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## LAUGHTER AS A PATH INTO COMEDY

LAUGHTER CAN BE, and often is, interpreted in negative terms: concealed aggression, repressed bitterness, nervousness, anxiety, inhumanity or imperfection in general. Henri Bergson, for example, claims that "Rigidity, automatism, absentmindedness and unsociability are all inextricably entwined, and all serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in character."<sup>1</sup> Santayana, for another, views the comic arising out of "suggestions of evil . . . and the grotesque."<sup>2</sup> Interpretations which attribute a negative nature to laughter usually involve a further claim that laughter has a therapeutic value which militates against the imperfections it reveals. Though laughter is more than a merely psychological phenomenon, it shares with the therapeutic an essentially intermediary function. Calling laughter a *path* highlights this intermediacy and calls attention to its directional parameters. In order to take account of this dimension of laughter, thought must stand within these directional perspectives. Interpretations which follow laughter along negative paths uncover some of these perspectives. We shall discuss only two: the trivial and the tribal. An analysis of these paths of deterioration can help to suggest the sense in which laughter can be a path of creation leading into Comedy.

In his essay on *Laughter*, Henri Bergson develops a reference to the perspective of the trivial. Bergson claims that we laugh "every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing."<sup>3</sup> Laughter appears as an inversion of the essence of living things:

. . . the clowns came and went, collided, fell and jumped up again in uniformly accelerated rhythm, visibly intent upon effecting a crescendo. . . . Gradually one lost sight of the fact that they were men of flesh and blood like ourselves; one began to think of bundles of all sorts falling and knocking against each other . . . large rubber balls hurled against one another in every direction . . . sticks came crashing down for the last time onto the two heads as of enormous mallets falling on oaken beams. . . . At that instant appeared in all its vividness the suggestion

that the two artists had gradually driven into the imaginations of the spectators: "We are about to become. . . . We have now become solid wooden dummies".<sup>4</sup>

The use of clowns, the presence of the fool or the simpleton are testimony to the trivialization of what is human. According to Bergson, the clowns have sought to convince the audience that they have become "solid wooden dummies," mere things. These, and straw men like them, become the mere play-things of shrewder powers. They are often as ignorant and unselfconscious as the objects in the world which surrounds and too often conquers them. They are made to appear even less capable than the inanimate things they are created and driven to master. The troubles Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton have with shoes, umbrellas, etc., are better illustrations of this all too real, but deteriorated state. Satire and caricature tend toward the trivial as well, implicitly claiming that human beings and situations are ultimately inane. Caricature and satire can also be intensely tribal in their formulation. The caricatured appearances of anatomical aspects of famous persons are often plainly brutal. And in satire there is a pervasive revolutionary current, inimical to the elementary forces of social order which satire seeks to explode.

Freud reaches underneath social structure too. His views on comedy and laughter lead in tribal directions. Freudians tend to trace all human behavior to tribal or somatic sources. The techniques Freud describes as instrumental in eliciting laughter are especially tribal in nature as they involve "degradation of something exalted."<sup>5</sup> In his essay, *Jokes and the Comic*, Freud details a procedure for making things comic called "unmasking," whereby the dignity of individuals is degraded by "directing attention to the frailties which they share with all humanity, but in particular, the dependence of their mental functions on bodily needs, laying bare the monotonous physical automatism that lies behind the wealth and apparent freedom of psychical functions."<sup>6</sup>

The directional perspectives involved in the sort of laughter and/or comedy described by Bergson and Freud are not simply generated by man; they also effect a transformation of human nature. This transformation has negative qualities—negative ultimately in a moral sense, for these sorts of laughter establish as well as reflect a deteriorated human nature. The transformation, expressed generally, is of a developing dominance of non-human or opaque presences over those which are human: something mechanical or somatic, trivial or tribal infests the spiritually or psychically vital. Bergson's clowns confront that which is non-human, and by some magic, they, themselves, become non-human. Under ordinary circumstances this transformation

is incredible and would provoke laughter least of all. But a circus is no ordinary condition, and within its extraordinary spell we thrive on the miraculous. A key to the generation of laughter in this case and others like it must certainly be man's willingness to accept contradictions (miracles), and the artist's ability to create acceptable contradictions. In Bergson's circus this acceptance has been gradually but easily managed. Bergson's clowns work hard, but their work is largely quantitative—an example of the idea that anyone can be made to laugh if conditions are sufficiently extreme. Extremes come cheaply, but man may be left poorer in spirit than he would be had the fee been more dear. In instances like this one, there is a relinquishing of humanity in favor of being a thing, and this is hilarious. An audience evidences more than merely abstract acceptance in such laughter; there is also a collaboration in the renunciation of humanity issuing in the sort of communal frivolity so characteristic of circus audiences. But this is a brotherhood which, while pleasant and cheap, is a "human" brotherhood only obliquely—in fact, paradoxically.

In Freud's view, what might be called "human dignity" is the price paid for comedy:

Thus a uniform explanation is provided of the fact that a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure of his bodily function and too little on his mental ones, and it cannot be denied that in both cases our laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which we feel in relation to him.<sup>7</sup>

Freud seems to identify a person's "dignity" with his "mental functions;" thus, when comedy constitutes the person more essentially as somatic than psychic, the person, and human nature with him, are deteriorated. That the laughter of an audience signifies its sense of superiority implies that the audience actively accepts and contributes to this deterioration. Interpretations which regard laughter solely as an acceptance of, or contribution to the deterioration of human nature are fundamentally incomplete. While laughter can constitute a process of relinquishing humanity, it can also generate and develop directions toward a new and more creative humanity. Laughter can be creative. In fact, from the perspective of a deteriorated directedness, laughter can provide a basis for the regeneration of the process of becoming human.

In Herman Hesse's novel, *Steppenwolf*, Harry Haller is a middle-aged bourgeois within whom sensitive and intellectual capacities for personal greatness still stir. The reader confronts Harry at a point in his life where the contradictory fragments of his personality must either cancel themselves out

in a literal death or achieve a mysterious new unity in the projected reality of humor:

The lone wolves who know no place, these victims of unceasing pain to whom the urge for tragedy has been denied and who can never break through the starry space, who feel themselves summoned hither and thither and yet cannot survive in its atmosphere—for them is reserved, provided suffering has made their spirits tough and elastic enough, a way of reconciliation and an escape into humor. . . . Humor alone, the magnificent discovery of those who are cut short in their calling to highest endeavor, those who falling short of tragedy are yet as rich in gifts as in affliction, humor alone (perhaps the most inborn and brilliant achievement of the spirit) attains to the impossible and brings every aspect of human existence within the rays of its prism.<sup>8</sup>

In the throes of the contradiction of suicide and rebirth, Harry longs for the unity achieved through reduction: to be simple and single again, i.e., to be dead. Such a longing may reflect a comic consciousness, but in a deteriorated state. This consciousness laughs bitterly at life, recognizing its polarities and contradictions, but lacking the strength and precision needed to hold them transparently together reflexively. "Immortal laughter" is the expression of success in the attainment of these capacities. Harry lives in his reflections; instead, he must learn to live in their refractions. His soul is inhabited by a wolf and a man and it is in need of resolution. Hesse indicates, however, that resolution is not achieved by narrowing one's world and simplifying one's soul, but by absorbing "more and more of the world and at last taking all of it up into one's painfully expanded soul. . . ."<sup>9</sup> Man is defined not in terms of the One but in terms of the Many; humanization is a process of multiplication not one of division. Multiplication will involve suffering because it will involve contradiction; but it may also generate a humanity more efficacious than the one involving a singular self. A suicide is required, but it must be a metaphysical, a comical suicide. This suicide catapults man into the immortal realm of humor—a magic theatre.

Hesse's "immortal laughter" is a laughter defined in terms of its possibilities. It involves a renunciation of the conventional, singular self. But as immortal, it implicates an extraordinary direction of its own and establishes it as a new mode of becoming human. This is the direction into Comedy. "Immortal laughter" is a process through which man may give himself up only to recreate himself in terms of the comic directions which transmute laughter into a creative path. That Harry is only a man who must yet learn to laugh like the gods, is a contradiction in essential nature which Comedy

alone is capable of affirming. The difficulty in generating creative laughter is due to man's obedience to an existential law of non-contradiction. Harry struggled with a soul which gave itself as part human and part inhuman, finding himself unable to live this contradiction out in conventional terms. Like most men, Harry attempted to find resolution in simple ways: in trivial or tribal directions. Pursuing this negative path results in an ultimate reduction of man to his opaque possibilities. "Immortal laughter" is possible only on the condition that man treat what is opaque, inhuman, as if it were transparent. This does not mean that he humanize, interpret or explain it; rather that he welcome it, in its own terms, into a human realm and learn to abide there creatively with it. Both the trivial and tribal directions of laughter involve a contentiousness on man's part in which resolution must obey the law of non-contradiction. They also involve an implicit definition of humanity which is perpetually closing in the face of multiple, contradictory possibilities. To remain open to the affirmation of these possibilities in their own terms, and to identify human nature with this openness is the function of laughter and the instructiveness of its comic directions. In fact, man develops the openness intrinsic to this new humanity on the path from laughter toward Comedy as he creatively appropriates the manifold possibilities which this path discloses. Comedy is just this process of contradiction made viable.

How are we able to dwell creatively in this precarious unity of what is conventionally (socially, psychologically, politically) human with what is opaque without seeking refuge in either a self-consistent conventional posture or in the negativity of inhumanity. Comedy requires of man the same sort of precision in response that Aristotle required of the moral man. For both, a non-quantitative "mean" is essential. We survive because we must, and because we work at it. And the task is no trivial test of our ingenuity. It constitutes the development of our humanity which is ever a condition of welcoming and participating in what is alien to us, and resisting the urge to renounce that participation in a variety of immoral ways. As we engage in this process, we become open of necessity; otherwise, we die as men. Speaking formally, man is engendered out of creative and open participation in what at any point on his path is alien to him. But the form and content of creative participation are identical—as possibility, and man's substantive nature must be construed as one of becoming. However, so far as man is essentially becoming, he is always, in immediacy, on a *path* (intermediacy). This is his paradoxical sort of stability and singularity. Moreover, the path changes as it seeks to make possibility concrete and as it directs poorly or well: whether it sharpens

or deepens the horizons ahead as well as behind. To maintain an active directedness, open at all ends, is the function of laughter as a *path*. The horizons ahead, as possibilities unimaginable and dark, are those which can elicit man's creative response and define his nature as open. But the "ahead" always involves a "behind," that dimension which definitively articulates the direction of our path, defining man's nature in terms of possibilities fulfilled and past, and sometimes grounding a betrayal of humanity.

Laughter is a species of insanity, a letting go and opening up of any and all definitive formulations of human nature. It can take us the way of deterioration (immorality) and move us toward the sterility of the trivial or tribal. Or it can be creative and take us in the direction of Comedy where what we have let go rediscovers itself as perpetually new and developmentally real. We have interpreted these directions in moral terms because they constitute the possibilities involved in becoming human. The moral distinctions implied can be justified only from their transmutative effect upon the condition of becoming human through the path itself, i.e., from a continual reimmersion in this unique sort of human experiencing.

## NOTES

1. Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, Doubleday and Co. (New York, 1956), p. 110.
2. G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, Scribner's Sons (New York, 1896), p. 245.
3. Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, Doubleday and Co. (New York, 1956), p. 97.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.
5. Robert Corrigan, ed., *Comedy*, Chandler Publishing Co. (San Francisco, 1965), p. 257.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
8. Herman Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston (New York, 1963), pp. 54-55.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 64.