from Washington! The sabre drags between the hero's legs; he puffs at a cigar and from the opening of both coat pockets the neck of a whiskey bottle peeps out. (Rosenkranz 2015, 250)

Rosenkranz ends his discussion of the Catlin image, however, by looking for some remedy that caricature can play by means of cultural *self-critique*: "if art should handle such contradictions [as those in the Catlin drawing]," Rosenkranz argues, it must *also* "have the irony to ridicule the shortcomings of culture itself" (Rosenkranz 2015, 252). As an example of caricature which can turn the irony back at the expense of the supposedly cultured perspective, Rosenkranz considers some caricatures published after the French took possession of the Marquesas islands:

> On one sheet we indeed see a noble Marquesan in boots, but otherwise only in a shirt, carrying a club, and intending to come out of a hut through whose door he sees his wife, outside, in a tender *tête à tête* with a French fop. But another Frenchman holds him back and tries to remove his club. "Unhappy man! What would you do?
>
> – Parbleu! One swipe at my wife's lover.
>
> – That would be to ruin your reputation. Follow European fashion, send a card to your rival, tomorrow morning you draw on the field, the gentleman will blow out your brains—and at least you will have complete satisfaction!"

> On another sheet we see a victim of fashion, forced into white stripped leggings, yellow *gilet* (waistcoat), stiff collar and a tight frock. "But, tailor, it is impossible for me to move arms and legs in this outfit you are putting on me.
>
> – That's what it takes. That's precisely what it takes. In Paris, the rich people do not dress any differently; the more uncomfortable one is in one's clothes, the more one promenades, to be at one's ease!"

Here Rosenkranz emphasizes that, if caricature has the potential for ethnic stereotype (here the French disdain for the supposed backwardness of the Marquesans) it can also turn the tables against those wanting to employ such stereotypes by pointing up the peculiar "civilized" habits of the putatively cultured (e.g., dueling or the wearing of fashionable but uncomfortable clothes).

The second example I want to examine in this last section concerns Rosenkranz' assessment of Heinrich Heine's poem "Disputation." In his discussion of the category of the "frivolous" (*die Frivolität*), a subcategory of the "crude," itself a subcategory of the low and the mean, Rosenkranz takes up a moment in Heine's poem in which a monk says that Christ is his "favorite dish" ("Tastes much better than Leviathan/ With the white garlic sauce/ Cooked probably by Satan") (Rosenkranz 2015, 168). These verses, says Rosenkranz, are "simply frivolous and not to be justified by the meanness of the fanaticism that is supposed to be depicted here": Heine's "immeasurable" frivolity lies in these "cold words, which pass over a religious mystery as if it were a culinary object." But this assessment is quickly followed by a specific attack on Heine's Jewishness: "One cannot demand of Heine that he make the Sacrament of the Last Supper to a moment of his own faith; only

poetry may demand from him that he does not shower with ridicule what is holy to thousands of the hearers he addresses" (Rosenkranz 2015, 168).

In justifying this line of criticism against Heine, Rosenkranz insists that "we abstract here wholly from the religious standpoint, we only apply the aesthetic yardstick and according to this we condemn these verses as bad verses" (Rosenkranz 2015, 168). But the more pressing question might be what conditions lie behind the availability of the "aesthetic" as an exclusively secular "yardstick" for the purposes of examining caricature. It's interesting to speculate, for example, about how Rosenkranz might have viewed some of the more famous caricatures of recent times, the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, which likewise sparked religious anger at apparent frivolity. (To his credit, Rosenkranz was certainly aware that the secular and the aesthetic could not simply be viewed as any kind of static category removed from shifts in political and religious perspective: in his *Hegel als deutscher Nationalphilosoph*, he remarks how his own age, as opposed to Hegel's, had become more political and less characterized by a "living" attachment to art.[7] *Our* own age, by comparison to Rosenkranz', appears to be one in which the aesthetic is even more under pressure by politico-religious concerns.)

In considering examples such as these, Rosenkranz acknowledges that because caricature can hang "closely with the struggles of parties in the state, church and arts," various forms of political and religious hate or prejudice will necessarily play "a great part" in caricature and satire. But he emphasizes that the *artistic* value of caricature rooted in such hate is "extremely limited," and his own solution is to move to the "higher" form of caricature where personal satire is left behind in an appeal to the fantastic and the ideal, where art can "strip from distortion all ethical anger" (Rosenkranz 2015, 256) and where self-parody is even more clearly enabled.

Rosenkranz' final example of such idealized or fantastic caricature at the end of his discussion in *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* comes from the Viennese theater that he takes to be so exemplary for contemporary satire and caricature: Ferdinand Raimund's play *The King of the Alps and the Misanthrope*. It's not by chance that Rosenkranz ends his account of caricature, I think, with a work about misanthropy (and I should add that the German title connects us a little more vividly to the question of hatred: *Der Alpenkönig und der Menschenfeind*). In this play about a hater-of-humanity, a fairy takes the place of the misanthropic figure, who now starts to complain about how exaggeratedly he is being caricatured. "How true, how deep, how philosophical, we want to say is this humor!" Rosenkranz writes. "If we all could see ourselves once so truly objectively, would we not also be of the opinion that we indeed appear to ourselves, but not quite how we really are, rather a trifle exaggerated?" (Rosenkranz 2015, 257).

[7] "Our age has become political. The aesthetic interest has retreated behind the great impulse which the state has received since the July revolution and still more since that of February. Our aesthetic culture is now so moderate that we are scarcely able to regulate facts of daily life aesthetically. In Hegel's time it was otherwise. Although the greatest political catastrophes were then taking place, interest in the productions of art and in aesthetic theories was very general and vital" (Rosenkranz 1874, 91).

Rosenkranz' category of idealization and the fantastic may offer a way for caricature to turn against some of the rankest prejudices which it can itself inspire—for example, the ethnic stereotypes in the examples above—but the question still remains: is it a problem that we are bound, if we stick to Rosenkranz' terms, to view such examples in the light of the dynamic between freedom and unfreedom? Aren't there simply "ugly" impulses behind many caricatures that can't be resolved in a move toward the ideal and the fantastic?

It's interesting to compare Rosenkranz' view here with other writers who have taken up the difficult question of caricature's social function and potential for both good and harm. In particular, I'm reminded of another writer who considered the comic treatment of misanthropy, George Meredith. Meredith's praise of the wit Molière directs against his misanthrope is offered in the context of a distinction between comedy and satire that may not quite overlap with Rosenkranz' terms, but the appeal that both make to the intellectual is striking. For Meredith, comedy is by its nature a "humor of the mind," and the gentle warmth and social importance of that humor make it different from what he takes to be the colder and more brutal slap of satire (targeted not at the mind, Meredith thinks, but at the back or the face). "You can estimate your capacity for comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love without loving them less; and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes" (Meredith 1956, 42). It would take more space than I have here to explore the differences between Meredith's comic treatment of the misanthrope theme and Rosenkranz' more caricature-focused one—the former seems to stress a kind of social correction and the latter a more individualistic awareness of the role of exaggeration—but it is striking that the appeal in both cases is to an essentially recognitive (and perhaps recognizably philosophical) task, concerned with seeing ourselves "as we really are."

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Chapter 6
Arthur Schopenhauer: Humor and the Pitiable Human Condition

Robert Wicks

Abstract An 1814 entry in Schopenhauer's early manuscripts states that "to a certain extent the greatest problems lying quite close to us are laughing, crying, and music." To show the importance of laughter in Schopenhauer's thought, this essay develops his notebook entry by considering how his accounts of laughter, crying, and music inform his views on the human condition. Schopenhauer's account of laughter as the upshot of perceiving an incongruity between our general conception of a thing or event and the actual perceptual qualities of the thing or event to which the concept refers is integrated with (a) his analysis of crying as essentially the expression self-pity and (b) his assertion of music's essential seriousness. "Humor" – a species of laughter that recognizes the "seriousness concealed behind a joke" – is shown to apply to the incongruity between the respective interpretations of life as a tragedy and as a comedy to yield an overall conception of the human condition as akin to a theatrical farce, where genuine heroism is impossible and where pity is the appropriate sentiment. Nietzschean laughter is introduced for contrast: Nietzsche's is a triumphant laughter expressive of his success in the fierce struggle to overcome his deep pity for the human condition.

Keywords Schopenhauer · Incongruity theory · Laughter · Comedy · Humor · Tragedy · Crying · Music · Heroism · Pity · Nietzsche · Hegel

In a notebook entry from 1814, written when he was 26 years old, Arthur Schopenhauer made the following observation:

> To a certain extent the greatest problems lying quite close to us are laughing, crying,[1] and music.
>
> Every full-toned piece of *music* is an analogue of the world. Here the *bass* seems to me to represent *inorganic* nature on which everything rests and out of which everything rises. The higher notes, however, are the organism and so on ever upwards to the high principle

[1] The word "weeping" [*Weinen*] in the published translation has here been replaced with "crying."

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_6

> leading note that sings the *melody*; this note is man. The analogue between *man's life* and the *melody* seems to me to be found in the fact that both are a whole which through association and relation manifests itself in constant succession. *Harmony* stands for the rest of the world from the animal to the crystal. Its character is that it does not develop itself in succession, but stays at all times regular and uniform, determined by a certain law and without freedom. (Schopenhauer 1988a, 200)

Those who are familiar with Schopenhauer's theory of music will recognize a substantial element of it in this early notebook entry, which he elaborates further in *The World as Will and Representation*, Book III, §52, published four years later. The entry leads us to anticipate that when Schopenhauer develops his account of music, he will relate music to laughter and crying. It is consequently a small surprise that aside from saying nothing more about laughing and crying in the notebook entry or in the entries immediately following, he altogether excludes from music that which is "laughable" [*das Lächerliche*] in *The World as Will and Representation*:

> The inexpressible depth of all music, by virtue of which it floats past us as a paradise quite familiar and yet eternally remote, and is so easy to understand and yet so inexplicable, is due to the fact that it reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being, but entirely without reality and remote from its pain. In the same way, the seriousness essential to it and wholly excluding the ludicrous [*das Lächerliche*] from its direct and peculiar province is to be explained from the fact that its object is not the representation, in regard to which deception and ridiculousness [*Lächerlichkeit*] alone are possible, but that this object is directly the will; and this is essentially the most serious of all things, as being that on which all depends. (Schopenhauer 1969, 264)

Schopenhauer states here that music is essentially not funny, and implies that if it ever is funny, then it is not being listened to properly, since funniness contradicts music's seriousness as a copy of the will as "thing-in-itself," where the latter is understood to be a driving, suffering-producing impulse. A way to understand Schopenhauer's claim about music is to invoke Kant's account of pure judgments of taste, which require that when judging an object aesthetically, we do not consider the object's kind in the judgment, but attend simply to the object's form. As applied to music and Schopenhauer, we would accordingly attend simply to the music's sonic patterns of tensions and resolutions as they are felt to embody the forms and flow of human emotions.

This contrasts with listening to music in terms of standardized musical categories such as "classical," "romantic," "modern," etc. – i.e., what Kant would describe as an attitude appropriate for making judgments of adherent or dependent beauty, where the aesthetic judgment adheres to or depends upon the kind of thing being judged – since these categorizations introduce the possibility of departing from the norm in an entertaining parody, for instance.[2] Schopenhauer maintains that music excludes levity, presumably when listened to properly, so it cannot be listened to with standardized musical categories in mind.

[2] An example would be Sergei Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* (1917) which playfully mimics the style of Joseph Haydn (1732–1809).

In the second volume of the second edition of *The World as Will and Representation*, published a quarter of a century after the first edition, Schopenhauer reiterates his view that music is essentially serious:

> For only the passions, the movements of the will, exist for it [music], and, like God, it sees only the heart. It never assimilates the material [matters of daily life], and therefore, when it accompanies even the most ludicrous [*lächerlichsten*] and extravagant farces of comic opera, it still preserves its essential beauty, purity, and sublimity; and its fusion with those incidents cannot drag it down from its height to which everything ludicrous [*alles Lächerliche*] is really foreign. Thus the deep and serious significance of our existence hangs over the farce and the endless miseries of human life, and does not leave it for a moment. (Schopenhauer 1958, 449)

The above passages invite the question of whether Schopenhauer's theory of laughter – understood as a theory of "what is laughable," i.e., situations, contexts, things, events, rather than ticklings and other physiologically caused laughing – can illuminate his claim that music properly excludes laughability, for if the latter is so, it remains a puzzle why Schopenhauer closely associated music with laughter and crying in his early notebook remark from 1814.[3]

6.1 Schopenhauer's Theory of What is Laughable

To address the above question, let us consider one of Schopenhauer's summaries of his theory of laughter:

> According to my explanation, put forward in volume one, the origin of the laughable is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it. Accordingly, the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a concept and the real object thought through it, and hence between what is abstract and what is perceptive. The greater and more unexpected this incongruity in the apprehension of the person laughing, the more violent will be his laughter. Accordingly, in everything that excites laughter it must always be possible to show a concept and a particular, that is to say, a thing or event, which can of course be subsumed under that concept, and this be thought through it, yet which in another and predominating respect does not belong under it at all, but differs strikingly from everything else thought through that concept. (Schopenhauer 1958, 91-92)

Schopenhauer presents an "incongruity theory" of what is laughable, and over the years it has become influential to those who theorize on this subject. The incongruity theory is standardly contrasted with the "relief theory" and the "superiority theory" whose respective representatives include Thomas Hobbes and Sigmund

[3] Schopenhauer presents his account of laughter initially in §13 of *The World as Will and Representation, Volume I* (1818), and develops it in the second volume of the second edition (1844) in chapter VIII, "*Zur Theorie des Lächerlichen*." The chapter title in the second volume can be translated as "on (or towards) the theory of what is laughable." The essay will sometimes refer to Schopenhauer's "theory of laughter" for expository smoothness, but this should be understood more precisely as Schopenhauer's "theory of what is laughable."

Freud.[4] Our concern here is not to review and consider the respective degrees of comprehensiveness and plausibility of these three theories, but rather to explore the incongruity theory as Schopenhauer expresses it for the sake of understanding his remarks about the relationship between laughter, crying, and music, and more generally, the relationship between these and his assessment of the human condition as a pitiable one.

With respect to theories of laughter, the incongruity theory presently prevails, although none of the three competing theories can account for all examples of laughter, which include laughing from tickling or the ingestion of substances such as nitrous oxide or hallucinogens, laughter at burps and other bodily sounds, socially divisive laughing "at" people, socially integrative laughing "with" people, mindless clowning, and laughter used as a vehicle for social criticism. Some kinds of laughter combine incongruity, superiority, and relief, as we will see. There are also non-standard examples of laughter, such as laughing from embarrassment or nervousness, where the situation appears to contain nothing funny and nothing at which one is laughing. Exactly why we laugh in many of these cases remains unclear.

With respect to theories of laughter per se, we can make a precautionary observation. Just as tears can issue from emotional states that are very different from one another, such as intense laughing and intense sadness without a common cause and significance for the outwardly shown tears, laughter can issue from emotional states that are very different from one another, such as feelings of superiority and feelings of embarrassment, without a common cause and significance for the laughter. If the idea of formulating a general theory of "tears" is for this reason ill-conceived, then so might be that of formulating a general theory of "laughter."

We have been referring to Schopenhauer's theory as one of "laughter," due to a terminological conflict between Schopenhauer's definition of "humor" and standard word usage. Schopenhauer uses the word "humor" to identify a kind of laughter – one to be described below – that is far more specific than is conveyed by the standard meaning of "humor," so it creates confusion to refer to his theory as a "theory of humor." In German, he uses the word *lächerlich* which is associated with a cluster of English words such as "laughable," "ludicrous," "ridiculous," "preposterous," "foolish," "silly," and "absurd." Since he also uses *lächerlich* to refer to what is mildly funny, it is also too circumscribed to characterize his theory as a "theory of the ludicrous," as do R. B. Haldane[5] and J. Kemp (Schopenhauer 1909a), as well as E. J. F. Payne (Schopenhauer 1958), in their translations of Schopenhauer's works. It is perhaps best described as a theory of what is laughable, where this is understood

[4] See Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) and Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905).

[5] It is worth noting that Richard Burdon Haldane (1856–1928) had an illustrious career in politics, serving in the United Kingdom as the Secretary of State for War between 1905 and 1912, and as Lord Chancellor between 1912 and 1915, and again in 1924. He studied philosophy with Herman Lotze in 1874 at the University of Göttingen, which was the university Schopenhauer first attended. Haldane's translation of Schopenhauer (with J. Kemp) (Schopenhauer 1909a,b,c) appeared when he was 27 years old. Elizabeth Haldane (1862–1937), well-known for her translation of Descartes's philosophical works (1911) and Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy (1892–96), was Richard Haldane's sister.

to refer to objects or events where the laughter involved results from some cognitive processing. We might also call it a theory of "funniness" in the "ha-ha" sense of the word.[6]

Although Schopenhauer's references to laughter sometimes contain aspects consistent with the relief and superiority theories – situations where laughing appears to be the expenditure of excess energy or ones where laughter expresses our superiority to others – his general account is an incongruity theory that associates a species of laughter with a species of cognitive dissonance:

> In every case [of this cognitive kind], *laughter* results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. (Schopenhauer 1969, 59)

As Schopenhauer formulates it, when there is laughter of the kind related to jokes, comedy, and ordinarily funny events or situations, it is due to a perceived incongruity between the cluster of expectations connected with a thing or event conceived under some concept, and the actual qualities of that thing or event in a particular situation that contradict those expectations.[7] He considers it to be analogous to a reflex action, where the stimulus is intellectual, rather than physical. For example, by referring to an animal as a "cat" one expects it to act like a cat, so one immediately laughs upon seeing the cat sitting patiently behind a plate on the kitchen table as a person would, looking up as if it expects to receive some food. A lawyer introduces his notorious criminal client in court as "this honorable man," at which point some of the criminal's friends chuckle. A proud and dignified president trips clumsily on a stairway when boarding an airliner, and a group of reporters watching from a distance all laugh.

Crucial to these examples are the background beliefs of those who laugh. The criminal's angry victim might not laugh at the lawyer's characterization of the man as honorable, finding the incongruity offensive, and the president's public relations chief, as well as the president, might feel embarrassed by the stairway episode. The background beliefs of the people who are perceiving the incongruity are always constitutive elements in the explanation of the laughter. In these cases, there is always the question of whether a person perceives an incongruity to begin with. If so, then there is the question of whether the perceived incongruity is itself regarded as funny.

An example of Schopenhauer's own laughter illustrates this. Schelling and Goethe, along with architects of later generations, have said poetically that

[6] Peter Lewis proposes that we define the scope of Schopenhauer's theory of laughter as covering all and only "intentional laughter," viz., "laughter directed at some object" (Lewis 2005). This effectively excludes cases of physiologically induced laughter as well as psychologically-grounded hysterical, embarrassed, and nervous laughter, since none involve laughing "at' anything. Referring to Schopenhauer's theory as a theory of funniness in the "ha-ha" sense of the word, as here suggested, intends to be compatible with Lewis's proposal.

[7] It is not that the very incongruity between concepts (as universals) and perceptions (as individuals) is itself funny, as some have claimed (Leite 2015). If that were the case, since we are always applying concepts to perceptions, life would be far more funny than it actually is.

"architecture is frozen music," intending to express an insight into the commonality between these two arts. They perceived no incongruity in the phrase. Schopenhauer, however, laughs, saying that "it would be ridiculous [*lächerlich*] to try to put the most limited and feeble of all the arts on an equal footing in essential respects with the most extensive and effective" (Schopenhauer 1958, 454). His hierarchy of the arts locates architecture at the most rudimentary and mundane level, since it deals with raw physical forces, and music at the opposite end as a subtle metaphysical expression of ultimate reality. When he hears the phrase "architecture is frozen music," he laughs because it sounds as if someone were to describe a pair of dogs viciously fighting over a bone as "rudimentary diplomacy." There is an insight about diplomacy in the comparison, since diplomats fight over natural resources such as oil, but comparing instinct-driven dogs to socially polished diplomats is also laughable. With Schopenhauer's hierarchy of the arts in the background, the thought that architecture is frozen music can be funny.

Here is an additional example that applies Schopenhauer's incongruity theory of laughter to laughter itself. Suppose the face of person who is laughing hilariously is distorted to a point where it no longer looks like the person in their usual and composed normality. Suppose one laughs at the person who is laughing because they look so wildly uncharacteristic. The Schopenhauerian analysis would not be that one's laughter is the expression of a gloating superiority over the person's lack of self-control, as the superiority theory would say, but that one is reacting to an incongruity between one's concept of the person's normal appearance and the person's hilariously laughing appearance at that moment.

If one has a philosophical mentality, it could be said that this example has us laughing at laughter itself as a kind of mischievous trickster who makes some people look laughable when they laugh. If one chuckles at this idea of laughter itself being a trickster, then the Schopenhauerian analysis – somewhat extended, since we have here an incongruity between two concepts of the same subject, a familiar one and a less familiar one that comes as a surprise – could be that the laughter results from an incongruity between one's normal conception of laughter, which does not personify it, and an alternative, mythological conception of laughter as a trickster who plays jokes on people who laugh hilariously by making them look funny.

6.2 Laughter, Crying, Music, and the Pitiable Human Condition

Schopenhauer's incongruity theory of laughter has so far been considered in a standard way by setting forth its contours and providing a series of illustrative examples. In the course of this, laughter as a phenomenon has been considered in relative isolation, without associating it with any other activities. We can now expand the inquiry to include some related phenomena, since Schopenhauer's notebook excerpt that associates music with laughter and crying signals a wider approach.

Consider crying. Laughter and crying can be conceived of as opposing behaviors, and, in some contexts, complementary behaviors. They can come very close to one another in their physiological effects, as when one laughs so hard that tears roll down one's cheeks. This resembles how pleasure, when it becomes very intense, can transform into pain, although in the pleasure-pain case the two in fact blend, since intense pleasure hurts. When tears of laughter roll down one's cheeks, however, one is definitely not crying. A connection between laughing and crying is furthermore indicated by how comedy and tragedy have come down through the ages as a complementary pair of theatrical types, all of which suggests that it is worthwhile to consider theories of laughter and theories of crying in conjunction with one another. Before doing so, let us first consider Schopenhauer's theory of laughter and his theory of music in relation to the alleged seriousness of music, judged as pure sound. This will help inform the relationship between laughter and crying as it bears on Schopenhauer's understanding of the human condition.

On the face of things, one can explain music's seriousness through Schopenhauer's theory of laughter. If laughter arises from an incongruity between a concept and an individual, and if music is appreciated as pure sound, then the musical experience will include no concepts that could generate incongruities and will consequently be serious by default.

Slightly eroding this rationale is Schopenhauer's account of seriousness in its direct relation to laughter, which he expresses in terms of concepts and individuals:

> The opposite of laughter and joking is *seriousness*. This, accordingly, consists in the consciousness of the perfect agreement and congruity of the concept, or the idea, with what is perceptive, with reality. The serious person is convinced that he conceives things as they are, and that they are as he conceives them. This is just why the transition from profound seriousness to laughter is particularly easy, and can be brought about by trifles. For the more perfect that agreement, assumed by seriousness, appears to be, the more easily is it abolished, even by a trifling incongruity unexpectedly coming to light. Therefore the more capable of complete seriousness a person is, the more heartily can he laugh. (Schopenhauer 1958, 99)

The above account of seriousness cannot explain the allegedly thoroughgoing seriousness of music as pure sound, since it relies upon the same components – concepts and individuals – that are at the foundation of the theory of laughter. The only difference is that in the case of seriousness in direct relation to laughter, there is a congruity rather than an incongruity between concept and individual.

A possible conclusion is that music is better described as neither laughable nor serious, but as independent of these attitudes. Nonetheless, assuming that if one's attitude is not self-consciously laughing, then one is serious "by default," then seriousness would apply to the experience of music, although independently of Schopenhauer's above characterization of seriousness, which for consistency's sake cannot be regarded as fully comprehensive.

Independently of his account of seriousness as the congruity between concepts and perceptions, Schopenhauer states that music is serious because it is an immediate copy of the core of reality or the "thing-in-itself," namely, will as a blind impulse.

Since he describes the will as thing-in-itself as a "one" that is beyond the distinction between "one" and "many," it is a uniform being with no room for incongruity, and as such, no room for laughability in terms of his theory of laughter.

Moreover, Schopenhauer regards the suffering in the world as a manifestation of will, and consequently characterizes will as a morally repulsive energy. If one adheres to a moral attitude as Schopenhauer does, then one would not find this suffering-producing energy to be fundamentally laughable or entertaining.

Schopenhauer's characterization of seriousness in direct relation to laughter states that a person with a thoroughly serious attitude accepts the world just as it is. There are a few ways to understand this. One way is to say that the serious person's conceptions of the world involve no surprises, and that the world accords with those conceptions. This could apply to a person whose lifestyle is circumscribed, predictable, and humorless. A second way is to say that the person's conceptions accord with the world by and large, and when mismatches arise between the person's conceptions and how the world appears, then these mismatches would not be entertaining or funny to the person, but mostly frustrating.

A third way is to say that the serious person has an enduring, underlying current of seriousness in his or her outlook, perhaps in appreciation of the death, suffering, and injustice that the world contains, despite how the person may laugh, play, and appreciate funny episodes. Here, the serious person conceives of the world as containing incongruities, and the world matches that conception. There is room for laughter, but an undercurrent of seriousness subordinates the laughter to more important matters.

This third kind of serious attitude coheres with the relationship between laughter and music as Schopenhauer describes it. Although the ordinary world contains laughable aspects, music expresses the serious underlying reality of things, and is never touched by laughter. Expressing this idea is Schopenhauer's understanding of the nature of humor in his technical sense of the word, to which we will turn shortly. To fill out the relationships between the three elements with which we began – music, laughter, and crying – let us now elaborate Schopenhauer's views on crying.

Drawing from his moral theory, which is based on the notion of *Mitleid* – a word that has been translated variously as "empathy," "compassion," "sympathy," or "pity" – Schopenhauer describes crying as an expression of feeling sorry for ourselves:

> That we are moved to tears not by our own sufferings, but by those of others, happens in the following way; either in imagination we put ourselves vividly in the sufferer's place, or we see in his fate the lot of the whole of humanity, and consequently above all our own fate. Thus in a very roundabout way, we always weep about ourselves; we feel sympathy [*Mitleid*] with ourselves. This seems also to be a main reason for the universal, and hence natural, weeping in cases of death… In the main, therefore, [the mourner] is seized with sympathy over the lot of the whole of mankind that is given over to finiteness. In consequence of this, every life, however ambitious and often rich in deeds, must become extinct and nothing. In this lot of mankind, however, the mourner sees first of all his own lot, and this the more, the more closely he was related to the deceased. (Schopenhauer 1969, 376-377)

When in 1814 Schopenhauer wrote that "the greatest problems lying quite close to us are laughing, crying, and music," universalistic interpretations of laughing, crying, and music must have been in his mind for his remark to make sense. As we have seen, he describes the universal significance of music as the immediate copy of the will as the thing-in-itself, both of which – music and will – are serious through-and-through. We see above that the universal significance of crying involves a moral consciousness that sheds tears in pity or compassion for oneself and at ground, for the miserable human condition.

With respect to the universal significance of laughter in relation to crying and music, Schopenhauer is not thinking of laughter that arises from watching three buffoons hit each other over the head with frying pans in a comedy routine. To understand his conception of laughter's universal significance in relation to crying and music, i.e., not merely in relation to the fact that all humans laugh, we need to introduce his distinction between laughter [*das Lachen*] and humor [*der Humor*], for he associates humor with a specific kind of laughter.

We can laugh for superficial reasons, as when we are tickled, or see animals do silly things, or enjoy slapstick comedy. We can also laugh, though, at something funny that contains a serious message, such as jokes containing social commentary or reflections upon the human condition. Schopenhauer refers to this kind of laughter as "humor," which is laughter infused with the "seriousness concealed behind a joke" (Schopenhauer 1958, 100).

A remark in Schopenhauer's early notebooks (1810–11) concerning Shakespeare's works presents this idea of humor. Shakespeare, he observes, employs incongruities to express thoughts about our human condition:

> Therefore *Shakespeare* frequently uses contrasts partly to shock us more easily in this way and to keep us more in a state of agitation, and partly to bring home to us the mysterious, hazardous, and many-sided nature of life. Thus when he has shown us what is great in life, he again shows us the trivial nature of the whole of life and so brings us to a higher point of view. This is called humor. (Schopenhauer 1988b, 13).

We mentioned earlier that understanding laughter in relation to crying is valuable, if only in view of the long tradition in the history of theatre where tragedy and comedy have had a long standing as a complementary pair. The above remark about Shakespeare, which portrays him as implicitly juxtaposing the greatness of tragedy with the triviality of comedy, inspires Schopenhauer's own conception of the laughable human condition, for Schopenhauer also formulates it in terms of a contrast between tragedy and greatness on the one hand, and comedy and triviality on the other:

> The life of every individual, viewed as a whole and in general, and when only its most significant features are emphasized, is really a tragedy; but gone through in detail it has the character of a comedy. For the doings and worries of the day, the restless mockeries of the moment, the desires and fears of the week, the mishaps of every hour, are all brought about by chance that is always bent on some mischievous trick; they are nothing but scenes from a comedy. The never-fulfilled wishes, the frustrated efforts, the hopes mercilessly blighted by fate, the unfortunate mistakes of the whole life, with increasing suffering and death at the end, always give us a tragedy. Thus, as if fate wished to add mockery to the misery of our

> existence, our life must contain all the woes of tragedy, and yet we cannot even assert the dignity of tragic characters, but, in the broad detail of life, are inevitably the foolish characters of a comedy. (Schopenhauer 1969, 321-322).[8]

Within the context of humor, Schopenhauer's theory of laughter as the apprehension of incongruities between concepts and individuals assumes a noticeably philosophical significance. In humor related to reflections on the overall human condition, Schopenhauer coordinates universalistic conceptions of crying and music with a universalistic conception of laughter to arrive at a characterization of the human condition that involves two incongruous perspectives, namely, the tragic view of the whole and in general, and the comic view based on the fine details. The tragic view is serious, the comic view is laughable, and when the two views are set side-by-side, Schopenhauer regards the overall situation as pitiable. It is seriously a pity that we must always become laughable when we try to be heroic, and that others, or even ourselves, can always deprecate our heroic efforts as laughable.

Schopenhauer makes light of his general theory of laughter's importance in *The World as Will and Representation,* and some interpreters accept this evaluation.[9] Considering his specific account of humor as the perception of incongruities that evokes laughter with a serious import, though, his theory of laughter shows itself not to be a mere subsidiary or supplementary thematic within his main work – it is not a mere *parergon*, one can say – for it underlies his humorous attitude towards the human condition, as when he quotes Voltaire in agreement, who says that life is a bad joke (Schopenhauer 1958, 465).

Schopenhauer's theory of crying also sheds light on the human condition when conjoined with his theory of laughter. As noted, there is an incongruous juxtaposition between regarding one's life as either a tragedy or as a comedy. Since there is an incongruity, there is a question of whether it is laughable, or could be perceived as such. Schopenhauer's response, as we have seen, is that the incongruity is humorous in his sense of the word, for beneath life's laughable aspect is a more serious aspect for which tears are appropriate. The human condition consequently has the structure of a theatrical farce, quoted earlier: "Thus the deep and serious significance of our existence hangs over the farce and the endless miseries of human life, and does not leave it for a moment" (Schopenhauer 1958, 449).

Articulating now the full situation in terms of Schopenhauer's theory of laughter, we have the following. There is an initial interpretation of life as serious, as involving painful experiences, struggles, and triumphs, but unfortunately also as typically ending in defeat and certainly death, and of consequently being tragic. Just as a ball can be thrown as high into the air as desired, and just as the force of gravity will always bring it down, we can strive for as much achievement as our circumstances and ambition will permit, but our weaknesses as finite beings will always work

[8] This passage closely reiterates a notebook entry from 1814 (Schopenhauer 1988a, 210–211), written at the same time as his entry that associates laughter, crying, and music with which we began.

[9] Peter Lewis states that "the role of laughter in Schopenhauer's pessimistic vision of the world" is "admittedly…only a minor theme in Schopenhauer's work" (Lewis 2005, 36).

tragically against us as an undermining force. Opposed to this is an undermining awareness that life's petty details operate comically to neutralize the tragic and serious view of life. The upshot is a comedy with a sobering import and a perception of life as a farce.

Schopenhauer accordingly finds the human condition to be humorous in his special sense of the word, for he does not laugh at it lightheartedly with comic innocence, but with a more penetrating awareness that no matter how conscientiously we try to be heroic, the trivialities of day-to-day existence will downgrade our efforts, transform life into a farce, and render our situation basically pitiful. Translating this dynamic into the themes of laughter, crying, and music within a theatrical context or play, it can be said that for Schopenhauer, as the music plays seriously and supportingly in the background, the amusement is eventually dampened by tears. In the theater, one can think of the Commedia dell'Arte's sad clown, Pierrot, or of Charlie Chaplin as the Tramp.

Schopenhauer's estimation that our lives are basically pitiful rests upon a background belief that concrete day-to-day and moment-to-moment trivialities cannot be disregarded by interpreting life in terms of grand conceptions. This is an upshot of the priority Schopenhauer gives to perception over conception, which lends an existential strength to life's trivialities sufficient to transform every magnificent tragedy into a petty comedy.

Nonetheless, an alternative set of background philosophical beliefs according to which general conceptions tend to predominate over perceptual details can counteract the degradation into comedy by regarding the trivialities as philosophically unimportant. Hegel exemplifies this attitude when he writes the following:

> [P]sychologists are particularly fond of contemplating those peculiarities of great historical figures which appertain to them as private persons. Man must eat and drink; he sustains relations to friends and acquaintances; he has passing impulses and ebullitions of temper. "No man is a hero to his *valet-de-chambre*" is a well-known proverb; I have added — and Goethe repeated it ten years later — "but not because the former is no hero, but because the latter is a valet." He takes off the hero's boots, assists him to bed, knows that he prefers champagne, etc. (Hegel 2001, 46–47)

Conceiving of one's life as a farce through the juxtaposition of its tragic and comic aspects may be a difficult proposition for people to sustain psychologically, and it might explain the common deprecation, dismissal, and avoidance of Schopenhauer's philosophy with perennial charge of "pessimism." It is revealing that in his private moments, even Schopenhauer, a theorist of these ideas, construed his life's narrative not in accord with his own conception of the human condition as a humorous farce, but in line with how Hegel – his arch-enemy of all people – recognized the heroic outlook's legitimacy, if not primacy.

Schopenhauer wrote in his notebooks that his life was "heroic" and was not to be "measured by the standard of Philistines or shopkeepers" (Schopenhauer 1988c, 485). When asking himself who he "really" was, he felt that he was not the professor who had no one attending his lectures, not the person about whom people gossiped maliciously, not the defendant in an assault case, not the lover who was

ignored by the women with whom he was infatuated, and not the person who was often kept home by illness. He regarded these roles as merely a "coat" he wore.

> But then who am I? I am the man who has written the *World as Will and Representation*, and has given a solution to the great problem of existence which perhaps will render obsolete all previous solutions, but which in any case will exercise the minds of thinkers in the centuries to come. I am that man, and what could disturb him in the few years he has still to draw breath? (Schopenhauer 1988c, 488)

Hegel's description of the hero and Schopenhauer's conception of himself recall one of most influential art-historical characterizations of the general and most distinctive characteristics of the Greek artistic masterpieces. Johann Winckelmann (1717–1768) stated that the best classical Greek sculpture displays a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur that compares to the depths of the sea, which always remain calm no matter how much the surface may rage.[10] As applied to personal character, a heroic person's solid and dignified sense of self is understood never to succumb to trivialities, disappointments, and superficial changes.

Schopenhauer, knowing that he was endowed with extraordinary philosophical talent, had a driving sense of mission to fulfil his potential. Had he conceived of his life as a farce down to the bone, had he taken seriously the mockery and embarrassment he experienced in the academic world, and had he been demoralized by his frustrations in romance, he might not have cared to fulfil what he regarded as his intellectual destiny and responsibility to the world. Rather, his sense of heroism kept him focused, productive, and confident that his influence and recognition would eventually become a reality.

6.3 Schopenhauerian versus Nietzschean Laughter

If we return now to Schopenhauer's philosophical view that the human condition is basically a pitiable one, involved as we are in a grand farce, we can introduce Nietzsche for contrast, for Nietzsche fights a fierce battle against the seriousness that Schopenhauer associates with music and the will as thing-in-itself. Explicitly opposing Schopenhauer, he advocates a life-affirming, heroic position expressed through a different kind of laughter in a struggle against the compassionate lamentation and sheer pity for the human condition that issues from Schopenhauer's interpretation of life as a farce.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, one of the opponents that Zarathustra (as Nietzsche) faces is the "spirit of gravity," or spirit of seriousness, personified as a devil and nihilistic dwarf, representative of a (supposedly) defeatist, Schopenhauerian attitude towards life in view of its abundance of overwhelming suffering. Nietzsche's steadfast resolve to say "yes" nonetheless to the world and its suffering consequently leads him to contend with a terrible thought, dangerous in its ability to

[10] See Winckelmann's "Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture" (1755).

debilitate: in affirming life, one must affirm the perpetual presence of weakness, despair, suffering, frustration, and worst of all, mediocrity. None of this will ever go away, and yet one must persist in life and be as healthy as possible. The spirit of gravity presents a teeth-gnashing assessment of the world as a field of unavoidable suffering – one from which Nietzsche refuses to shrink, and which he is committed to overcoming.

We have seen that in Schopenhauer's view, there is an interrelationship between music, crying, and laughing that represent, respectively, (1) the underlying seriousness of reality conveyed by pure music, (2) a weeping pity for humanity in its plight, where heroism is inevitably debased by trivialities, weakness, and mediocrity, and (3) the consequently humorous apprehension that life is a tremendous farce. Daily life reinforces this disillusioning picture with an abundance of examples: war heroes have been spouse abusers, great presidents have been slave owners, great singers have been thugs, great actors have been drug addicts, great businessmen have been embezzlers, great politicians have been murderers, great religious leaders have been sexual predators, and great philosophers have been Nazis. Many of the "higher men" have been "human, all-too-human."

Nietzsche expresses his opposing view of the world with the same elements as Schopenhauer – music, crying, and laughter – but he inverts Schopenhauer's pitying, world-negating, and disillusioned view of humanity into a world-affirming, joyous, enthusiastic, and heroic one. Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche compares ultimate reality to music, regards ultimate reality as an essentially meaningless energy that he calls will to power, regards the bulk of humanity as pathetically weak-minded, and recognizes redemption or salvation in a higher state of consciousness.

Their important difference resides in where they locate that higher state of consciousness, which for Schopenhauer is otherworldly and which for Nietzsche is not. Recognizing with Schopenhauer the same suffering-filled, dog-eat-dog world in which we live, he affirms this world nonetheless, and in doing so, in place of an attitude towards the world characterized by humor and self-pity, he laughs an opposing laugh of joyful triumph.

The following is a dramatic excerpt from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* which is usually interpreted as Nietzsche's (as the shepherd boy) moment of overcoming of the abysmal, nihilistic, interpretation of the world – an interpretation that regards the world as an eternally recurring being, inescapably adulterated with mediocrity and subsequently as evoking pity for humanity's pathetic condition. Underlying the imagery is that of the ouroboros, the ancient circular symbol of a snake that bites its own tail, here symbolizing the world's perpetual continuation and repetitive recycling, mediocrity inclusive. Nietzsche's crushing question is whether one can affirm the eternal recurrence of such a world, given the moral disgust and nausea it can provoke:

> And verily, what I saw – I had never seen the like. A young shepherd I saw, writhing, gagging, in spasms, his face distorted, and a heavy black snake hung out of his mouth. Had I ever seen so much nausea and pale dread on one face? He seemed to have been asleep when the snake crawled into his throat, and there bit itself fast. My hand tore at the snake and tore in vain; it did not tear the snake out of his throat. Then it cried out of me: "Bite! Bite its head

> off! Bite!" Thus it cried out of me—my dread, my hatred, my nausea, my pity, all that is good and wicked in me cried out of me with a single cry…
>
> The shepherd, however, bit as my cry counselled him; he bit with a good bite. Far away he spewed the head of the snake—and he jumped up. No longer shepherd, no longer human—one changed, radiant, *laughing*! Never yet on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was not human laughter; and now a thirst gnaws at me, a longing that never grows still. My longing for this laughter gnaws at me; oh, how do I bear to go on living! And how could I bear to die now! (Nietzsche 1954, 159-160)

The shepherd boy's laugh can be interpreted as a poetic rendition of the triumphant joy that arises from overcoming the nihilistic, farcical interpretation of the human condition, along with the nausea and pity it generates. If we apply Schopenhauer's theory of laughter to the situation, the shepherd boy's laughter – understanding the shepherd boy to symbolize Nietzsche and his battle against nihilistic pessimism and moral nausea – can be understood to stem from the perceived incongruence between his conception of himself as not having the ability to overcome the pessimistic vision of the world due to his disposition towards pity, and his actual overcoming of that vision.

If Schopenhauer is correct that "the greater and more unexpected this incongruity in the apprehension of the person laughing, the more violent will be his laughter," then one can infer that the shepherd boy, or rather Nietzsche, was philosophizing throughout with the background belief that his chances of being genuinely able to affirm the eternal replay of the ordinary, spatio-temporal world, with all of the pain, mediocrity, and moral outrage it contains, were virtually nil. Hence the incredible, superhuman laugh of triumph that comes out of the shepherd boy.

The kind of laugh here compares to that of a sportsperson at the moment of winning a competition that was assumed to be unwinnable – a laughter that involves tremendous relief and feelings of superiority towards, and triumph over, one's former self. All three – incongruity, relief, superiority – are present in Nietzschean laughter. It is the upshot of a profound and difficult struggle, and is not the laugh of someone who, after having lost an important battle, laughs dismissively in a pretension that the battle was unimportant. Nor is it the embittered laugh of a degraded hero.

Like Schopenhauer, and inspired by him, Nietzsche compares the world to music, but in his overcoming of pity and consequent affirmation of the world, he understands the affirmation of life and the associated healthy person not as a serious character, but as one who says "yes" to the world with the joyful enthusiasm of wanting to hear a piece of music played over and over again. To affirm the world's eternal recurrence is to yearn for the infinite replay of a song that, although it sounded so miserable in the past, is now willfully reinterpreted as terrific and powerful. The kind of character who can achieve this revision in perspective is akin to the shepherd boy who overcomes the nausea that issues from the compassionate interpretation of human existence. For Nietzsche, this kind of character embodies a superhuman ideal of health and does not regard life as a farce, but rather as a glorious play, tragic as it may be:

> [This is] the ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world-affirming individual, who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and what is, but who wants it again *just as it was and is* through all eternity, insatiably shouting *da capo*, not just to himself but to the whole play and performance. (Nietzsche 2002, 50–51)

6.4 Concluding Thoughts

In this excursion from Schopenhauer's 1814 notebook remark – one that refers us to the importance of laughter, crying, and music, but which leaves the suggestive triad undeveloped – we can see that Schopenhauer's theory of laughter resides substantially in the background of his attitude towards the human condition, and that his theory of laughter is not a peripheral feature of his philosophy. It is also evident that the well-known idea that background assumptions are crucial to finding something funny operate in distinguishing opposing attitudes towards the human condition. We can also see how Schopenhauer's theory of laughter reveals a moral and compassionate vision of the world that underlies his estimation of the human condition as a pitiable one.

The contrast between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche also shows how opposing attitudes towards the human condition can generate different kinds of laughter. In Schopenhauer's case, it is the humorous laughter of a farce that reveals the pitiable sadness of frustrated and degraded heroes. In Nietzsche's, it is the triumphant laughter of those who, having self-doubts when facing what appears to be an insurmountable challenge, eventually and dramatically prevail in the struggle. By transforming the farcical interpretation of the human condition into a heroic one, Nietzsche upholds what he regards as a healthier kind of laughter and a healthier kind of life. By maintaining his moral vision of the world, Schopenhauer by contrast reveals the depths of his compassion for suffering humanity.

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Chapter 7
Humor as Redemption in the Pessimistic Philosophy of Julius Bahnsen

Frederick C. Beiser

Abstract Is humor an antidote for pessimism? One philosopher who saw humor as the only redemption in a world filled with suffering and sorrow was Julius Bahnsen (1830–81), one of the most radical pessimists of the German pessimistic tradition (1860–1900). After a brief account of the life of Bahnsen, I sketch his tragic philosophy of life, according to which life is filled with inevitable and irresolvable contradictions. The only respite from the suffering created by these contradictions, he taught, came with humor. Against his contemporary Nietzsche, Bahnsen held that art could not serve as a source of redemption from the tragedy of life. True art revealed suffering and did not try to conceal it; and true redemption came only after utter honesty, recognizing the horrors of life while still laughing at them.

Keywords Pessimism · Suffering · Tragedy · Redemption · Humor

7.1 Humor and Pessimism

If we are to understand humor, we have to consider, sooner or later, its relation to pessimism. There are those moments in life, at least for most of us, when we feel that all is futile, that all our struggles and suffering have been in vain. Humor is often an effective—indeed the only—antidote to those moments. Of course, we can understand humor even if we are fortunate enough to never have any of those moments; we can go through life laughing even if we are always happy. But in that case it is still fair to say: we have not appreciated humor, we have not understood its depth and significance. For humor shows its point and power precisely in the face of those pessimistic moments; it allows us to stare tragedy in the face, to peer into the depths of the abyss, and yet to go away laughing. With humor we prove that, despite it all, our spirit is not crushed, that we can still stand above the worst that fate throws against us. The sense of humor I have in mind here was perfectly captured by a German army officer in World War I who, when facing inevitable defeat against

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_7

overwhelming odds, reported back to his superiors: "*Die Lage ist unmöglich; aber sie ist nicht ernst"* ("The situation is impossible; but it is not serious").

Humor has a definite *philosophical* significance. This philosophical significance does not mean, however, that it puts forward a philosophical thesis. Humor does not consist in a worldview of its own. It does not hold, for example, that this is the best of all possible worlds, or even that it is not the worst of all possible worlds. If that were the case, the pessimist could escape the effect of humor simply through refuting these positions. The power of humor is that it has its beneficial effect upon us even if pessimism were true. Humor cannot provide a refutation of philosophical pessimism; but it still shows its philosophical worth because it can provide a remedy against the worst consequences of pessimism: despair and suicide.

What role, if any, did humor play in philosophical pessimism? By "philosophical pessimism" I mean here the systematic attempt to provide an intellectual justification for those pessimistic moments in life, the attempt to show that life consists essentially in sorrow and suffering. The great modern movement of philosophical pessimism took place in the second half of the nineteenth century in Germany. Its father was, of course, Arthur Schopenhauer; but the movement had other important protagonists, figures largely forgotten but very important in the history of philosophy. Among them were Eduard von Hartmann, Philipp Mainländer, Julius Bahnsen, and the young Friedrich Nietzsche; no less of note but equally forgotten were two female philosophers, Agnes Taubert and Olga Plümacher.[1] All of these pessimists held one defining thesis: that life is not worth living; that it is better that we were not born. Their arguments for this simple thesis were, however, complex and various: that life consists in suffering, the preponderance of pain over pleasure; that life is futile because we cannot achieve anything because we are divided within ourselves; that we attain eternal peace only in death; and so on. Whatever the reason for their *Weltschmerz,* all these pessimists had to admit that their philosophy made the misery of life even the more miserable. It was bad enough for life to be suffering and futility; but it was even worse *to know* that it is, inescapably and intrinsically, suffering and futility. They recognized fully, therefore, that there had to be some palliative against their own pessimism, some medicine to make it more bearable. Otherwise, they could not prevent what seemed to be its inevitable conclusion: despair and suicide. That was just the conclusion that Philipp Mainländer took in 1877: the most consistent and heroic of pessimists, he hung himself while standing on copies of his masterpiece, *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* (*The Philosophy of Redemption*). To forestall that conclusion, to prevent such a drastic and dramatic remedy, the pessimists proposed various therapies. Thus Schopenhauer proposed asceticism; Hartmann advised devotion to the work of culture; and the young Nietzsche recommended art.

The pessimists took their pessimism seriously. They were on the whole a rather somber lot. Nowhere in their work is there anything even approaching a joke. Among this dreary lot there was, however, one philosopher who did appreciate the

[1] I discuss these thinkers and expand on my comments on Bahnsen at Beiser 2016, 167, 229–284.

role of humor: that was Julius Bahnsen. Bahnsen was perhaps the grimmest of the pessimists, going beyond Schopenhauer, Hartmann and the young Nietzsche in his bleak outlook on life; against them he denied that culture, art or religion could be any relief from the suffering of life. But there was for Bahnsen, unlike all the other pessimists, one sure escape from life's terrors and traumas: humor.

Since Bahnsen is so forgotten today, and since he shows us the power of humor amid the bleakest pessimism, I will attempt to introduce his philosophy here. Before I do that, however, I must say a little bit about the person and the life.

7.2 Person and Life

It should come as no surprise that Bahnsen's pessimism came from a sad life. His philosophy was very much the product of a broken heart and thwarted ambition. If we were to summarize Bahnsen's life in a word, we could do no better than to describe it in good contemporary American slang: Julius Bahnsen was a loser.

Julius Friedrich August Bahnsen was born March 30, 1830, in Tondern, Schleswig, the son of Christian August Bahnsen, the director of a training school for school teachers. His mother died when he was young, which was the source of persistent grief. Her loss, he later wrote, made it hard for him to participate in the pleasures of childhood (1905, 4n).[2] He dated the beginning of the misery in his life to December 1842, the day his father brought the *Noverca* home "as a Christmas present" (7). Bahnsen grew up on the desolate moors of Schleswig, which he always regarded as a terrible fate. He regretted deeply the isolation and deprivation of his early childhood, and he complained bitterly about the monotony and "*Kleingeisterei*" of life in the provinces, which he called his "intellectual Siberia." There was no cultural stimulus, and there were few children with whom he could share his interests. Nothing more seemed to demonstrate the conspiracy of the fates against him than the fact that he had to spend most of his life in the provinces. After a university education in Kiel and Tübingen, and after one short journey to London, he would work for the rest of his life as a school teacher in the Prussian hinterland. Bahnsen wanted nothing more than to be a university professor; this was his dream and life ambition; but it was never to be.

If Bahnsen's professional life was a failure, his personal life was a disaster. In 1862 he married Minnita Möller, whom he loved dearly; but she died the next year giving birth to their only child. In 1868 Bahnsen married again, now to Phillipine Clara Hertzog, who bore him three children. But the marriage was a very unhappy one and ended in divorce in 1874. The experience of deep loss, followed by a bitter divorce, made Bahnsen a broken man. Eduard von Hartmann, for a while a close personal friend, saw Bahnsen often during the 1870s and he thought Bahnsen unhinged from his bitter experience; he even described him as a psychopath,

[2] References in Roman numerals are to Rudolf Louis's introduction to Bahnsen's *Wie ich Wurde was ich Ward*.

"a male hysteric."[3] Though this is the self-serving diagnosis of an exasperated and disillusioned ex-friend, it probably does reflect something of Bahnsen's desperate state of mind during these years.

Given his unpropitious beginnings, it was only fitting that Bahnsen's pessimism began early. In his autobiography he tells us that, when was only seventeen, he had already formed "the nihilistic core idea" behind his worldview. That idea was not the result of reading philosophy or poetry, but the product of experience and temperament. On March 10, 1847—Bahnsen is very precise with his dates—he was sitting in his "gloomy little room" next to the stove when he was overcome with a profound sadness, "a melancholy contemptuous of the world and men" (1905, 20). He felt "finished with the world," and even contemplated suicide, happy that he could quickly end it all by throwing himself off a nearby bridge. Ever since that day, he wrote, he felt the rest of his life was only a *"Galgenfrist,"* i.e., a short delay before the gallows.

One of the most formative experiences of Bahnsen's life came in the summer of 1856 with his meeting with Schopenhauer. Bahnsen informs us that he first heard about Schopenhauer in the winter semester 1851/52 while still a student at Tübingen (1905, 45–46). He had first heard about Schopenhauer from his teacher Jakob Rauff, who told him about "the paradoxes" of his philosophy. His curiosity aroused, Bahnsen duly read *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*), which came to him like a revelation. He found especially appealing the fourth and final part, that which contains Schopenhauer's pessimism. Having earned a little money from teaching, Bahnsen immediately went out and bought a copy of the second edition, the first book he had ever owned. After the death of his brother, Bahnsen said that he derived much comfort from Schopenhauer, whose philosophy became for him a substitute for religious ritual and dogma (1905, 46). For Bahnsen, Schopenhauer's philosophy offered the core values of religion without the questionable baggage of theism.

In the summer of 1856 Bahnsen finally summoned the courage to request an audience before the great sage. To his delight and surprise, his wish was granted. He duly made the pilgrimage to Frankfurt, where *Schöne Aussicht* Nr. 17 seemed like "the antechamber of a world potentate." Despite his reputation as a recluse and misanthrope, Schopenhauer greeted Bahnsen kindly. From their meeting Bahnsen went away with a feeling of awe and devotion, as if he had just received "the blessings of a first communion" (1905, 47). "Everything of the mystic that had been slumbering in me was now, in one stroke, awakened and unleashed" (47).

After his first meeting with Schopenhauer, Bahnsen resolved to master his philosophy completely, so that he would be a disciple second to none. Although he had to work as a private tutor some thirty hours a week, he devoted every spare minute to the study of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Such was his knowledge of his teacher's works that at their next meeting, some fourteen months later, Schopenhauer

[3] See Louis' description in Bahnsen 1905, xlv. Even Louis, who is skeptical of Hartmann's comment, describes Hartmann in those years as "in the literal sense of the word a hunted animal" (*"im buchstäblichen Sinne des Wortes ein gehetztes Wild")* (Bahnsen 1905, xlvi).

rewarded him with a remarkable tribute: his mastery of the texts put him on par with Frauenstädt! Since Schopenhauer regarded Frauenstädt as his chief apostle, this was high praise indeed.

The young Bahnsen embraced Schopenhauer's philosophy not only as his worldview but also as his guide to life. Since Schopenhauer had preached that redemption could be achieved only through self-denial, Bahnsen started to practice asceticism. He aspired to be the next Saint Francis of Assisi. Despite much fasting and abstention, he began to despair that he would ever attain Schopenhauer's ideal. He worried constantly about relapses into the ways of the flesh; and never did he warm to the idea of castration (1905, 48). Remarkably, Bahnsen seemed little worried about Schopenhauer's own epicurean lifestyle, which was hardly an example for a young ascetic.

Bahnsen's discipleship did not last long, at most four years.[4] He later wrote that he was especially troubled by two points in Schopenhauer's philosophy, and that in thinking through them he began to abandon it (1905, 48–49). The first point was "the famous 'merely'" (*das famose "bloss"*) in Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic. Though Bahnsen does not explain what this means, it is an obvious reference to Trendelenburg's famous criticism of Kant's argument in the Transcendental Aesthetic, according to which Kant has not demonstrated that space and time are "*merely*" subjective. Kant's argument, Trendelenburg noted, had left open a possibility for realism: namely, that though the forms of space and time are subjective in their origins, arising from the a priori forms of sensibility, they still correspond to things-in-themselves. Bahnsen will later explore this gap in Kant's argument, making it the basis for his own realism. The second point was "the possibility of successful asceticism," which seemed to conflict with other cardinal theses of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Though Bahnsen again did not go into any details, he surely had in mind the impossibility of denying the will when it is the dominating force in human life and action.[5]

Quite apart from his later reservations about Schopenhauer, we have to ask whether Bahnsen was ever a completely faithful and unbiased interpreter of his philosophy. Like Frauenstädt and Mainländer, Bahnsen read his own ideas into Schopenhauer's writings. In a letter to Schopenhauer written February 21, 1858, Bahnsen describes the core of his master's philosophy as "the world law of negativity."[6] That phrase signifies what became the guiding theme of Bahnsen's philosophy, which he called his "real dialectic." According to the real dialectic, self-contradiction lies in the very heart of human beings. They can never achieve

[4] Louis claims (Bahnsen 1905, xl) that Bahnsen was a "Schopenhauerian of the strictest observance" ("*Schopenhauerian strengster Observanz*") for only "a few years," but this seems an underestimate because the discipleship seemed to last from May 1853, when he first resolved to meet Schopenhauer, until 1857, just before he published his essay on Schopenhauer's theory of mathematics.

[5] In Bahnsen 1880, 192, Bahnsen informs us that he was skeptical about the moral worth of asceticism when he first read Schopenhauer's "chief work" in 1857. In his marginal notes he argued that asceticism by itself has no moral value, i.e., that a person can be ascetic for strictly self-serving reasons.

[6] For Schopenhauer's articulation of this idea, see Schopenhauer 1893, 357.

anything, and are doomed to constant torment, because they desire in their heart of hearts contradictory things. In reading this theme into Schopenhauer Bahnsen was forcing his own ideas onto his master, given that Schopenhauer never conceived his will in dialectical terms. Schopenhauer's will is an irrational force, to be sure, but its irrationalism consists more in its blind and incessant striving rather than its inner conflicts. In seeing the will as not only blind but also self-contradictory, Bahnsen was casting it in Hegelian terms, which could have been only utter heresy for Schopenhauer.

Bahnsen's life ended as sadly as it began. Although he was disappointed in love and life, Bahnsen was a devoted teacher. In 1881 he was tutoring one of his sick students, when he caught the student's illness: diphtheria. Bahnsen died before he could finish his main philosophical work, *Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt,* whose second volume appeared in 1882. As was fitting for such a tragic life, Bahnsen was soon forgotten. He was revived briefly in the 1930s for his psychology when he was celebrated as the predecessor of Ludwig Klages. If he is remembered at all, it is as the contemporary of Nietzsche, who once regarded him as a fellow pessimist. Yet to make Nietzsche the sole reason for interest in Bahnsen betrays, I think, historical ignorance. Bahnsen deserves to be treated as a philosopher in his own right just as much as Nietzsche.

7.3 His Philosophy

Perhaps the best introduction to Bahnsen's worldview is a short book he published in 1877, *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz.* This book was meant to be popular, and it is indeed Bahnsen's clearest and most accessible work. *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz* reveals the very heart of Bahnsen's philosophy. Its immediate purpose is to explain his theory of tragedy; but to do this was virtually to explain his entire worldview, which is at its heart tragic.

It is a characteristic feature of Bahnsen's pessimism—one that distinguishes it from the pessimism of Schopenhauer, Hartmann or Mainländer—that it gives such a central place to tragedy. Of course, Schopenhauer, Hartmann and Mainländer also had a tragic conception of the world; but they still did not make much use of the concept of tragedy in formulating their pessimism. For Bahnsen, however, tragedy plays a pivotal role in the formulation of pessimism. The heart of his pessimism lies in his real dialectic, the inner conflict of the will, which he sees as the source of tragedy.

Bahnsen was not, however, the first pessimist to introduce tragedy into his formulation of pessimism. Nietzsche had already taken that step in his *Geburt der Tragödie* (*Birth of Tragedy*), which had appeared in 1872, five years before Bahnsen's tract. It is interesting to note, therefore, what Bahnsen has to say about Nietzsche. Although he does not mention him by name, Bahnsen does take silent issue with him in his introduction. "The friends of art," he writes, referring to Schopenhauer and probably also to Nietzsche, tell us that beauty is "a pleasant illu-

sion," "a resting place in the struggle for existence," "an invocation of the dream of heaven on earth" (1877, 5). But, Bahnsen protests, the real purpose of tragedy is just the opposite: it does not shield us from the horrors of existence through pleasant illusions; rather, it shatters all such illusions and forces us to confront the grim reality of the world, the harsh and brutal fact of self-division (6). Tragedy, then, does not attempt to give us an antidote, escape or reprieve from pessimism; instead, it strives to illustrate the deep truth lying behind it. It is only when we get beyond every illusion of optimism, when we tear away all the threads of the veil of Maya, Bahnsen contends, that we can begin to take pleasure in tragedy (7).

The very heart of tragedy, for Bahnsen, consists in two fundamental facts: first, that the individual has to choose between conflicting duties or incommensurable values; and second, that he or she will be punished, or have to suffer, because he or she obeys one duty or honors one value at the expense of the other (1877, 87, 88). Tragic heroes always do their duty or strive to act on their ideals; they are always brave and take a moral stand and act on principle; but they still have to pay the price for such courage and integrity; they have to suffer because they choose one duty or value when there are other duties and values which deserve to be honored no less. Because duties and values conflict, and because tragic heroes must act on some duty or value in a particular situation, they have no choice but to sin; they must violate another duty or disregard another basic value; and for that infraction or transgression they must be punished (50–1). The essence of a tragedy, then, is that we must do the right or act for the good, but that we will also be punished for it because we cannot help violating other duties and goods. Even with the best intentions and the most scrupulous conscience, we end up doing something bad and wrong, for which we must pay.

Bahnsen's theory of tragedy begins, therefore, with what is often seen as a fundamental fact about the modernity: the conflict between values, between incommensurable visions of the good life. Like Max Weber and Georg Simmel, Bahnsen does not believe that there is a rational solution to these conflicts or these visions. The fate of the modern individual is that he or she must choose between these values and worldviews, where the choice cannot be exclusively or entirely moral, correct or rational. That this fate is tragic is the central contention of Bahnsen's theory.

Bahnsen's tragic worldview was meant to be the antithesis of the optimistic worldview of Christian theism (1877, 103). According to theism, there is a divinely instituted harmony between moral virtue and personal happiness. If we do what we ought to do on this earth, then we will be rewarded for it in heaven; and, conversely, if we do what we ought not to do, we will be punished in hell. The tragic worldview not only questions this harmony, but it also denies a central premise behind it: that what we ought to do in life, our moral obligations and conceptions of the highest good, are perfectly clear and consistent. The tragic worldview begins, Bahnsen argues, with the recognition of moral conflict and unclarity. That conflict consists in not only clashing duties but also competing values and opposing conceptions of the good life. For the complicated situations in life, it will not be clear what we ought to do, either because we are subject to conflicting duties, or because of competing values, all of which are incommensurable, and none of which has more

authority than another. Whatever we do in these situations will involve violating a conflicting duty or cheating other basic values in life. Every single action in life, Bahnsen remarks, takes place in the face of weighty and worthy countermotives, and it has consequences so bad that, in some respects, not doing it would have been the better option (84). Hence, for Bahnsen, tragedy begins from a very important fact about our moral life, one not recognized by the traditional theistic worldview: namely, the relativity of morals, the lack of moral absolutes. This relativity is apparent not only from conflicting duties, but also from competing conceptions of the good life, where there is no right or wrong, good or bad, in choosing one course of action over the other.

Bahnsen's theory of tragedy was conceived not only in opposition against the optimistic worldview of theism, but also against competing theories of tragedy. First and foremost among these was Hegel's theory, which had been recently reaffirmed by Friedrich Vischer in his *Aesthetik* (1846, 227–321). Bahnsen had attended Vischer's lectures on aesthetics in the winter semester 1851/52 when he was a student at Tübingen[7]; and he had worked out his own views by playing them against his teacher. According to Hegel, tragedy is about the inevitable moral conflict between individuals, or between the individual and the social whole where the individual separates himself from the whole and takes a stand against it (Hegel 1970, 520–6). While the individual is correct from his partial and one-sided standpoint, he is incorrect from the broader standpoint of the social whole, which has to harmonize the interests and standpoints of all individuals. The individual must suffer a tragic fate because his standpoint is one-sided and partial, or because he dares to separate himself from the whole. Tragedy pleases us, Hegel thinks, because it has a moment of reconciliation: we take pleasure in the downfall of the tragic hero because it satisfies our deeper feelings and intuitions about the greater moral authority of the social whole. For Bahnsen, however, there is no such moment of reconciliation. Tragedy is tragedy precisely because moral conflicts are irresolvable, precisely because there are incompatible conceptions of the good. There is no moment of reconciliation because there is no social whole that can resolve these conflicts or harmonize these conceptions of the good.

Bahnsen's theory of tragedy also marks a major departure from Schiller's theory, which had played a major role for decades in German thinking about the tragic. Bahnsen was a great admirer of Schiller, praising him in a centennial address for his anticipation of Schopenhauer's pessimism (Bahnsen, 1859). Yet, if we read between the lines of *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz*, it becomes clear that he did not accept Schiller's theory of tragedy. According to Schiller, our pleasure in tragic events derives from the recognition of the moral qualities of the hero, who has the power

[7] As Louis informs us (Bahnsen 1905, xxxi). It is also noteworthy, as Louis explains, pp. xxxiv-xxxvi, that Bahnsen did his doctoral dissertation under Vischer on the subject of aesthetics. His dissertation, *Versuch, die Lehre von den drei ästhetischen Grundformen genetisch zu gliedern nach den Voraussetzungen der naturwissenschaftlichen Psychologie* (Tübingen: Universität Tübingen, 1853). The work appears to have been lost.

to act on his duty despite the personal suffering that it causes him.[8] The spectacle of his actions is pleasant because it shows us the power of our moral autonomy and freedom, despite the pressure of circumstances, and despite our opposing personal inclinations. For Bahnsen, however, the autonomy of the tragic actor appears not simply in his resolve to act on his duties but in his willingness to choose one duty over another even though he knows he will suffer for it (Bahnsen 1877, 86). Schiller, the follower of Kant's moral philosophy, believed that moral duties never conflict, and so he failed to appreciate the dilemmas facing the tragic character. Schiller assumes that the essence of the tragic hero resides in his acting contrary to inclination and self-interest and in following his duty; but, for Bahnsen, there is nothing tragic about having to choose duty over inclination, which is a commonplace of moral life (55, 64). Tragedy arises not simply because we choose to act on our duty against inclination but because in doing our duty we inevitably violate other duties (51). Schiller also wrongly assumes that tragedy somehow lies in acting according to one's conscience and one's better convictions; but here he assumes, wrongly, that our convictions and our conscience are perfectly clear and consistent. As Bahnsen puts it, convictions do not just drop into our heads like rain falls on a flower pot (32–33). Often we do not know what we really believe; and often we have to work this out for ourselves in pressing circumstances without ever really knowing, or having the opportunity to think about, our ultimate convictions and commitments.

In his analysis of tragedy Bahnsen very much emphasizes the inevitability of tragic action, the role of necessity or fate in the hero's downfall. He makes tragic necessity one basic criterion of tragedy. There are two basic criteria of tragedy, he explains. The first is that tragedy reveal some moral conflict (1877, 62); and the second is that this conflict, and the consequences that flow from it, must be inescapable (67). This is not to say that the tragic hero is "pushed," that his own decision plays no role in his downfall (49). If his own will did not play a role, he would incur no guilt and he would not deserve punishment (67). Nevertheless, Bahnsen still insists that the tragic hero cannot be the complete master of his fate. He must also find himself in a situation over which he has no control; and once he has made his decision, the consequences must unfold inevitably, and in such a manner that he becomes the victim of that decision.

The fact that tragedy is inescapable and inevitable, Bahnsen argues, has an important consequence for pessimism: it shows that there really cannot be, *pace* Schopenhauer, Hartmann and Nietzsche, redemption (1877, 53, 124). Their ethics of redemption is based on the false assumption that we can somehow escape the world, whether it be through aesthetic contemplation, asceticism or suicide. But tragedy shows us that we are inevitably and inextricably caught in the drama of the world. When we must often prove our integrity by struggling against trying and demeaning circumstances, and when we have obligations and commitments to others and to the community as a whole, we cannot escape into another world or even

[8] See Schiller 1792, 92–125. Bahnsen does not refer explicitly to Schiller's writing or even mention his name. But Schiller's theory was well-known, so well-known Bahnsen would have assumed his reader knew of it.

annihilate ourselves. No, we are trapped here in this world; we must take a stand, fight and suffer the consequences (32).

There is, then, no redemption, no reconciliation, in Bahnsen's deeply tragic view of the world. This is not to say, however, that his worldview is grim or sad. For Bahnsen still offers some relief from all the suffering and tragedy of life: namely, humor. Although the situation is impossible, it is still not serious because we can laugh at it. Humor makes us recognize our predicament and powerlessness; but it also allows us to stand above it (1877, 107). By laughing at our situation we abstract and detach ourselves from it, and so escape, if only momentarily, from the weight of the fate pressing down upon us. Although Bahnsen bids us to appreciate the role of humor in bearing the tragedy of life, he is still at pains to insist that it still brings no redemption (123). It offers no enduring remedies, no failsafe recipes, to escape from the suffering and moral dilemmas of life; its only power is to lighten the load and to prepare us for even more to come.

Just how humor works its redemptive role Bahnsen did not explain. But he certainly means to give it a central role in his philosophy: it appears in the closing remarks to *Das Tragische als Weltgesetz.* Unfortunately, he gives humor virtually no role in his other works. But in giving such a central place to humor Bahnsen at least demonstrated that he was not a bad loser after all.

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Chapter 8
'What Time Is It? . . . . Eternity': Kierkegaard's Socratic Use of Hegel's Insights on Romantic Humor

Marcia C. Robinson

Abstract Kierkegaard's avowed role as a Socratic gadfly to Danish Christendom can be viewed as an instantiation of Hegel's idea of the romantic humorist. Comparing Kierkegaard's manner of "awakening the Christians of Christendom to Christianity" with pertinent sections of Hegel's *Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art* makes this apparent. It shows that Kierkegaard's running critique of leading Danish Hegelians was not only of the speculative nature and conventional content of their positions, albeit ethical and religious, but also of their aesthetic form, namely, Hegelian classicism. In challenging the neat, refined and comprehensive form of their thought in a manner befitting Hegel's romantic humorist, Kierkegaard maintained that such classicism no more led to authentic living than did romanticism's morally-vacuous aesthetic individualism. Kierkegaard used Hegel's romantic humor, then, as an anti-aesthetic aesthetics in order to call for a suspension of Hegelian classicism so that a truer form of existential art, namely, the ongoing creation of human being in "co-operation with God," might emerge.

Keywords Aesthetics · Hegelianism · Humor · The religious · Romanticism

Søren Kierkegaard's close relation to G. W. F. Hegel is undeniable—despite his acerbic critiques of Hegel's Danish followers. This relation is not only apparent in his absorption of Hegel's ideas. More important for this essay, this relation can also be seen in his adaptation of Hegel's aesthetics to the rhetorical and existential strategies of his polyvocal authorship—a variegated body of writings published under pseudonyms as well as his own name. Indeed, one might argue that in taking on the role of Socratic gadfly to nineteenth-century Danish Christendom, Kierkegaard became the very instantiation of Hegel's romantic humorist—a point that if true could reveal more about the significance and the complexity of the aesthetic for Kierkegaard's religious and ethical project.

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_8

Suggesting that Kierkegaard's role as Socratic gadfly has a fundamentally Hegelian character requires some preliminary clarification. First, this somewhat provocative, but relatively modest claim needs to be situated in recent scholarship on Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel. Second, the meaning and problem of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's thought needs also to be addressed in terms of recent scholarship. Doing so will make clear what the issues, implications and scope of this essay are.

8.1 Kierkegaard and Hegel

Scholars today primarily take Kierkegaard's appropriation of Hegel's dialectic or theory of sublation (*Aufhebung*)—Kierkegaard's well-known stage theory—to be the most apparent and least controversial way to address the two thinkers' close relation. Jon Stewart, however, goes beyond stage theory to examine this relation more comprehensively than most. Indeed, in *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, he seeks to prove against standard interpretation that Kierkegaard's view of Hegel was mostly positive. Moving stepwise through the authorship, from the early writings to *The Sickness unto Death*, he demonstrates that Kierkegaard regularly incorporated into his project a wide array of Hegel's ideas, not just his theory of sublation (Stewart 2003, 90–595).

Such a careful analysis is certainly one way of recognizing the depth of Kierkegaard's engagement of Hegel. However, given Kierkegaard's ambivalence about just about everything, other close readers of the Dane may not be as sanguine as Stewart. To start, one sees Kierkegaard time and again criticizing a thinker in one breath, while appropriating that person's ideas in the next. This includes overemphasizing a problem in a thinker's work, while mining the same thinker to construct his own way of correcting it. Such was the case with the German romantic writer, translator and playwright Johann Ludwig Tieck, whom Kierkegaard, following Hegel, critiqued sharply in his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, yet utilized regularly throughout his published and unpublished writings.

Kierkegaard's broad critique of the German romantics' godlike use of irony, which also appears in his dissertation, is another case in point. On the one hand, it is almost a wholesale assumption of Hegel's critique of the romantics in the *Aesthetics*. On the other, Kierkegaard's antidote to the romantics' Promethean irony is not simply an acceptance of Hegel's criticisms, since it involves both a critique of and a corrective to Hegel's readings of Socrates and romantic irony. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates's exemplification of the power of the religious to shape the life of an individual who is humble and receptive enough to assume its endless task is an embodiment of an earnest and moral form of irony (*CI*, 235–36, 266–70). Such irony, says Kierkegaard, is an authentic existential position. As such, it tacitly grounds the Christian form of poetic living that he presents later as an alternative to the forms represented by master romantic ironists Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck (*CI*, 274–308). On Kierkegaard's view, Hegel fails to realize this, because he

fails to recognize the religious dimension of Socrates's pursuit of wisdom; fails to understand that Socrates's irony—his claim to be ignorant—is earnest, always abstract, and always negative, and so not concrete; and fails to realize that the irony of the romantics only makes sense if it too is a serious existential position—that is, one that facilitates despair, not human betterment (*CI*, 235–36, 266–70). In other words, Kierkegaard thinks that Hegel has in part missed some major points about selfhood by primarily addressing irony in Socrates as a discursive strategy, not as a stance toward life.

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, the logician-humorist Johannes Climacus, famously brings all of this to a caricatured climax in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, where he elaborates these stakes in his comparison of the speculative thinker to Socrates. There, as Stewart rightly indicates, Climacus clearly criticizes Hegel's Danish followers for claiming "to go beyond" the faith of this "simple wise man" for absolute knowledge, as though faith were an easy matter (Stewart 2003, 453–488; *CUP* 1:201–4).[1] In doing so, Climacus makes it clear that it is Hegel's own idea of the march of Spirit in human history, with all of its incarnational associations, that has initiated their lack of sensitivity to the nuances of existing. In pointing this out, Climacus is not ignorant of the psychological depths of Hegel's thought, since Kierkegaard created Climacus in order to give voice to one aspect of his own absorption of those depths. Nor, as Stewart suggests, was Kierkegaard himself necessarily being mean to or jealous of his Hegelian contemporaries by openly criticizing them, while quietly appropriating some of their critical insights on faith (Stewart 2003, 454–66, 476–88). Rather, one might instead see Kierkegaard's point and pointedness under the guise of Johannes Climacus as a rhetorical and existential use of Hegel's notion of romantic humor—a dialectic of hilarity and seriousness. Kierkegaard wishes to call attention to something that he thinks is important to human beings as such—namely, the complexities of what it means to exist as an individual—but which he thinks is being obfuscated by the "mass" mindset of a religious and cultural establishment under the influence of a thinker who himself had not taken seriously enough his own recognition of the role of humor in romantic art. Hence, Kierkegaard demonstrates that it is not precision that is needed, but a form of exaggeration that calls attention to both the incongruity between speculation and existence in the Hegelian position—an amusing matter—and the existential stakes involved—deadly earnestness.

Following Kierkegaard's ambivalence toward Hegel in light of his moral and religious project, then, makes taking an appreciative, yet cautionary approach towards Kierkegaard's positive relation to Hegel appropriate. Such caution goes hand in glove with two other key issues, namely, clarity about Kierkegaard's

[1] Entries cited from this translation of Kierkegaard's journals and papers (*Papirer*) follow the convention of the Hongs (Kierkegaard 1967–78), which begins with an abbreviation of the title (*JP*), followed by the topic number to the referenced entry as assigned by the Hongs (e.g., 1688), and completed by the multiple-part notation found in the definitive Danish edition (e.g., II A 627 n.d., 1837). So, for example, the full citation referenced here is: *JP*, 1688 II A 627 n.d., 1837.

meaning of the term "the aesthetic" (also spelled "esthetic") and the problem that a positive interpretation of it raises, when Kierkegaard himself seemed to be virulently opposed to it.

8.2 The Meaning and the Problem of the Aesthetic in Kierkegaard's Corpus

The Danish term *æstetisk* and its cognates—like the English "aesthetic" and the German *ästhetisch* and their cognates—derive from the ancient Greek term *aisthanomai*, which means "to perceive or to sense." Kierkegaard knew the ancient Greek term, and generally used its Danish derivative to refer to the sensuous or that which can be perceived by the senses. In doing so, he associated it with the immediate, the momentary, and the fleeting aspects of life (*POV*, 43; *SUD*, 26–27, 51–54). As a reader of Hegel and the Greeks, Kierkegaard also associated the term with the philosophy of art or aesthetics, and so also with the fine arts and their related terms in his day, particularly the beautiful and the sublime, since they all dealt with perception, awareness, feeling and the senses, not simply issues of taste. Kierkegaard, however, went beyond both of these uses of the term to define the aesthetic as a way of life or sphere of existence.

For him, true aesthetes—that is, romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel who claimed to "live poetically"—are not unconscious of life in the same way as ordinary people. They are not so caught up in the busyness of day-to-day existence that they fail to reflect upon it. Rather, they reflect upon it because they want to shape it according to their own moods or whims. This, though, says Kierkegaard, is self-centered and immoral, since it means acting as though the gift and grace of life only exists for one's own pleasure. Such a vision of poetic living also simply fails to accomplish its goal, since it is "not the true reconciliation" of ideal and actual existence that allows the individual to be at home in "actuality... ; no transubstantiation of the given actuality takes place," and so "the true bliss in which the subject is not dreaming but possesses himself in infinite clarity" is missing—a benefit only for those individuals who are happy to acknowledge and to receive a "blessing" from a power greater and other than themselves (*CI*, 279–81, 297–9). In other words, poetic living is only joyous, deeply fulfilling, and valid, if one actually becomes fully aware of who one is by relating to the source, the sustenance, and the grace of one's existence, namely, God or the divine—something Kierkegaard elaborates later in terms of creatureliness, sensibility and time in a discourse on the joy of the lilies and the birds (*WA*, 36–39).

Kierkegaard's use of the term "transubstantiation" illuminates this point in its obvious reference to the Christian liturgical idea of the incarnation. His concern in using this term is not to discuss the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, but rather to address the way that an individual's relation to the divine can thoroughly transform or change the substance of that person's life by altering her or his attitude, outlook, and way of being in the world. With this, Kierkegaard both evokes Socrates's

pursuit of human excellence and the ancient Greek adage "know yourself" (*Phaedrus* 229e–230a; *Apology* 38a; Plato 1961, 478; Plato 2010, 57). He also implicitly weaves these evocations into his developing idea of a religious form of poetic living, one in which the individual "co-operates with God" as an assistant to a Master Craftsman (*CI*, 280). Kierkegaard concludes, then, by following these remarks with a series of characterizations, in subsequent pseudonymous works, of what he deems to be illustrative of the Schlegelian lifestyle, particularly *Either/Or*'s "Seducer's Diary" (*EO, I*, 301–445). There, Kierkegaard makes it clear that the aesthetic lifestyle of the romantics not only fails at being authentically poetic, but in so failing is not even an advance on the "unexamined lives" of ordinary bourgeois people.

Such direct, sustained and sharp criticisms of the romantic aesthetic lifestyle, along with unconscious existence in general, are precisely what have led generations of Kierkegaard scholars to identify him as the antagonist of art and aesthetics, particularly where morality and religion are concerned. This is still a strong tendency in Kierkegaard commentary, despite recent concessions, because a reading of *Either/Or*, *Stages on Life's Way*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *The Point of View*, especially in tandem with the religious writings, makes it clear that Kierkegaard himself thought that the aesthetic needed to be left behind for better ways of living. Hence, it is not just Kierkegaard's direct critiques of the aesthetic that make identifying a positive role for the aesthetic in his conception of authentic living difficult, but it is also his theory of the stages. Two scholars at opposing ends of the spectrum—namely, George Pattison and Sylvia Walsh—examine this difficult issue in works that span the last two decades, and either reinforce the prevailing interpretation, with some qualifications, or attempt to overturn it.

George Pattison follows the intellectual, moral and religious substance of Kierkegaard's thinking about the aesthetic by taking a historical and philosophical approach that leads him to a primarily negative, though at times cautiously affirmative, stand towards a positive use of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's corpus. In an early work, he maintains that Kierkegaard realized that there was only nihilism in the existential aesthetics of the romantics (Pattison 1999, 40–43). Thus, as works such as *Either/Or*, *Stages on Life's Way*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *Practice in Christianity* show, Kierkegaard clearly thought that there could only be an end to existential art, since for him existential art meant romanticism. Sylvia Walsh, by contrast, finds a deep and positive engagement of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard's and his pseudonymous authors' treatments of the ethical and/or religious spheres of existence. She traces the idea "living poetically" throughout Kierkegaard's corpus, and then effectively demonstrates that the existential art of which Climacus speaks positively in discussing the "subjective thinker as an artist" is ultimately the art in which Kierkegaard's authentic or "single individual"—the Christian—must be involved as s/he "flies to grace." This, as Walsh indicates, is a very different kind of poetic living, one that is no longer identified as such, because the art involved no longer belongs to the individual, but to God (Walsh 1994, 43–125, 167–242, esp. 196–242). In light of this argument, Pattison cautiously adjusts his position on the aesthetic in later works. He, however, does not explicitly make Christian existential art his own. Rather, seeking to nuance the tension that he

initially saw between the aesthetic and the religious, he examines Kierkegaard's moral and religious use of the image "before God," along with several others, as a "regulative ideal" (Pattison 2002, 85–116, 122–67; Pattison 2013, 155–70, esp. 155–58). This does not preclude a Christian existential art; it simply allows him to illuminate the "end of art" in Kierkegaard as a dialectic of image and iconoclasm in which the figure "before God" eradicates any self-posited image as absolute.

As both Walsh's and Pattison's positions are compelling and important for understanding Kierkegaard, my concern in this paper is to continue the cautious union of their positions already quietly initiated by Pattison. I have long agreed with Walsh that there is an existential aesthetics at work in the ethical and religious spheres of Kierkegaard's thought, and that his religious existential aesthetics entails persons being continually shaped by a divine "creative encounter," to use a phrase of theologian Howard Thurman (Robinson 2001; Robinson 2008; Thurman 1972, 28–30, 67–91; Thurman 1961, 10–23). However, I also agree with Pattison that there is a Hegelian structure to Kierkegaard's aesthetics that leads to "the end of art" (Pattison 1999, 35–188). As just seen, Pattison is also concerned with the way that Kierkegaard's use of the image "before God" functions as a Kantian regulative ideal, facilitating "the end of art." I am not concerned to explore this related issue, but rather to illuminate the way that Kierkegaard appropriates Hegel's romantic humor in order to address the end of human art and the beginning of divine art, particularly in light of Walsh's discussion of humor and holy jest in the *Postscript*—a humor that tinges some of the discourses (Pattison 2002, 30). Indeed, by following Pattison's historical approach, I realize that there is a bridge—provided by Kierkegaard's reading and adaptation of Hegel's views on romantic art—that allows one to connect Pattison's and Walsh's observations without collapsing the two positions into each other. This conceptual bridge has both to do with the way in which one understands the end of art in Kierkegaard and with the way that the very Hegelian nature of Kierkegaard's aesthetics leads a receptive individual directly into a divine art, in which silence and humility are major tools, tools that encourage one to stop using the phrase "poetic living," precisely as one accepts that one is living in "a drama that the deity is writing" (*E/O, II*, 137). This dialectic of the end of human art and the beginning of divine art fuels this paper's focus on Kierkegaard's positive use of Hegel's aesthetics, particularly in the way in which it elaborates Kierkegaard's adaptation of the romantic humorist.

8.3 Kierkegaard as Romantic Humorist: The Poet-Gadfly of Danish Christendom

In the posthumously published *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard indicates that his purpose in writing the authorship—his large body of multi-dimensional works—was to be a gadfly to Danish Christendom (*POV*, 41–47, 50–55). Like Socrates, who took it as his religious calling (from the Delphic oracle)

"to sting" his fellow Athenians into examining their lives for the sake of human excellence, Kierkegaard also took it as his religious vocation to awaken the "Christians of Christendom" to Christianity—his idea of "the examined" or authentic "life" (*Apology*, 20e-23c, 28b-28e, 29d-31b; Plato 2010, 36–39, 46–47, 48–50; *POV*, 47, 55–56). In assuming this role, Kierkegaard did not simply mimic Socrates as he appears in Plato's *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, or other dialogues. Rather, he assumed a form of the gadfly suited to the particularities of his cultured Danish audience—many of whom were romantics and Hegelians, appreciative of comedy, irony, and tragedy, and nostalgic for social unity in the wake of the French Revolution and the rise of the Napoleonic Wars. In doing so, Kierkegaard did not speak directly to his audience as Socrates did, but indirectly through myriads of voices, most of which were not his own. Like Socrates, though, Kierkegaard understood his fundamental approach to be deceptive, "godly deceptive," as M. Holmes Hartshorne put it (Hartshorne 1990, 6–7). That is, as gadfly, Kierkegaard sought to bring his readers—particularly his prominent ones—to a realization or awareness of something earnest and personal that they were not expecting or desiring to engage, precisely by using jest, jokes, wit, irony, parody, stories, and the like (*POV*, 46, 53–54). This, in effect, made Kierkegaard a kind of court jester, a master of the comic and the tragic for the modern cultural elite. Kierkegaard's inspiration for this type of gadfly, though, was not simply the medieval court jester who challenged the king and the church, but the romantic humorist of Hegel's *Aesthetics*.

Given that two of the leading Danish Hegelians in Kierkegaard's audience were advocates and interpreters of Hegel's aesthetics, namely, Johan Ludvig Heiberg and Hans Lassen Martensen, Kierkegaard's choice of the romantic humorist as gadfly was apropos. In his comparison of classical and romantic art in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel assigns the critical position to the romantic artist, and then makes humor the highest form of that art because of its ability to subvert all art (Hegel 1998, 602 ff).[2] For Kierkegaard, this was the best position from which to challenge what he took to be the comprehensive view of Heiberg's speculative philosophy and aesthetics and Martensen's speculative dogmatics, ethics, and aesthetics. In other words, he sought to question the existential authenticity of their views by using the aesthetics of their German master. Early on, he took aim in particular at Heiberg—one of the most important cultural arbiters of Kierkegaard's day, for Heiberg's influence extended to leading theologians and scholars such as Martensen.[3]

According to Alastair Hannay, Heiberg combined Hegel's phenomenology of Spirit coming to know itself through human history—that is, Heiberg's interpretation of it—with his own notion of the artist or "poetic genius." On Heiberg's view, the poetic genius was the one through whom the Spirit as the Truth or "Eternal Idea first enter[s] human experience," to use Hannay's phrasing (Hannay 2001, 18).

[2] For more on Hegel on romantic art and humor, see Rutter (2010) 217–226 and Lydia Moland's essay in this volume.

[3] For more on Martensen's dogmatics, ethics, and especially his theological aesthetics in regard to the comic, particularly in relation to Heiberg and Hegel, see Horn (1969), 81–204; and Martensen 1997, 10–11, 286–88).

This union of speculative philosophy and aesthetics had much to do with Heiberg's position and convictions as a writer, literary critic, editor, and publisher. With such a heavy investment in the literary world, it was natural for him to view art as the best means to promote a philosophy that he believed could bring unity for masses of people at a time of social fragmentation in Europe. Heiberg's fundamental concern with Hegelian philosophy, then, was not simply academic; it was a means to reconstruct Danish society after the tumults of revolution elsewhere in Europe led to the British bombardment of Copenhagen (Hannay 2001, 1–8, 15–18).

In *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Time* (1833), Heiberg maintains that his "age requires philosophy," and that philosophy is "nothing but knowledge of the eternal or the speculative idea, reason, truth, whose various expressions [—art, religion, and philosophy proper—] all designate the same substance" (Hannay 2001, 17). In saying this, Heiberg was calling for an expression of human being that was at once both universal and particular. The essence of the human spirit needed to be expressible in the ideals, values, conventions, institutions, and individuals of a particular age in order for it to emerge as Spirit. Making this essence clear and presenting conventions and institutions to embody it were the express tasks of the most talented artists and poets, followed by theologians and ultimately philosophers, who could give it the theoretical refinement it demanded. We need "representatives," Heiberg contended, "artists, poets, teachers of religion, philosophers," whom "we also call…teachers and educators of mankind,….not in virtue of themselves," but in their ability to present "the mirror in which mankind sees itself and becomes conscious of itself as its own object. The spirit is not something [human beings] get from themselves but [something they get] from God, but God's spirit is mankind's" (Heiberg 1861, 385; in Hannay 2001, 17). As this last remark indicates, Christianity—with its doctrine of the incarnation of the divine in the human—plays an integral role in Heiberg's Hegelian philosophy. In fact, one might say that Heiberg was only building on Hegel's own rarified use of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. For here, Heiberg employs the intimate union of the divine and the human in the man Jesus in Christian theology in order to re-present its notion of ideal human being in broad societal terms. In doing so, he makes Christianity a new classicism (Hannay 2001, 1–21).

By reclaiming Hegel's classical aesthetic for social purposes, without relinquishing his doctrine of sublation (*Aufhebung*), though, Heiberg built the continual end of art—and religion as a symbol system—into his project, since a dialectic in which Spirit takes on specific form and then explodes it in order to take on more appropriate ones, particularly philosophical ones, means that the concrete expressions of art and religion were always to be left behind. Thus, no matter how much he championed the significance of the poetic genius as an artist who "had a responsibility to" make "the truth of the Eternal Idea" known to "the less-endowed," and no matter how much he evoked Christianity in order to give particular religious authority and substance to his project, Heiberg nevertheless embraced a position—Absolute Knowledge—whose express purpose was to overcome the need for both (art and religion). Hannay wonders whether or not Heiberg understood the full ramifications of this. Given his reaction, Kierkegaard seems to have thought not. Heiberg was

simply too concerned with promulgating the Hegelian aesthetics to worry about Hegel's notion of Absolute Knowledge coming to fruition in his lifetime, or anyone else's, since subsequent ages had it as their task to begin anew in order for Spirit or God to speak through them. If so, things were as they should be, and all was right in the Heibergean universe.

Kierkegaard thought that this implicit divinization of human culture was fraudulent, and took issue with Heiberg and other Hegelians precisely by exposing the disruptive power of the religious in aesthetic terms. That is, he went directly to Hegel's discussion of romantic art, as a disruption of classical art's repose, in order to show that human art should point beyond itself to something better capable of embodying Spirit. For Kierkegaard, this pursuit of more appropriate forms for Spirit entailed a different creative process—a divine art, if you will—grounded in time, and concerned with the development of individual human spirits, not with an uncritical unification or deification of conventional society as an expression of Spirit. According to him, it was this divine creative process—this "sculpting" of an individual as a self through time by means of her/his relation to God—that had humor as its doorway (*CI*, 305). Kierkegaard purposefully included in the ongoing *Aufhebung* of this process, if you will, himself and his own creative productions. Herein is the reason that Hegel's romantic humor was so important for his project. Kierkegaard believed that he, as much as any of his Hegelian and romantic contemporaries, needed the right cultivation of humor in order to "sit loose to" his own genius as an avowed "poet of the religious"—to apply a Calvinist expression to his self-characterization—since this was the only way that God's "good work" could come forth in him (*CI*, 281).

To this end, Kierkegaard appreciated and appropriated several things in Hegel's discussion of romantic art in the *Aesthetics*—usually without acknowledging it. First, although he was not interested in the label "romantic," he nevertheless appreciated the passion and the imagination of the German romantics, and especially Hegel's deft presentation and subsumption of their position into his own moral project (Pattison 1999, 35–56).[4] Appropriately, then, one of the first insights that Kierkegaard drew from Hegel's treatment of romantic art was the idea that the creative spirit in art is a dynamic force in humankind that compels them to "sit loose" to all forms or expressions. Hence, unlike classical art, romantic art makes clear in the yearning of the creative spirit that ideality in art is only fleeting—an aesthetic basis for Kierkegaard's notion of the moment as the fullness of time. As a result, romantic art is ultimately not about capturing Spirit or the ideal in perfect human form, as classical art promoted, but rather about self-awareness or Spirit coming to know itself as such in the creative human process (Hegel 1998, 517–18).

[4] Pattison addresses Kierkegaard's acceptance of the distinction that Hegel makes between classical and romantic forms of art, particularly as Kierkegaard moved away from the Hegelian circle of Pattison (1992, 43–56). He also acknowledges Kierkegaard's appropriation of Hegel's idea that as Spirit, romantic art points beyond itself, and in doing so signifies the end of art—a transcendence of both Heiberg's and the German romantics' apotheosis of art (1999, 49–50, 174–86). In doing so, though, he does not identify Kierkegaard as a romantic humorist on the order of Hegel's romantic writer. This is the point that this essay seeks to make.

Indeed, self-recognition as Spirit in art is precisely what Hegel explores in his discussion of romantic treatments of Christianity, chivalry, and individual character broadly. According to him, these topics allow both the artist and the audience to participate, so to speak, in Spirit as it emerges in the personal struggles of religious, historical, or fictional characters (Hegel 1998, 63–69, 530–86; cf. Pattison 2013, 142–70). Given his appropriation of aspects of Hegel's "unhappy consciousness" from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in his treatment of despair in the aesthete of *Either/Or* and in his pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus' analysis of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard undoubtedly appreciated the psychological implications of this discussion as well. Kierkegaard also undoubtedly appreciated the fact that the *Aesthetics* made it clear that the modern age was not characterized by one aesthetic, but many—a third insight. The German romantics whom he and his Danish professors acknowledged, namely, August and Friedrich von Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Karl W. F. Solger, and others—promoted irony (Pattison 1999, 1–62). Heiberg, whose authority rested on his having met and been a pupil of Hegel, promoted a Hegelian classicism (Hannay 2001, 15). And Hegel himself promoted an anti-aesthetic aesthetic, namely, romantic humor, as drawn from the collective insights of his romantic compatriots.

The highpoint of Hegel's discussion of romantic art in the *Aesthetics* for Kierkegaard, though, as Pattison demonstrates, was undoubtedly Hegel's elaboration of romantic humor as an antedote to mere irony (Hegel 1998, 517–611). At the beginning of the *Aesthetics*, Hegel criticizes the romantics for misusing irony to empty art of moral aims (Hegel 1998, 67–68). He even goes so far as to call the romantics' recognition of the incongruous elements in human nature "the most inartistic of all principles" (Hegel 1998, 68). Romantic irony, says Hegel, is an anti-art, or to put it another way, an anti-aesthetic aesthetic that was immoral in its mere play with human character. By the time that he discusses romantic art in relation to classical art, though, Hegel has identified a more appropriate use of romanticism's recognition of the incongruous in human existence, namely, humor, an aesthetic principle related to irony that facilitates his own project. In this context, humor, like irony, is still an anti-aesthetic aesthetic, since as a form of art, it too realizes the limits of art for embodying the Spirit, and so leads to the end of art. It, however, is not mere play with moral character, but rather a moral act that uses levity in order to lead to a higher understanding of self and human being.

From the start of this discussion, Hegel maintains that romantic art as Spirit—not as the ironic play of Friedrich Schlegel and others—must eventually break out of its own creative boundaries in order to find a more appropriate home for itself (Hegel 1998, 517–8; cf. 64–69). Indeed, on his view, the very task of romantic art is to reveal to the artist and the audience alike that there is always a cleavage between the ideal and the actual in human art; therefore, art cannot be the ultimate resting place for Spirit (Hegel 1998, 517–29). This does not mean that art should be disparaged. Art plays a central role in self-awareness, and actual existence is always the stage on which the Spirit unfolds in its innate pursuit of fulfillment. Rather, art should be appreciated precisely by allowing it to pursue its end and its transcendence in humor. Humor, says Hegel, is the highest expression of romantic art, because it makes clear

that art must present its own limitations to itself—an ethical move with a healthy dose of laughter—so that the artist and audience might move on to something more appropriate for them as manifestations of Spirit—religion, then philosophy in Hegel's case, and religion only, in Kierkegaard's (Hegel 1998, 586–92, 600–602; *JP*, 1688 II A627 n.d., 1837). Hegel then concludes that this understanding of romantic humor is best exemplified by Laurence Sterne.

It is Hegel's assessment of Sterne, I suggest, that was a general inspiration for Kierkegaard's existential project (Hegel 1998, 602). A sketch of Kierkegaard's possible use of Sterne for moral and religious reasons makes this apparent, especially if followed by an explication of humor in relation to irony, the comic, and the tragic in Kierkegaard's corpus, and especially if briefly illustrated in its existential power by Kierkegaard's illumination of incongruity at the borders of the ethical and the religious spheres.

As Christopher Ricks indicates in his 1967 introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Sterne challenged the deification of the novel and the novelist in eighteenth-century Britain by taking a humorous stance toward the capacities of the novel—an outlook that not only exposed its limitations, but that also acknowledged its significance and integrity (Ricks 1967, xv–xxi). Sterne knew, says Ricks, that "novels cannot save us" (Ricks 1967, xvii). And so "with humor and sensitivity"—jokes, pointless twists and turns, bawdiness, and subtle paradoxes in a story that failed miserably as biographical fiction—he insisted against his fellow, cultured eighteenth-century Britons that the novel was not "more profound, more true and more complete than any [other form of] literature"—or any discipline for that matter—in telling us who we are (Ricks 1967, xvii, xix). Indeed, that was not even possible. Instead, Sterne indicated that writers were at their best precisely as they recognized that art contains two opposing views (Ricks 1967, xix–xx). Although writing is everything for them as writers, writing is also "ultimately as nothing compared to living" both for them and their audiences (Ricks 1967, xix). Hence, if one wants to know what it means to be human, one needs truly to live, not simply to write or to read novels, even ones aimed at instigating virtue.

Kierkegaard could not have agreed more, especially in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, a spoof on Danish Hegelianism. Although he does not seem to have owned *Tristram Shandy*, at least not at his death, Kierkegaard did own Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, a work done in the same vein. This suggests that Kierkegaard knew the Irish author first-hand, not simply through Hegel. As a result, he could easily have owned or read *Tristram* as well, and, following Hegel's commentary on romantic humor, perused it, as well as *A Sentimental Journey*, for tactics, given that humor for Sterne went hand in glove with moral concerns in both of these works. Indeed, Sterne's tactics and moral purpose for a chastened literary aesthetics may well have given Kierkegaard the very inspiration for a seemingly meaningless, yet morally purposeful humor that he had thought was missing in the "ingenious" capering of German romantic Ludwig Tieck, a comedic sense that he both admired and lamented (*CI*, 303–8; Robinson 2008, 271–314). If so, this inspiring insight on how to give his

own sense of romantic humor depth would certainly help to explain the structure and the character of humor in the authorship.

This is especially the case in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where an evocation of Sterne might be said to emerge in his union of a Tieckean playfulness with an impish edge and a profound, even dark, earnestness. There, one can see how Hegel's claim—that "individual details" in Sterne's work "gush forth without any order," yet have "their inner connection... all the deeper" in the rich and expressive spirit of a writer who knows how "to make... [the] substantial emerge out of contingency"—might have been a perfect insight—with a Tieckean twist—for Kierkegaard as he constructed both his pseudonymous author, the logician-humorist Johannes Climacus, and Climacus' ridiculously long *Postscript* to the *Philosophical Fragments*, a work nearly four times shorter than its purported supplement (Hegel 1998, 602).

In the *Postscript*, Climacus responds to what he takes to be the Hegelians' misunderstanding of faith and existence in a manner that at first seems scholarly, until one gets into it and realizes that it is hilariously unwieldy and its jesting uncannily disconcerting. That is, Climacus begins as though he is going to be serious, since he self-identifies as a speculative thinker. The table of contents looks like scholarly exposition, and Climacus starts in good faith with the objective view of Christian faith by considering historical discussions of the Bible and the Church. As these fail to address the central issue of subjectivity, where faith is concerned, he moves on to the speculative view of Christianity. At this point, the reader will have already picked up a comedic sense emerging in the exposition. The fun-house begins in earnest, though, as Climacus takes his reader down numerous, haphazard alleyways of comic critique, including a long digression on Lessing, followed by a barrage of jokes about and mimicry of speculative thinkers (i.e., Danish Hegelians) who assume that they can build a system of existence while they are still living. Eventually this labyrinth of laughter opens out onto a more pointed discussion of subjectivity as truth in matters of faith and existence, as the ensuing discussion of Socrates and Christianity reveal. This makes the reader think, at least for a while, that we have finally arrived at a serious discussion again. The play resumes, however, as this discussion gets interrupted first by a melancholy episode in the cemetery, where Climacus eavesdrops on a grandfather talking to his grandson—a story with all of the shadows of a Tieckean fairy tale—and then by a long hilarious review of contemporary literature that emerges out of Climacus' thwarted attempts to write about the insights gleaned from this private interchange in the cemetery. For every time he begins to write, he is beaten to the task by Kierkegaard or one of his pseudonymous authors. When Climacus finally returns to his discussion of subjectivity, he moves to an elaboration on the subjective thinker, particularly as existential artist, and follows this with what appears at first to be an intricate philosophy of religion, corresponding to both his ideas of the subjective thinker and of "truth as subjectivity." To some extent, this is what it is. Nevertheless, it too is filled with digressions and amusement. For example, Climacus' treatment of suffering as an expression of Religiousness A—a form of immanent religiosity distinct from Christianity—is infused with a hilarious discussion of the inability of a person to go on an excursion

to the Deer Park without God's help. And, as though all of this were not enough, even the conclusion is not an actual conclusion, given that it too is extended with more reflections and an appendix. Finally, the whole thing appears to end in a revocation, as though this 600-plus-page tome were simply one big joke.

To put this in terms Hegel might use to describe his romantic humorist: all of the many twists and turns of Climacus' treatment of the Hegelians' misunderstanding of faith and existence "gush forth" comically "without any order" in a manner akin to *Tristram*, and are topped off with a seeming rejection that makes the *Postscript* look like a "cock and bull story," just as Sterne claims *Tristram* is at the end (Sterne 2003, 588). All of this hilarity, though, as Hegel says of Sterne, might be taken as a "light, unostentatious jogging along which in its triviality affords.... the supreme idea of depth" (Hegel 1998, 602). For there is, as John Lippitt notes, a point to all of this pointlessness, and that point is moral (Lippitt 2000, 47–71). In Climacus' case, humor exposes both the limitations of speculation and art in the Hegelian vein represented by Heiberg and his colleague Martensen, and points to true living as a risk or venture in time. Existence, says Climacus, requires faith, not as belief in the veracity of a set of logical propositions in a beautifully composed speculative system, but as a venturing "out over 70,000 fathoms" (*CUP*, 1:140, 204, 232, 288, 424–31). As such, faith is not "objective certainty" about life, but rather "objective uncertainty," which makes faith akin to being in a leaky boat that one is neither to abandon nor to bring to safe harbor *(CUP*, 1:204, 225, *n., 555). Similar to Ricks' characterization of Sterne's attitude, then, Climacus' view of faith as a "happy passion" is an optimism that "neither despairs nor presumes" (Ricks 1967, xx-xxi).[5]

8.4 Humor as an Anti-Aesthetic Aesthetic

As is already evident, in making this comparison, one need not think that Kierkegaard's humor always entails the kind of rip-roaring hilarity that seems to constitute Sterne's fiction, for much of what constitutes the comical in the authorship is more akin to Tieck's uncanny impishness—the laughter of romantic irony, Shakespeare's ironic mix of lightheartedness and seriousness—a carefully-crafted union of the comic and the tragic, and Socrates' mordant wit—an existential form of irony in the service of the divine. This brings us to the technical meaning of humor in Kierkegaard. C. Stephen Evans and John Lippitt have both identified humor in Kierkegaard's corpus with his pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus. Lippitt notes that Climacus' understanding of humor stands in direct relation to his ideas about irony and the comic. Humor, along with irony, wit, satire, parody, jokes, etc., is a subcategory of the comic, says Lippitt, while the comic is the broader or umbrella term for anything amusing or laughable (Lippitt 2000, 63). As such, humor is a perspective of amusement that emerges out of a deep and sympathetic

[5] Cf., for example, Ricks' remarks on Sterne's optimism in *Tristram*—a point, I might add, in the midst of *Tristram's* pointlessness—with *CUP*, 1:140.

understanding of the shortcomings of all human beings (Lippitt 2000, 63–65). It sees the incongruity, the disconnects or contradictions in human efforts just as irony does, but unlike irony, it is kinder and more compassionate in its smile (Lippitt 2000, 63–65). Evans sums up Climacus' humor nicely, where he says: "The humorist sees... the whole business of existing [as] a jest, something to smile over, since it has no *eternal* significance. The humorist's smile is, however, 'sympathetic'. His [comic sense] is not teasing and divisive, as is irony, but reunites him with [hu] mankind, since all human beings in the final analysis 'get equally far' [*CUP*, 1:582].... Therefore, the humorist... always 'recalls' his efforts" (Evans 1983, 203).[6] I agree with Evans and Lippitt, but think that this understanding of humor is applicable to Kierkegaard himself. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that Kierkegaard's own position is identical in every respect to his pseudonymous author's, since unlike Climacus, he seems to have made the move to the religious. Rather, I mean that in his concern to awaken Copenhagen's existentially "sleepy" Christians to the moral rigors of Christianity, Kierkegaard functions as a humorist just as Climacus does. Indeed, one might even argue that he created Climacus to make this apparent.

Kierkegaard's self-avowed role as a gadfly to Danish Christendom suggests that irony rather than humor should be the definitive feature of his religious vocation. After all, Socrates, his role model, functioned as an ironist, inspired by the Delphic oracle "to sting" his fellow Athenians out of their moral torpor (*POV*, 41–47, 50–56; *Apology*, 20e-23c, 28b-28e, 29d-31b; Plato 2010, 36–39, 46–47, 48–50). Kierkegaard and his troupe of pseudonymous authors also clearly used irony throughout the authorship, often with reference to that "simple wise man." As indicated earlier, though, Kierkegaard's historical and cultural context was defined by Hegel, who championed humor over irony, both in criticizing the romantics' purported misuse and abuse of irony, and in lauding the comedies of Aristophanes, which made fun of Socrates precisely as they validated "the state, religion, and art" as the "truly moral in the life of the Athenians" against all such "sophistry"—one clear reason for institution-loving Heiberg's and Martensen's appreciation of Hegel (Hegel 1975, 1202). Hence, in accord with the Hegelian influences of the time, particularly as they defined cultured Christianity, Kierkegaard constructed his Socratic-religious project with humor as the overarching perspective. In doing so, he agreed with Hegel that humor is higher than irony, that is, romantic irony, because humor brings the despair of romantic irony to a crisis at the border of "the higher spiritual life" (Hegel 1975, 1202, 1220–2, 1233, 1235–6; Hegel 1998, 64–8; *JP*, 1688 II A 627 n.d., 1837). Kierkegaard, however, disagreed with Hegel's idea that Socrates' irony was only discursive by allowing it to come forth as humor, the highest form of irony—that is, as a "controlled element" facilitating existence (*CI*, 237, 326–9).

In his dissertation *The Concept of Irony*, his journals and papers, and Climacus' *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, all of which engage or assume Hegel's

[6] The Hongs translate the way that Evans handles the Danish for "in the final analysis 'get equally far'" as "viewed eternally, go equally far." The latter translation is what appears in *CUP*, 1:582, not what Evans provides in his strategic quoting of Kierkegaard.

Aesthetics, Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous author seem to be concerned with humor and irony not simply as literary devices, but also as perspectives on and attitudes toward life, or as Sylvia Walsh puts it, "existential determinants" or "existence-qualifications," (Walsh 1994, 210–20). As such, humor and irony, for both Kierkegaard and Climacus, have comic and tragic dimensions (Walsh 1994, 210–20). Depending upon the circumstances, humor and irony entail either "painless" recognitions of "contradiction"—or the comic—or "suffering" and so painful recognitions of "contradiction"—or the tragic (*CUP*, 1: 514). In other words, as recognitions of contradiction, the comic and the tragic qualify humor and irony as perspectives on and attitudes toward life. Key in this, as Walsh rightly indicates in discussing humor, is Climacus' argument that humor is "the final *terminus a quo* in relation to the Christian religious"—that is, humor "terminates immanence within immanence" as "the last stage in existence-inwardness before faith" (*CUP*, 1: 291; Walsh 1994, 213). Thus, humor is clearly the perspective of an individual concerned with existence, as just seen in Lippitt's and Evans' commentary.

Similarly, in the dissertation, Kierkegaard presents irony as the perspective of an individual sensitive to finite existence. Irony, however, is a thoroughgoingly negative position on conventional life in two modes, namely, Socratic and romantic, or as Kierkegaard elaborates them, "controlled" and "uncontrolled irony," respectively (*CI*, 236–329, esp. 324–9). According to him, Socrates is the premier example of an ironic personality with moral purpose (*CI*, 236–7, 259–71). As such, Socrates—and other "world-historical" figures like him, such as Shakespeare and Goethe—is the perfect embodiment of a "controlled" form of irony, for Socrates used the contradictions that he saw in conventional life to give his fellow Athenians an authentic "bath of regeneration and rejuvenation," compared to the one that Heinrich Heine wittily noted that the romantics provided the German bourgeoisie (*CI*, 270–1, 304, 324–6). That is, Socrates shocked his fellow citizens into recognizing the error of acting as though they possessed absolute knowledge and truth, so that they might rectify their situation and seek existential health (*CI*, 270–1, 326–7; *Apology* 29c-30b; Plato 2010, 47–49). Kierkegaard clearly has in mind the amusing image of Socrates as "a gadfly" stinging Athens as "a big, noble, but sleepy horse" (*CI*, 326; *Apology* 30e-31b; Plato 2010, 49–50).

By contrast, Kierkegaard maintains that romantic irony does just the opposite (*CI*, 274–308). Although it critiques the same contradictions in conventional life as Socratic irony does, its practitioners are not concerned to help others to heal themselves (*CI*, 286–308). Rather, their concern is to play with them and to reject altogether the conventionalism defining their lives. For Kierkegaard, Tieck, in his brilliant comedic sense, is particularly adept at demonstrating the purposelessness of this type of irony, while Schlegel's imaginative forays into erotic love in the novel *Lucinde* demonstrate its thoroughgoing immorality in the use of others for one's own pleasure (*CI*, 289–308). For Kierkegaard, then, both figures represent the "uncontrolled" nature of romantic irony, since neither are about human betterment, but rather the destructive nature of human despair (*CI*, 289–308).

With this, one can clearly see both the comic and the tragic sides of Socratic and romantic irony emerging in Kierkegaard's dissertation. Kierkegaard and Climacus draw attention to both sides of Socratic irony by indicating that Socrates risked his life for his moral and often comedic displays of irony—and lost it, "the final battle … and … suffering" with death (*CI*, 236, 264, 271; *CUP*, 1:201–7). Similarly, in a journal entry from 1837, Kierkegaard uses the comical image of a see-saw to characterize the relation between romantic humor and romantic irony, and in the process, illuminates the tragic nature of romantic irony. There, Hegel also clearly emerges as the source of Kierkegaard's, and by association Climacus', technical sense of humor. Kierkegaard even evokes Hegel's position on romantic humor:

> If I have conceived... of the romantic position as a see-saw, the ends of which are characterized by irony and humor, then it follows naturally that the path of its oscillation is extremely varied, all the way from the most heaven-storming humor to the most desperate bowing down in irony, as if there were a certain rest and equilibrium in this position (Wieland's "Irony"), for irony is first surmounted when the individual, elevated above everything and looking down from this position, is finally elevated beyond himself and from this dizzy height sees himself in his nothingness, and thereby... finds his true elevation. —See *Prindsessinn Brambilla* [by E. T. A. Hoffmann].
>
> June 2, 1837

> This self-overcoming of irony is the crisis of the higher spiritual life; the individual is now acclimatized—the bourgeois mentality, which essentially only hides in the other position, is conquered, and the individual is reconciled.

> The ironical position is essentially: *nil admirari* [nothing to be admired]; but irony, when it slays itself, has disdained everything with humor, itself included. —
>
> (*JP*, 1688 II A 627 n.d., 1837)

Here, Kierkegaard makes it clear that like Hegel on romantic art, he views humor as a higher form of irony in the romantic position, as his reference to the romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann indicates. He also suggests that humor is the mark of "the higher spiritual life," and so is able to go up on the see-saw, "surmounting" mere irony by revealing its nihilism for what it is, and by surpassing the bourgeois conventionalism that mere irony critiques in the process. In other words, romantic humor as a higher form of irony takes up mere irony and what it critiques into itself, as it overcomes all of irony's productions, including its own.

This suggests that Kierkegaard not only recognized the comic and the tragic nature of romantic irony and humor, which means that he was already thinking of irony and humor as "*confinia*" or border positions between the aesthetic and the ethical and the ethical and the religious, well before he wrote the *Postscript*. But Kierkegaard was also clearly thinking about Hegel's Spirit in romantic humor transcending and transforming the essentially ironic or "cleaving" nature of romantic art in order to move toward the "higher spiritual life." Humor was already the liminal position of irony, intellectually and existentially, that could lead one into a more authentic way of being in the world, just like Socrates' "rejuvenating bath." One might argue, then, that Kierkegaard constructed his pseudonymous author Climacus and Climacus' *Postscript* to elaborate this very point, for this is particularly apparent in Climacus' discussion of the Hegelians' failure both to recognize the critical

nature of Hegel's romantic humor and to recognize that humor could never penetrate the authentically religious and make it comic.

Sylvia Walsh provides a helpful explication of aspects of this discussion in her examination of Climacus' idea of a mature or sympathetic form of humor. There, she maintains that Climacus' mature or sympathetic form of humor is not simply the recognition that all humans lack the foresight to know the meaning of life prior to living it—the recognition with which Evans and Lippitt are concerned, and the recognition whose "suffering" Climacus "revokes" "in the form of a jest," since its "explanation lies behind" (Walsh 1994, 214; Evans 1983, 203; Lippitt 2000, 63–65; *CUP*, 1:447, 449–50, 582). Rather, in recognizing the limitations of all humanly-conceived positions on existence, something Climacus calls "immanence," mature humor as a liminal or border position to the religious is also the means to give up—that is, "to revoke"—any notion that one can ever have a God's-eye view on life as an existing individual, even within the sphere of the religious—something about which Lippitt is concerned in a manner different than Walsh or Evans (*CUP*, 1: 91–93, 118–25, 140, 192, 205, 447, 572–73; cf. Walsh 1994, 212–20, esp. 213; Evans 1983, 17–292; Lippitt 2000, 47–120).

This is precisely the kind of Socratic move that a humorist in a Hegelian vein should make, particularly if such a person is also a speculative thinker or logician like Climacus. For if it is the task of the romantic humorist, as Hegel puts it in the *Aesthetics*, to identify the limits of art, as an artist, for artists and audience alike, so it is the task of the logician-humorist as a thinker to identify the limits of thinking for all existing human beings, intellectuals and ordinary people alike. This, after all, says Kierkegaard, was Socrates' avowed task in Plato's dialogues—that is, when Plato was willing to allow Socrates' thoroughgoing irony or negativity to stand without assistance from his appeal to the positivity of the mythical (*CI*, 101–4; cf. *Apology* 20c-23c, 29c-31a; Plato 2010, 35–39, 47–50). Hence, like Socrates, Climacus' acknowledgment of reason's limits is not a disparagement of thinking any more than the self-recognitions of Hegel's romantic humorist are a disparagement of art. Rather, Climacus' mature humor is the highest form of irony, the highest position within thought for helping the individual to become receptive to more authentic forms of living, namely, the religious—and particularly the Christian.

Climacus himself does not make the move to the religious, which is precisely what forecloses his ability—sadly—to transcend the pain of existing. He, however, does explore the intellectual and psychological dynamic within which humor is able to facilitate this transition. To start, he contends that it is humor that recognizes such a move as a gestalt, metaphoric or paradigm shift, as Lippitt puts it in his examination of M. Jamie Ferreira's claim that Kierkegaardian faith involves a "transforming vision" (Lippitt 2000, 108–20, 135–74). That is, drawing upon his own experience, Climacus sees the incommensurability between speculative thought and faith; realizes that speculative thought and the world built upon it must be surrendered before faith; and feels the pain of what this means as someone invested in both. Indeed, this insight undoubtedly informs Climacus' exploration into the psychological turmoil of the thinker who becomes a person of faith. His careful consideration of the kinds of pathos-filled moments of resignation, suffering, and guilt makes this apparent, as

does his distinction between Religiousness A and B in this psychological drama, a distinction that parallels his earlier comparison of Socrates as an existential thinker to the reflective person encountering a thoroughgoingly-paradoxical faith (*CUP*, I: 201–7, 387–586). And as Lippitt astutely notes, Climacus clearly seems to have Socrates in mind as the prime example of Religiousness A, given his struggles with Athens, given that the truth in Religiousness A is not itself paradoxical, and given that Kierkegaard, as the creator of Climacus, viewed Socrates as a religious figure (Lippitt 2000, 102–3; *CI*, 236).[7]

As Walsh rightly notes, though, Climacus does not simply understand the dynamics of the paradigm shift involved in faith, but he also understands the limits of humor before the religious. Herein are two further challenges that Climacus makes as humorist-logician to Heiberg and Martensen as speculative thinkers enamored with Hegel's aesthetics. First, and related to his understanding of humor's ability to facilitate a paradigm shift, Climacus maintains that "modern scholarship's" "speculative thought"—code for the "immanence" of Heiberg and Martensen—makes a mistake in claiming that "humor" is "the highest *after* faith" (*CUP*, I: 291). That is, to put this in terms of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, they assume that humor is a mediated and so a higher position than faith because humor ensues, in part, from romantic art's presentation of the "immediacy" of faith's struggles as something to be surmounted. "Humor," though, argues Climacus, "is the last stage in existence-inwardness *before* faith," precisely because of the paradigm shift that it facilitates *to* faith (*CUP*, I:291; emphasis mine). Hence, humor might be confused with faith because of this, but it is neither faith nor higher than it (*CUP*, I:447). As Climacus maintains, the humorist who is an existing individual, especially one who is sensitive enough to understand Sterne, recognizes the impending suffering at the juncture between itself and religion, and "retires" honestly—and without hesitation—back into the security of "immanence," even though his "home" in thought is now encircled by pain (*CUP*, I: 447). Such a humorist may not understand this suffering, or see a way out of it, but said humorist has no desire to become a "martyr" by becoming religious (*CUP*, I:291–2, 447).

Humor can only continue in the religious sphere, then, Climacus avers, if it becomes "incognito," that is, if it takes on the hidden form of "holy jest," in which the suffering person of faith realizes inwardly, not outwardly in relation to others, including other religious individuals, that everything that one does, from excursions in the Deer Park to the most stringent imitation of the religious ideal depends upon divine grace (*CUP*, I:462, 471–2; Walsh 1994, 214–20, 236–40). Such divine jest, Climacus concedes, can be articulated by the faithful individual, but only indirectly, and only at the right time and with the right amount of wit, when it emerges out of this person's ongoing experiences of life's contradictions and need for grace, which

[7] Climacus' elaboration of the psychological dynamic around Religiousness B also anticipates what Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard's stringent, Christian, pseudonymous author, re-presents in his discussion of Christ and the believer in *Practice in Christianity* (*PC*, 40–68, 85–144, 192–9).

is nothing other than a further deepening in faith (*CUP*, I:462, 471–2; cf. Pattison 2002, 30).

As is obvious at this point, religion, for Climacus and Kierkegaard, as it was for Socrates, is not fundamentally an institutional matter, that is, a matter of assenting to certain dogmas, observing certain rites, identifying as a member of a particular group, practicing the virtues, or following any other ethical code, as it was for Socrates' young interlocutor Euthyphro or some of Kierkegaard's ecclesiastical contemporaries (*Euthyphro* 4b-16a; Plato 2010, 9–27). Rather, as Alastair Hannay indicated in his keynote address during the fourth international Hong Kierkegaard Library conference at St. Olaf College in June of 2001, religion, for Climacus and Kierkegaard, is first and foremost a matter of the heart, a matter that involves pathos, self-understanding, and a willingness to live with the effects of such inwardness in a world that does not value it, a world that includes the institutional church. This does not mean that Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous author disparage the church, its teachings, its people, or its rites and devotional practices, even though they can be quite critical of them. Rather, Kierkegaard's and Climacus' emphasis on the heart is their way of addressing human integrity and authenticity. For them, humor is essential for this pursuit. Indeed, if one looks back from the *Postscript* to *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* together, both from 1843, the beginning of Kierkegaard's published authorship, and compares the assessor or Judge Wilhelm to Johannes de Silentio's Abraham, one can see just how Kierkegaard's appreciation and use of humor to pursue existential authenticity began to blossom as the highest form of irony. Allow me to elaborate by explaining the title of this paper.

The brief quotation constituting the first part of the title of this paper—"What time is it? Eternity."—comes from "The Esthetic Validity of Marriage," the first of two long letters in *Either/Or, II*. There, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Judge Wilhelm makes this remark to the aesthete of the first part of *Either/Or*. Championing the retention of first love in the act of marriage, Wilhelm declares that failing to make time the dwelling place of the eternal is tantamount to living in hell. In saying this, the ethical judge does not metamorphose into a fire-and-brimstone preacher. Rather, mimicking his romantic friend, Wilhelm evokes the imagery of knights, heroes, princes and princesses from the Middle Ages—or the age of chivalry as Hegel characterizes it in the *Aesthetics*—in order to orient the courtly love that his friend lauds in something higher: the ethical as the capacity to take responsibility for one's life in time, a divine or sacred feature of human being, according to the judge (*EO*, II, 134–40, 176–7). Wilhelm's point in evoking fairy tales of medieval chivalry, then, is not to join the aesthete in idealizing romanticism's celebration of the fleeting nature of erotic love, but rather to expose the incongruity in the aesthete's position. For with a healthy dose of irony, the judge wryly tells him that he can have the ideal love that he seeks in more than fleeting moments, if he takes responsibility for one instance of erotic love. If he did this, the paternal assessor avers, he could transform his dissatisfaction with conventional life into something truly ideal, a life that captures the eternal in time, namely, bourgeois marriage.

Indeed, marriage, says the judge, would place him in the most spectacular drama of all: the drama of God. As a result, the aesthete would not only attain so much intimacy with God that his and God's actions would become interchangeable, but he would also enjoy the same personal peace and "domestic life of... quiet, modest, humming" that the judge enjoys (*E/O*, II, 137–9, 144).

Wilhelm's perfect harmony of inner and outer life not only evokes the classical repose of Heiberg's ethical aesthetics as discussed earlier, but in coming before *Fear and Trembling*, it also sets the stage for that "dialectical lyric." Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard's now well-known pseudonymous poet of the religious, exposes the ridiculousness of assuming that a divine drama is peaceful in his aesthetic response to the smugness of the ethical judge. Opening *Fear and Trembling* with a bit of ribbing to Danish Hegelians, he sits down in the parlor—or perhaps better, the theater—of Heiberg, where he immediately and unsuccessfully attempts in four scenes—altarpieces really—to stage Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as a comedy. Along the way, he utilizes fairy tales with knights, heroes, a country boy and a princess, as well as a few scenes from ordinary life. After this bit of entertainment, he then moves to a kind of combined philosophical and literary analysis as he tries to make sense of Judaism's and Christianity's purported exemplar of faith: Abraham on Moriah. Herein is the whole matter of humor as a gestalt shift, as Lippitt discusses it, and as a *"confinium"* or threshold into the religious.

Comparing Abraham to Jepthah, Brutus, and especially Agamemnon in Sophocles' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, de Silentio compels Heiberg and his Hegelian colleagues—who Judge Wilhelm now clearly represents—to take note of their error (*FT*, 9–14, 54–67). Look, he says, at Abraham. One minute you have a loving father and faithful husband; the next minute you have a madman ready to kill his son. As a celebrated man of faith, he is both loving family man and murderer. What on earth are we supposed to make of this terrible incongruity? As supporters of Hegel's situated ethics, particularly in an aesthetic form, the Judge Wilhelms in the audience cannot help but see the slippage—and the horror—which immediately announces that being an actor in a divine drama, particularly that of the Judeo-Christian God, hardly leads to peace and "domestic humming (*FT*, 54-67; *E/O, II*, 137-39, 144, 341-54). Indeed, before this Abrahamic "duck-rabbit," de Silentio's romantic humor makes clear that Wilhelm's evocation of the prompter and the actor in ancient Greek theater was a misunderstanding as well, since the clashing responsibilities of parents who are also rulers—Agamemnon before Iphigenia—hardly make for domestic bliss or personal peace in either.

Thus, with *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard meets Heiberg and his colleagues in the theater—and one might easily add the salon, the university, and the church—where they all reside, and compels them, as he says in *The Point of View*, "to take notice" of faith (*POV*, 50). If the gestalt of Abraham does not lead to a paradigm shift or "transformative vision," it will at least help to dispel delusions of contentment, which Lippitt maintains is the legitimacy of humor. For in the anguish of Abraham, de Silentio evokes the judge's smug remark to the aesthete about hell, and

calmly tells him—to use the expression of nineteenth-century, African-American, ex-slave-turned-feminist Sojourner Truth—"what time of night it is."[8]

8.5 Abbreviations of Kierkegaard's Published Works

All works are published in Kierkegaard 1978–2000 as indicated below.

CI:	*The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*
CUP:	*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments, a Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation, an Existential Contribution*
E/O, I:	*Either/Or, a Fragment of Life, Part One, Containing A's Papers*
E/O, II:	*Either Or, a Fragment of Life, Part Two, Containing B's Papers, Letters to A*
FT:	*Fear and Trembling, a Dialectical Lyric*
PC:	*Practice in Christianity*
POV:	*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*
SUD:	*The Sickness Unto Death, a Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*
WA:	*Without Authority: The Lily in the Field and the Bird in the Air*

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[8] The phrase "what time of night it is" closes a speech that Sojourner Truth gave in 1853 at Broadway Tabernacle in New York City as part of the Woman's Rights Convention. By "night," she meant the low and dark state of American society under slavery and gender oppression, particularly as revealed in the tenor of the opposition that she and others encountered in advocating for blacks' and women's rights. As her and her colleagues' opponents seemed not to be fully aware of the moral darkness or hell that they were supporting, Truth took it as her task to awaken them. See Cady Stanton et al. 1887, 1:567–8. Truth's expression is apropos to the discussion here because the lack of awareness that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous poet of the religious Johannes de Silentio saw in the cultured leaders of Copenhagen parallels the lack of awareness that Truth encountered in her situation. Just as her challengers had no understanding of the moral darkness that they were representing and supporting, so cultured Copenhageners seemed to Kierkegaard's de Silentio to have no understanding of the darkness or difficulties that the religious could create for them in their conventional lives or the darkness that was their conventional lives from a religious perspective. See the transcription of this speech, often entitled "What Time of Night It Is," in Stanton et al. 1887, 1: 567–568.

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Chapter 9
Jest as Humility: Kierkegaard and the Limits of Earnestness

John Lippitt

Abstract This chapter argues that jest [*Spøg*] - an apparently marginal and comparatively overlooked feature of Kierkegaard's treatment of the comic, humor and irony - has far greater significance than is normally realized. It argues that jest is the expression of an existentially important kind of humility. To see this, we need to understand the relation between jest and earnestness (especially, how jest reveals the limits of earnestness for humans *qua* finite creatures) and the link between this and the important Kierkegaardian category of "infinite resignation." The chapter then explores the dangers of the "spirit of comparison" discussed in Kierkegaard's 1847 discourses on the lilies and the birds. It argues that jest addresses these dangers through expressing a particular kind of humility, one typified by a recognition of our dependence and a focus on others, rather than underestimating ourselves or not exaggerating our abilities or importance. Finally, it suggests that the relationship between such humility, "eschatological trust" and hope sheds new light on how best to understand Kierkegaard's claim that awareness of a "way out" must be present if a use of the comic is to be ethically "legitimate."

Keywords Kierkegaard · Humility · Jest · Earnestness · Infinite resignation

9.1 Introduction

It is perhaps no accident that there are not one but two contributions to this volume on Søren Kierkegaard. I sometimes claim to my students that Kierkegaard is one of the wittiest of writers in the western philosophical tradition (though, inexplicably, some remain unconvinced by this claim after a semester of reading him). Several of the pseudonyms under which Kierkegaard wrote so many of his texts have a somewhat impish sense of humor; he analyses humor and irony in several places in his journals; and his *Magister* dissertation was on *The Concept of Irony.* But it is the

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_9

pseudonym Johannes Climacus who gives the most central role to humor in his thinking.

My involvement in this volume stems from a book I published some time ago, a monograph entitled, slightly misleadingly, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (Lippitt 2000). The book's title, on which the publisher insisted, promised what the book had never intended to deliver, namely a comprehensive account of the concepts of both humor and irony across the whole of Kierkegaard's authorship. In fact, though it does briefly discuss other texts, including selected aspects of Kierkegaard's dissertation, its primary focus is on humor - and to a lesser extent irony - in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. A more accurate title would have been that of the doctoral thesis from which it arose, namely *Kierkegaard's Humorist: Climacus and the Comic.* (But a first-time author is no match for a sufficiently determined publisher's marketing department, and reviewers were kind enough to overlook this mismatch.) Johannes Climacus is the pseudonymous author of two of Kierkegaard's best-known texts, *Philosophical Fragments* (or *Crumbs* [*Smuler*]) and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, the latter text being about six times as long as the text to which it claims to be a postscript. (Some have seen this as being Kierkegaard's idea of a joke.) Climacus discusses what humor means as an ethico-religious category; describes himself as a humorist; and works out an elaborate account of irony and humor as *confinia* ("boundary zones" or liminal spaces), between the existence-spheres (the "aesthetic," "ethical" and "religious" modes of living) for which Kierkegaard is well known. Irony and humor are treated as sub-categories of what seems to be his general category of the comic. On one level, in the *Postscript*, irony appears as the boundary zone between the aesthetic and the ethical existence-spheres, and humor between the ethical and the religious. Except that things soon get more complex than that. There has been quite a bit of discussion about the precise role of humor in relation to what Climacus calls Religiousness A – a generic category of religiousness that occupies much of his text and which one commentator has described in terms of "a phenomenology of religion as such" (Westphal 1996, 150) – and the specifically Christian form of incarnational religion that Climacus calls Religiousness B. These topics – the significance of the self-description as a humorist and the roles of irony, humor and the comic in relation to the existence-spheres - were central to what my book went on to discuss, though it also explored such related themes as what for Kierkegaard constitutes an ethically "legitimate" use of the comic.

I don't propose to return directly to the main themes of that book in the present chapter. Instead, I want to use this opportunity to explore how my current interest – in Kierkegaard and various putative virtues, such as hope, humility, patience, gratitude and forgivingness – might connect with this earlier work.[1] I shall argue that a

[1] This arises as unfinished business from a later book (Lippitt 2013), which seeks *inter alia* to recover from a sometimes exaggerated focus on self-denial in Kierkegaard's writings another Kierkegaardian voice, that recognizes the importance of "proper self-love." As part of the task of trying to distinguish such self-love from its improper varieties, I found myself exploring what it might mean to express this through trusting in, hoping for, and forgiving oneself. Each of these

focus on humility, in particular, enables us better to understand the significance of a concept, "jest" [*Spøg*], which is an apparently marginal feature of Kierkegaard's discussion of humor, irony and the comic. But jest might be more important than I previously realized. What I have tried to sketch in this chapter is an account of how *jest is an expression of a particular kind of humility.* This will involve a brief exploration of a key theme in some of Kierkegaard's less well known and less commonly read "upbuilding discourses" [*Opbyggelige Taler*] written under his own name. Of particular importance are the 1847 discourses on what we can learn from the lilies in the field and the birds of the air mentioned in Matthew's gospel.[2] Interestingly for our purposes, Kierkegaard describes these discourses – the second part of his *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* – as "humorous" (JP 5, 5975, cf. UDVS 388–390).[3] We shall later see why.

It should be said at the outset that several have been sceptical about linking Kierkegaard to the virtues. Lutherans, it is sometimes assumed, don't do virtue. Did not Luther despise Aristotle's ethics, one of his earliest and most loathed teaching assignments at Wittenberg, fighting a battle to get it replaced in the curriculum with "our theology and that of St Augustine" (see MacCulloch 2003, 117, 123)? And since Kierkegaard is part of the Lutheran tradition, the argument sometimes goes, it cannot be right to think of him as any kind of "virtue ethicist." Proponents of this argument have typically worried that the claim to possess a virtue amounts both to claiming meritoriousness, and to assuming an autonomy inconsistent with the Lutheran claim of our radical dependence upon divine grace.

But while treating Kierkegaard as a "virtue ethicist" in either an Aristotelian or contemporary neo-Aristotelian sense is not what I wish to do, there can be no denying the fact that Kierkegaard's work does contain extensive ruminations on qualities – faith, trust, hope, patience, courage, gratitude and forgivingness, to name a few – which it makes good sense to describe as virtues. The above worry can, I think, be avoided by understanding virtue in the way suggested by Mark Tietjen. Tietjen suggests the following definition of a virtue according to Kierkegaard: "*dispositions to be achieved by works that one must strive to do in response to God's grace, with the help of God's grace*" (Tietjen 2010, 163). I think we can, without violating the spirit of Kierkegaard's thought, quite reasonably view virtues thus understood as dispositions one can acquire, nurture and develop. Much of his writings, especially some of the "upbuilding discourses," seek to help with precisely

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have non-virtuous as well as virtuous expressions, and though I tried to sketch such a distinction in the later chapters of that book, I think there is far more that needs to be said, particularly on the question of what it means for forgiveness – of others and oneself – to be undertaken as a "work of love," to use the Kierkegaardian phrase. The investigation of this is taking me into a further exploration of love of the neighbour, hope and humility. All, I think, are key elements in Kierkegaardian faith.

[2] Kierkegaard discusses the lilies and the birds (Matthew 6: 24–34) in no fewer than fourteen separate discourses, including the three from 1847.

[3] A related journal entry (JP 5, 5976; cf. UDVS 390–391) responds to the charge that these discourses "lack earnestness" – the concept of which jest is the companion.

such a task.[4] What I want to say more about in this paper is one particular virtue: humility. I propose that what Kierkegaard means by jest can be understood as the expression of a certain kind of humility.

9.2 Jest and Earnestness

Even amongst those who have written on humor, irony and the comic in Kierkegaard, jest is a relatively underexplored concept. In Kierkegaard's work, it is almost always associated with earnestness [*Alvor*]. In an important passage on "indirect communication," jest and earnestness are described as a "dialectical knot" that the recipient of the communication must learn to untie for himself (PC 133/SKS 12, 137).[5] Similarly, as a gloss on how Socrates' "sense of the comic was just as great as his ethical pathos," we are told that "his earnestness was concealed in jest" (SLW 366/SKS 6, 340).

Earnestness, by contrast, is a central concept in Kierkegaard's thought, running through texts early to late, signed and published under his own name, and connected to heartfelt ethical and religious commitment and striving (earnestness being ultimately a volitional phenomenon (Davenport 2014, 222, 225–6)). In the *Postscript*, it is associated with willing the good, the *continual* willing of which is to govern the pursuit of all finite ends and goals (CUP1 387ff./SKS 7, 352ff.). This absolute good must have an authority independent of my own choices. Where this is lacking, we get the variety of despair described in *The Sickness Unto Death* as the despair of *defiance*, in which the agent recognises no "power" over himself - fails to acknowledge divine authority - and "therefore basically lacks earnestness" (SUD 68/SKS 11, 182).

Yet earnestness is typically accompanied by jest. Both terms are liable to misconstrual. We misconstrue what Kierkegaard means by earnestness if we think of it as morose, joyless solemnity. And we misconstrue jest if we think of it as simply light-hearted levity. When we are told that true earnestness includes jest, as in the above passage on Socrates and in the diarist Quidam's claim that "true earnestness is the blend of jest and earnestness" (SLW 365/SKS 6, 339), the suggestion is that *jest is present to reveal the limits of earnestness for us as finite creatures*. How so?

A key passage is the claim in the *Postscript* that "one is nothing before God, that all personal effort is only a jest" (CUP1 78/SKS 7, 79). However, it would be a failure of earnestness to take this to mean that one should cease in one's efforts to realise the good. Rather, as John Davenport has argued, one can see this as a recommendation to embrace what Kierkegaard calls "infinite resignation" in its broadest

[4] I make a more detailed version of this case in Lippitt 2017.

[5] This and subsequent parenthetical references to Kierkegaard's works are to titles and page numbers of the English editions listed in the Sigla at the end of the chapter, followed by volume and page number of the standard Danish edition, *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (SKS). For publication details of both, see the Sigla.

sense (Davenport 2012, 148). The picture here commended is that, having willed the good absolutely, we should do whatever we can to bring it about. But we should also recognise our finitude, and that "outward success never follows necessarily. There is always some gap between willing and the result that is filled only by luck; in that sense, we can do nothing without God. In a deeper sense, we may not be able to *try* as we should without God" (ibid.).[6]

All this shows the influence of the Lutheran tradition on Kierkegaard. At various times, Kierkegaard struggles with the question that had troubled Luther and others: why, if salvation is by faith and grace alone, and one's good works are of no merit, should one bother with good works at all? And his answer is a recognizably Lutheran one. In "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther had argued that good works come naturally to the true Christian as *an expression of love and gratitude* for God's grace. The same thought finds expression in a famous journal entry in which Kierkegaard remarks: "infinite humiliation and *a striving born of gratitude* – this is Christianity" (JP 1, 993, my emphasis). Elsewhere, he echoes the Lutheran concern that the "free gift" of divine grace should be received in the appropriate spirit:

> Although it is the utmost strenuousness, imitation [of Christ] should be like a jest, a child-like act – if it is to mean something in earnest, that is, be of any value before God – the Atonement is the earnestness. It is detestable, however, for a man to want to use grace, "since all is grace," to avoid all striving. (JP 2, 1909).

What Kierkegaard adds to Luther's position is to talk about this under the guise of "jest." To better understand this, it would help here to see more fully how all this connects with the important Kierkegaardian notion of "infinite resignation."

9.3 Jest and Infinite Resignation

Resignation is a key concept in the *Postscript*, where it appears as the "initial" expression of existential pathos in Religiousness A. (Resignation, suffering and guilt are respectively described as the "initial," "essential" and "decisive" expressions of the existential pathos of Religiousness A.) But the best-known discussion of "infinite resignation" is in *Fear and Trembling*, where it is presented as the first part of the "double movement" of faith. It involves "resigning" or renouncing that which is of the greatest value or importance to a person - what "really is the content of his life" (FT 35/SKS 4, 136) - in recognition of one's ultimate powerlessness to bring about the longed-for end.[7]

John Davenport has argued that infinite resignation as described in *Fear and Trembling* is a limiting case in "the spectrum covered by the ethico-religious 'jest.'" As he explains: "it is the synthesis of willing an ethically good outcome wholeheartedly while accepting that it is pragmatically impossible for us, as we cannot see how

[6] I leave to one side the question of whether "luck" is the optimal term here.

[7] For more on this, see Lippitt 2016a, Chap. 3.

our agency … can make it even marginally probable" (Davenport 2012, 148). Yet importantly, this is not the same as *despair*, a category which - Davenport persuasively argues - needs to be kept distinct from resignation. To understand how this is possible, we must distinguish between resignation *simpliciter* and the complex form of resignation that *The Sickness Unto Death* describes as a form of despair, that is, "to be unwilling to hope that an earthly need, a temporal cross, can come to an end" (SUD 70/SKS 11, 184).[8] Such despair is resignation *plus* the refusal to "hope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible" (SUD 71/ SKS 11, 185). Only this attitude - and not resignation *per se* - is incompatible with faith. Why is infinite resignation a vital precursor to the movement of faith? Climacus suggests that it is only through resignation that I "face … toward an eternal happiness [*Salighed*; blessedness] as the absolute *telos*" (CUP1 400/SKS 7, 364), rather than attempting to negotiate between multiple commitments in order to find the highest. It is plausible to see this as being what Johannes *de silentio* (the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling)* has in mind when he says in that text that "infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that whoever has not made this movement does not have faith. For only in infinite resignation do I become transparent to myself in my eternal validity, and only then can there be talk of laying hold of existence by virtue of faith" (FT 39/SKS 4, 140).

To address a much-discussed interpretative controversy, Davenport has proposed two types of infinite resignation - "Beouwulfian" and "elegiac" - each of which could turn into either despair or faith. What both types have in common is a longed-for end, valued as good, but which the agent cannot see how they can bring about under their own powers. *Pace* commentators such as Edward Mooney and myself (before Davenport convinced me that I had previously been wrong), Davenport also thinks that in both types of resignation, the agent *continues to value this end fully* (Davenport 2008, 228–229). Where the two types of resignation differ is that in the first ("Beowulfian"), the agent continues to strive for the longed-for end, but without the hope that this striving will contribute to bringing it about. His examples include heroic battles in which defeat is considered "no refutation" and Socrates' continuing to press his case with the jury while knowing all too well what the outcome will be (Davenport 2008, 228–229). In the second ("elegiac"), the agent gives up actively striving for the longed-for end, while nevertheless not diminishing his love or care. But what remains humanly impossible – unachievable under the agent's own powers – remains "eschatologically" possible: achievable through the God for whom "all things are possible." Insofar as resignation, thus conceived, does not require a devaluation of the finite (such as Abraham's love for his son Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*'s primary narrative), this suggests a way in which the movement of faith can be built *cumulatively* onto the movement of resignation, thus preserving the idea of faith as a "double movement."[9]

[8] On the importance of hope in Kierkegaardian faith, with specific reference to *Fear and Trembling*, see Lippitt 2016a, 175–196.

[9] Could the role of jest in this be an example of how, as Climacus puts it, "[t]he more competently a person exists, the more he will discover the comic" (CUP1, 462/SKS 7, 420)?

What I want to suggest here is that the recognition of my own limits present in both kinds of infinite resignation (Beowulfian and elegiac) - a recognition of how my own efforts are ultimately a "jest"; how they are, in a sense, comical – expresses a certain kind of humility.[10] But I think that there is much more to be said about the *kind* of humility of which jest is the expression. It is that task to which I now turn.

9.4 Jest as Humility: But What *Kind* of Humility?

In much of the recent debate about humility (or its cousin modesty), philosophers disagree about whether it involves a disposition to underestimate, or be ignorant of, accomplishments or self-worth in some respect (and if so to what degree) or whether it involves, on the contrary, *accurate* self-assessment which nonetheless takes care not to *exaggerate* one's importance.[11] In other words, it has often been taken to involve either *underestimating* yourself (in some key respect) or at least *not overestimating* yourself. One problem thrown up by this approach is that any view of humility which involves comparisons with others seems *prima facie* to be far more readily achievable by those of relatively minimal achievements and talents.[12] *Ceteris paribus*, it seems harder for the person of genuinely impressive achievements to attain the virtue of humility. The underlying worry results, I believe, from a limited conception of humility, in which *comparison with other people* is too central. There is, I shall suggest, no need to think of it thus. Moreover, we will not grasp what Kierkegaard has in mind if we think of humility in these terms. A mode of self-assessment in which the spirit of *comparison with others* looms far too large – as in both the underestimation and non-exaggeration accounts – is a key target of a trio of Kierkegaard's discourses from 1847 (the year immediately after the *Postscript*) on the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, those "unlikely teachers" referred to in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. One way of putting the alternative view of humility is that it involves not thinking *less* of yourself but thinking *of* yourself less.[13]

[10] Looking back to my earlier work, I see that even then I had some sense of the importance of this humility, and its connection with other virtues such as patience and hope (Lippitt 2000, Chap. 9). But I did not consider humility as being any more than something like a realistic awareness of my own limitations.

[11] For some key discussions in this debate, see Driver 1989, Flanagan 1990, Richards 1992, Schueler 1997, Driver 1999, Schueler 1999 and Driver 2001. Nicolas Bommarito notes that "The bulk of the contemporary philosophical literature on modesty is made up of various responses to Julia Driver's account" (Bommarito 2013, 95).

[12] Hence Winston Churchill's famous (but highly unjust) jibe about Clement Attlee: "a modest little man with much to be modest about."

[13] This view is sometimes attributed to C. S. Lewis, and the source for this phrase is sometimes given as Lewis 1952. But while broadly consistent with what Lewis says there, as far as I can see he never uses this precise phrase.

One memorable theme in the 1847 lily and bird discourses is the description of the destructive power of a "naughty little bird," the spirit of "comparison" (UDVS 169/SKS 8, 268). Kierkegaard's basic thought is that a huge amount of human misery is the result of unproductive comparisons of ourselves to others, and that such comparisons produce an unhealthy kind and degree of worry. In these discourses, as I read them, Kierkegaard seeks to oppose such anxiety with a certain kind of contentment, rooted in a sense of life as a gift and a fundamental trust in the goodness of that gift (Lippitt 2016b). But a certain kind of humility is key in achieving this.

Let us back up a bit. The central theme of the first discourse is "to be contented with being a human being" (UDVS 162/SKS 8, 261), and it is contrasted with the human tendency towards worry [*Bekymring*]. We are told that the lilies and birds are our teachers: the first thing we are to learn from them is their *silence*, through which we may learn a kind of self-forgetfulness that counteracts the destructive self-centeredness and self-absorption that for Kierkegaard is at the heart of so many human ills. Contemplating the lilies and the birds, the worried person may at least temporarily forget himself – and yet he, "unnoticed … learns something about himself" (UDVS 161–2/SKS 8, 261).

How so? Kierkegaard draws a parallel between the beauty of a lily and that of a human being (UDVS 165/SKS 8, 265). The sheer wonder of being alive, and of being human, is typically forgotten through the "worried inventiveness of comparison" (ibid.). *Comparison* now becomes a crucial theme in the discourse, and the kind of damaging self-focus that it encourages inspires one of the most memorable passages in the discourse literature, on "the worried lily."[14]

In this parable, in which Kierkegaard plays inventively with a biblical passage, the life of a beautiful, carefree lily is complicated by the arrival of a little bird who visits at unpredictable intervals. The lily, initially puzzled by the bird's comings and goings – why doesn't it, like the lily, stay in one place? – falls "more and more in love with the bird, precisely because it was capricious" (UDVS 167/SKS 8, 267). Instead of delighting in the lily's beauty, the bird stresses its difference (its freedom of movement) and – worse still - waxes lyrical about the beauty of other lilies it has encountered on its travels. It typically ends its chatter with the remark that "in comparison with that kind of glory the lily looked like nothing – indeed, it was so insignificant that it was a question whether the lily had a right to be called a lily" (UDVS 167/SKS 8, 267).

Unsurprisingly, the lily becomes worried, and its self-doubts disturb its previously carefree existence. Now its static life starts to seem restrictive. Influenced by the bird's destructive chatter, the lily starts to feel humiliated, and to wish it were a Crown Imperial, which the bird has told it is the most gorgeous of all lilies, envied by all others. In a subtle twist in the tale, the lily convinces itself that its desire is not so unreasonable, since it is not "asking for the impossible, to become what I am not, a bird, for example. My wish is only to become a gorgeous lily, or even the most gorgeous" (UDVS 168/ SKS 8, 267–268).

[14] For a slightly different treatment of this, with which material in the next three paragraphs overlaps, see Lippitt 2016b.

Eventually, the lily confesses its worries to the bird, and together they hatch a plan. The bird will peck away the soil restricting the lily to its spot, uproot it, and together they will fly to where the most gorgeous lilies grow,

> in the hope that with the change of place and with the new surroundings the lily might succeed in becoming a gorgeous lily in the company of all the others, or perhaps even a Crown Imperial, envied by all the others. (UDVS 168-9/SKS 8, 268)

Once uprooted, of course, the lily withers and dies. The worry that led to its demise is a human, all too human trait. The lily is the human being, while the "naughty little bird" is "the restless mentality of comparison, which roams far and wide, fitfully and capriciously, and gleans the morbid knowledge of diversity" (UDVS 169/SKS 8, 268). Further, the little bird is "the poetic and the seductive in the human being" (ibid.), and the poetic is a mixture of truth and untruth. While the diversity it notes between human beings is not outright false, the poetic "consists in maintaining that diversity... is the supreme, and this is eternally false" (UDVS 169/SKS 8, 268). The problem arises from stressing the diversity that results from the spirit of comparison more than our common humanity. This seems to speak to all kinds of issues about "status anxiety."

As we noted earlier, Kierkegaard explicitly describes these particular discourses as "humorous." How so? Part of the humor, as Kierkegaard sees it, lies in the inversion of human beings having to take as their teachers such lowly, dumb creatures as the lily and the bird (JP 5, 5976). But I think there is also a certain sad, wry, humor to the parable of the "worried lily" in particular. Kierkegaard, who explicitly picks out the tale of the worried lily as "humorous," predicts that in these discourses "the reader will smile at many points but never laugh, never laugh ironically" (JP 5, 5976). Here it is worth noting that in the *Postscript*, whereas irony is said to be proud, dividing one person from another (Climacus talks of it in terms of self-assertion and "teasing" (CUP1 551n/SKS 7, 501)), humor tends to be characterised in terms of those tragicomic aspects of the human situation *that we all share*: hence Climacus' description of it as both "sympathetic" (CUP1 582/SKS 7, 529) and "profound" (CUP1 552n/SKS 7, 501). The error that leads to the lily's demise is a recognisably human one, part of what Kierkegaard sometimes calls the universal-human, namely failing to appreciate the goods of its life *as* goods through enviably comparing itself and its circumstances to those superior specimens of its own species that the bird's destructive chatter has encouraged it to imagine. We can recognise the same tendency to which the lily falls victim in everything from get rich quick schemes to unnecessary plastic surgery.

In an earlier discussion of these discourses, I argued that this kind of contentment is linked in important ways to numerous virtues: cultivating gratitude, learning patience, and experiencing forgiveness and - as a result - being able to forgive oneself. But I now think that I underplayed a crucial link to the virtue of humility, which will bring us back to the category of jest.

The humble person resists the temptation towards self-absorption or self-obsession that characterizes the worried lily. He resists the temptation to have an

orientation towards the world in which the self and its needs and concerns are what matters most. C. S. Lewis suggests the following about humility:

> Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call "humble" nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. (Lewis 1952, 128).

In a valuable article, Joseph Kupfer has argued for four dimensions of the moral perspective of the kind of humility that I think is at play here (Kupfer 2003). All pertain, to varying degrees, to the perspective expressed by what we have called jest. First (and perhaps most important for our purposes) is acknowledgment of our *radical dependence*, glossed by Kupfer in terms of the need to acknowledge how much of whatever we might have achieved depends upon other people and circumstances beyond our control. The ultimate source of "every good and every perfect gift" (EUD 31–48/SKS 5, 39–56) for Kierkegaard is of course God, and it is this recognition that the attitude of jest primarily registers. But I do not wish to deny – and nor, I believe, would Kierkegaard – that the attitude of jest could cover our dependence upon our fellow creatures and contingent circumstances too. Second, as part of his response to the "high achievers" worry mentioned earlier, Kupfer notes that a focus on the morally exemplary helps to keep our "technical" (e.g. sporting, academic, professional) achievements in perspective – even for high achievers. Third, setting high moral ideals enables even the morally exemplary to keep their moral achievements in perspective, as the infinite nature of the ethical demand means that there is always more to be done. When they succeed, they are aware of how much more is to be done, so rather than bask in their success they get on with doing more of what is needed. The fourth dimension of the moral perspective of humility is an orientation towards objectively valuable things in the world such that we appreciate and promote the value of these goods *apart from their instrumental value to ourselves*. This is, I think, part of the attitude of "grateful striving" mentioned earlier.[15]

The upshot of this is that the humble person's attention is "away from themselves and toward things that have value in the world apart from themselves." Other people; goods they care about; serving a valuable cause. "The result of this outwardness is that humble individuals are disposed not to dwell on themselves" (Kupfer 2003,

[15] Kupfer glosses this point as follows:

> humble individuals … are inclined to devote themselves to further that which is objectively worthwhile. People with humility are not merely abashed by the greatness of human genius or natural phenomena; they are motivated to work to promote worthwhile things in the world. This active, motivational aspect of objective valuation is significant because it explains why extraordinary individuals do not bask in their success. They are too busy getting on with the work that stretches before them. More often than not, people of outstanding achievement who possess great humility are committed to serve something outside themselves, such as art or science, mankind or God, because it is worthwhile in itself. For those of us who are less gifted, the objectively valuable things may be family, community, or simply doing our ordinary work competently. (Kupfer 2003, 257)

251). Robert C. Roberts presents a similar picture of humility as "a trait marked by the absence of a certain kind of concern or concerned attention" (Roberts 2009, 129), such that the humble person is focused on value-not-necessarily-related-to-the-self rather than herself. But there is a key link here to *patience*: the person who "wills the good in truth" will do what he can, suffer what he must, but must ultimately "in quiet patience leave everything up *to the good itself*, what reward he is to have, what he is to accomplish" (UDVS 97/SKS 8, 202, my emphasis). The contrast here is with the wilful person who must *themselves* have the victory. The difference, in other words, is between those to whom what matters is the ultimate triumph of the good and those to whom what matters is the triumph of the good *through their own efforts*. The latter person does not accept the "jest" that is recognised in the movement of resignation.

Consider an objection at this point. Why don't the achievements of the morally exemplary, in comparison to my own, inspire the same anxiety that troubled the worried lily? Why not feel the same inadequacy in the face of their achievements as the lily felt in comparison to the gorgeous Crown Imperials the bird encouraged it to imagine? The answer is that the lily's problem was its competitive ego. Without this ego's demands, it is possible genuinely to enjoy, to delight in, the achievements of others, including their moral achievements. The virtuously humble do not feel this anxiety insofar as they have "died" to a significant extent to their competitive egos. (I see this as a central element in the biblically inspired talk of "dying to the self" that runs through so much of Kierkegaard's writings.) This gives them what Roberts describes as "a transcendent form of self-confidence" (Roberts 2007, 81), stemming from a worldview in which – despite the greater differences of achievement, moral and otherwise – everyone is viewed as of ultimately equal value (ibid., 83).

In order to cultivate such a virtue, we would need a view that requires us to see our neighbours as our valued equals (rather than "the competition"). And we would need some alternative basis for our self-acceptance than success in competitive ranking or the esteem of others. Christianity, in which our ultimate value derives from being equally valued and loved by an all-loving and all-forgiving God, provides such a worldview (though of course not uniquely so) (ibid., 89).[16]

A person armed with such a view can offer on the part of the humble person a response to Hume's objection to humility. (Hume famously denied that humility is a virtue, denigrating it as one of the "monkish virtues" which "men of sense" regard as vices.[17]) But on the view outlined here, it is simply false, *pace* Hume, that the humble person derives no benefit from his humility. If Kierkegaard is anywhere near right

[16] Kantian dignity or Raimond Gaita's focus on our "common humanity" (which I take to be a secularised version of Christian neighbour-love) might be other such worldviews. The specifically Christian version is well expressed by Rowan Williams, who writes of "moving deeper into trust as we discover what it means to be the object of an eternally trustworthy love": he glosses the outworking of the Lutheran "justification by faith" as "the belief that it is trust that sets you right, not achievement, success, performance" (Williams 2007, 158–159).

[17] The "monkish virtues" allegedly "are everywhere rejected by men of sense … because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment" (Hume 1975, 270).

about the degree of misery caused by the spirit of comparison inspired by the "naughty little bird," then the humble person's focus away from the self and towards things of value in the world other than himself avoids an enormous degree of debilitating anxiety. He largely avoids the worry about how his performance, achievements, appearance etc. compares to that of others, which plays such a central role in many people's lives. And the lifting of this burden from his shoulders is a benefit indeed.

9.5 Returning to Jest and the Comic

So, how does all this connect back to the topic of jest and the comic? The attitude of the humble person described above is a manifestation of jest – and Kierkegaard's wider category of the comic – in the following way. Climacus, in a view echoed in Kierkegaard's signed writings on his treatment by the scurrilous satirical publication *The Corsair*, claims that in order for a use of the comic to be ethically "legitimate," it must have in mind a "way out" (CUP1 516/SKS 7, 468),[18] which renders a comic – as opposed to tragic – incongruity relatively "painless."[19] What does this mean?

[18] See COR and Lippitt 2000, Chap. 7.

[19] On the importance of qualifying what could, consistent with the rest of the text, be meant by this, see Lippitt 2000, 130. There is a parallel here between remarks of Kierkegaard and those of Hegel. As Lydia Moland has noted, Hegel insists that

> 'comedies must be light-hearted. Through their antics, their lewdness, and their mischief, comic protagonists stay at a distance even from their own aims and so remain unmoved when their projects fail. If instead "an individual is *serious* in identifying himself with such an inherently false aim" **and miserably clings to it**, "there is none of the real essence of the comical," no matter how much the audience laughs'. (Moland 2016, 87, citing Hegel 1975, 1200)

Similarly, Kierkegaard chastises a contemporary playwright, one Baron Holberg whose stock-in-trade he sees as human misery, for being "demoralizing," and adds that in ridiculing human suffering, "it is absolutely necessary that the person concerned be himself happy in his ridiculous delusion; as soon as he is himself unhappy in his ludicrous delusion, he is not to be laughed at" (JP 2, 1763).

More generally, at end of a long footnote in the *Postscript* on the comic as "contradiction" (*Modsigelse*) (better: incongruity), Climacus contrasts a laughter rooted in "flippancy and wantonness" (CUP1 519n/SKS 7, 466) with the *genuine* comic and suggests that the pathos of *sympathy* he associates with humor is required. (Recall that humor for Climacus tends to be about what we all have in common – the existential situation that we all share – as opposed to irony, which he presents as teasing and divisive.) So Climacus, like Hegel, seems to recognise an essence of the humorous comic, and presents a *legitimate* use of it as being one that offers at least a glimpse of something "higher" than that at which it laughs. (This imagery of height – that one *ascends* the existence-spheres – is a repeated refrain in the *Postscript*.) This gives us a hint of what Kierkegaard seems to mean by the "way out." Though what that means for Climacus is different from what it would mean for the "Christian humorist" whose "eschatological trust" – trust in the ultimate triumph of the good – will take a particular form appropriate to claims about the god-man that Climacus is fascinated by, but which is a worldview he professes to remain outside.

What I think I was grappling for in attempting to address this in *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, and can see rather more clearly now, is that the "way out" is provided by the attitude of "eschatological trust" in the ultimate triumph of the good, and the attendant attitude of *hope* that I now see as central to Kierkegaardian faith. Such faith contains a type of eschatological hope (using the term "eschatology" in a fairly general sense to refer to the ultimate realization of the good [Davenport 2008]). Such an attitude would explain the relatively relaxed view of the humorist.[20] A "Christian humorist" would be someone who was able – to use an example of Roberts' – to see the humor in somebody's being caught in a lie not because they didn't care about telling the truth, but because they had what Roberts calls "an auxiliary belief" – what I would now frame in terms of eschatological trust – that "disemburdens [them] of total responsibility for correcting the evil" (Roberts 1987, 172). Such a person has passed through infinite resignation to faith. The "way out" does not deny either moral evil or the suffering of life: as the *Postscript* makes abundantly clear, Kierkegaard's humorist is well aware of that. But his eschatological trust prevents his being utterly overwhelmed by it, in much the same way as the humble person is able to recognise what causes anxiety without finding this anxiety utterly debilitating (unlike the worried lily). In the way I have tried to sketch here, the prevailing attitude of such a humorist – the attitude here discussed as "jest" – can be seen as an expression not of moral laxity but of the virtue of humility.[21]

9.6 Sigla of Kierkegaard Texts

SKS	1997–2014. *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*. Vols 1–28 and K1–28. Edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al. Copenhagen: Gads Forlag.
CA	1980. *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
COR	1982. *The Corsair Affair and articles related to the writings*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, 2 volumes, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
CUP	1992. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, 2 volumes, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
EUD	1990. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[20] Understanding "humor" here as a category that could *include* Religiousness B (Christianity), rather than being distinct from it in the way that the overall discussion in my book implied. Some of Kierkegaard's journal entries suggest an understanding of "humor" as a more distinctively Christian category than Climacus claims.

[21] My thanks to Lydia Moland and the Boston University Philosophy Department for the invitation to speak, and for useful discussion of these matters, at the symposium in April 2016 from which this volume originated.

FT	2006. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
JP	1967–78. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
PC	1991. *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
SLW	1988. *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
SUD	1980. *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
UDVS	1993. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Chapter 10
The Divine Hanswurst: Nietzsche on Laughter and Comedy

Matthew Meyer

Abstract The purpose of this paper is to explore the philosophical significance of laughter and comedy in Nietzsche's works. Although a few scholars have noted this dimension of Nietzsche's project, these themes have yet to make their way into mainstream Nietzsche scholarship. Moreover, references to Nietzsche in current philosophical work on laughter, humor, and comedy are rare. By bringing attention to the important role that laughter and comedy play in Nietzsche's later works, I implicitly advance the case that Nietzsche scholars should pay more attention to laughter and comedy and that Nietzsche should be discussed more frequently in contemporary work on the philosophy of laughter, humor, and comedy.

The structure of the paper is straightforward. In the first section, I provide evidence attesting to the significance of laughter in Nietzsche's works and then explore its philosophical significance. In the second section, I do the same with comedy by drawing parallels between Nietzsche's later philosophy and the Dionysian comedies of Aristophanes. In so doing, I show how laughter and comedy are central to Nietzsche's life-affirming ethics and his project of self-creation, but I also note that Nietzsche's understanding of laughter and comedy may challenge some of our most fundamental ethical intuitions.

Keywords Nietzsche · Aristophanes · Comedy · Laughter · Dionysus

10.1 Introduction

Laughter and comedy are not the first things associated with Nietzsche's philosophy. Indeed, the claim that Nietzsche is a proponent of laughter and comedy might seem like a joke. What, after all, do topics like the will to power, the *Uebermensch*, the eternal return, the revaluation of values, nihilism, and Nietzsche's self-proclaimed role as the Antichrist have to do with laughter, humor, and comedy? This is not just the opinion of the casual reader. Some of the most influential

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_10

interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy by twentieth-century German scholars such as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Karl Löwith have little to say about laughter and comedy. In Anglo-American scholarship that dates back to Walter Kaufmann, major interpreters have largely followed this trend. On the one hand, much of the work now done on Nietzsche in Anglo-American philosophy focuses on extracting ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical views from his texts and so the more poetic dimensions of his works are often downplayed or ignored. On the other hand, even those who emphasize the important role of art and aesthetics in Nietzsche's works tend to ignore the potential significance that laughter and comedy might have for his larger project.[1]

To be sure, Nietzsche does address some weighty issues in his writings. The central message of his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, is that we need to recreate Oedipus-style tragedies to affirm a life filled with meaningless suffering, and this general framework largely holds throughout Nietzsche's later writings. For this reason, scholars interested in Nietzsche's views on art and his activity as a philosopher-poet have stressed the importance of tragedy. However, some, such as John Lippitt (1992) and Lawrence Hatab (2005), have noted the significance of laughter in the final part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Kathleen Higgins (2000) has drawn attention to the humorous aspects of *The Gay Science*. Still others have pointed to the potentially comic nature of Nietzsche's autobiography, *Ecce Homo*. Whereas Christine Battersby (2013) discusses Nietzsche's self-presentation as a Hanswurst—a comic figure from eighteenth-century Viennese theater—in *Ecce Homo* (*EH*, "Destiny" 1), Daniel Conway (1993) and Nicholas More (2014) have interpreted *Ecce Homo* as an exercise in self-parody and satire, respectively.

In a 2012 article,[2] I sketched perhaps the most aggressive argument regarding the centrality of laughter and comedy to Nietzsche's post-*Zarathustra* project. Specifically, I claimed that Nietzsche's 1888 works should be understood as a Dionysian comedy and so be associated with the work of Aristophanes. I have two primary reasons for reading these texts in this way, neither of which have to do with the claim that Nietzsche's works are or are intended to be funny.[3] First, because I follow Paul Loeb (2000 and 2010) in holding that *Zarathustra* should be understood as a tragedy and satyr play[4] and because we know that Nietzsche also wrote his own *Dionysian Dithyrambs*, comedy is the only remaining poetic genre needed to complete a proper Dionysian festival in Nietzsche's works. Thus, if it is right to think that Nietzsche composes his own tragic trilogy, satyr play, and dithyrambs, we have

[1] Came's volume (2014) contains a number of essays on art and the affirmation of life, but there is no substantive discussion of laughter and comedy in the work. This is also true of Young (1992) and Ridley (2007).

[2] Meyer (2012) is based on a paper first given at the annual conference of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society in 2003.

[3] Higgins (2000, 3) stakes her reading of *The Gay Science* on this claim.

[4] Hatab (2005, 155) agrees. In Meyer (2002), I briefly sketch my reasons for thinking that the first three parts of *Zarathustra* should be read as a tragedy. Also see Loeb (2010) and Reginster (2006, 51-52).

reason to look for a comedy in his post-*Zarathustra* writings. The second reason for thinking that a comedy can be found in Nietzsche's 1888 works is that they bear striking similarities to two key structural elements common to the genre of Old Comedy. On the one hand, I read works like *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Case of Wagner*, *The Antichrist*, and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* as enacting a comic *agon*. On the other hand, I understand *Ecce Homo* to be a comic *parabasis* of self-creation and so the centerpiece of Nietzsche's comedy.[5]

Whereas the purpose of my previous paper was to sketch the reasons I have for reading the 1888 works in this way, the purpose of this paper is to explore the philosophical significance of laughter and comedy in Nietzsche's project.[6] This is important not only because these themes have yet to make their way into mainstream Nietzsche scholarship, but also because discussions of Nietzsche's ideas in current philosophical work on laughter, humor, and comedy are surprisingly rare.[7] By bringing attention to the important role that laughter and comedy play in Nietzsche's later works, I implicitly advance the case that Nietzsche scholars should pay more attention to laughter and comedy and that Nietzsche should be discussed more frequently in contemporary work on the philosophy of laughter, humor, and comedy.

The structure of the paper is straightforward. It consists of two main sections. In the first, I provide evidence that attests to the importance of laughter in Nietzsche's works and then explore its philosophical significance. In the subsequent section, I do the same with comedy. In so doing, I show how laughter and comedy are central to both Nietzsche's life-affirming ethics and his project of self-creation. At the same time, I highlight the way in which the understanding of laughter and comedy that Nietzsche endorses challenges some of our most deeply held ethical intuitions. Taken together, we will find that the role laughter and comedy play in Nietzsche's works cannot be overlooked and that Nietzsche's views on laughter and comedy should prompt some serious reflection and discussion.

10.2 Nietzsche on Laughter

Positive references to laughter run throughout Nietzsche's later works. Although he mentions laughter in some of his earliest writings and with increasing frequency in *Human, All Too Human* and *Daybreak*, laughter does not take on a prominent role

[5] See Meyer (2012) for a more detailed explanation of both the comic *agon* and the *parabasis* and how they relate to Nietzsche's 1888 work. For more on Nietzsche's interest in the *agon* in general, see Acampora (2013) and Tuncel (2013). Surprisingly, neither author links the *agon* to Dionysian comedy.

[6] Hatab (2005) also provides reflections along these lines.

[7] For instance, Morreall (2016) makes no mention of Nietzsche. I hope that this paper will help Nietzsche find his way into future revisions of the *SEP* entry on "Humor," even if Nietzsche's project has more to do with the traditional categories of laughter and comedy.

in his works until the 1882 edition of *The Gay Science*.[8] In the very first aphorism of the work, Nietzsche tells us that we live in the "age of moralities and religions," and it is during these times that "the ethical teacher comes on stage, as the teacher of the purpose of existence." This ethical teacher wants to make sure that there is something about which we cannot laugh and so that we do not laugh at existence or even ourselves. The passage is prophetic because Nietzsche claims that every one of these teachers of existence was eventually vanquished by the "waves of uncontrollable laughter." For this reason, Nietzsche thinks that "even laughter may yet have a future," and so someday we may be able to laugh at ourselves "*out of the whole truth*" (*GS*, 1).

In the aphorism, Nietzsche also speaks of a time when laughter will have "formed an alliance with wisdom" such that only a "gay science" will be left (*GS*, 1). This remark indicates that laughter is an essential part of Nietzsche's "gay science," and Nietzsche makes this point again in the fourth book of the work. In the all-important aphorism "In *media vita*," Nietzsche speaks of making life into an experiment and so a means to knowledge. Although it is unclear exactly what he means by this, Nietzsche claims that this principle will allow one to live boldly and gaily and even "laugh gaily, too" (*GS*, 324). Three aphorisms later, Nietzsche refers to laughter again in "Taking seriously." Whereas most believe that thinking well requires grave seriousness, Nietzsche claims that this is a prejudice opposed to his "gay science." Because he believes that our best thinking is done when laughter and wisdom unite, Nietzsche takes it as his task to prove that the need for such seriousness is indeed a mere prejudice (*GS,* 327).

The connection between the future and laughter also occurs at key moments in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Specifically, Nietzsche not only claims that "*laughter* may yet have a future" (*BGE,* 223), he also wants to rank philosophers—and so presumably philosophers of the future—according to "the rank of their laughter." In this way, the philosopher will resemble the Greek gods. According to Nietzsche, these gods not only philosophize, but also "know how to laugh the while in a superhuman and new way"; thus, "it seems they cannot suppress laughter even during holy rites" (*BGE*, 294). In the subsequent aphorism, Nietzsche reveals himself to be the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus, and this suggests that Nietzsche wants to connect laughter to his renewed interest in the Greek god of both tragedy and comedy (*BGE*, 295).

In *Zarathustra* IV, Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of laughter throughout the final sections of "On the Higher Man." He prophesizes that "someone must come—someone to make you laugh again, a good gay clown (*Hanswurst*), a dancer and wind and wildcat, some old fool" (*Z*:4, "Welcome"). In the same section, Nietzsche also proclaims that "*laughing lions* must come," and in the final section of *Zarathustra* IV, the figure of the laughing lion appears again with a flock of doves (*Z*:4, "The Sign"). Although it is far from clear what this laughing lion is supposed to represent, there is reason for thinking that the combination of a lion and

[8] See Siemens and Hay (2015) for an essay that explores the role of laughter in relation to Nietzsche's figure of the free spirit.

doves symbolizes the lion of Venice in the Piazza di San Marco.[9] If this is right, the laughing lion surrounded by doves may refer to the comic opera of Nietzsche's close friend Peter Gast, *The Lion from Venice*, that Nietzsche started to actively promote around the time he was composing *Zarathustra* IV.[10] So understood, the satyr play of *Zarathustra* IV concludes with a reference to comedy and so functions as a *Zwischenspiel* (*KSB* 8, 974) that transitions from the tragedy of the first three parts of *Zarathustra* to the comedy of either Gast's opera or Nietzsche's 1888 works or both.

Although *Zarathustra* IV was published only privately during Nietzsche's lifetime, we know that he considered the passages on laughter important. This is because he quotes from *Zarathustra* IV at length in the final section of the 1886 preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, part of which reads: "This crown of the laughter, the rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter I have pronounced holy: you higher men, *learn*—to laugh!" Significant here is the way in which Nietzsche contrasts laughter with the "metaphysical comfort" that he proposed in the 1872 edition of the work. Nietzsche claims that the longing for metaphysical comfort is a form of romanticism that inevitably leads, as it did for Wagner, to Christianity. To divert us from this path, Nietzsche urges us "to learn the art of *this-worldly* comfort first" (*BT,* "Attempt" 7).

Such remarks point to an opposition between the this-worldly redemption of laughter preached by the "Dionysian monster who bears the name of Zarathustra" (*BT,* "Attempt" 7) and the metaphysical redemption Nietzsche associates with romanticism and Christianity. What this suggests, in turn, is that the opposition Nietzsche establishes at the end of *Ecce Homo* between Dionysus and the Crucified (*EH,* "Destiny" 9) is, in part, an opposition between the this-worldly redemption of laughter and the other-worldly redemption of metaphysics. Such a reading is substantiated by two pieces of evidence. First, we know that both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer associate the morality of pity with Christianity, and the contrast between (Christian) pity and (Dionysian) laughter is central to *Zarathustra* IV. Second, we know that Nietzsche understands his endorsement of laughter to go hand in hand with his self-proclaimed role as the Antichrist. This is because Nietzsche writes the following in an 1883 letter—some 5 years before he pens *The*

[9] See Loeb (2004) for a general discussion of this issue. Following Carl Jung, Loeb also notes (135n.3) the potential connection between the flock of doves and the Piazza di San Marco, and he rightly points to Nietzsche's poem, "Mein Glück!" in the Appendix of *The Gay Science* as evidence for this reading.

[10] In September of 1883, the month in which the second part of *Zarathustra* appeared, Nietzsche writes to Gast (Köselitz) that they are possibly related to one another as tragic and comic poets (Nietzsche remarks that Wagner once referred to him as a closeted tragic poet) (*KSB* 6, 461). Nietzsche first refers to Gast's *The Lion from Venice* in a letter to Franz Overbeck in May of 1884 (*KSB* 6, 513) just after publishing the third part of *Zarathustra*. In March of 1885, just prior to the distribution of *Zarathustra* IV, Nietzsche then writes again to Overbeck about the opera (*KSB* 7, 589), and he writes to Carl von Gersdorff only a few days later exclaiming that the opera absolutely has to appear on the German stage (*KSB* 7, 593). References to Gast's comic opera can be found in Nietzsche's letters as late as 1888.

Antichrist—to Malwida von Meysenbug: "Do you want a name for me? The language of the church has one: I am -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- -- the Antichrist. Let us not forget laughter" (*KSB* 6, 400).

The opposition Nietzsche establishes between a life- and world-affirming laughter and a Christianity that rejects such laughter does have some historical legitimacy, and I want to take a brief look at the Christian opposition to laughter so as to better understand the significance Nietzsche attaches to it. Although recent attempts have been made to show the compatibility of Christianity and laughter (Martin 2012), much of early Christianity condemned laughter as a this-worldly phenomenon that ought to be extirpated from the human psyche, and this point has been well documented by Stephen Halliwell in his book, *Greek Laughter*, in the chapter, "Laughter Denied, Laughter Deferred: the Antigelastic Tendencies of Early Christianity" (Halliwell 2008, Ch. 10).

Halliwell begins his treatment by noting the negative role laughter plays in the Gospels. Although one rarely finds Jesus joking and laughing, Jesus himself is subjected to ridicule as Pontius Pilate sentences the "king of the Jews" to death by crucifixion. In the Gospel of Mark, the language of mockery is explicit. Jesus is made to wear a purple cloak and a crown of thorns so that he can be ridiculed, and the mockery and derision continues while he is on the cross. In the Gospel of John, the language of mockery is not explicit, but the same "cruelly fantasized role-playing," to borrow Halliwell's phrase (2008, 472), takes place as Pilate points to Jesus and declares, "ecce homo."

According to Halliwell, the mockery and crucifixion of Jesus forms the background for the Christian aversion to laughter. Although the Old Testament clearly allows for cases of laughter in which the corrupt are derided for their sinful behavior and so allows for a "right time" or *kairos* for both laughter and tears, Halliwell argues that early Christian fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Basil of Caesarea gradually deferred the *kairos* for laughter to the afterlife. To laugh here on earth is to affirm the goodness of this world and so to forget the crucifixion of Jesus. The right time for laughter is only in the future of eternal life (2008, 510). This world is a tragedy, and Christianity teaches that the divine comedy will only come in the afterlife for those who accept Christ as their savior. In this way, Nietzsche and the early Church fathers agree: both understand laughter as affirming the here and now. Whereas Christianity rejects the this-worldly implications of laughter, Nietzsche embraces laughter for precisely this reason.

The Christian suspicion of laughter can also be linked to concerns about its corrupting influence on the soul. As Halliwell notes, John Chrysostom understands "laughter as a diabolical *incarnation*" and so part of the devil's dance in human life (2008, 495–512). Based on Plato's critique of laughter in the *Republic*, the idea is that we often laugh at things we would refrain from doing ourselves. However, such laughter relaxes our resistance to these temptations, and so the more we joke about mischievous or immoral behavior, the more likely we will find ourselves engaging in such activity someday.

Here, the church fathers are particularly fond of emphasizing the connection between laughter and sexuality. For Nietzsche, Christianity's hostility toward

sexuality and the body is part of its overall rejection of the natural world, and so Christianity opposes the Dionysian celebration of the body, fertility, life, and laughter (*TI*, "What I Owe" 4). In one sense, the concern of early Christian thinkers is that laughter leads to immoral sexual behavior. Thus, it is often associated with female giggling and prostitution, and laughter is often understood to be "an instrument of erotic seduction" (Halliwell 2008, 491), a sentiment intimated by Marilyn Monroe's remark, "if you can make a woman laugh, you can make her do anything." In another sense, early Christian writings indicate that laughter and sexual desire have a common root. In Halliwell's words, "both are ways of seeking the gratifications of a bodily existence in the present" (2008, 510). In Nietzsche's terms, both are expressions of the affirmation of life and our embodied existence in this world, and this is precisely why Christianity opposes them.

Halliwell also explains the way in which the ascetic tradition of monasticism that developed within Christianity tried to abolish laughter entirely from the economy of life: "Truly to rid life of laughter, one of the most basic of affective urges, requires an extreme form of asceticism. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Christian suspicion of laughter was readily channeled into the religion's most highly organized type of ascetic life, monasticism" (2008, 513). To make his case, Halliwell turns to St. Basil of Caesarea's argument in the *Asketikon* that there is never an appropriate time for laughter. Monastic asceticism is about striving for absolute self-discipline, and, as Jorge from Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (2006) reminds us, there is no room for uncontrollable laughter in such a life (2008, 514).

With the opposition between asceticism and laughter in early Christian thought in mind, we can begin to understand the significance of Nietzsche's references to laughter and comedy in his critique of ascetic ideals in the third essay of the *Genealogy*. In the second section, Nietzsche suggests that Wagner should have written a "Luther comedy" to point out that there is no necessary antithesis between chastity and sensuality (*GM,* III 2). In the third section, he wonders whether Wagner's *Parsifal* was a joke, noting again that a great tragedian "arrives at the ultimate pinnacle of his greatness only when he comes to see himself and his art *beneath* him—when he knows how to *laugh* at himself" (*GM,* III 3). In the closing sections of the essay, Nietzsche refers to "*comedians* of the Christian-moral ideal" (*GM,* III 26) and claims that "the ascetic ideal has at present only *one* kind of real enemy capable of *harming* it: the comedians of this ideal" (*GM,* III 27). Although not explicit, remarks in the preface of the *Genealogy* suggest that Nietzsche himself is using comedic laughter to attack Christian morality and asceticism (*GM,* Pref 7).

Perhaps the best example from contemporary culture of the way in which laughter can affirm a human condition marked by suffering and death is found in the closing scene of Monty Python's comedy, *Life of Brian*. Hanging from the cross in a way that parodies the crucifixion of Christ, the main character, Brian, is encouraged to cheer up by a fellow hanging on a cross just next to him, and this segues to a rendition of "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life" by a chorus of individuals suffering the same fate. In the lyrics, we hear that because "life's a piece of shit"—the wisdom of Silenus *in nuce*—we must not forget "to laugh and smile and dance and sing," and even though "life is quite absurd and death's the final word," we

"must always face the curtain with a bow." Thus, we need to forget about our sins, give the audience a grin, but remember that the last laugh, namely, the laugh of death, is on us.

Although the lyrics acknowledge the ultimate victory of death, the tune nevertheless points to a way for us to cope with absurdity, suffering, and death—perhaps this is why it is now the most popular tune at British funerals. Specifically, it implies that there is a close relationship between theater and life, and one of the best ways of coping with the human condition is by understanding life itself as a theatrical show. Once we understand that life is a comedy and tragedy, we will be in a better position to affirm it through laughter, tears, song, and dance. Indeed, this seems to be Nietzsche's theme from the beginning of his work to the end. It is by turning to the arts of Dionysus that we can fully embrace the human condition in all its aspects and so find a this-worldly redemption to the problem of suffering and death symbolized by the cross.

From what has been said thus far, it would seem that Nietzsche is indeed the great bringer of glad tidings (*EH,* "Destiny" 1), the philosopher who promotes love, life, and laughter against the dour curmudgeons of early Christianity who hated sexuality, the body, life, and so laughter. So understood, Nietzsche seems to agree that laughing with the sinners is better than crying with the saints, and this is why even contemporary Christians want to incorporate more laughter into Christianity. There is, however, a darker side to laughter, and it is not a mere coincidence that the villains in Disney films are known for their diabolical laughs. In my mind, what makes Nietzsche's appropriation of laughter both interesting and challenging on a philosophical level is that he is not only aware of this darker side of laughter, he even seems to embrace those aspects that go beyond good and evil.

To begin to see this darker side, we need to look at the way in which laughter can be connected to a logic of power that condemns the two great symbols of morality in the Western tradition: Socrates and Jesus. On the one hand, I have already noted the way in which Jesus is mockingly presented as the "king of the Jews" before he is crucified. The underlying logic of such mockery is that since he does not have the power to prevent his own crucifixion, he is obviously not what his followers make him out to be. Thus, his status as "king" is ridiculous. On the other hand, the main argument of the *Apology* is that Socrates' only *serious* accuser is the comic poet Aristophanes—Socrates' elenchus is designed to show that Meletus is not a serious accuser—and so, according to Plato, it was the mockery of Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds* that ultimately led to Socrates' conviction and death. What this indicates is that there is a deep tension between both Christianity and Platonic-Socratic philosophy, on the one hand, and the sort of laughter that Nietzsche embraces and associates with Dionysus, on the other hand.

The connection between power and laughter generally and in Nietzsche's thought in particular is substantiated by what is known as the superiority theory of laughter. Although the seeds of such a theory can be found in Plato's *Philebus* (*Phil.* 48a-c), Thomas Hobbes is often credited for fully articulating the theory. As Hobbes writes in the *Leviathan*:

> Sudden glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and to compare themselves only with the most able. (Hobbes 1996, Pt. 1, Ch. 6)

According to the superiority theory, laughter results from a "sudden glory" in which one applauds a current self in comparison to another or past self. Thus, laughter occurs when one suddenly becomes conscious of one's superiority or power over another or a former self. Again, this is something most evident in the laughter of Disney villains: they laugh when contemplating a newly discovered power that will allow them to vanquish a rival or even conquer the world.

Although Nietzsche does not claim that *all* laughter results from a consciousness of superiority—he provides an account of laughter in *Human, All Too Human* that could be associated with the incongruity theory (*HH,* 221)—his remarks at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil* in the section entitled "Olympian Vice" indicate that he thinks at least *some* laughter results from the sudden consciousness of superiority. This is because Nietzsche refers to a view he attributes to Hobbes: "laughing is a bad infirmity of nature, which every thinking mind will strive to overcome." Although there is no explicit mention of the superiority theory, Nietzsche's reference to Hobbes and his further remarks in the aphorism imply it. This is because Nietzsche wants to "risk an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter—all the way up to those capable of *golden* laughter" (*BGE,* 294). Such a remark implies the superiority theory of laughter because Nietzsche links the capacity for laughter to a *rank ordering* of philosophers and so a hierarchy in which one philosopher is superior to another based on their capacity for laughter. So understood, Nietzsche agrees with Hobbes' view that at least some laughter is linked to a sense of superiority. However, he rejects Hobbes' view that laughter therefore ought to be deemed an infirmity, and this is because Nietzsche rejects the egalitarianism that underlies Hobbes' condemnation.

Nietzsche's call for philosophers capable of golden laughter can be linked not only to his project of a rank ordering of values but also to the psychology associated with the will to power. This is because Bernard Reginster has noted that the desire to overcome resistance is an essential feature of such a psychology (Reginster 2006, 11). Although I follow Ivan Soll in resisting Reginster's attempt to *define* the will to power as the overcoming of resistance, I do think, again like Soll, that the overcoming of resistance is necessary for the conscious experience of the feeling of power (Soll 2012, 123–124). Indeed, the intensity of the feeling of power is heightened when the resistance is great and the overcoming of the resistance is quick, and it is here that we experience something similar to what Hobbes calls "sudden glory." Because Nietzsche praises laughter in the same book that he defends crucial elements of his doctrine of the will to power, i.e., *Beyond Good and Evil*, there is

reason to think that Nietzsche holds the view that laughter is one important way in which the conscious experience of an increase in power is expressed.

According to Reginster, the psychology of the will to power also reveals a sort of paradox (Reginster 2006, 133). This is because if we desire the conscious experience of power, then we also desire the resistance necessary for such an experience. Resistance, however, is a form of suffering, and so in desiring resistance, we actually desire suffering. What this means is that any pleasure associated with a laughter that emerges through an experience of "sudden glory" will necessarily be tied to resistance and so pain, and so the laughter that comes from a conscious feeling of superiority involves a mixture of pleasure and pain.

In the *Philebus*, Plato also claims that laughter involves a mixture of pleasure and pain, and so it is listed along side a whole range of emotions, such as "wrath, longing, lamentations, fear, love, jealousy," that Plato thinks make up the "tragedy and comedy" of both theater and life (*Phil.* 50b). Plato's point is important not only because he contrasts these mixed pleasures with the pure pleasures of contemplative life, but also because we know from a careful reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* that such "mixed pleasures" are central to Nietzsche's broader claim that only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence eternally justified (*BT,* 5 and 24). Although Apollonian illusion is one way that art helps us cope with an otherwise bleak reality (*BT,* 3-4), Nietzsche's more radical solution to the problem of suffering involves the Dionysian phenomenon of *musical dissonance*. Specifically, Nietzsche points to our enjoyment of musical dissonance as proof that we can take pleasure in pain, suffering, and resistance, and he thinks musical dissonance can be used to explain why we take pleasure in tragic performance and even a suffering-filled life (*BT,* 24). So understood, Nietzsche's later call for comic laughter shares the same logic as his early call for a tragic art rooted in musical dissonance. Both are pleasures mixed with pain that show how humans are capable of affirming a life that is essentially suffering, and it is in this sense that both oppose pity—a suffering from suffering—and fall under the banner of what Nietzsche calls the Dionysian.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche notes as early as *The Birth of Tragedy* that this pleasure-pain combination present in Dionysian art can, in its most raw expression, be a "witches' brew" of "sensuality and cruelty" (*BT,* 2), and the dark side of this dynamic also seems to be at work in Nietzsche's call for a revival of laughter. This is because Nietzsche associates laughter with *Schadenfreuede*. Thus, in a well-known passage, he claims that "laughter means: to be *schadenfroh* with a good conscience" (*GS,* 200). According to Schopenhauer, *Schadenfreude* is related to envy and cruelty and is the exact opposite of pity (*Mitleid*). Since pity, which Schopenhauer links to Christian love or *agape* (*WWR,* I 65), is the basis for his ethics, Schopenhauer dubs *Schadenfreude* "the worst trait in human nature," "devilish," and "its mockery the laughter of hell" (*PP,* II 114). In contrast, Nietzsche takes a hard line against pity in both *Zarathustra* IV and *The Antichrist* (*A,* 2) precisely because Schopenhauer's ethics of pity or *agape* forms the basis for the denial of life and so nihilism (*GM,* Pref 5).

Thus, Nietzsche's call for a laughter that is "*schadenfroh* with a good conscience" points to an affirmation of life that goes beyond and even inverts Schopenhauer's

conception of good and evil. To understand the way in which laughter can go beyond good and evil, one only needs to think of the laughter expressed in Raskolnikov's dream sequence from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in which a crowd cheers on a drunken man as he beats a horse—a symbol for Jesus—to death in the public square. Since Nietzsche seems to think that "without cruelty there is no festival" (*GM,* II 6) and he engages in a mockery of both Socrates and Christianity in his final works, he seems to differ significantly with contemporary theoreticians and proponents of laughter. Although both find something positive in laughter, most contemporary proponents seek to show that it is less ethically problematic than the tradition has held it out to be (Morreall 2009, Ch. 5). In contrast, Nietzsche not only recognizes these ethically problematic aspects of laughter, he even embraces laughter as a way of affirming life in its totality—including the ugly and disharmonic aspects of existence—and ultimately uses it as a weapon in waging a war against an ethical tradition that has historically condemned it.

10.3 Nietzsche and Comedy

Although there has been some discussion of Nietzsche's interest in comedy in the secondary literature, surprisingly few scholars have linked such interest directly to the genre of comedy most associated with Dionysus, namely, Old Comedy.[11] In this section, I develop a set of claims about the philosophical significance of comedy in Nietzsche's works by identifying various philosophical positions implicit in the genre of Old Comedy and comparing these positions with themes that appear mostly in Nietzsche's later writings: the privileging of life over truth, perspectivism and the relativity of cultural norms, *ad hominem* attacks, the quest for freedom and autonomy, and the paradox of fatalism and self-creation.[12] I conclude with some remarks about Nietzsche's implicit rejection of a tradition that has historically privileged tragedy over comedy.

Similar to his interest in laughter, Nietzsche does not begin to express significant interest in comedy until the 1882 publication of *The Gay Science*. Nevertheless, there is a brief reference to comedy in *The Birth of Tragedy* that should not be overlooked. Specifically, Nietzsche notes that the comic provides "an artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity," and so he implicitly argues that the comic, like the tragic, plays a role in saving us from a "Buddhistic negation of the will" (*BT,* 7). In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche begins with the claim that even though "the comedy of existence has not yet 'become conscious' of itself," "the short tragedy always gave

[11] Hatab (2005) is a significant exception. However, he conflates his discussion of comedy with the satyr play that he rightly finds in *Zarathustra* IV. Although Hatab is right to read *Zarathustra* IV as a satyr play, it is important to distinguish between the satyr play and comedy. They are two related yet distinct genres, evidenced by the fact that tragedians, not comedians, were typically the authors of the satyr play.

[12] Although I try to minimize it, there will inevitably be some overlap here with my 2012 article.

way again and returned to the eternal comedy of existence" (*GS,* 1). In the aphorism "*Homo Poeta*" from the third book of *The Gay Science* (*GS*, 153), Nietzsche again refers to comedy as a possible solution to the death of God. In the preface to the 1887 edition, Nietzsche points to "*incipit tragoedia*" and so the title of the final aphorism of the 1882 edition of the work, an aphorism that introduces the opening lines of what becomes *Zarathustra* (*GS,* 342). However, he then speaks of something "wicked and malicious": "*incipit parodia*" (*GS,* Pref 1).

Although some have argued that this means we should read *Zarathustra* as both a tragedy and an ironic parody (Pippin 1988, 67), I think "*incipit parodia*" refers to the comedy of Nietzsche's 1888 works in which he parodies Christianity as a comic Hanswurst (*EH,* "Destiny" 1). As Battersby has noted, a literal translation of Hanswurst is "Hans the Sausage," and he is known for his lusty appetites and frank speech. The character originated in Viennese theater in the eighteenth century and he frequently appeared in German popular theater and comic opera (Battersby 2013). In Nietzsche's works, the appearance of Hanswurst is already foreshadowed in *Zarathustra* IV as someone who must come to make the higher men laugh again (*Z*:4, "Welcome"), and Nietzsche refers to himself as a Hanswurst repeatedly in his letters just before his collapse in 1889. Not only does he claim to have taken on the role of the Hanswurst (as well as a satyr and a feuilletonist) in *The Case of Wagner* (*KSB* 8, 1183), he writes to Cosima Wagner that, "a certain divine Hanswurst has recently completed the *Dionysian Dithyrambs*" (*KSB* 8, 1240).

Although these passages point to Nietzsche's interest in the comic, my understanding of the comic dimensions of his later writings includes the more specific claim that Nietzsche's 1888 works can be tied to what is known as Old or Dionysian Comedy and its primary representative, Aristophanes. Although we know that much of Nietzsche's critique of Euripides and Socrates in *The Birth of Tragedy* can be traced back to Aristophanes' work, Nietzsche's own affinity for Aristophanes isn't made explicit until *Beyond Good and Evil*. There, Nietzsche praises Aristophanes along with Petronius for his tempo, style, and free-spirited thinking, and in the same section, Nietzsche refers to Aristophanes as "that transfiguring, complementary spirit for whose sake one *forgives* everything Hellenic for having existed." The aphorism concludes with the claim that Plato had a copy of Aristophanes under his deathbed pillow and that he could not have endured life without Aristophanes' comedies (*BGE,* 28). In chapter seven, Nietzsche exclaims "holy Aristophanes" (*BGE,* 232) and speaks of "the laughter and high spirits of the most spiritual revelry, for the transcendental heights of the highest nonsense and Aristophanean derision of the world" (*BGE,* 223). Finally, Nietzsche explains in an unsent 1888 letter to Heinrich Köselitz that he has written with "a heroic-*Aristophanic* haughtiness" a proclamation to all European courts calling for the destruction of the House of Hohenzollern (*KSB* 8, 1227).

Nietzsche's interest in Aristophanes and Aristophanic comedy can be readily linked to the Dionysian in his later works. This is because we know that Aristophanic comedy, like tragedy, was performed in honor of Dionysus at ancient Greek festivals, and just as Nietzsche claims to be a "disciple" of the philosopher Dionysus throughout his post-*Zarathustra* works (*BGE,* 295; *TI,* "What I Owe" 5; *EH,* Pref

2), Aristophanes claims to have been reared by Dionysus in the parabasis of the *Clouds*. As noted above, Nietzsche clearly links laughter to the Dionysian and implicitly includes Dionysus among the Greek gods capable of golden laughter in the final aphorisms of *Beyond Good and Evil* (*BGE,* 294-295). Finally, Nietzsche claims in the preface to the *Genealogy* that once we recognize that "our old morality is part *of the comedy*," we will discover a new possibility for "the Dionysian drama of 'The Destiny of the Soul,'" and Nietzsche relates this Dionysian drama to comedy by remarking that "the grand old eternal comic poet of our existence will be quick to make use of it" (*GM,* Pref 7).

One of the most philosophically significant aspects of Old Comedy in relation to Nietzsche's works is its penchant for what Harry Frankfurt has called bullshit. According to Frankfurt, bullshit is not lying, but rather speaking with a lack of concern for truth or "how things really are" that nevertheless gives the pretense of communicating genuinely held beliefs (Frankfurt 2005, 33-34). One such bullshitter in Old Comedy is the hero of Aristophanes' *Birds*, Peisetairos or Persuader-of-Companions. Having escaped what he thinks is an overly litigious Athenian democracy, Peisetairos finds himself confronted by a chorus of misanthropic birds. To soothe their anger, he convinces the hostile birds that their current condition is rather deplorable. They were once gods, he tells them, and he explains that he has a plan to make them great again. Peisetairos, however, has little concern for the truth of the myth he tells the birds. Instead, he employs the myth to manipulate the birds into assisting his own quest to overthrow Zeus.

Although one might accuse Peisetairos of lying, it is better to say that Old Comedy operates in an atmosphere in which bullshit is not only permitted but even celebrated. Of course, the bullshit of a character like Peisetairos is transparent to the audience, and the pleasure the audience takes in watching a bullshitter at work is more like the pleasure we experience in what Frankfurt calls a bull session. What is common to both is that there is a certain license and irresponsibility vis-à-vis truth. So understood, comedy is a realm in which comedians and the audience alike take pleasure in a temporary liberation from what Nietzsche might call the tyranny of truth, and just as comedy calls out bullshit in everyday life—one only need to think of George Carlin's skit on religion—the comedies of Aristophanes also present their own bullshit, albeit in a self-conscious manner composed for the comic stage.

Nietzsche's first attempt to liberate us from the tyranny of truth in the name of artistic playfulness can be found in the 1873 unpublished essay, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." There, Nietzsche not only argues that we are ill equipped to know "how things really are," but also that the intellect "celebrates its Saturnalian festivals" when it frees itself from concepts by playing with metaphors and shifting "the boundary stones of abstraction" (*TL,* 2). Although there is no explicit mention of comedy, the playfulness and irony Nietzsche celebrates here can be readily linked to the genre of comedy, and it is through this playful attitude that we both realize and revel in the fact that we are essentially artistically creating subjects (*TL*, 1).

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche returns to this theme by questioning the value of truth and the will to truth at the beginning of the work (*BGE,* 1). Although it would be wrong to claim that Nietzsche finds no value in truth, it is clear that he

rejects, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the absolute value he attaches to truth in a work like *Human, All Too Human*. Here he promises to assess judgments according to their life-promoting capacity (*BGE*, 4). Indeed, attaching an absolute value to truth is a marker of the very asceticism that comedy opposes (*GM,* III 27), and this opposition between comic laughter and an ascetic will to truth is implied in the 1887 preface to *The Gay Science*. This is because Nietzsche refers to the will to truth or the desire to see everything naked as something indecent, and it is indecent because the truth may not only be a woman, but perhaps even Baubo, a Greek goddess known for moving Demeter to laughter by flashing her genitalia (*GS*, Pref 4).

Just as it is free to unmask bullshit through frank speech and to indulge in bullshit by playing with conventional "truths," Old Comedy also gives expression to and celebrates the vital forces that Nietzsche calls "life." The word "comedy" derives from the ancient Greek word *kômos*, and *kômos* is best translated as revel. According to Karl Kerényi, it refers to "the swarming bands of men who went about honoring the wine god with dancing and singing, but following no strict, let alone somber, rite" (Kerényi 1976, 333). In the *Symposium*, Plato offers a literary depiction of a *kômos* when Alcibiades crashes Agathon's dinner party, and in the comedies of Aristophanes, we find various representations of the *kômos* as well. The most pronounced instance occurs at the end of the *Wasps*, where an old man, named Lovecleon, gorges himself on food and drink at a symposium and proceeds to insult everyone at the party. The play ends with the old man performing an exuberant "crab" dance, which, according to Hatab, is meant "to express his indomitable spirit of life" (Hatab 2005, 166).[13]

Along with the emphasis on life in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche also speaks of perspective, the basic condition of all life (*BGE,* Pref). As I have argued elsewhere, Nietzsche's understanding of perspectivism largely parallels the account of Protagoras' *homo mensura* doctrine in Plato's *Theaetetus* (Meyer 2014a, Ch. 5.2–5.4). So construed, perspectivism is the idea that we construct "life-worlds" from basic sense impressions that are themselves relative to the perceiver by projecting certain categories of the mind onto these impressions. Just as two people might perceive what seems to be one and the same wind to be hot and cold depending on the respective conditions of their bodies, perceivers also bundle together and conceptualize various perceptions to form organized worldviews in ways that differ from individual to individual, society to society. Because of this, each of us can be said to inhabit his or her own life-world. As Nietzsche makes clear in "On Truth and Lies," it is primarily through the "legislation of language" that a shared understanding as to what counts as "truth" and "lie" is artificially created, and the reason why we legislate through language is not so that our concepts correspond to some ultimate reality, but rather so that we can avoid a *bellum omnium contra omnes* (*TL,* 1).

In my view, much of the humor in Old Comedy is based, first, on the insight into the variability and relativity of perceptions, customs, and cultural norms and, second, on the belief that there is no natural basis for such customs and norms. In this sense, Old Comedy depends on the distinction between *nomos* and *phusis* often

[13] This is taken from Meyer (2012, 35-36).

associated with the sophists.[14] On the one hand, comedians like Aristophanes force us to see the world from new and unexpected perspectives—such as that of the dung beetle in *Peace*—and to consider "ridiculous" ideas that run contrary to dominant customs of the day—such as women ruling in the *Assemblywomen*. On the other hand, by playfully altering and even completely reversing such norms, Old Comedy draws attention to and even implies that there is no natural backing for such *nomoi*. Thus, when a comic poet like Aristophanes comes across claims to the effect that certain truths or values are "self-evident," he calls bullshit. In this sense, Aristophanic comedy shares with Nietzsche the view that all normative claims about how to live derive, consciously or not, from the psychic constitution or biography of those who create them (*BGE,* 6), and anyone who claims otherwise is a self-deceived actor who deserves to be unmasked (*BGE,* 9).

Similar to Nietzsche's strategy in the *Genealogy*, much of what Old Comedy does is unmask the pretensions of those who believe themselves to be motivated by some objective truth or higher ideal. In the *Clouds*, philosophical investigation is presented as a means to manipulating the courts and legislative bodies for private benefit. In the *Birds*, Peisetairos' quest to rule—itself motivated by a desire for pleasure and power—works precisely because even the gods get hungry. In this way, all human and even divine activity, including rational thought, is reduced to or driven by what Plato calls the *epithumetic* desires of the body for food, drink, and sex, and so rationality is presented, to use Schopenhauer's language, as a "slave to the will." In this way, Old Comedy implies that human beings are really no different from animals and so continuous with the rest of nature, and this may be why so many Aristophanic choruses are dressed as animals.

Because norms and values are not discovered in nature but rather produced by individuals and groups of individuals driven by specific needs, the critique of those values inevitably involves a critique of the persons who construct and adopt them, and it is for this reason that both Aristophanes and Nietzsche employ *ad hominem* attacks throughout their works.[15] Most notably, Nietzsche revives the Aristophanic tradition of launching *ad hominem* attacks against Socrates in "The Problem of Socrates" from the *Twilight of the Idols*. There, Nietzsche labels Socrates a decadent manifestation of a declining humanity. To make his case, Nietzsche does not discuss, first and foremost, Socrates' ideas, but rather his decadent physiology. The real problem with Socrates is that he was *ugly* (*TI,* "Socrates" 3), and this lies at the bottom of his dialectics (*TI,* "Socrates" 5) as well as his idiosyncratic equation of "reason, virtue, and happiness" (*TI,* "Socrates" 4). Similarly, Nietzsche dedicates the *Genealogy* to showing how various aspects of Christianity—the morality of selflessness, guilt, the bad conscience, and asceticism—all emerged from sick, degenerate, and self-conflicted forms of a desire for power. In this way, Nietzsche, like the comic poet, claims to unmask the self-deception involved in each of these higher ideals, and by holding up a mirror to society, the comic poet shows those otherwise unknown to themselves who they really are (*GM,* Pref 1).

[14] See Taylor and Lee (2015) for further discussion of this distinction in relation to the sophists.

[15] See Solomon (2003, ch. 1) for a discussion of Nietzsche's use of the *ad hominem*.

Nevertheless, Old Comedy does not stop at pointing out the relativity and subjectivity of values and norms that shape the cultural caves we inhabit. It also engages in the project of artistically creating new norms and customs that are more suitable to the wants and desires of the comic hero and poet.[16] Rather than seeking to escape the cave of culture for Plato's heavenly realm of truth, Aristophanes has the comic hero set out to create a new cave that—to employ Nietzsche's language—"bears decided and decisive witness to *who he is*—that is, in what order of rank the innermost drives of his nature stand in relation to one another" (*BGE,* 6). Just as Plato has Socrates create an entire city in the *Republic* to meet the needs and longings of the philosopher, Aristophanes has Peisetairos construct his own *nomoi* to satisfy his erotic longings for feasts and celebrations in the *Birds*.

Similarly, Nietzsche makes it clear that the philosopher of the future will be a lawgiver, one who says, "thus it shall be" and so "determines the Whither and For What of man" (*BGE,* 211), and although there seems to be little scholarly agreement about who this lawgiving philosopher of the future is supposed to be, we do find one clear example of such legislation that parallels the *nomoi*-creating activity of Aristophanic heroes at the end of Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*. In his "Laws Against Christianity," Nietzsche re-dates the calendar to year one, day one and issues seven laws or *nomoi* condemning Christianity (*KSA* 6, 254). For these reasons, there seems to be a deep parallel between Aristophanic comedy and what Nietzsche calls "*great politics*" (*EH,* "Destiny" 1), and such great politics is perhaps rivaled only by what I think is Plato's own anti-comic comedy in the *Republic* (Meyer 2014b).[17]

We can also articulate this project of *nomoi* creation that is central to both Old Comedy and Nietzsche's post-*Zarathustra* works in the language of freedom and autonomy. Indeed, we can find in both a comedy like the *Birds* and Nietzsche's larger oeuvre a quest for what Isaiah Berlin calls positive and negative liberty. Whereas the *Birds* begins with the main characters yearning for negative freedom in that they long to escape from the Athenian *nomoi* that place constraints on the satisfaction of their hedonistic desires, the play ends with the main character creating laws that reflect his own needs and so results in a version of positive freedom. It is a form of positive freedom because the comic hero now lives under laws that he himself has authored, and so he has attained a version of autonomy. In contrast to

[16] Here, it must be acknowledged that there is a difference between a comic hero—like Peisetairos of the *Birds* or Dicaeopolis of the *Acharnians*—creating his own *nomoi* and the comic poet doing so, and thus there seems to be an important difference between Nietzsche's later writings, in which the only potential comic hero is Nietzsche himself (*qua* divine Hanswurst), and Aristophanic comedy. Nevertheless, there is a way in which Aristophanes would often identify with the comic heroes of his plays in the parabasis (see Hubbard (1991)), and, as I note below, Cratinus even made himself into the hero of his own comedy.

[17] The most recent work on Nietzsche's "great politics" by Drochon (2016) contains no references to or discussions of laughter, comedy, Aristophanes, or Nietzsche's role as Hanswurst. Although there is no passage that links Nietzsche's conception of great politics directly to Aristophanic comedy, the parallels between Nietzsche's concept and the political ambitions and activity of Dicaeopolis, whose name means "just city," from the *Acharnians* and Peisetairos from the *Birds* should be obvious.

Kant, however, the self enacting the legislation in the *Birds* is not a rational self. Indeed, comedy seems to deny that there is such a thing. Instead, it is what Kant would call the faculty of desire. As a result, Peisetairos' pronouncements lack the character of universality central to Kantian ethics, and so stand radically at odds with the Kantian conception of autonomy.

Whereas Nietzsche engages in the process of liberating himself from traditional constraints and customs and so pursues negative freedom in the free spirit works, i.e., *Human, All Too Human*, *Daybreak*, and *The Gay Science*, the fourth book of *The Gay Science*—the final part of the free spirit trilogy—outlines a quest for and so transitions to the pursuit of a positive freedom that can be associated with Nietzsche's philosophy of the future. After criticizing Kant's categorical imperative on the grounds that its demand for universality rests on an unacknowledged selfishness, Nietzsche provides his most explicit statement of an individualistic and artistic form of autonomy that is then linked to a theme from Pindar's second Pythian ode. In the well-known passage from "Long Live Physics," Nietzsche writes: "we, however, *want to become those we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves" (*GS,* 335).

For my purposes, this passage is important because it includes a variant of the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*, "*how one becomes what one is*." This suggests that whereas Nietzsche outlines the project of self-creation or becoming who one is in works like *Schopenhauer as Educator* and *The Gay Science*, the project itself comes to a final realization in *Ecce Homo*, and since I understand *Ecce Homo* to be the centerpiece of Nietzsche's comedy, there seems to be an intimate connection between Nietzsche's project of self-creation and his Dionysian comedy. Recent scholarship on Old Comedy substantiates such a link: not only did comic poets create persona in their parabases to distinguish themselves from their competitors (Biles 2011, Ch. 1), the comedian Cratinus—one of Aristophanes' primary opponents—made himself into the comic hero of his *Pytine* (Bakola 2010, Ch. 1.5). Thus, the comedies of antiquity provided a platform for comedians to engage in a project of self-creation that is artistic, antinomian, and highly individualistic and so corresponds to the kind of self-creation that Nietzsche outlines in *The Gay Science* and practices in *Ecce Homo*.

Based on this understanding of comedy, some might think that Nietzsche, *qua* comic hero of his own comedy, is a sort of *Uebermensch*, one who transcends fate and even the human condition by taking on a godlike role of giving order and value to his world. Indeed, the *Birds* ends with the main character replacing Zeus as the divine ruler of the Greek world, and so it seems that comedy represents an ultimate form of humanism in which—to echo Hegel's assessment of comedy—all gods are dead. What cannot be overlooked, however, is that Nietzsche's comedy is just one aspect of a larger understanding of life and the world that also includes tragedy, and so the project of comic self-creation must be reconciled with the fatalism central to tragedy.[18] On my reading, the comic self that Nietzsche constructs in *Ecce Homo* is

[18] Leiter (2001) has drawn attention to the possible conflict between fatalism and self-creation. My point here is simply that the issue can be tied to the relation between tragedy (fatalism) and comedy (self-creation) and so also explored in these terms.

not the *Uebermensch* of *Zarathustra* precisely because the *Uebermensch* is the hero of Nietzsche's tragedy who symbolizes the doomed attempt to transcend fate. In contrast, the comic self that Nietzsche constructs in *Ecce Homo* identifies with fate. This, I think, is the significance of the title of the final chapter of *Ecce Homo*, "Why I am a Destiny." Here, the subjective "who one is" is reconciled with or even identical to the objective "what one is," and so the comic poet's love of self is also a love of fate (*amor fati*) (*GS,* 276).

If this is the dynamic at work in *Ecce Homo* and *Ecce Homo* is the centerpiece of Nietzsche's comedy, then comedy seems to be just as or even more important than tragedy in Nietzsche's mature quest to justify existence as an aesthetic phenomenon (*BT,* 5). On the one hand, the tragedy of *Zarathustra* and the comedy of Nietzsche's 1888 works can be seen as providing two alternative ways of understanding and affirming one and the same reality. Whereas tragedy emphasizes the objective forces of nature that require the individual to come to terms with fate, comedy reverses this relationship by giving primacy to a poetic "I" that now identifies with fate. So understood, *Zarathustra* and *Ecce Homo* form two poles of equal significance in Nietzsche's oeuvre. On the other hand, it might be that Nietzsche holds comedy higher than tragedy in that the confrontation with fate and death central to tragedy is a *necessary step* in the creation of a self that can then love fate and life. So understood, *Ecce Homo* is the culmination of Nietzsche's philosophical and poetic activity and *Zarathustra* is an important step in this process. In either case, the mature Nietzsche implicitly rejects a tradition, dating back to at least Aristotle's *Poetics* and extending up to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, that privileges tragedy over comedy as the more serious and significant of the two genres.

10.4 Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper has not been to provide a definitive or an exhaustive understanding of the role that laughter and comedy play in Nietzsche's philosophical project. My thoughts on these matters are still somewhat provisional, the scope of this essay is limited, and my admittedly selective understanding of Old Comedy needs to be developed, deepened, and nuanced. Instead, the purpose of this paper has simply been to bring attention to an often overlooked and yet important aspect of Nietzsche's project by highlighting the way in which laughter and comedy take on a central role in Nietzsche's works starting with the 1882 edition of *The Gay Science* and by drawing mutually illuminating parallels between Nietzsche's philosophy and the genre of Old Comedy. Although my immediate goal is to get scholars working on Nietzsche to pay more attention to such themes and those working on laughter, humor, and comedy in contemporary philosophy to recognize that Nietzsche has something to contribute to current discussions, the more distant hope is that Nietzsche's insights will get philosophers generally to recognize that comedy

and laughter have long been philosophy's unacknowledged or even suppressed other and that we would do well to pay more attention to the philosophical significance of comedy and laughter both in the past and today. In so doing, we may come to see Aristophanes as one of ancient Greece's most profound philosophers and eventually look upon our own comedians—from Lenny Bruce and George Carlin to Chris Rock and Amy Schumer—as some of America's most insightful intellectuals.

10.5 Abbreviations and Translations of Nietzsche's Works

A = 1954. *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann, 565-656. New York: Viking Press.

BGE = 1989. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Random House.

BT = 1967. *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. W. Kaufmann, 15-151. New York: Vintage.

CW = 1967. *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. W. Kaufmann, 153-192. New York: Vintage.

EH = 1989. *Ecce Homo*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann, 215-335. New York: Random House (references include abbreviated chapter title and section number).

GM = 1989. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann, 13-163. New York: Random House (references include essay number followed by section number).

GS = 1974. *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Random House.

HH = 1996. *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KSA = 1999. *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, 15 Vols. Berlin, Munich: DTV, De Gruyter (references include volume and note or page number).

KSB = 1986. *Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, 8 Vols. Berlin, Munich: DTV, De Gruyter (references include volume and letter number).

PTAG = 1962. *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. M. Cowan. Washington, DC: Gateway.

TI = 1954. *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann, 463-564. New York: Viking Press (references include an abbreviated section name and section number).

TL = 1993. "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. and trans. D. Breazeale, 77-97. New Jersey: Humanities Press.
WP = 1968. *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
Z = 1954. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann, 109–439. New York: Viking Press (references include book number and an abbreviated section name).

10.6 Abbreviations and Translations of Other Authors

Phil. = 1997. Plato's *Philebus*, trans. J. M. Cooper, 398–456. Indianapolis: Hackett.
PP II = 1974. Arthur Schopenhauer's *Parerga and Paralipomena*, trans. E. F. J. Payne. Oxford: Clarendon Press (references include section number).
WWR I and II = 1969. Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, Vols. 1 and 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover.

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Chapter 11
Life's Joke: Bergson, Comedy, and the Meaning of Laughter

Russell Ford

"Drama offers nature her revenge on society" (Bergson L76/R122).

Abstract Despite its brevity and relative neglect in Bergson scholarship, the concerns of Bergson's little book *Laughter* extend to much more profound things than its title indicates. On the surface, its significance might seem to be symptomatic: laughter exposes something essentially human. But in the very first chapter, Bergson observes that laughter and the comic exclusively concern the human, but also "must have a *social* meaning." Bergson's very interest in laughter and the comic might well arise from the fact that the phenomenon of laughter indicates a social situation – denoted as the comic – in which human beings are both the source and the object of laughter. The comic situation gives laughter, as a *sociological fact*, a dual valence: humans laugh, but they only ever laugh at themselves.

The present essay argues that Bergson's account of the comic can only be fully appreciated when read in conjunction with his later metaphysical exposition of the *élan vital* in *Creative Evolution* and by the account of fabulation that Bergson only elaborates fully three decades later in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. The more substantive account of the *élan vital* ultimately shows that, in *Laughter*, Bergson misses his own point: laughter does not simply serve as a means for correcting human behavior but is rather the *élan vital*'s vital summons, the demand of

The author would like to thank Keith Ansell-Pearson for the invitation to write this essay, Anna Street for her helpful comments, and Lydia Moland for her tireless and brilliant editing work that made it substantially better in every way. Errors and incidences of humor that remain are the author's own. This essay is dedicated to Rich Doyle whose work inspired it and nourished it. With gratitude and thanks.

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5_11

life itself, that human beings challenge their obligations, question their societal forms, and thereby create new and, for Bergson, more ideal forms of life and community.

Keywords Bergson · Comedy · Life · Laughter · Politics · Ethics · Vitalism

In his *Introduction to Sociology*, Theodor Adorno states that "it can happen that we catch sight of the essential—and may even do so today—in relation to phenomena that seem to lack any such significance" (Adorno 2000, 19). Henri Bergson's 1900 *Le Rire* (*Laughter*) is a case in point. Despite its brevity and relative neglect in Bergson scholarship, the concerns of this little book extend to much more profound—more essential—things than its title indicates.[1] On the surface, its significance might seem to be symptomatic: laughter exposes something essentially human. In the very first section of the first chapter, Bergson observes that laughter and the comic exclusively concern the human, relate solely to the intelligence, and "must have a *social* meaning" (L10–12/R2–6).[2] They are significant, then, to a wide scope of human existence. Bergson notes that previous philosophers have defined human beings as "animals that laugh"; they could just as well, he says, "have defined the human being as a laughable animal [*un animal qui fait rire*]" (L10/R3).[3] Bergson's very interest in laughter and the comic might well arise from precisely this point: the phenomenon of laughter indicates a social situation – denoted as the comic – in which human beings are both the source and the object of laughter. The comic situation gives laughter, as a *sociological fact*, a dual valence: humans laugh, but they only ever laugh at themselves (L10/R2–3).

The present essay argues that Bergson's account of the comic is only fully understood when read in conjunction with his later metaphysical exposition of the *élan vital* in his 1907 *Creative Evolution* and then by the account of fabulation (the myth-

[1] Several recent and classical accounts of Bergson's work, such as Mullarkey's *Bergson & Philosophy* (2000), Lawlor's *The Challenge of Bergsonism* (2003), Deleuze's *Le bergsonisme* (1998), Ansell-Pearson's *Henri Bergson: An Introduction* (2011), omit consideration of *Laughter* entirely. He is mentioned only in passing in Morreall's (2016) humorously self-serving entry in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* "Philosophy of Humor." Of the various accounts of Bergson's philosophy, only Jankélévitch's *Henri Bergson* (2015), originally published in 1931, contains significant references to *Laughter*. It should also be noted that Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1990), originally published in 1905, also addresses Bergson's claims.

[2] Translation modified. Works by Bergson are abbreviated as follows (the citation to the original French first and the English translation (when available) second): *Matière et Mémoire* (MM); *Matter and Memory* (MM) (Bergson 2012); *Le Rire* (R); *Laughter* (L) (Bergson 2008); L'Évolution créatrice (EC); *Creative Evolution* (CE) (Bergson 2013c); *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (DSMR); *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (TSMR) (Bergson 2013b).

[3] This would to some degree be in accord with the conventional understanding of Bergson as arguing that laughter is a social corrective. We laugh at someone in order to draw their attention to their violation of social norms. A more careful and nuanced reading of Bergson's argument such as that attempted here and, to an extent, by Bernard G. Prusak's article "*Le rire à nouveau:* Rereading Bergson," shows that laughter operates as more than a merely local human correction.

making function, as it is translated into English) that Bergson only worked out fully three decades later in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Already underway, though confusedly, in *Laughter*, the working out of the *élan vital* ultimately shows that, in *Laughter*, Bergson misses his own point: laughter does not simply serve as a means for correcting human behavior but is rather the *élan vital*'s vital summons, the demand of life itself, that human beings challenge their obligations, question their societal forms, and thereby create new and, for Bergson, more ideal forms of life and community.[4]

Why would the living force that Bergson will come to call *élan vital* create such a situation? Why does it play such a joke on its greatest achievement?[5] As the metaphysical exposition of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (1907) will make clear, part of the force of laughter is directed not at a specific actor or actors but at life itself: laughter makes a moment comical through the reimposition of the decisive moment of tension. The moment of freedom from the care for self-preservation is just that: a moment, an ideal and disinterested abstraction that already harbors the seed of its own resolution. It is a moment of the action of life, a moment of tension and flexibility *between* the forces of tension and flexibility. This repetition alerts the reader to the joke. Reading *Laughter* through the lens of the more fully-developed vital metaphysics of *Creative Evolution* shows that laughter aims not at the social overcoming of individual self-consciousness, at the mere destruction of human vanity, but at an evacuation – a loosening and relaxation – of a self-consciousness that exhibits the symptoms of the growing tension and inflexibility of an isolated individual (L82/R132). The comic, in other words, is the action of life disclosed by laughter. Correspondingly, the comic art is the critical art of dramatizing the perpetual and irresolvable action of life (Lee 2016, 55–64).[6]

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[4] Prusak writes that although *Le Rire* precedes *Creative Evolution* "by 7 years, the earlier book not only anticipates, but is already organized by the doctrine of the *élan vital* or "life drive" that the later book would elaborate. It is argued in this paper [Prusak's] that Bergson's metaphysics distorts *Le Rire*'s account of laughter and the nature of the comic" (Prusak 2004, 377). This thesis further allows Prusak to use Bergson "to gain new insight into the meaning of the scholastic proposition, *Homo est. animal risible*" (ibid.). The upshot is that if laughter is always the laughter of a group who share a set of norms and values, then human beings, who are the only animals that "naturally live artificially in the light of social norms," are also the only laughable (*risible*) animals (Prusak 2004, 386). Theses similar to Prusak's – arguing for the normative force of comedy – are not uncommon and may also be found in Chap. 3 of Noël Carroll's (2014) *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* and in Chap. 3 of Matthew Bevis' (2013) *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* which takes Bergson as its point of departure. The present essay argues the paucity of this thesis.

[5] See below. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson will maintain that the free and fully conscious human being is the "term" and the "end" of evolution (CE265/265).

[6] Rereading *Laughter*, which we might now better be entitle *The Comic: An Essay on the Meaning of Laughter*, the creativity of human life emerges as the outcome of the dreamy and artistic relaxation of the intellect. Even the opening line is in clear opposition to its title: "What does laughter mean?" (L9/R1). The entire book might be taken as justification for Agnes Heller's remark that "[w]hen we speak about the comic, we face a mess" (Heller 2005, 5). The meaning of that mess is addressed – humorously – in Ford's "Introduction: Why So Serious? On Philosophy and Comedy" (2016a, b).

11.1 The Argument of *Le Rire*

Bergson's account of the laughable is often wrongly reduced to *Laughter's* most famous phrase, namely that we laugh whenever we find "the mechanical is encrusted [*plaqué*] on the living" (Doyle 2002, 153–174; Doyle 2016, 83–87).[7] With this formulation, Bergson invites us to imagine a fishmonger who can only throw an object as if it were a fish, or a particle physicist who is unable to express him or herself in any way other than by recourse to the specialized language of their profession. But Bergson's account is much more nuanced than this easy banality, and his essay has at least three concerns not adequately encapsulated by this phrase: it aims to answer the behavioral and social question of what provokes laughter, of what the laughable *is*; it aims to situate this answer within Bergson's developing metaphysical position; and it aims to provide something of an account of art generally.[8] This ambition helps to explain both one of the more comical aspects of Bergson's book – that it doesn't deal at all with the actual act of laughter – but it also helps explain one of the most enigmatic and important passages in the book: the crossed carrefours that organizes and concludes the final section of the opening chapter (L24ff/R29ff). There Bergson acknowledges the difficulty of offering a definition of the comic. Instead of a single definition, he suggests an image:

> [W]e might think of an immense forested avenue, with *crosses* or carrefours that mark it at intervals: at each carrefour we will walk round the crossing, we will venture out to explore the paths that open out before us, after which we will go back to our original direction.

This image shows that the claim that the comical is "the mechanical encrusted on the living" is not the conclusion of Bergson's analysis of the comic phenomenon but merely the result of the exploration of one of these *stipes* – these branching paths – that emerge as he pursues the *patibulum* of the meaning of the comic.

Chapter One, the first *stipe* of the carrefours, is sociological. It is, after all, the sociologist who investigates not only "the comic in general" but who surveys "the comic of forms and expressions" of a society. Bergson accordingly gathers his metaphysical tools from a series of sociological observations whose results, after further refinement, he will proceed to deploy in a fully formed theory of art as well as social life.[9] Bergson's rhetoric here is vital for following not only the argu-

[7] The fourth section of the first chapter of *Laughter* states that "[t]he attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" (L21/R22–23). (This passage is italicized in the French and printed in small caps in the English translation.)

[8] The concern with the nature of art generally is presented quite early in the first chapter (L10/R2). However, in the first part of the third and final chapter of the essay – the chapter that the rest of the book has been explicitly building towards – Bergson asks, "What is the object of art?" (L72/R115) and he answers, a few pages later, in a brief statement that virtually presents his entire metaphysics, that "[a]rt. is certainly only a more direct vision of reality" (L75/R120).

[9] Prusak's "reinterpretation" of Bergson's book too strongly argues that the theory of *élan vital* "organizes" *Laughter*, but he is absolutely correct to note that Bergson's metaphysics, which is still far from completely formulated in 1900, has a distorting effect on several of Bergson's claims. (Prusak, 2004)

ment of *Laughter* but also seeing the way that the argument develops later. Bergson orients himself and his investigation by the metaphysical crossing, the philosophical *patibulum*, of the carrefours – it drives his investigation and, at the carrefours, it orients and structures his sociological strolls. The preceding four parts of Chapter One have developed the various *stipes*, the radiating bars, of the cross – the *crux* – of Bergson's argument. His observations – for instance, the sociological *stipes* into which he sojourns – conjoined to the other *stipes* provide only an initial orientation, not what is all too easily confused with Bergson's "definition" of comedy.

Having catalogued these observations—which I will not detail here—Bergson turns his attention to how they have enriched his initial claim that the comical is "the mechanical encrusted on the living".[10] His observations are philosophical since they question the object as to its essence. His first conclusion is that the comic concerns only the human (L10/R2). When we laugh at a hat blowing away from its owner, we laugh because it seems to be purposely, consciously evading capture: it seems to be acting like a human. Secondly, the comic is accompanied by an "*absence of feeling*" (L10/R3) indicating that that it is not sympathetic. Bergson notes that were someone to

> [t]ry for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said and done; act, in imagination with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word give [their] sympathy its widest expansion: as though at the touch of a fairy wand [they would] see the flimsiest objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything. (L10/R4)

The laughable appeals exclusively to "pure intelligence" (L11/R4, translation altered). But, finally, the third characteristic of laughter is that it requires an echo: that is, it requires a community (L11/R4). The analysis of the observational data yields only these three characteristics by which "[t]he comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of people concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence"[11] (L12/R6). From these characteristics, Bergson draws a metaphysical conclusion: society requires of each of its members "a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence. *Tension* and *elasticity* are two forces, mutually complementary, which life brings into play" (L16/R14).

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[10] Bergson's book is filled with examples of the various comic phenomena he discusses. Some are familiar and recur often – such as scenes from *Don Quixote* and *The Misanthrope* – others are taken from the vaudeville or comic stage of Bergson's own time, while still others are seemingly perennially funny (a person slipping on a banana peel, sneezing at the most poignant line while delivering a eulogy, etc.).

[11] However, it is not at all clear that these are equivalent definitions. In Section Four, to repeat, Bergson gives the "law" of comic forms and movements as "*The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine*" (L21/R22–23; the French places this definition in italics; the English translation uses small caps). In Section Five, as stated above, Bergson states that "the central image" from which explorations into the comic will depart and return is *"[s]omething mechanical encrusted (plaqué) on the living*" (L24/R29; the English translation omits the italics).

However, a further qualification is needed: "society asks for something more; it is not satisfied with simply living, it insists on living well" (L16/R14) and therefore fears individuals that content themselves with *merely* living according to established norms and habits. To borrow William Connolly's term, the laughable would arise when the teleodynamic activity of a society is placed in abeyance.[12] The comparably much shorter sections three and four of Chapter One add just two more things that prompt laughter: bodily rigidity (which reverses the properly human dominance of form over matter) and repetitive bodily actions that, by fulfilling the three characteristics and so also exemplifying the mechanical encrusted on the living, cause the human actor to resemble a mechanism rather than a living being.[13] These two sections will only become important when Bergson turns to the relation between art and life.

In Section Five of the first chapter, Bergson returns to the philosophical *patibulum* from his sojourns in the *stipes* and, rather than nailing comedy to a simple Latin cross, this multiple crucifixion, as though on the more ornate Gothic cross' several *stipes*, allows him to explore three other observations of the comic effect. Although it eludes any definition, Bergson states that there is a "formula" of the comic effect that "exists well enough in a certain sense, but its development does not follow a straightforward course" (L24/R28). The *roulette* that its development does follow is again an early indication of Bergson's conclusion not only in *Laughter* but in the development of the theory of *élan vital* in *Creative Evolution* and *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. The development of Bergson's account of comedy is neither rigid nor repetitive and is, in fact, "a game, a game that imitates life" (L37/R52) or, speaking of the animating "comic fancy," Bergson states – in a discussion that is to some extent interrupted by the second chapter before being taken up again in the third – that this *fantaisie* "is indeed a living energy, a strange plant that has nourished on the stony portions of the social soil" (L36/R49). If, as Heraclitus is said to have remarked, "[l]ife is a child at play, moving pieces in a game" (Graham 178/179; HCT 154 [F109]), then the comic fancy chooses roulette.

The second chapter of *Laughter* takes up what Bergson calls the comic element in situations and in words. If the first chapter was, at least in part, exploratory, the second chapter has a confirmatory character. Its method is to take children's games and amusements and to discover how they develop or grow into a more mature form

[12] In his article, "Species Evolution and Cultural Freedom," Connolly offers the neologism "teleodynamic," or "teleodynamism," as the name for an alternative to three prevalent forms of teleology: genocentrism, divine intentionalism, and natural teleology. Connolly's teleodynamism "projects differential degrees of agency into multiple, heterogeneous, and interacting systems, and it identifies periodic moments of creativity within and between evolving organisms." He concludes that teleodynamism "does not altogether deny teleology; rather, it insinuates differing degrees of creativity into *teleodynamic* processes." In other words, such processes are goal-oriented but undetermined as to the goal that they must pursue, creating new goals as evolution proceeds (Connolly 2014, 444). Keith Ansell-Pearson's *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (2001) pursues a similar reading of Bergson.

[13] As Bergson puts it elsewhere: "The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself" (L23/R26).

of the comic – but this is to be done to test the law that has already been discovered: "*Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement*" (L37/R53). Bergson's three examples of such "children's games" are the jack-in-the-box, the dancing-jack (a puppet controlled by strings), and the snow-ball, by which Bergson means "an effect which grows by arithmetical progression, so that the cause, insignificant at the outset, culminates by a necessary evolution in a result as important as it is unexpected" (L43/R62). Each of these examples is carried further using corresponding situations from drama.[14] "But," Bergson asks at the conclusion of these three analyses, "why is it we laugh at this mechanical arrangement?" (L45/R66). The answer, which Bergson regards as merely a different formulation of the previous answer, is that "the rigid mechanism which we occasionally detect, as a foreign body, in the living continuity of human affairs is of peculiar interest to us as being a kind of *absentmindedness* on the part of *life*" (L45/R66; emphasis added to "life"). Despite his claim that this is just the same definition repeated in a different form – a claim sure to validate part of Bergson's argument by provoking a surprised laugh from his reader – even Bergson seems to realize his argument is starting to shift here. He notes first that "the "methods" of the second chapter "have been entirely empirical" (L46/R67), but he then turns to what he calls "a full and methodical theory" (L46/R67) which will involve discovering, via the particular magnification provided by drama, the "essential characteristics [that] life, when viewed from without, seems to contrast with mere mechanism" (L46/R67).

The turn to life itself, after the tripartite characterization of the comic as human, concerned solely with the intelligence, and inherently social, is bewildering for the reader unless one recalls that this book is by an author who, in his earlier works, showed a marked interest not only in contemporary psychological research but also in the philosophical issue of the worldly embodiment of the mind. In *Time and Free Will* (*Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* [Bergson 2013a]) Bergson sought to show, among other things, the reality of the "free act" through the elaboration of his capital concept of duration.[15] *Matter and Memory* (*Matière et Mémoire*) makes this worldly embodiment even clearer, stating in what Bergson calls his "theory of *pure perception*" (Bergson 2012, MM65/MM67) – a theory that has not yet had memory added back into the activity of perception – that "[p]erception, in its pure state, is, then, in very truth, a part of things" (Bergson 2012, MM64/MM66–67). The laughable, the comic and the laughter that it provokes must also be features of life peculiar to the form of the human.

[14] Bergson assumed, at the outset of Chapter Two, "that the stage is both a magnified and a simplified view of life" and that "comedy is capable of furnishing us with more information than real life on this particular part of our subject" (L37/R51).

[15] See especially Bergson's account of the way that the associationist conception of the mind employs a defective understanding of the free human individual (Bergson 2013a, 155–163). Frédéric Worms' summary of the *Essai* in his "Brève introduction aux autres livres de Bergson" at the end of his *Introduction à Matière et Mémoire de Bergson* is also helpful in this regard (Worms 1997, 292–295).

"Life," Bergson asserts, "presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space" (Bergson 2008, L46/R67). The difference between these aspects yields three characteristics "which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical" (Bergson 2008, L48/R68) and to each of these characteristics can be opposed its counterpart, yielding the following table which would depict, according to Bergson, a corresponding and complete list of "the methods of light comedy, [for which] no others are possible" (Bergson 2008, L46/R68):

Outward characteristics of the living
A continual change of aspect
The irreversibility of the order of phenomena
The individuality of a perfectly self-contained series

Outward characteristics of the mechanical
Repetition
Inversion
Reciprocal Interference of Series

For each characteristic of the mechanical, Bergson provides several examples drawn from comic theater. Repetition is a series of incidents that recur again and again in different circumstances; inversion is obtained by the reversal of roles (Bergson highlights the trope of "the robber robbed"); while the reciprocal interference of series is perhaps illustrated best by Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* or *The Comedy of Errors* in which the device of twins allows for the characters to have a reasonable but incorrect understanding of their actions while the audience is able to see the whole, correct situation revealed at the end of the play.[16] In each case, Bergson concludes, the objective of the laughable is "to obtain what we have called a *mechanization* of life" (L52/R77).

The other section of Chapter Two is concerned with laughable effects expressed in or obtained by language. It is a relatively minor part of Bergson's argument in which he merely demonstrates how language, too, is laughable when it adheres to his three-part criteria. He then turns to the comic in character, which, as the subject of Bergson's third and final chapter, is the culmination of the argument of the entire book: from the outset, Bergson has been "[c]onvinced that laughter has a social meaning and import, that the comic expresses, above all else, a special lack of adaptability to society, and that, in short, there is nothing comic apart from man, we have made man and character generally our main objective" (L65/R101–102).

Human beings are essentially social beings for Bergson, and the laughable can therefore only be found where a member of a community displays an "absent-mindedness" toward both her fellow citizens and to the norms of the community that she has learned in order to become its member (L65–66/R102–103). A philosopher of normative political theory, banging out journal articles in her ivory tower, entirely unaware of any real political situation, would be just such an absent-minded

[16] Bergson's own examples are the comparably less well-known *Tartarin on the Alps* (1885) by Alphonse Daudet (1840–1897) as well as works by Eugène Marin Labiche (1815–1888).

individual. The function of laughter is both to chastise such "callousness to social life" (L66/R102) but also to return the individual to society by waking her from her dream (L66/R103). It is for this reason that Bergson regards "[t]he analysis of comic *characters* … as the most important part of our task" (L65/R101). Comic forms, movements, situations, and words—the subjects of the first two chapters—have been analyzed on the basis of the thesis that only humanity is comic, which has created the recurring problem of "explaining how we come to laugh at anything else than character, and by what subtle processes of fertilization, combination or amalgamation, the comic can worm its way into a mere movement, an impersonal situation, or an independent phrase" (L65/R102). The precipitate of these investigations is a "pure metal," extracted from the impurities of its "ore" and, concluding the chemical analogy, Bergson writes that "[n]othing could be easier" than analyzing the comic character.

In fact, however, the last chapter of Bergson's book turns out to be exceedingly complicated. Like the first chapter it is composed of five sections but, whereas the first chapter was unified by its devotion to the exhibition of the "comic fancy," the third chapter weaves together three problems. The first of these is, as the reader may expect, the determination of the comic character. However, this problem occupies only half of the first section of Chapter Three before giving way to a second problem: the relation and meaning of art to human life. In this discussion, and in contradistinction to so many caricatures of Bergson's theory, laughter is certainly reasserted as a social corrective but one that, while perhaps instantiated by individuals, indicates a natural, social, and unconscious action on the part of nature and society that follows a logic imperceptible to consciousness: "It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life" (L94/R152). These problems are neither starkly separated nor carelessly blended in Bergson's discussion. Bits of each show up in the others. One of the things that this corroborates is the importance of this little book to the metaphysics expressed most coherently in *Creative Evolution*. There it is life—*élan vital*—that is under investigation, and while humanity is afforded a privileged position, Bergson's phrasing here indicates a "revolt" that is human in scope but ultimately inhumanly deeper.

Bergson states that the aim of laughter is "to reprove the absentmindedness of one of our fellows and to wake him out of his dream" (L66/R103). Bergson notes that every human society has its own customs and habits to which newcomers – children and immigrants alike – are introduced and immediately expected to follow. They are not suggestions, and when someone ignores or otherwise violates these norms they exhibit—in Bergson's apt phrase—"*a growing callousness* [*le raidissement*] *to social life*" (L66/R102). Like a character in a comedy, the laughable member of society is distinguished not by particular faults or acts of wickedness, but simply by "rigidity." After a detour through the techniques by which an unsociable fault can be made laughable, Bergson returns to the central issue of character—to "the ready-made element in our personality" (L72/R113) — and concludes that "inattention is here equivalent to what we have called unsociability" (L71/R112).[17]

[17] Bergson's analysis of the techniques by which a comic character can be rendered yields three

Here Bergson feels compelled to raise the question of the relation between comedy and the other arts. "Life is action" and drama is action rendered artfully (L73/R115). This life of action is concerned with utility, not creativity. Perception is always selective in order to appropriately guide conduct; self-knowledge is practical as well since it is oriented toward capabilities and the fulfillment of needs; even our everyday language is utilitarian, ignoring the individuality of things whenever possible and instead seeing things as genera. In sum, Bergson concludes, "we live in a zone midway between things and ourselves, externally to things, externally also ourselves" (L74/R118). This zone of utilitarian existence will be more fully fleshed out in *Creative Evolution* but here, in *Laughter*, Bergson wants to explain and to some extent justify not just the comic but the arts themselves.[18] The aim of art is precisely "to brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities … in order to bring us face to face with reality itself" (L75/R120). Artists are human beings, members of society, who are able to detach themselves, in part, from the utilitarian character of life and thereby create artifacts that reveal the ultimate natural necessity that human beings must live together in society and also live by the rules instituted for the order of that society.

Having identified the distinguishing features of comedic characters, and after offering a surprisingly expansive account of the relations between comedy, art, and life, Bergson ends the first part of the final chapter by returning "to the double conclusion we reached in the course of our investigations" (L80/R130). The first part of the conclusion is that "a person is never ridiculous except through some mental attribute resembling absent-mindedness" (L80/R130). This attribute is now further likened to a "parasite," and the function of laughter would be to excise a foreign body. Moreover, the comical aims to depict character types that are as widespread in a society as possible, thereby achieving a maximum curative effect. These distinctive characteristics form the second part of Bergson's conclusion. Finally, however, Bergson adds a remarkable statement on the relation between comedy, art, and life: "So we were probably right in saying comedy lies midway between art and life. It is not disinterested as genuine art is. By organizing laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment, it even obeys an impulse of social life. And in this respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a

characteristics. The first is that the character must be unsociable (again, though, not immoral); the spectator's attention must be drawn to the unintentional and automatic *gestures* of the character (rather than to the character's *actions*); and, finally, the character is marked by automatism, not merely in the sense of behaving like a machine but in making "involuntary gestures" and/or in uttering "unconscious remarks" (L69–71/R111). The combination of the two – "systematic absent-mindedness" – is the most laughable spectacle of all, and its exemplar is Don Quixote.

[18] Bergson spends a significant amount of space here differentiating the arts of comedy and tragedy. Tragic drama, he claims, is always concerned with the unique individual (L77/R123) but, in displaying a unique character such as Oedipus, Hamlet, or Hippolytus, tragedy offers the spectator a glimpse of their own individuality – precisely what they forget in their everyday utilitarian existence. Comic drama, on the other hand, aims to portray not individuals but types, even caricatures. "The effect" of the comic, the provocation to laughter, "must appear to us as an average effect, as expressing an average of mankind" (L86/R129).

return to pure nature" (L81/R131). Here again, Bergson's nascent metaphysics intrudes—productively—on his analysis. As he will explain in *Creative Evolution*, life aims to create forms and, in human beings, it has created forms that are themselves capable of creating forms. Reading this back into *Laughter*, Bergson can be seen ascribing the comic art—and the laughter it produces—to human beings so that they might have an implement to shatter the inevitable calcification of their naturally creative social forms.

Sections two and three then return to the anticipated and more conventional discussion of comic character. In the very brief second section, Bergson again dons the garb of the alchemist and, mixing together all of the elements of the comic obtains from them not the "mess" that Agnes Heller feared but a single, familiar precipitate: vanity.[19] Neither virtue nor vice, this omnipresent human quality is "an admiration of ourselves based on the admiration we think we are inspiring in others" (L82/R132). Although he forgoes a detailed analysis of vanity, Bergson clearly indicates that it is a necessarily social quality—it is "based on" what we think we are "inspiring in others" —and he also makes clear its close bond with laughter: "laughter perform[s], with mathematical regularity one of its main functions—that of bringing back to complete self-consciousness a certain self-admiration which is almost automatic, and thus obtaining the greatest possible sociability of characters" (L82/R133). One of the main functions of laughter seems then to be the laughable—because it occurs with "mathematical regularity" —rejoining of social life with natural life.

Section three—as brief as the one that precedes it—emphasizes that the character of society—namely, that individuals in our everyday dealings with them are generally reduced to types, and those types often correspond to the individual's profession. Thus, if the precipitate of the laughable is vanity, its most common and effective forms will be the vanity that assumes the form of "*professional callousness* (l'*endurcissement*)" (L84/R136). Bergson exemplifies this character by pointing to judges who only speak legalese and act solely according to the dictates of the legal profession. Doctors that do the same, or religious officials—Tartuffe being the obvious example—are likewise too rigid to be lifelike and therefore laughable. In each case, the vain character has and acts on a self-estimation that is *not* based on others, making them laughable. Although these examples provide helpful and readily-available evidence for Bergson's argument, he pushes the point further. In addition to—and perhaps lurking beneath—every instance of professional callousness is what Bergson calls a "professional logic," i.e. certain ways of reasoning that are customary in particular professional circles, but awkward or maladapted for general public life (L85/R138). An investigation of this "professional logic," as well as its cognates and outgrowths, will form the core of argument of the final two sections of *Laughter*.

As short as they are, and as far as they stray from the central thesis of *Laughter*, the final two sections of the last chapter are among the most important and rich in the book. Having introduced the idea that there is a kind of logic to the comic—that

[19] See footnote 14.

"particular" or "professional" logic that manifests as a professional callousness—Bergson, in section four, takes up directly the claim by the artist and critic Théophile Gautier that "the comic in its extreme form is the logic of the absurd" (L85/R139).[20] Bergson immediately notes, however, that there is an obvious error in Gautier's theory insofar as there are absurdities that are not comic at all; his theory mistakes a cause for an effect. However, Gautier's theory is not discarded entirely. Rather, having previously determined what it is that produces the comic effect, Bergson sets about rectifying Gautier's claim (L86/R139).

The correction is accomplished by an analysis of that epitome of the comic, Don Quixote, who "furnishes us with the general type of comic absurdity" (L87/R142). On the one hand, an ordinary person who perceives "something that bears a faint resemblance to a large motionless body with revolving arms" would probably identify this thing as a windmill through simple common sense: "Common sense represents the endeavor of a mind continually adapting itself anew and changing ideas when it changes objects. It is the mobility of the intelligence conforming exactly to the mobility of things. It is the moving continuity of our attention to life" (L86/R140). Common sense is the faculty that navigates the everyday middle ground of the utilitarian, the space between the extremes of art and life. Quixote's error is logical, but it also represents "a very special inversion of common sense" (L87/R141). Where common sense, in its healthy operation, is a continuous adaptation between the mind and the world, the "special inversion" in Quixote's case is that his character has acquired a particular rigidity; his is "[a] stubborn spirit [that] ends by adjusting things to its own way of thinking, instead of accommodating its thoughts to things" (L87/R142). The latter part of Bergson's remark is an infelicitous one because it obscures the work that the plastic and utilitarian mind does in coming to have ideas of the objects that it encounters. Bergson seems to intend a distinction between Quixote's idiomatic rigidity and the supple adaptability of everyday common sense. He discards the various sorts of rigidity that characterize the morbidity of various kinds of mental illness—these arouse pity and Bergson has already concluded that the laughable bears no trace of the emotional. What he is left with, surprisingly, is the logic of dreams: "The behavior of the intellect in a dream is exactly what we have just been describing. The mind, enamored of itself, now seeks in the outer world nothing more than a pretext for realizing its imagination" (L88/R143). And, Bergson continues, "if the logic of the comic is the logic of dreams, we may expect to discover in the logic of the laughable all the peculiarities of dream logic" (L88/R143). The hypothetical is significant because Bergson will assume the veracity of his antecedent in the subsequent discussion.

Given that forms of the laughable become laughable when they are recognizable as a cognate of one of the more familiar forms, Bergson now argues that any "*play of ideas*" becomes laughable when it is recognized as resembling what he calls "the play of dreamland (*les jeux du rêve*)" (L88/R143). This is a complicated rhetorical

[20] Pierre Jules Théophile Gautier (1811–1872) was a widely-esteemed critic and playwright. He is one of the few critics whose theory of comedy Bergson singles out in *Laughter*. Despite the widespread notoriety of Gautier's claim about the comic, the source of the quote is unclear.

maneuver. What allows it is perhaps best expressed in an essay that Bergson published in 1908, one year after *Creative Evolution*, entitled "Memory of the Present and False-Recognition." There, speaking of psychic facts generally, Bergson writes that the abnormal or morbid psychic fact

> was already being manufactured while the conditions were normal; but it was prevented from emerging, when about to appear, by one of those continually active inhibitory mechanisms which secure *attention to life*. Were each of these organs to work by itself, there would result a host of useless or untoward effects, liable to disturb the functioning of the others and so upset that adjustable equilibrium by which our adaptation to the environment is continually maintained. But a work of elimination, of correction, of bringing back to the point, is constantly going on, and it is precisely this work which secures a healthy mind. (Bergson 2002, 142).

Although not mentioned, one of the ways of correcting and retrieving ill minds is, of course, laughter. Inverting the traditional question from "why is the ill mind so?" to "why isn't the healthy mind so?" Bergson here establishes the basis for a novel interpretation of psychic life generally that helps to explain the convoluted path of the concluding pages of *Laughter*. In his 1908 essay he continues "I have applied that method [of explaining why certain psychical phenomena are not found in the normally healthy mind] to the study of dreams.... They are supposed to be facts of a special order... which is the dream-life" (Bergson 2002, 142–3). Our utilitarian social existence is a limitation, a diminishment of the fullness of our dream-life and its bewildering array of sensible and intelligible effects, and laughter—as Bergson argues in 1900—is the social remedy for any member of the community who strays too far into "the play of dreamland."[21]

Since "given one form of the laughable, other forms that are lacking in the same comic essence become laughable from their outward resemblance to the first," any relaxation of our utilitarian social disposition may lead us into "a certain general relaxation of the rules of reasoning" (L88/R143–4). In other words, the relaxation of reason may lead us to become laughable. More generally, "[t]he reasonings at which we laugh are those we know to be false, but which we might accept as true were we to hear them in a dream" (L88/R144). Bergson identifies four such reasonings that have the appearance of dream-reasonings: witticisms, in which a play on words overtakes (or undercuts) the play of ideas; "comic obsessions," in which a common element repeatedly appears in all manner of contexts; "a particular *crescendo*" that terminates a string of ever-more ridiculous situations; and, finally, the "reciprocal interference of two series" that is possible in dreams because, in dreams, the dreamer "is himself, and not himself" (L88–91/R143–7). This analysis which,

[21] In the fourth section of *Laughter*, Bergson flatly states that "Comic absurdity is that of dreams" (L88/R142; the entire phrase is italicized in the French). It is difficult – if not impossible – to correlate Bergson's arguments in 1900 with those he makes in 1908. To do so would, at a minimum, require an investigation that ranged far afield of the present argument. What can be —and has been—shown is that Bergson's discussion of dreams in 1900 and 1908 both emphasize the same central point: that our everyday utilitarian existence – common sense – is a "constriction" of the much more extensive life of dreams. Additionally, reading backwards from the 1908 essay to *Laughter*, the later essay is a valuable clarification of the final pages of the former.

on the one hand, seems to accord with what Bergson had previously argued in fact leads to a new insight that Bergson only develops in a few brief lines of the final section of the entire book. As Bergson writes in the opening line of that section, "the comic seems to show itself in a form somewhat different from the one we lately attributed to it" (L91/R147–8). It is no longer simply the "callousness" of a "plaque" that adheres to the living, nor is it simply a "mechanical encrustation," —although, to be sure, it appears in these guises—it now appears as the self-criticism of life itself effected by humanity, its avatar and greatest achievement.

Any reader of the final section of *Laughter* must find it remarkable that Bergson's "theory" of comedy is so often reduced to "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (L24/R29). It remains true that laughter "is first and foremost a means of correction" (L91/R148), but it is equally true, as the analysis of Chapter Three has shown, that the corrective aspect of laughter "is not what we are immediately struck by in our first impression of the laughable" (L91/R148). Our first impression of the laughable is not contempt or hatred, but "sympathy." The person at whom we laugh is first treated "as a playmate" (L92/R144). As Bergson notes, the examples he has given immediately preceding have shown that there is "a movement of relaxation" in laughter that must be analyzed and accounted for" (L92/R142). The work of common sense is utilitarian; it "demands a continuous effort of intellectual tension" by which the mind forces its ideas to remain within the bounds of the sensible (L92/R149). But this work is just that and, like any form of work, it requires occasional suspension. Such a suspension is not a pure disavowal of real existence but is rather, like the logic of dreams, the continuation of the creation of ideas only now broken away from the restrictions of the sensible. "So," Bergson writes, "comic absurdity gives us from the outset the impression of playing with ideas. Our first impulse is to join in the game" (L92/R149). Common sense is work—it is a tensity—and the laughable character appears first of all—and perhaps only for a moment—as someone who has set this work aside. The result—"our first impulse," Bergson stresses—is an implicit solicitation to join in their play (L92/R149–150).

Two points remain. The first is that the relaxation of laughter and the behavior of the laughable are unsustainable. The prior analysis of laughter has not been discarded, it has only been simplified: laughter is the social disapprobation inflicted on someone who has wandered too far from the social life of common sense. The second part, closely bound to the first, is that laughter is human only insofar as it is vital. Or, better, it is vitality, the *élan vital*, that laughs through humanity. Laughter is not infallibly inspired by kindness, justice, or any other conventional normative consideration. To be an act with normative force, "it would have to proceed from an act of reflection" (L93/R150). However, Bergson has just finished demonstrating that the initial sympathy provoked by the laughable arrives prior to common sense and reflection. "In this sense, laughter cannot be absolutely just" (L93/R151). Thus Bergson concludes by returning to the *naturalness* of laughter, to its vitality. By laughing at and thereby humiliating its members, a society betters itself perhaps not normatively but certainly creatively; in Bergson's words, "nature has utilized evil with a view to good" (L93/R152). In order to develop, grow, expand and pursue teleodynamic ends, society must play at its most central forms of life, its most cher-

ished and constitutive beliefs – and this play will appear inevitably laughable to conservative common sense. In the concluding lines of *Laughter*—lines that already anticipate the metaphysics of *Creative Evolution*—Bergson reminds the reader that "[w]e have seen that the more society improves, the more plastic is the adaptability it obtains from its members; while the greater the tendency towards increasing stability below, the more does it force to the surface the disturbing elements inseparable from so vast a bulk; and thus laughter performs a useful function by emphasizing the form of their significant undulations" (L93–4/R152). In other words, the laughable brings the non-vital to light and allows it to be eliminated from the social body. The result—and this is the most important conclusion of Bergson's essay—is a decrease in the laughable but an *increase* in a society's ability to play with its constituent and normative forms—to experiment with new forms of life—without abandoning common sense. Laughter is the sign of a "slight revolt on the surface of social life" (L94/R152) that betokens the work of stabilizing and making less disturbing all of the organs that make up human society precisely by valorizing their different teleodynamisms.

11.2 Laughter and Life

Bergson's *Laughter* has led two strangely different lives: famous for being a detailed philosophical consideration of the laughable, and famous for being ignored or minimized as a part of Bergson's corpus.[22] Bergson never returns to the book, takes up its arguments or, if he does, he does so implicitly and without citation or mention of comedy and laughter. In fact, whether Bergson himself realized it or not, the discussion of comedy—especially in the closing pages of *Laughter*—adds an important dimension both to the metaphysics developed most fully in *Creative Evolution* and to the study of human norms and values in the much later *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. As Prusak has correctly argued, Bergson's discussion of the laughable is inextricable from his discussion of norms.[23] Furthermore, such norms need not be envisioned as fixed termini but can rather be conceptualized - in William Connolly's Nietzschean formulation of the dynamically vital processes that constitute the open cosmos of creative evolution - as *teleodynamic*.[24] Work such as

[22] The editors of *Bergson's Key Writings* provide a note to their Introduction explaining that "[t]he one work we have excluded from both the readings and our introductory discussion is *Laughter*, because, being primarily a popularist piece of work, its place must be peripheral in an analysis of his academic philosophy" (Ansell-Pearson and Mullarkey 2002, 376). Finally, Bergson's last publication, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* also makes no reference to *Laughter*.

[23] Prusak, op. cit., 384. Prusak is here following the earlier work of Helmuth Plessner.

[24] Connolly, 444. An interesting essay that uses Connolly's work to analyze the political role of the laughable in Aristotle is John Lombardini's (2013) "Civic Laughter: Aristotle and the Political Virtue of Humor." Lombardini writes that "the positive value of laughter lies in its ability to serve as a medium for critical engagement with friends, enemies, and strangers with whom we disagree" (216, also see the discussion on 219–222).

Prusak's, Connolly's, Lombardini's, and others enable a new appreciation of Bergson's full account of comedy and its role in his larger political project. Such an endeavor is beyond the scope of the present essay, but some traces of the laughable can be found in both *Creative Evolution* and *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* that might serve as seeds for future research.[25]

The avowed purpose of *Creative Evolution* is to explicate the *élan vital*, discovered in Chapter One, which shows that "[l]ife does not proceed by the association and addition of elements, but by dissociation and division" (EC89/CE90). The *élan vital* does not follow any kind of teleological development but rather develops according to the problems that impose themselves as obstacles to its unified expression. This is the inception of the three great classifications – plant, animal, and human – the last of which is marked by two different faculties: intelligence and instinct.[26] Bergson offers several definitions of these terms but the most comprehensive is as follows: "*instinct perfected is a faculty of using and even of constructing organized instruments; intelligence perfected is the faculty of making and using unorganized instruments*" (EC140/CE141). It is intuition— "instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious" (EC176/CE178) —that yields consciousness whose expansion thereby yields "endlessly created creation" (EC178/CE179). Accordingly, humanity, possessed of consciousness – which is, as the most expansive faculty for creation, "the motive principle of evolution" — "comes to occupy a privileged place in nature" (EC182/CE183). Humanity is the creation whose consciousness allows it, a created form, to invent ever new forms.[27] The chain of evolution, of division that pursues ever-different forms of wholeness in its teleodynamic process, is broken by the consciousness of man. "With man, consciousness breaks the chain. In man, and in man alone, it sets itself free" (EC264/CE264). Constantly threatened by the ease of "automatism," the free and fully conscious human being is the "term" and the "end" of evolution (EC265/CE265). In its everyday utilitarian activity the very freedom of instinct that constitutes consciousness – a blend of intellect and intuition – threatens to sweep humanity into a vacuous dreamworld. Laughter is the vitality of the intellect that returns it to the teleodynamic task of real creation.

Twenty-five years after *Creative Evolution*, Bergson published his last major work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (*Les deux sources de la morale et*

[25] Additional examples of such work can be found in Ford (2004, 2016a, b), Lefebvre (2008, 2013).

[26] "The *impetus of life* [l'*elan de vie*], of which we are speaking, consists in a need of creation" (Bergson EC251/CE252). Bergson's subsequent discussion elaborates the way that the impetus of life is forced to reckon with matter as an obstacle to its creativity. The discussion culminates in Bergson's declaration that "Everywhere but in man, consciousness has had to come to a stand; in man alone it has kept on its way. Man, then, continues the vital movement indefinitely, although he does not draw along with him all that life carries in itself" (EC266/CE266).

[27] Bergson is somewhat unclear as to whether non-human animals possess intelligence. He states that intelligence and instinct "never entirely separate from each other" (EC142/CE143) but that different organisms possess one or the other to a greater degree. They "*represent two divergent solutions, equally fitting, of one and the same problem*" (EC143/CE144).

de la religion).[28] A steady contrast is drawn throughout the book between what Bergson calls "open" and "closed" societies and between these societies and the *élan vital* elaborated in his earlier work.[29] In the final chapter of *The Two Sources,* Bergson states that the "closed society is that whose numbers hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defense, bound, in fact, to a perpetual readiness for battle. Such is human society fresh from the hands of nature" (TSMR266/DSMR283). The open society, on the other hand, is a society which Bergson dreams of embracing all of humanity. It is "a dream dreamt, now and again, by chosen souls, it embodies on every occasion something of itself in creations, each of which … conquers difficulties hitherto unconquerable" (TSMR267/DSMR284). The difference between these two types of societies – in their mutual connection to Bergson's metaphysics – is the particular type of "fabulation" that provides the basis for the belief system that holds them together.[30] And Bergson emphasizes that they must be *held*; durable human communities require a particular kind of grounding fiction in order to keep the intelligence from driving their members apart, in order to constitute a *common sense*. "The truth is that intelligence would counsel egoism first" (TSMR122/DSMR126). With the ascendancy of intelligence in humanity, "*religion is then a defensive reaction of nature against the dissolvent power of intelligence.*" (TSMR122/DSMR127). As humanity develops, this "defensive reaction" assumes the more familiar social forms of laws and the norms of various social groups.

However, as Bergson has persistently argued across his oeuvre, the *élan vital* is a creative force that reaches its apex in humanity: the creation that is itself a power of creation. But it does not create with the intelligence, whose function is to preserve the creation that every human community already is. Instead, it is instinct, the sympathy that binds all human beings to each other, by which individuals give their allegiance, give themselves "to a society comprising all of humanity" (TSMR212/DSMR225). Bergson turns to a kind of mysticism in *The Two Sources*, to "dynamic religion," one that prospects for ever-better and more inclusive forms of social life, of humanity. The vital tool for such prospecting is laughter. Its perpetual criticism of our tendencies to egoism, to self-absorption – in short, to vanity – remedies and valorizes the joint work of human communities. At the limit, vanity is abolished – precisely the condition for a society that comprises every human being. Human life was only ever a joke: the *élan vital* acting as a creative force that perpetually risks the complacent self-absorption of vanity in order for

[28] Bergson's fame was at its peak during the second decade of the twentieth century and he traveled widely, both to lecture on his philosophy and to further the interests of the French government during the First World War. He retired from the Collège de France in 1920 and then went into near-seclusion after 1925 due to crippling arthritis. The publication of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* was therefore a major philosophical event. For an account of the intellectual currents in which Bergson's final book appeared – one largely dominated by phenomenology and Heidegger – see Kleinberg 2005 and Worms 2009.

[29] Bergson's concepts would later be famously adopted by Karl Popper.

[30] The English translation of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* renders the French "*fabulation*" as the "myth-making function."

that same *élan vital* to perpetually goad its greatest achievement, humanity, toward the joyful and free creation of its own future.

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L. L. Moland (ed.), *All Too Human*, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91331-5