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# Laughing Doubles: The Duality of Humour

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## Abstract

This thesis examines humour as a theoretical problem, taking humour as both an object to be defined and as a mode of thinking in its own right. In the first chapter, I position humour between good sense and nonsense within a Deleuzian and psychoanalytic framework, culminating in a discussion of humour's relationship to perversion. In the second chapter, I further develop this connection to perversion through an analysis of Christian humour, exploring the incongruity between the transcendent heights and corporeal depths, with special attention paid to the comedic works of Erasmus and Rabelais. In the third chapter, I examine how humour functions without the transcendent principle operative in Christianity, considering humour as a problem of modernity. I present modern humour as the incongruity between vital matter and mechanical life through a reading of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* in dialogue with the theories of humour advanced by Henri Bergson and Wyndham Lewis. Across the various foci of this thesis, I develop a theory of humour as the expression of an incongruous duality that rejects resolution in favour of one term or a synthesis of the two into a higher principle

## Keywords

Humour, irony, incongruity, sense, nonsense, Gilles Deleuze, psychoanalysis, Christianity, Desiderius Erasmus, François Rabelais, modernity, Flann O'Brien, Henri Bergson, Wyndham Lewis

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	i
Acknowledgements .....	ii
Preface: <b>Thinking (with) Humour</b> .....	1
Chapter 1: <b>The Sense of Humour</b> .....	10
Chapter 2: <b>Perverse Laughter, Christian Humour</b> .....	35
Chapter 3: <b>The “Funniness” of Bicycles: Modernity, Mechanism, and Humour in <i>The Third Policeman</i></b> .....	60
Conclusion: <b>Punchline, or A Very Brief Conclusion</b> .....	82
Bibliography .....	83
Curriculum Vitae .....	86

## Preface: Thinking (with) Humour

### I. The Dual Problem of Humour

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said that “[a] serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes” (quoted in Dribble 87). This is not that work, and neither is it a text about Wittgenstein. Nonetheless, the quote from this sombre Austrian does point to the relationship between philosophy and humour that will be a central concern of my investigation. This relationship, this core problem, is—like much else in this text—double sided, dual, split. On the one hand, it is a question of the philosophy of humour: What theoretical or conceptual framework is adequate to addressing the nuances of the phenomenon of humour? How can we think the notoriously slippery problem of the humorous? What does it mean to be funny? On the other, the investigation is a question of humour in philosophy, or a humorous mode of thinking: What can humour tell us about philosophy, about thought itself? How can we make humour a part of our thinking? And what are the ramifications for a philosophy that incorporates the structure and practices of humour? The two sides of this question can be formulated as the difference between what it means to think or conceptualize humour as an object of study and what it means to think *with* humour, that is, to make humour a part of the philosophical process itself.

The double-sided nature of this inquiry corresponds to what I identify as the defining characteristic of humour: its duality. To put it succinctly, humour is the ability to hold two incongruous and seemingly contradictory positions at the same time without seeking either a resolution in favour of one term or a synthesis of the two under a higher principle. The

investigation to follow is both a demonstration of how behind every instance of the humorous we find an incongruous duality and an examination of how such a duality shapes our way of thinking. How can we think the doubleness of humour and what will a humorous mode of thought mean for philosophy?

## II. Thinking Humour

While many of the “major” or “canonical” thinkers (from Plato to the present) address humour at some point in their respective oeuvres, very few offer a sustained or in-depth treatment of this topic. They give us only fragments,<sup>1</sup> and what they do give us offers wildly varying interpretations of humour.<sup>2</sup> One of this project’s aims is thus, using and abusing these fragments, to give humour the philosophical and theoretical elaboration it deserves. In presenting my own analysis of humour, I hope to bring out some of what is latent in the various too-brief treatments of humour from the history of thought.

The point of departure for situating my work within the philosophical-theoretical field of humour studies is the three theories of humour outlined by D. H. Monroe in his “Theories of Humor” (1988).<sup>3</sup> Monroe argues that the various philosophical approaches to humour can all be classified into one of three categories: superiority, incongruity, or relief. To provide a better understanding of the range of thought on humour, I offer a brief outline of each of these theories below.

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<sup>1</sup> Two exceptions here are Bergson (*Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic*) and Freud (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*) who each devote a book-length work to the question of the humorous.

<sup>2</sup> From humour as loss of self-control and a reaction to ignorance in others (Plato), to an expression of the absurdity of faith (Kierkegaard), a resolution of tension between two competing concepts (Kant), or a release of unconscious energy (Freud), the explanations given to account for the humorous are as diverse as the thinkers who have approached this problem.

<sup>3</sup> Monroe also offers a more-extended treatment of humour and laughter in *The Argument of Laughter* (1951).

According to the superiority theory of humour, we laugh when we feel that we have some form of advantage over someone else. In this view humour is always directed at another (the target of our laughter) and it is necessarily aggressive:

Very often we laugh at people because they have some failing or defect, or because they find themselves at a disadvantage in some way or suffer some small misfortune. The miser, the glutton, the drunkard are all stock figures of comedy; so is the henpecked husband or the man who gets hit with a custard pie...According to this view, all humo[u]r is derisive (349-50).

Monro identifies Hobbes as the probable originator of this theory and claims Bergson (who argues we laugh at the human behaving like a machine) as another famous proponent of this view.

In incongruity theory, we laugh not at the degradation of another but at the (seeming) incompatibility of two competing ideas. In this approach, humour depends upon the “mingling of two ideas which are felt to be utterly disparate” (352). The intensity of the humorous effect produced is determined by “the degree of contrast between the two elements, and the completeness with which they are made to fuse” (352). Humour is thus the ability to bring together two incongruous notions. Kant and Schopenhauer (among others) both present formulations of this theory of humour.

While both superiority theory and incongruity theory focus on humour as a mental function or a property of thought—the recognition of fault in the other and the incompatibility of two notions, respectively—relief theory pays more attention to the bodily aspects of humour. Humour is a means of affording us “relief from the restraint of conforming to [social] requirements” and laughter is the release of energy pent up by social restraints (353). What we

consider humorous is that which lets us escape the social censor, allowing us to express indirectly what is usually forbidden. Monro identifies Freud (jokes as a release for unconscious energy) as a representative of this theory.

The current investigation takes an incongruity approach to humour, seeing the humorous as a phenomenon of fundamental doubleness. However, I believe it is important to make a further distinction within the broader category of incongruity. Under the umbrella of incongruity theory we can find a multitude of theories about what constitutes the two terms of the incongruity, but there is one principal division within incongruity theory that can separate these disparate theories into two distinct camps. One group of incongruity theorists claim that humour (and the pleasure of laughter it brings) arises out of the resolution of two *apparently* contradictory or incongruous positions. Kant, who sees humour as “the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing,” is one thinker who falls into this first category (62). In contrast, the other camp of incongruity theorists sees humour as a response to or the expression of a *real incongruity or contradiction* between two terms.

The conception of humour I develop in this work builds off this second viewpoint, seeing humour as a real and unresolvable doubleness. I identify the first viewpoint not with humour but with irony, the opposite of humour. While irony contains a moment of humour (of real contradiction) it is fundamentally opposed to the real duality of the humorous, reducing the two to the one in the name of a higher principle. I elaborate on the distinction between the ironic and the humorous in the chapters to follow and the contrast between these two terms will animate much of my discussion of humour, but for now this simple definition will suffice. I do not wish to enter into the elaborate rhetorical divisions of classical thinkers (defining a separate and distinct province for wit, humour, derision, the comic etc.) However, in addition to the above



distinction between irony and humour, I also make a distinction between humour—defined as “funniness” or what makes us laugh—and comedy, which is a literary or artistic form, distinct from though often containing humour (or humorous elements).

While my approach to humour is ostensibly positioned within the incongruity camp of humour theory, I believe that the fundamental doubleness this approach highlights is actually the basis for humour in the other two theories as well.<sup>4</sup> In Hobbes’s iteration of superiority theory, for example, humour arises out of a contrast between oneself and others or between oneself in the present and in the past (37). The derisive or cynical humour of superiority theory will, however, not be the focus of this investigation. But there is also connection between incongruity and relief theory, one that will be much more fruitful for the discussion to come.

Relief theory speaks to the fundamental duality or incongruity of the human: mind and body, ego and unconscious, reason and the (irrational) drives. Humour is a function of thought, a cognitive experience, but our reaction to the humorous is expressed through the body in laughter. To think humour in terms of the double is to think the human condition, and it is from the perspective of incongruity theory that we can best understand how humour negotiates the aporias or sticking points between the two terms that define the human. While the question of the human at the centre of relief theory will thus be one of our concerns, this question will be approached as part of a larger examination of the incongruous doubles that define all humour.

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to the three theories of humour outlined by Monro, there is also a “play theory” of humour outlined by Max Eastman. Eastman sees humour as a manifestation of the instinct for play that humans share with other animals: “we come into the world endowed with an instinctive tendency to laugh and have this feeling in response to pains presented playfully” (45). I see the laughter/humour associated with play as a response to the duality of how we approach games: we abide by the rules of the game and take them seriously while at the same time recognizing that the game and its rules are imaginary creations. For a further discussion of incongruity and play, see my discussion of Schopenhauer in Chapter 1.

### III. Thinking Humorously

I have so far presented a preliminary definition of humour, a basic shape to guide our investigation. But up to this point we have only approached humour from the outside. We must now ask what it means to think with humour, to bring humour into the process of thought itself.

Taking up the thread of relief theory and the duality between mind and body, we are immediately drawn to psychoanalysis. Beginning with Freud's book on jokes, psychoanalysis has had a long relationship to humour.<sup>5</sup> Humour is a means of bringing the non-representable, the libidinal, and the unconscious into language; it allows us to see the hidden psychic forces at work behind and beneath rational discourse, expressing the tension between conscious and unconscious. Psychoanalysis operates in a similar way, bringing the unconscious to language in the hopes of relieving the patient's symptoms through abreaction. Psychoanalysis is thus an essentially humorous form of thought.

But psychoanalysis is not the only form of thought that incorporates humour into its method. In *Comic Relief* (2009), John Morreall argues that there is a fundamental affinity between humour and philosophy. He identifies eight key characteristics that stand-up (what he calls a contemporary representative of humour) shares with philosophy: 1) They are conversational. 2) They reflect on everyday experiences, especially puzzling ones. 3) They ask questions about such experiences. 4) They are practically detached from those experiences. 5) Both seek out new perspectives and surprising thoughts. 6) They think critically. 7) They reject authority and tradition. 8) They think in counterfactuals, manipulating possibilities as easily as realities (Morreall 126-8). The numerous similarities between humour and philosophy suggest

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<sup>5</sup> Lacan also made frequent use of jokes and puns in his writing to demonstrate the structures of the unconscious, and Žižek, in his Lacanian approach to political theory, treats jokes as an expression of social or political symptoms.

the possibility of using humour as a form of (or at least part of) a philosophical-theoretical inquiry.

However, in his discussion Morreall compares humour to philosophy in the form of a Socratic dialogue. But the Socrato-Platonic image of philosophy, with its emphasis on reason and the purity of forms, seems anathema to the real duality and incongruity of humour. To really think with humour would demand a mode of thought that works by means of aporia instead of synthesis, difference instead of identity, and irrational forces instead of reason. In this way there is a fundamental affinity between humour and the major movements of twentieth-century continental thought. In their refusal of traditional definitions of notions like truth and reason, poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, and the like all exhibit “humorous tendencies” in their method. Perhaps humour, then, is a distinctly modern or contemporary structure of thought.

My particular philosophical approach draws heavily on Gilles Deleuze’s work in *The Logic of Sense* (1969). While Deleuze only explicitly explores humour in a few brief passages, his focus on the contrast between good sense and nonsense and his distinction between irony and humour, as well as the centrality of paradox to his thought, all come together to offer a framework within which to consider humour as a mode of thought.

To really think with humour thus means to use the methods of twentieth-century continental thought (incongruous and dual systems of thought) in conjunction with the insights of psychoanalysis (duality of the human, reason and unreason). Only from this perspective can we think humour humorously.

#### IV. The Laughs Keep Coming

Taking the dual problem of thinking about and with humour, this investigation will thus explore the various dualities that constitute the humorous and how these dualities can be employed in a system of thought.

In a first chapter, I explore humour in relation to the question of meaning, positioning humour through a Deleuzian framework as the duality of sense and nonsense that lies at the root of all language. I contrast the duality and difference of humour with the synthesizing movement of irony. I then explore this dichotomy in relation to the problem of the generation of sense, examining the relationship between humour and the unconscious, and end by linking humour to the discourse of perversion.

In a second chapter, I further develop the connection between humour and perversion through the intermediary term of Christianity. I consider humour as a perversion of the law and then explore the essentially perverse belief structure of Christianity in relation to Christian humour. I first examine how Christian humour uses the tension with the transcendent to energize the immanent, before I proceed to highlight how Christianity brings the power of two contrasting “beyonds”—the heights (irony, reason, the immaterial) and the depths (satire, senselessness, the corporeal)—to bear on the human world. This analysis proceeds through a consideration of two comedic works of Renaissance humanism, Erasmus’s *The Praise of Folly* (1511) and Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564), that epitomize the structure of Christian humour.

In a final chapter, I examine humour as a problem of modernity through a close reading of the novel *The Third Policeman* (1967) by Flann O’Brien, as a paradigmatic example of modern humour in comedy, in conjunction with an analysis of the competing theories of (modern) humour advanced by Henri Bergson and Wyndham Lewis. I consider how humour

changes after the collapse of the transcendent dimension at work in Christian humour, focusing on the humour of the incongruous duality between mechanical man and living matter that defines the ontology of modernity.

My investigation thus traces humour from its function in the creation of meaning, to humour as a (perverse) relation to belief and the law, and finally as a structure of being that defines modernity. This study seeks to determine not only how we can define humour but also how humour defines us—how it shapes our thinking, our beliefs, and even our very being.

# The Sense of Humour

## I. Making Sense of Humour

What does it mean to have a sense of humour? Already this question implies a close relationship between humour and sense: humour as something to be sensed, and sense as a property of humour. But is humour not better associated with the opposite of sense: the absurd, the illogical, and the nonsensical? Every joke, every witticism, and every instance of humour enacts the breakdown of good sense and the order of ordinary discourse. We think that words mean one thing, only to discover that they mean another (your mother?), or even two things at once; existing words are stretched or broken in the creation of a pun; the rules of logic and of linguistic expression are suspended in the fantasy space of the joke.

However, all of this is not to say that humour is without a reason and a set of rules all of its own. While humour violates the laws of logic and of good sense through its contortions and manipulations of language, it does so according to the rules of its own system, the system proper to humour, an “illogical” or “alogical logic.” This is to say that humour, as much as ordinary discourse, is bound by the rules of sense and follows a certain logic in its functioning. These rules do not correspond with, and are often contradictory to, the rules of ordinary discourse, but humour cannot for this reason be separated from the order of sense or meaning. As we shall see, the sense of humour has an intricate relationship with the logic of ordinary discourse and with the construction of sense as a whole. Our task, then, is to discover the nature of the process that governs the workings of humour, that is, to discover the “sense” of humour.

## II. Sense out of Nonsense

Before we can tackle the question of the sense of humour, however, we must first seek to understand the complex relationship between sense and nonsense. The fundamental argument of Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense* (1969) is that nonsense is not the opposite of sense but rather that which enacts the creation of sense. Nonsense is the "zero point of thought," the founding instance upon which all further sense and meaning will be grounded (Deleuze 241). Considered within the framework of ordinary discourse, such a claim must itself appear nonsensical; for how can nonsense which itself means nothing act as the foundation for all sense? There is, however, a reason which explains not only why it is possible but also why it is *necessary* for nonsense to act as the ground for all sense: the problem of infinite regress.

On the one hand, language can be envisaged as a system for describing external reality. In this case, the proposition denotes a state of affairs that exists in the world and words are grounded through their reference to things. ("This is a chair.") But on the other hand, language can be considered as a system of signs unto itself where words are defined only in terms of other words. (Chair: "a seat for one, usually with four legs.") While the first view of language allows for an ultimate ground of meaning in the world of things, language as a system unto itself encounters the problem of infinite regress (and circularity) where words can only be explained in terms of other words, which must in turn be explained by other words, and so on: the sense of a proposition is always another proposition.

Even if we accept the original point of reference to the external world, we still encounter the same problem, as words can only describe this reality if we already understand what these words mean and what they are saying about the world. Language as a system of description presupposes the foundation of sense which we sought to discover. Treating external reality as a

point of reference gives the illusion of founding sense by presupposing that sense is already there, but it cannot account for the creation of sense as such. As Deleuze puts it,

given a proposition which denotes a state of affairs, one may always take its sense as that which another proposition denotes. If we agree to think of a proposition as a name, it would then appear that every name which denotes an object may itself become the object of a new name which denotes its sense...For each one of its names, language must contain a name for the sense of this name (29).

In trying to find a starting point for sense, we fall again into this problem of infinitely deferred names, as sense is always somewhere else than in the word itself. If sense can be grounded neither through reference to the external world nor in the relation of words within language, where does sense ultimately come from? If meaning is always-already deferred, lost in the chain of infinite regress, how then do we enter into the order of language?

The solution to these problems is not to try to explain our way out of this paradoxical bind but rather to recognize that all language is grounded on such a paradox, to recognize that sense itself is constituted by paradox. What is needed is a (paradoxical) word that is beyond the order of ordinary discourse and meaning which give rise to the problem of infinite regress, a word that “says its own sense” and in doing so “enacts a *donation of sense*” (67; 69, original emphasis). Such a word could serve as a founding instance from which the regression of meaning can receive its first term. This paradoxical first term is nonsense, and in this way, nonsense is at the root of all sense.

As the other of sense, the nonsense word does not have a sense or meaning in itself. Instead this zero point of sense is split in two directions, doubly displaced with respect to itself, as both an excess and a lack; the “0” of nonsense is thus split into a “+” and a “-.” The “+” takes



the form of a floating signifier, a sign without referent or “empty square,” while the “-” becomes a floating signified, or an “occupant without place” (47). In the domain of nonsense, everything goes in both directions at once. Deleuze remarks on this logic of dual directionality when he writes that Lewis Carroll’s Alice only becomes “larger than she was” by also becoming “smaller than she is now” (1).

The movement of the floating signifier across words and things as it pursues the floated signified is the movement of sense, and this circulation of the displaced sense of the signifier through language is the basis of all meaning. All language functions through the circulation of signifier and signified, excess and lack, the two sides of nonsense. All sense depends upon this fundamental kernel of nonsense—nonsense as the truth of sense.

### **III. From Nonsense to the Humorous**

Such is the nature of the intrinsic relationship between sense and nonsense, but what role does humour, or more specifically the “sense of humour,” play in this relationship? If nonsense represents one pole of sense, sense’s founding moment and sense pushed to its limit, then the other pole of sense is the “good sense” of ordinary discourse where propositions have a clear meaning and follow the normal rules of logic. Humour, then, operates in the space between good sense and nonsense. It traverses the space in between these two extremes and puts them into communication with each other through a double operation. In the first instance, humour leads good sense back to its foundation in nonsense, bending the rules of good sense and revealing what lies beneath them. In the second instance, humour introduces nonsense into the domain of good sense to generate a surplus circulation of sense.

While in all cases the nonsense word is the origin of sense, there are, in fact, three different ways in which nonsense can act as the locus of a system of meaning. The first is through a contraction of “the symbolic elements of one proposition, or of many propositions which follow one another” (42). (“Your royal highness becomes ‘y’reince.’”) The contractive nonsense word enacts a “synthesis of succession” that connects the propositions of one series and distributes sense among them. The second is a circulating word that performs a synthesis of coordination between two series, causing them to converge around this element. (The Snark and the Phlizz are examples.) The circulating word acts as a point of contact between the two series and a centre around which they can organize their sense. The final and most important form of nonsense is the disjunctive or portmanteau word. This word enacts a “ramification” or branching of series that causes the two series to diverge, making them distinct and separate. Whereas the circulating word unites the series around a centre, the portmanteau word distances the series from each other.

Deleuze uses Lewis Carroll’s “frumious” as a paradigmatic example of the portmanteau nonsense word. The word “frumious” represents both “fuming-and-furious” and “furious-and-fuming” at the same time. In each of these two alternatives one aspect of “frumious” dominates over the other, but the word “frumious” itself expresses both of these possibilities equally. It also expresses the distance between these two possibilities, as well as their incompatibility, without deciding in the favour of either (44). The two series of “frumious” are defined through a mutual determination of difference where each affirms its distance from the other. The portmanteau gives sense to two series, but this always takes the form of two incompatible moments of sense. While the circulating word demonstrates the coexistence of two senses, the portmanteau seeks to

show that the two senses it creates are incompatible, but nonetheless it affirms both at once.

Where does humour fit into all of this?

As Deleuze defines it, humour is a “dialectical principle” (9). Humour’s special relationship to nonsense is through the third function of the nonsense word, the divergent function of the portmanteau word. If the portmanteau word is what causes the ramification and real divergence of series, humour is the mechanism of differential relation by which two really divergent series are related to each other and through which the fundamental doubleness of language is recovered. Through humour, the two series “affirm their distance” as really divergent and incompatible but without ever deciding in favour of one term (or series) over the other (172). Humour prevents this doubleness of the portmanteau-nonsense from falling into the single good meaning of ordinary discourse or, alternatively, it recovers this doubleness buried within discourse. Humour thus expresses an “alogical incompatibility” between series (177).

While such an operation would violate the laws of good sense or ordinary discourse, where all propositions must be either true or false, humour acts at the level of (non)sense and as such is not bound by such rules. Humour is the form of speech and of thought wherein two conflicting senses can be affirmed or acknowledged without contradiction. It is the principle of language by which one is able to assert that A and B are incompatible, while at the same time affirming<sup>6</sup> both A and B without contradiction. This is the paradox at the heart of every joke, every instance of humour.

There is a tradition of philosophers who recognize this fundamental doubleness of humour, the proponents of what Monro calls the incongruity theory of laughter (352). The

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<sup>6</sup> By affirming I mean accepting the sense of a word, proposition, thought etc. as it appears, without seeking to judge this sense in relation to an exterior criterion. This will become clearer in the section to follow where I discuss the distinction between humour (affirming the two without contradiction) and irony (judging against the standard of the one).

essence of this theory is that laughter arises from a conflict between two perceptions, ideas etc. To better understand what is meant by the doubleness of humour, we must turn to the formulation of incongruity theory presented by Arthur Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer argues that humour arises from “the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (Vol.1 59.) In such a situation we come to realize that our conceptual framework is somehow inadequate to representing the infinite fluidity and variation of the real world. Laughter always expresses the victory of reality over reason, or the failure of reason to account for the real world. While our conceptual framework may be inadequate to represent the world our perception itself is infallible: “In every suddenly appearing conflict between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right; for it is not subject to error at all, requires no confirmation from without, but answers for itself” (Vol.1 60). The pleasure that we derive from humour is a result of this victory of perception over reason. Humour thus represents a momentary reprieve from the demands of reason and thought, allowing for the enjoyment of pure perception.

However, Schopenhauer’s incongruity theory has its own internal moment of inconsistency or doubleness. On the one hand, humour is the expression of the real incongruity between the abstract and the sensuous, between reason and the material world. On the other hand, the pleasure of humour arises from the resolution of this incongruity in favour of the real. From one perspective Schopenhauer presents humour as a real doubleness whereas from the other he presents it as the resolution of this doubleness in favour of perception.<sup>7</sup> However,

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<sup>7</sup> This moment of inconsistency is also an expression in miniature of the debate between those proponents of the incongruity theory who argue that humour is the result of the *resolution* of incongruity (e.g. Kant) and those who assert that humour is a response to the (irresolvable) incongruity as such (e.g. Morreall).

following the method of humour and nonsense, we should not try to explain away this inconsistency but rather trace out the nature of its points of incompatibility.

One of the examples Schopenhauer uses to demonstrate his theory is a story about prison guards playing a game of cards with one of their prisoners. When the guards discover that the prisoner has been cheating, they kick him out and thus free him from the prison: “They let themselves be led by the general conception, ‘Bad companions are turned out,’ and forget that he is also a prisoner, i.e., one whom they ought to hold fast” (Vol.2 97). As Schopenhauer explains it, we laugh at this joke because the rules of the game do not apply to the real world situation of a prison. Two different things have been subsumed under one abstract idea. The reason of the game has failed to account for the lived reality. We laugh also because of our momentary triumph over reason. But is this really how the joke works?

The stakes of Schopenhauer’s story are illuminating. Is there not a certain likeness between Schopenhauer’s example and the terms of his theory of humour? The law of the prison is the law of reason. Everything has its specific place and its specific function, and all must conform to the rules of the law. The law of the game, in contrast, is the law of the sensuous. The game, of course, has its own rules to be followed but it also represents a temporary escape from the division and ordering of the prison. There are no guards or prisoners in a game of cards; there are only players. The moment of humour arises when these two series, that of the prison (guards, prisoners, “hold fast”) and that of the game (cards, players, “turned out”), arrive at a moment of incompatibility. The prisoner is both prisoner and player, two incompatible terms, without being any less of one on the account of the other. On a naïve reading of Schopenhauer’s theory, the prisoner’s escape represents the victory of perception over reason, but there is more to be said about this story.

While Schopenhauer presents his theory in terms of the abstract and the sensuous, this theory could equally be recast as a division within language between the domain of good sense and nonsense. The law of good sense is the law of reason and the prison, whereas nonsense confirms to the rules of the game, not without rules but different in nature to the rules of reason. The fundamental incompatibility at the heart of the humour in Schopenhauer's story would then be between the level of ordinary discourse and the level of nonsense. In such a case humour affirms the incompatibility of these two levels, as their laws contradict, but nevertheless asserts that both are fundamental to language as a whole. Humour may express other dualities, but it is always also a testament to the duality of language itself.

With this new framework in mind, the prisoner's escape should be interpreted as humour's affirmation of nonsense against good sense. Humour recognizes the power of both levels but privileges nonsense as the source of all sense and the realm of doubleness. And what significance does the prisoner's cheating hold? While the guards and the prisoner both recognize that the rules of the game are different from the rules of the prison, they have different understandings of the nature of how the game should define its difference from the prison. To cheat means to introduce more nonsense than what the guards will tolerate. There is a view of humour that sees nonsense or incongruity as an aberration from reason rather than a phenomenon in itself. The guards will play the game of humour, mixing nonsense with good sense, but they always take care never to stray too far from the rules of reason. When the prisoner plays the game, he does so in such a way as to exacerbate the gap in between the rule of the game and the rules of the prison. He takes the logic of the game to its fullest extent and so introduces a measure of nonsense beyond what can be taken up and re-suppressed by the prison. He asserts the rights of nonsense as its own discourse alongside good sense.

#### **IV. Irony *contra* Humour**

While humour affirms both the coexistence and incompatibility of good sense with nonsense and introduces nonsense into the discourse of good sense, there is another principle of language that performs the opposite operation, establishing identity and contradiction in the place of alogical incompatibility and reducing sense to ordinary discourse. It is the danger that Schopenhauer's story of the prisoner alludes to, the danger of the vantage point of reason that sees humour as only an aberration from good sense. This other principle is irony.

Humour demonstrates that two series are incompatible or incongruous and really divergent; irony, in contrast, attempts to demonstrate that the divergence of the two series is only an appearance. It seeks to show that what appears to be distinct, divergent, and separate is really only one and the same. Humour affirms the divergence of the two, whereas irony causes the two to converge into one, or, if convergence is not possible, to create a contradiction:  $A = A$  or  $A \neq \sim A$ .

In the ironic speech act, there is a contradiction between what is said and what is meant, between the proposition and its sense. There are always two propositions, two senses, and two series involved. For the first series, the words of the proposition are spoken but the sense is suppressed, while for the second series the proposition is suppressed but the sense is expressed. This double operation is how irony expresses something other than what is said. However, the two series are not equal. The uttered proposition (first series) is judged against the sense of the second, unspoken proposition (second series). Either the first proposition is deemed adequate to denoting the sense of the second, in which case an identity is established between the first proposition and the second, or the first proposition is deemed inadequate of denoting the second, in which case a contradiction is established. The value of the first level (the uttered proposition)

will always be determined by the second, to be redeemed or condemned by the test of adequate identity. The sense without proposition of the second series is the ultimate truth of the ironic statement.

This definition of irony is counter-intuitive, as in common usage the ironic refers to ambiguity, inconsistency, or multiple levels of meaning. While irony thus appears to be a structure rooted in duality and incompatibility, it only brings out (apparent) inconsistency in the name of a higher or more fully realized principle. Socrates ironizes his interlocutors to discover a higher principle; Marxist irony finds inconsistencies and contradictions in the current state of affairs that they might be resolved in the name of a future society of the proletariat. Even the deconstructive vision of irony advanced by Paul de Man, where irony is the problem of the “impossibility of understanding” and where the question of meaning is always open, never finished, still adheres to this structure (167). Deconstruction denies presence or meaning in the present, constantly deferring closure to the always displaced “to come.” While the moment “to come” never arrives, it still takes the place of an ultimate law or principle that gives shape to deconstructive irony. Humour, in contrast, has no dream of future redemption or unity; it is the recognition of the real duality or incongruity in the now.

Pirandello remarks on this fundamental difference between irony and humour, writing that irony distances itself from the official position of what is said but still only presents one viewpoint; this hidden view is the reality behind the appearance of the proposition. Humour, on the other hand, is created through the “feeling of the opposite” a real tension between two opposing views held simultaneously that cannot be decided in favour of one or the other (Pirandello 4).



Irony, like humour, is defined not only as a principle of language; it is also a structure of thought and a particular relation to the world. Deleuze identifies three moments, or three forms, of irony, each building on the last toward the creation of ordinary discourse and good sense. The first of these moments is Socratic irony, which seeks “to transcend sensible particularity toward the Idea; and to establish laws of language corresponding to the model” (Deleuze 137-8). This is the foundation of a model for judging everything. In Socratic irony every object and sense is judged against every other to create a hierarchy of classification and systematization of being. Through a succession of ironic contradictions and identities everything is given its place.

While Socratic irony organizes the world of existing things, classical irony goes beyond the existing to the possible, demarcating the limit of what can allowably appear within the bounds of reason and representation. Classical irony, then, “determines not only the whole reality, but also the whole of the possible” (138). It marks the boundaries of what can be tolerated within a system of representation based on the absolute either/or split between identity and contradiction.

Romantic irony supplements this arrangement of things and possibilities, with the position of an ultimate judge taken up by the person, or the “I.” The “I” is self-identical and from this position of absolute identity it can judge everything else in terms of its variance from this identity. The identity of the “I” with itself and its correspondence to the world become the ultimate measure of all identity and contradiction, making the (self-identical) person the ultimate standard of understanding. The coherence of the “I” corresponds to the coherence of the domain of the sensible under the rule of the Idea, and together they guarantee that we extract reliable judgments from our thoughts. Both the person and the world thus adhere to the order of

representation and identity. Through this triple movement of irony, the language of good sense and reason is constructed from the chaos and real divergence of nonsense and humour.

If humour is the means by which language is returned to the doubleness of nonsense and the power of sense returned to ordinary discourse, irony is the means by which sense is reduced to the ordinary language of the proposition. While humour relies on nonsense and paradox, good sense and common sense are the implements of irony. Irony and humour are the two intermediary figures between nonsense and the order of good sense; humour moves always towards nonsense and irony always towards the good sense of the proposition.

#### ***V. Pas-de-sens commun, peu de bon sens***

The fact that, as a rule, when we speak our words mean one thing only, that our sentences follow the rules of logic and good sense, testifies to the victory of irony. We are always already in the domain of the ironic. The question of our inquiry thus becomes: how does humour counteract the movement of irony? That is, how can we recover the doubleness of humour from the principle of identity and oneness asserted by irony?

We have seen how humour maintains the doubleness of nonsense, but while we have claimed that humour can lead good sense back to nonsense we have not yet undertaken an explanation of how such a process is possible. While it is evident from the fact that jokes and witticisms exist that humour can challenge good sense and irony, the nature of this confrontation has yet to be determined.

The foundation of the order of irony is common sense, the “faculty of identification that brings diversity in general to bear upon the form of the Same” (77-78). Common sense at once expresses: (1) the subjective unity of the self under the order of the ‘I’; this ‘I’ subsumes the

judgments of the other faculties through a principle of identity, affirming the coherence of the self and the ability for that coherent self to make judgments; (2) the objective unity of the world of objects as an order of representation within which each can be measured against the other; every object has its place in the rational order of nature; (3) the correlation of the subjective unity with the objective unity, confirming the capacity for the ‘I’ to make good judgments about the world of representation; the coherence of the ‘I’ corresponds to the rationality of the world of objects allowing for the construction of an edifice of rational knowledge about the world of things.

In these ways, common sense is the culmination of the three moments of irony, the result of a rational arrangement of things (Socratic), the established boundaries of a system of representation (Classical), and the correspondence between the “I” and the world of things (Romantic). Common sense is this principle of identity and unity ensuring that our knowledge of the world is “good.” We can know about the world because it and our mind conform to the principles of common sense.

While common sense serves as the foundation upon which we can make rational judgments about the world (and acquire knowledge), it is the province of the faculty of good sense to undertake the judgment of each particular instance and submit it to the law of common sense. Good sense is that which “affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense or direction (*sens*)” (1). From every sensation, every encounter, and every word, good sense extracts that which confirms and conforms to the rules of common sense. When good sense seeks to uncover the meaning of a word or proposition, it considers the word in relation to the faculty of common sense, treating only what is rational and one-sided in that word. In ordinary, good sense discourse, the encounter with language is mediated by the laws of the faculty of common

sense and only that which conforms may pass. In this way, good sense enacts a movement “from the most to the least differentiated, from the singular to the regular” (75). It delimits and homogenizes the chaos of nonsense, reducing difference and divergence to the one meaning that conforms the law of common sense. Together good sense and common sense ensure the functioning of ordinary discourse, the triumph of irony.

However, while the culmination of the movement of irony is the elimination of nonsense from language, irony is not able to accomplish this movement without its own engagement with a certain kind of nonsense. In *Seminar V* (1958) Lacan discusses two forms of nonsense that are fundamental to the workings of discourse: *peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens*.<sup>8</sup>

According to Lacan, desire begins as a pure physical need. However, because of the primacy of the signifier and signifying chain in the unconscious, we never experience our desire in this pure form (Lacan 48). Desire is always already disfigured and disjointed by both the signifier and the desire of the Other, which form the basis of the symbolic. Because of this primary disfigurement of desire, the message of discourse can never exactly express our desire, leading to a fundamental disconnect between signifier and the original desire which appears as a *peu de sens* (i.e., a bit of sense, or not much sense). This *peu de sens* signals that our words have failed to communicate their message, that the sense of our desire has not been adequately expressed. The *peu de sens* is a metonymical leveling out of language, the failure of the signifier so that any sign can stand in for anything.

The failure of meaning in *peu de sens* thus poses a challenge to the Other, threatening the foundations of the signifying chain:

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<sup>8</sup> Lacan uses the terms *peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens* instead of nonsense (*non-sens*) to demonstrate that, while these two operations do not conform to the traditional rules of logic, they still have an important relationship to sense.

It is this *peu de sens* as such that is taken up, and through which something happens that reduces to its dimension this message in so far as it is at the same time success, failure, but a necessary form for any formulation of demand, and which comes to interrogate the other about this *peu de sens* that is here, and the dimension of the essential Other (69).

This *peu de sens* of meaning, the failure of discourse, must be supplemented by the *pas-de-sens* to close the gap in the signifying chain. The *pas-de-sens*, with the sanction of the Other, brings together two unlike elements through the function of metaphor, forming a new meaning to resolve the ambiguity opened up by the *peu de sens*. The *pas-de-sens* must be “taken up, authenticated” by the Other to close this signifying gap and to ensure the functioning of discourse (71). The lack of sense in *peu de sens* is thus supplemented by an arbitrary addition of a supplement of sense, and it is this supplement of added (non)sense that ensures the functioning of discourse. It is only through the conjunction of these two fundamental moments of nonsense (the failure of sense) that the sense of ordinary discourse can exist at all.

These two figures and the fundamental figures of language that they represent, that is, metaphor and metonymy, correspond to common sense and to good sense respectively. The assertion of an identity (and the leap of meaning) between two terms is the principle by which common sense is able to assert the unity of the “I” and the correspondence between the rational mind and the rational world. The “I” is metaphorically united with the other faculties and with the world of representation. This assertion (of) new identities is what ensures that good sense is able to extract a “good” meaning from each word and from the sentence as a whole. Good sense is able to find the correct meaning because common sense puts it there, ensuring that good sense will always find what it seeks. *Pas-de-sens* ensures the functioning of *peu de sens* in the same way that common sense does for good sense.

However, while these figures ensure the functioning of ordinary discourse they also suggest an open point from which this discourse can be undermined through humour. Lacan develops the concepts of *peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens* through a reading of Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). He relates them to two forms of jokes: the metonymical joke and the metaphorical joke.

Lacan's example of the metonymical joke, borrowed from Freud, relies on a double meaning of the word "calf" in German where it can refer equally to a false idol (golden calf) or serve as an insult (the German equivalent of "ass" or "donkey"):

"You see my friend that the worship of the golden calf is not over."

"Oh!," replies Heinrich Heine, having looked at the personage, "for a calf he seems to me to be a little old" (51).

The source of the metonymical joke is when one word (calf) splits into two series of meaning. There is thus a levelling out of meaning in the *peu de sens*, where the word loses its one good meaning and instead ambivalently suggests two incompatible meanings.

The example of the metaphorical joke that Lacan gives is Heine's joke about the relative (of one of his characters) who treated him "famillionairely," that is, familiarly and like a millionaire (54). While the metonymical joke represents the divergence of a sentence into two series as a result of an ambiguous word, the metaphorical joke expresses the convergence or coming together of two series in the message of discourse. The simultaneous arrival of "He treated me like a millionaire" and "He treated me familiarly" leads to a collision of the two in the word "famillionairely."

Normally, the *peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens* work together to ensure the functioning of ordinary discourse. They do this silently, suppressed beneath the order of ordinary discourse.

However, as Lacan's examples show, these functions cannot be entirely repressed, and they sometimes emerge as a rupture in discourse. The appearance of *peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens* in normal discourse represents the failure of irony. The gaps and spaces in sense which this order sought to suppress emerge from within language. Insofar as *peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens* function unconsciously or automatically (below the level of discourse), they work in the favour of irony to ensure that language creates "good" meaning. However, in bringing these figures to the surface one is able to challenge this ironic order of language, leading language back to its roots in nonsense.

Lacan's analysis already indicates that the means for achieving this reintroduction of *peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens* into discourse is the joke. The metaphorical joke, which condenses two colliding messages into one word, challenges the principle of identity upon which common sense is founded. Humour shows the failure of irony to neatly collapse the two meanings into one, the joke serving as an image of real doubleness and incompatibility. The unexpected collision of two meanings interrupts the smooth functioning of metaphor, a failure of identity. It reveals that what irony presents as one and the same is really double, divergent, and incongruous. Similarly, the metonymical joke undermines the ability for good sense to extract one coherent meaning from each word. It plays on the ambiguities and doubleness inherent to language to disrupt the unity and coherence of the one "good" interpretation. If a word can mean more than one thing, the coherence of the sentence is disrupted and the doubleness of nonsense restored to language.

*Peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens* are thus the turning points between irony and humour. On the one hand, they function in service of irony to create a system of coherent and rational language, the language of good sense and common sense. On the other hand, however, this operation can only be achieved through the nonsense involved in these operations. It is the same

gaps in sense upon which irony depends that humour exploits to lead language back to its origin in nonsense.

## **VI. Humour and the Unconscious**

While we have so far considered nonsense and humour only as they relate to language and ordinary discourse, Lacan's treatment of the *peu de sens* and *pas-de-sens* suggests a further point of inquiry in our investigation of the sense of humour, namely, the relationship between humour and the unconscious. For Lacan there is a fundamental connection between humour and (unconscious) desire, as well as the emergence of language from the unconscious:

The object of the joke is to re- evoke for us this dimension through which desire if it does not recapture, at least indicates everything that is lost on the way along this path, namely all it has left behind at the level of the metonymical chain on the one hand, in terms of waste, and on the other hand whatever is not fully realized on the level of the metaphor (68).

Humour points to the power of the unconscious that has been lost in language, the nonsense of the unconscious that has been repressed. While humour is a mechanism for taking language to its limit in nonsense, it also puts language in touch with what is beyond that limit, pushing language beyond language. In this way it brings all manner of other psychic forces— desire, drives, the power of the unconscious—to bear on language. Humour not only has an essential relationship to nonsense but to the unconscious processes that precede the emergence of language at the zero point of sense. The structure of humour thus has a fundamental connection to the workings and structure of the unconscious: *L'inconscient est structuré comme une blague*.



This is the fundamental insight of Freud's *Jokes* book. Freud differentiates between innocent jokes, which merely express the joy of free play in language (the forms of nonsense discussed earlier) and tendentious jokes, which express some form of unconscious content. (Freud 110). Every joke of the tendentious variety expresses an aggressive sexual impulse that has been repressed (113). Because of this repression, the unconscious content cannot appear directly to the conscious mind; it must be disguised. This is the reason for the various manipulations of language involved in humour. Jokes rely on the same mechanisms as dreams for relating unconscious content to the conscious mind: condensation, displacement, and indirect representation. The manipulations of language in humour are the wound of unconscious desire inscribed into the language of discourse. This unconscious content is its own kind of nonsense, or "pre-sense," which humour introduces into discourse as an interruption of good sense and a return to doubleness.

We may be tempted to read the unconscious content behind the joke as its "true meaning," but such a reading overlooks the complexities of the joke. Taking Freud's "famillionairely" as an example, we can see that the joke expresses two ideas at once ("familiarily" and "like a millionaire"). The aggressive unconscious content is certainly there, but so is the socially acceptable message of the rational mind. The source of humour is the incompatibility between these two impulses which are nevertheless both expressed: "He treated me familiarly *and* like a millionaire." In the joke both sides speak at once, but neither to the exclusion of the other. This incompatibility without contradiction expresses the fundamental doubleness of the human, the coexistence of the reasoning ego and the desiring unconscious. Humour interrupts the discourse of good sense through an intrusion of unconscious nonsense,

leading language back to its source in the unconscious, and in the same movement it rationalizes and sensibilizes the impulses of the unconscious by transforming them into language.

The importance of sexuality for psychoanalysis stems from the former's position as the locus of the human: it expresses the duality of the human as both a creature of instinct (appetitive and reproductive need) and a creature of language (discourse, images, desire separated from need). The sexual is thus an expression of the fundamental duality or inconsistency of the human. And can the same not be said of humour? The rational mind and the unconscious mind, thought and sexuality, good sense and nonsense—these dualities of the human are what humour causes to appear. The doubleness of humour applies not only within the field of language; it is an expression of the doubleness at the heart of the human. This is the most profound expression of the sense of humour.

## **VII. The Laughing Pervert**

There is, however, another “sense” of humour that we have yet to explore, namely, humour as perversion. As Deleuze writes,<sup>9</sup> thought first emerges through a desexualization of libidinal energy, a transference of energy from the surface (zones) of the body to the metaphysical surface of thought (238). Thought is libido separated from its sexual origins. When humour brings the power of the unconscious to bear upon discourse, the act of transforming desire into language necessarily entails a degree of desexualization. However, through the introduction of unconscious energy into language humour also enacts a resexualization of language, leading language back to its origin in the libido. This process is most evident in the

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<sup>9</sup> *The Logic of Sense* has a generally amicable relationship with psychoanalysis, and Deleuze's text is concerned with many of the same problems and questions that occupy psychoanalysis. Deleuze's treatment of explicitly psychoanalytic content (i.e. perversion) is thus a natural supplement to my earlier Freudian and Lacanian analysis of the psychic process involved in humour.

sexual tendentious joke, where language takes sexuality as its content and its form through the contortions of the joke. Language addresses sexuality (content) and is also marked by the inscription of the unsymbolizable nonsense of sexuality (form of the joke). It is through the dual directionality of this operation, desexualization of libido and resexualization of thought, that humour achieves its effect of doubleness.

While this process of re- and desexualization is essential to the workings of humour, it is also for Deleuze the characteristic operation of the pervert.

Perverse conduct is...inseparable from a movement of the metaphysical surface which, instead of repressing sexuality, uses desexualized energy in order to invest a sexual element as such and to *fix* it with unbearable attention (245).

In other words, the pervert, like the humourist, straddles the limit point between sexuality and thought. The thought which emerges out of sexuality is returned to its sexual origins, but in a way that ensures it still bears the traces of its origins in thought. Thought is marked by its origin in the sexual and the resexualized energy bears the trace of its past desexualization. This is the doubleness particular to the pervert.

However, the pervert as defined by Deleuze is not defined merely a sexual deviant. The pervert is the one who makes his symptom into a system. He is “someone who introduces desire into an entirely different system and makes it play, within this system, the role of an internal limit, a virtual center or zero point” (304). He extracts that in the symptom which is more than the symptom, raising it to its highest power. He sees the symptom as the expression of a possible world, of a possible way of being, and follows this idea to its ultimate conclusion. This is how (as Deleuze has explained) Sade and Masoch are able to construct their literary works on the

basis of their unusual sexual proclivities. They transform their sexual symptoms into new systems of desire, new and unique systems of thinking.

The system of “normal” desire is bound up with the Oedipal system and the phallus. It is a system in which all desire is judged against the standard of phallic desire. The pervert’s disavowal is, from the Oedipal perspective, a symptom of the refusal to accept the reality of castration. However, the disavowal of the phallic lack is equally a refusal of the Oedipal system of desire that is centred around the (castrated) phallus, and thus a decentring of the Oedipal system. The pervert’s chosen fetish object or image comes to function as the centre of a new system of desire, one different in kind and in structure from the Oedipal system. Within the system of perversion every term, every object, and every image take on a new meaning, defined no longer in their relation to the Oedipal phallus but instead through their relation to the new image.

In this way, perversion undermines the official discourse and system of the neurotic, suggesting alternative meanings and interpretations for each element of that system and so challenging its ultimate coherence. This process is the “perversion” of the Oedipal discourse. This is why Deleuze defines the pervert’s disavowal as a form of “esoteric knowledge” (243): The pervert sees the possibility of a way of being beyond the restrictions of Oedipus.

And does humour not perform just such a perverse operation in the field of language? Within the discourse of good sense, words have one true or correct meaning. The humourist brings out more, treating (non)sense qua symptom as the basis for a new systematicity. Humour takes the words of good sense to their ultimate limit in nonsense. It decentres language through the introduction of nonsense and makes nonsense a centre, introducing new elements of sense, new systems and structures to explore.

If the father is the archetypal figure of Oedipal neurosis, then the figure of perversion is undoubtedly the uncle. The proverbial perverted uncle who shows a little too much fondness for telling dirty jokes is perverted as much because of his obsession with sexuality as because of his obsession with language—and his obsession with the conjunction of the two in the joke. The father speaks the official discourse of the master: declaring, dividing, arranging. His will defines the rules of good sense. The uncle, removed from the direct line of filiation, does not seek to supplant the father as master, as is the case with the Oedipal son. Instead the uncle constructs his own alternative discourse, one that exists alongside that of the master discourse, introducing duplicity into the discourse of the father and enacting his own system based on the language of doubleness and nonsense. Humour is both the perversion of sense and the sense of the perverse discourse.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

As we have seen, humour acts in the space between good sense and nonsense, leading language back to its origin in nonsense and introducing nonsense into ordinary discourse. Humour achieves this through an affirmation of the doubleness inherent to nonsense, and by affirming the doubleness of discourse as both good sense and nonsense. Irony seeks to move from nonsense to good sense, but humour can counteract this movement by exploiting the leaps in sense upon which irony depends. Humour has a special relationship to the unconscious, introducing the power of the unconscious into language and leading language back to the unconscious. In this way, humour is also an expression of the doubleness that defines the human.

To conclude this chapter, I suggested that another way of understanding the psychoanalytic duality of the human is through the structure of perversion. In the next chapter, I

will develop this relationship between perversion and humour further, with a more in-depth analysis of the perverse-humorous attitude in relation to belief and the law.

# Perverse Laughter, Christian Humour

## I. Perverting Belief

In the preceding chapter, I established humour as an expression of the incongruous duality of good sense and nonsense (as well as the fundamental duality of the human itself). I then connected this incongruous duality to perversion *qua* psychic structure, linking the perverse duality of de/resexualization, perversion of good sense into nonsense, and the pervert's fascination with language and sexuality to the doubleness of humour. In this chapter, I plan to further develop the connection between humour and perversion through what may seem like an unlikely waypoint: Christianity. Ostensibly, Christianity is the religion of transcendence, Truth, and the Word—the ultimate expression of good sense. What, then, can a religion like this have to do with humour and perversion? Despite appearances, however, there is a profound connection between perversion, Christian faith, and humour.

While today we tend to think of perversion as it is defined psychoanalytically (or more broadly sexually), the original meaning of the term is religious. The pervert is the one who turns away from or distorts the true religious doctrine (“perversion”).<sup>10</sup> The pervert is a religious heretic, one who denies official doctrine, yet her rebellion against the convert and the law has its own particular form. The pervert is not the non-believer who refuses the law, rebelling and withdrawing to the fringes (the criminal or outcast, the eternally rebellious child). Neither is she the rebel who seeks to replace the existing law with a new order of her own (the new king, the

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<sup>10</sup>The pertinent portion from the OED definition of perversion is as follows: “...the action of turning aside from what is true or right; the diversion of something from its original and proper course, state, or meaning; corruption, distortion; (*Theol.*) change from Christian belief or truthfulness to non-Christian belief or falsity (opposed to *conversion*...)]apostasy.”

son who want to be a father himself). Rather the pervert operates within and alongside the dimensions of the existing law. The pervert claims to be truer than the true believer, to have grasped the law better than even the true convert. The pervert brings to light all that is latent, hidden within the structures of the existing law, exacerbating gaps and exploiting the space of the interstices.

While it is important to recognize the theological origins of the term “perversion,” the historical attitudes to religious perversion, with its heretical deviance, are inseparable from the attitude to sexual perversion and the former have informed the early psychological and psychoanalytic theory.<sup>11</sup> Perversion is thus not merely a clinical disorder. The same system of organization is at play in both. The sexual pervert thus abides by the same system of thought, the same guiding principles, as the religious. A thorough understanding of perversion in its clinical or psychoanalytic sense can thus help us understand perversion’s religious manifestation and vice versa; and both of these forms will offer new insight into the (perverse) structure of humour. As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, perverse “belief beyond belief” (the law beyond the law) is a fundamental component of Christian faith. The Christian believer’s means of expressing this faith is humour: laughter brings out the contradictions in the convert’s law and shows what is latent in its structure.

I begin my investigation by exploring further points of connection between humour and perversion through an examination of Deleuze’s three images of the philosopher in *Logic of Sense*. Building off this groundwork I then connect humour, perversion, and Christianity through Žizek’s notion of the “perverse core of Christianity” (3) and Kierkegaard’s discussion of irony

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<sup>11</sup> In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Kraft-Ebbing describes perverts as those who (due to social or personal causes) deviate from the “true” or correct expression of sexuality, essentially condemning them as sexual heretics (8). There are thus many points of connection between the historical treatment of religious and sexual perverts.



and humour in relation to the categories of the ethical and the religious. Finally, I analyze Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* (1511) and Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564) as two works that epitomize the structure of perverse Christian laughter I outline in this chapter. While Christianity seems to aim toward a transcendent beyond, I argue that, in reality, Christian humour uses the energies of the transcendent heights and the material depths to energize or reinvigorate the immanent world of the human.

## **II. The Perverse Image of Thought**

Before we can explore the perverse aspects of Christianity and their connection to humour we must first seek to determine the structure of perverse thought in general. To undertake this analysis we will return to Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, particularly his discussion of the three images of the philosopher.

In the chapter "Eighteenth Series of the Three Images of the Philosopher," Deleuze outlines three systems of thought, three notions of what it means to think or to practice philosophy, each with its own psychoanalytic disorder or symptom—what Deleuze calls "properly philosophical diseases" (127)—and each with its own approach to the question of (non)sense and/in language. As the perverse image of thought is defined largely in terms of the other two images (and the relation between them), I outline all three of these images below.

The first is the cliché image of the philosopher: the philosopher of the heights, the Platonic image of philosophy. This philosopher turns away from the material world in search of a "high principle," an abstract form or a figure pure reason (127). This is the philosopher who seeks a pure and lofty truth, free from the muddling of the material and empirical world. The movement proper to this image of thought is an ascent toward the high principle, a conversion;

its philosophical disease is manic depression (128). The good object in the heights is a source of great joy (mania), yet insofar as it is withdrawn into the distance of the heights the philosopher can only experience the pain of its loss as a form of depression (215). The philosopher of the heights enacts a movement of desexualization, drawing libido away from its bodily origins to pursue an abstract principle of reason. The ascent of this philosopher corresponds to the movement of irony discussed in the first chapter; it is the process of discovering the one good sense that will resolve contradiction and ensure the domination of law or reason, the rule of the one abstract principle over the multitude of material difference.

The second image of the philosopher is the pre-Socratic and Nietzschean notion of the philosopher as a thinker of the depths. This philosopher refuses the otherworldly ascent and high principles of the Platonist, engaging instead in a search for the true substance of being within the depths of the earth, a space of pure materiality. This second image of thought is dedicated to finding a bodily and material point where thought (language) and the body coincide, “where the anecdote of life and the aphorism of thought amount to one and the same thing” (128). The movement of the philosopher of depths is a descent into the earth and a subversion of the Platonic heights and ideals. The philosophical disease proper to the philosophy of depths is schizophrenia, which manifests in the substance of partial objects and the unformed (earthly) mass of the body without organs (129). The thinker of the depths enacts a (re)sexualization, returning thought to its libidinal origins in the erogeneity of the body; it is a movement toward the corporeal against the abstraction and immateriality of the heights. The comic principle of the depths is satire, a laughter that emphasizes the physiological and especially the scatological. Satire deflates the high principles of the heights through an interruption of pure unsymbolizable matter.

The third image of philosophy is the philosophy of the surface and the Event whose representatives are the Stoics (and Lewis Carroll). This third image represents a refusal of both the height of Plato and the depth of the pre-Socratics in favour of a lateral or horizontal organization of thought. Everything becomes a question of the surface “between things and propositions themselves,” between the passions of bodies and the incorporeal events (132). This is the philosophy of perversion. The pervert partakes of both heights and depths but does not belong entirely to either; she is a liminal figure, carefully poised on the boundary between the two. The pervert expresses the duality of good sense (irony) and sexual nonsense (satire), desexualization and resexualization; perversion is defined by the tension and incongruity between these two approaches.

The pervert’s philosophy is oriented toward understanding the event, or what Deleuze will elsewhere call the virtual. The event is that in the thing which is beyond the thing, the hidden structure or potentiality that exists beyond the actual (149). Just as the sexual pervert disavows the lack (of the phallus) to construct a system around a substitute fetish object, the philosophical pervert disavows, or sees beyond, the actual to the dual-directional event. Humour, as we have discussed, is the comic mode of perversion and the surface. But while we have already identified a number of points of connection between humour and perversion, Deleuze’s discussion of humour in conjunction with the three images of philosophy (the only point in *The Logic of Sense* where he discusses humour at any length) offers yet another way of understanding the connection between humour and perversion, one that will help us better understand the relations of our triad humour-perversion-Christianity. Since Deleuze’s treatment of humour here will inform much of our discussion in this chapter it is worth quoting at length:

But every time we will be asked about signifieds such as “what is Beauty, Justice, Man?” we will respond by designating a body, by indicating an object which can be imitated or even consumed, and by delivering, if necessary, a blow of the staff...Diogenes the Cynic answers Plato’s definition of man as a biped and featherless animal by bringing forth a plucked fowl...And, in order to persuade the spectator that it is not a question of a simple “example,” and that Plato’s problem was poorly posed, we are going to imitate what is designated, we are going to eat what is mimicked, we will shatter what is shown. The important thing is to do it quickly: to find quickly something to designate, to eat, or to break, which would replace the signification (the Idea) that you have been invited to look for. All the faster and better since there is no resemblance (nor should there be one) between what one points out and what one has been asked (135).

Deleuze calls this operation of presenting objects in response to abstract questions—and then immediately destroying or doing away with those objects—humour, a process that undermines both the ascent toward the ideal or perfect principle and the descent into pure matter. Humour begins as a means of undermining the convert’s climb toward abstract truth, that is, the ironic climb to good sense. The humorist or pervert shows an object to draw thought back to the world of things, to demonstrate that sense and reason cannot be divorced from the world of materiality. The lack of resemblance between the question and the object is here essential, as it is this lack which prevents the object from being reincorporated into the framework of the abstract ideal. (“The fish is an example of X, which remains the higher principle.”) The object must instead act as a material interruption, a kernel of inassimilable matter that interrupts the logic of pure abstraction. In this way, the humorist enacts a “descent” into the depth of bodies against the Platonic ascent (135).

Yet this descent in itself is not enough to constitute the operation of humour. For while humour and perversion are opposed to the ascent of the heights, they stand equally opposed to the depths of bodies and pure substances. The pure descent is the movement of subversion or satire, challenging the heights through obscenities and insult words (246). What separates humour from subversion is that while humour turns to the bodily substance of the depths to undermine the ironic ascent of the convert it still returns to the surface, an ascent in miniature, not to the sky but to the surface where depth and height meet. This liminal space, suspended between height and depth is the defining characteristic of humour.

When significations hurl us into pure denotations [i.e. the depths], which replace and negate them, we are faced with the absurd as that which is without signification. ...By the same movement with which language falls from the heights and then plunges below, we must be led back to the surface where there is no longer anything to denote or even to signify, but where pure sense is produced...Once again, what matters here is to act quickly, what matters is speed (135-6).

We must return to the surface to achieve the moment of humour, the tension between the heights and depths. Humour moves between the two vertical poles, the desexualized ideal and the purely (re)sexual(ized) body, good sense and non/pre-sense, at great speed (Deleuze emphasizes this twice), forcing them to coexist and creating a perverse humorous discourse out of this incongruous coexistence. While humour acts as a refutation of conversion's ascent, offering a denoted thing against abstract signification, the convert's question is still what begins the movement of humour. We must move upward before we can move down. But humour then immediately subverts this initial upward movement by offering a thing, a piece of matter that both moves against and disrupts the movement of conversion. Humour is not content with this

material depth: It must rise from the depths and up to the surface, pulled upward by the convert's will to climb, and it is here where the tension of the height and the depth produces humour. The two sides of the surface can be complementary—the abstraction of the heights is reinvigorated through the life of the material in the depth; the depth is tamed and ordered by the reason of the heights to give birth to sense—but humour is equally about the contradiction between these two poles, subverting the law through matter but also reinvigorating it through the energy of the depths and giving birth to a new perverse order. It is a perpetually unstable discourse, introducing new moments of (non)sense and creation on the surface and bringing the event to bear on what is, reinvigorating the surface through the tension between height and depth.

### **III. Humour and the Perverse Core of Christianity**

With this new understanding of the “geographical” and “geometrical” dimensions of perversion and humour (i.e. their relation to heights and depths, their overall shape), we can now turn to the question of Christianity (92, 93). While we have established that perversion is a structure or attitude of belief, it is still unclear why there must be a fundamental connection between this structure and the Christian. Surely, Christianity has had its share of perverts, those who challenge church doctrine and push it to its limits. But isn't this doctrine itself still the fundamental law of Truth and good sense? Christianity appears to have more in common with the Platonic image of philosophy, the ironic ascent to the Truth, than it does with perversion.

However, in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003), Slavoj Žižek argues that Christianity itself is fundamentally perverse. He claims that the Christian religion is based on a disavowal of God's lack. In coming to the world as Jesus, a man, God revealed his own fundamental fallibility. The Christian God is, in essence, imperfect and, on some level, the Christian believer

knows this, but she continues to act as if God is still God, as if He hadn't been undermined through his becoming man. For Žižek, the necessary consequence of the “perverse core of Christianity” is atheism, the acceptance that the big Other (i.e. God) does not exist and the creation of an immanent community founded on atheistic principles:

The point of this book is that, at the very core of Christianity, there is another dimension. When Christ dies, what dies with him is the secret hope discernible in “Father, why hast thou forsaken me?”: the hope that there is a father who has abandoned me. The “Holy Spirit” is the community deprived of its support in the big Other. The point of Christianity as the religion of atheism is not the vulgar humanist one that the becoming-man-of-God reveals that man is the secret of God (Feuerbach et al.); rather, it attacks the religious hard core that survives even in humanism, even up to Stalinism, with its belief in History as the “big Other” that decides on the “objective meaning” of our deeds (Žižek 171).

However, even as Žižek speaks of the need for Christianity to fade away into atheism, his description of this process belies the unique value of a perverse Christian belief. A blind belief in the omnipotence of the big Other is harmful as it prevents us from taking responsibility for our own actions and obscures the truth of our own lack, the lack which constitutes subjectivity as such. The transition to atheism and immanence is thus beneficial as it increases personal autonomy and allows for the recognition of the fundamental lack at the heart of the human. But for all this, Žižek's immanent community is not a society founded on pure rationality or scientific materialism. While the community he envisions relinquishes the name of the Father and His absolute infallibility, this community comes into being under the auspices of the Holy Spirit. Even if we give up the absolute authority of the Other, such a community still needs some

supplemental kernel to unite the people, some higher aim to ground their existence. Earlier in his book, Žižek describes the importance of this supplemental kernel: “It is crucial... to assert some kind of primordial excess or too-muchness of life itself: human life never coincides with itself; to be fully alive means to be larger than life, and a morbid denial of life is not a denial of life itself, but, rather, the denial of this excess” (98). An atheistic community without a goal or purpose beyond basic survival or hedonism can thus be just as harmful as a blind faith in the big Other.

The solution to this double bind is to believe as a pervert. The pervert knows, in a sense, that God is not all powerful, but she disavows this knowledge. From a certain perspective, she continues to act as if God were omnipotent and whole, as if the Other were not lacking; outwardly she shows her faith and acts like any other believer. But because of what she knows the pervert will not pursue the same transcendental vision of the lofty heights so dear to the convert. Rather the pervert uses the structure of belief, the name of the Father whose lack she has disavowed for her own purpose. She invokes the power of the Other, the vision of an idealized world, but she subverts this vision by putting it into contact with material reality, reinvigorating it with the vital energy of libido; she then uses this materiality to breath new life into the stale idealism of the heights. The effect of this process is a new kind of belief, not a faith in the world beyond, but a faith that the disavowed vision of the Father—when mixed with the life force of the material—can redeem the community. The Holy Spirit (the Holy Uncle?) is the force that energizes the community, giving it its sense through the tension between the transcendent and the immanent, the ironic beyond and the material (satirical/humorous) now.

Simon Critchley argues that Christian humour is fundamentally otherworldly, that it contrasts the ideal world of heaven with the fallen now to create laughter (11). He claims that



Christian humour thus turns us away from the real world to an abstract paradise. But contrary to popular opinion, Christianity is not—at least in its perverse aspect—the ascetic religion of otherworldliness and self-renunciation. At times it climbs in the name of transcendence, but this transcendence is never complete. Christian irony is always-already deflated and undermined by the lack in the father. The power (energy) of the transcendent falls back into the immanent, giving new life to the world through its tension with the material. Christian belief (and humour) is defined by the tension between the transcendent and the immanent, the immaterial heights and the material (sexual) world of man.

#### **IV. Humour *contra* Irony in a Christian Mode**

Kierkegaard says that the man of faith is as a contradiction because he looks “exactly like others” while inwardly he is absolutely different (“Unscientific” 230). He carries the power of the transcendent within him, but he acts within the realm (and in the name) of the immanent. This incongruity between absolute faith and a firm commitment to the immanent is why Kierkegaard identifies religious belief with humour. In his schema of the three spheres of existence humour is the bridge between the ethical and the religious (231). For Kierkegaard, the subject begins in the aesthetic (the realm of the sensible, the finite, and the particular) but after a passage through irony, the subject arrives in the ethical (the domain of reason, the law, and the general rule; the general good). Through the movement of irony, the subject encounters the contradiction between the particulars of the sensible and the demand of the law, of good sense. The ironic transition is an “infinite absolute negativity,” a movement away from the content of multifarious existence towards the true moral law (“Irony” 35). The ethical is thus the culmination of good sense and common sense discussed in the first chapter. However, even

though the law of the ethical presents itself as absolute (and absolutely good), the truth of the religious can never be achieved through the reason of good sense alone. Kierkegaard insists on the importance of the ethical good while at the same time declaring the need to go beyond this absolute law, to believe—against all reason—in the truth of religion that cannot be justified. The absurdity of this incongruity is the foundation of faith: “the absurd is precisely the object of faith and only that can be believed” (“Unscientific” 212). While the ironic ascent is necessary to move beyond simple hedonistic satisfaction, the ethical alone cannot achieve the force of Christian faith. Only humour and the power it carries, the tension between the ethical and religious, reason and the absurd can express the absurdity of faith. While the religious is beyond the aesthetic it still manages to integrate the latter in a way that the ethical (with its turning away) cannot, recognizing the contradiction with the finite material but still living fully within the material world of sensation.

In contrast to Kierkegaard’s view of humour which captures the absurd or incongruous duality of Christian belief, in *Sensus Communis, An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor* Shaftesbury presents a view of Christian humour (one of many) that tries to return Christian belief to the ironic ascent of the convert. Shaftesbury recognizes the incongruity involved in humour, what he calls an “amiable Collision” (8), and he claims that opening up thought to free debate and humour is a way of challenging the stuffiness and rigidity of established thinking. At this point he is still somewhat in the domain of the humorous, that is, the double and the incongruous. But Shaftesbury only creates his opening in the hope that a higher principle of reason or truth will appear: “For without Wit and Humour, *Reason* can hardly have its proof, or be distinguished” (22). In his attempt to unite Christianity with reason and Truth (ignoring the lack of the father), Shaftesbury reduces humour to irony, presenting the duality of humour as a

mere moment within the process of irony, a dualism that will be synthesized into a higher truth. Shaftesbury and all those like him profess Christian belief but nevertheless fail to acknowledge the perverse structure of this belief, the duality and absurdity, that founds their faith. Christian faith cannot be explained or rationalized without compromising its fundamental structure.

Through the religious return to the materiality of the aesthetic in Kierkegaard and the looming shadow of the community without spirit in Žižek, both thinkers demonstrate how a dive into the material (and in conjunction with the transcendent) can energize the surface. However, neither of these thinkers makes use of the full libidinal and corporeal potential of the depths to create an energizing tension through its contradiction with the heights. Žižek and Kierkegaard ignore (or downplay) the sexual power of the pervert in their descriptions of Christianity, but this does not have to be the case. There are other examples of Christian humour that recognize the full power of the depths and the energies it contains.

Where should we look to find examples of this form of Christian humour? Who are history's great laughing perverts? With its appreciation for both the heights of abstraction and the earthy materiality of the body/things—not to mention the love of hearty laughter—Renaissance humanism, and particularly the works of Rabelais and Erasmus, is the strongest manifestation of Christianity's perverse humour. In the sections that follow, I will thus examine how perverse Christian humour functions in practice through an analysis of Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* and Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

## V. Erasmus's Perverse Foolosophy

In his "Prefatory Letter" to *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus emphasizes the importance of foolishness and play for achieving true understanding. Defending the levity of his text, he writes that

it is quite unfair to allow students no amusement at all, especially if trifles lead to serious ideas and if a frivolous subject is handled in such a way that a reader who has any sense can profit by it a good deal more than he can from the forbidding and showy subjects undertaken by some writers...nothing is more delightful than to treat trifles in such a way that you do not seem to be trifling at all (Erasmus 3-4).

Erasmus suggests that there is a certain kind of understanding or knowledge that always evades serious and literal-minded discourse, an understanding that can only be achieved through folly and humour. This is the esoteric knowledge or double belief of the pervert. Folly is not a mere amusement or diversion, justified only through the pleasure it provides; it is rather, paradoxically, a source of a certain kind of wisdom.

Speaking now in the voice of Folly herself, Erasmus elaborates this notion through his coined concept of "foolosophy." Folly first uses the term "*foolosophers*" pejoratively to refer to her pretentious "loyal followers" who are "*most foolish* in fact but try to pass themselves off as wisemen and deep philosophers" (13, original emphasis). Here the term "fool" acts as a deflation and debasement of the pretense of those who think they have seized a higher truth. It is a subversion that undermines a false ascent, bringing the foolosophers back to earth, but Folly's insult in this passage still preserves the category of the true philosopher as convert. While there are many who falsely claim to possess the wisdom of the heights, there is still the possibility of

those who do possess true wisdom. The *foolosopher* does not have access to the heights but the *philosopher* does. The paradigm of a knowledge of the heights is, in this moment, undisturbed.

However, just before this section Folly challenges the simple notion of truth (through ascent to the ideal) by problematizing the category of wisdom. Folly says that she will play the sophist with you for a while—not the kind that nowadays crams boys’ heads full of troublesome trifles and passes on the tradition of disputing with more than womanish persistence; rather, I shall follow in the footsteps of those ancient rhetoricians who avoided the title “Sophi” (or “wisemen”) and chose instead to be called “sophists” (10). As Miller notes in a footnote to this passage, Folly here reverses the roles of Sophi and sophist. She aligns wisdom with the casuistry and trickery of the sophist while treating the Sophi as a fraud or impostor (10). This passage, along with the earlier section, suggests that wisdom is not such a simple category as it may appear. The category of philosophy is actually subject to a quaternary division, rent from within into a pair of dyads: philo/foolo + sophy/sophistry. The subcategory of philo + sophy is simple enough to understand. This is the place of the earnest seeker of truth. But what of the foolosopher? Folly applies this term to those who appear wise yet are foolish in reality, but there is also a sense in which Erasmus’s text is its own kind of foolosophy, a foolish approach to wisdom which nevertheless yields a special form of knowledge. In the next category we would find the philo-sophist, the lover of faulty reasoning. At face value, this would appear to be a purely negative figure, the one who manipulates reason for her own gain. But Folly’s foolosophical approach (i.e. seeking the wisdom in folly) also often depends on just such a form of faulty reasoning to show, negatively or through juxtaposition, a hidden truth or meaning. Or perhaps this operation belongs to the fourth category: foolosophistry. Through folly, the faulty reasoning of the sophist is negated and put to use in the

service of the surface. In this schema of philo/foolo + sophy/sophistry, we can see the outline of Erasmus's system of perverse humour. Philosophy (employed here in the traditional Platonic sense) demands an ascent towards abstract truth, but philo-sophistry deflates these pretensions by embracing faulty reasoning and derision (the language of the earth, drawing thought back to the body). At the same time the folly of foolosophy returns us to the earth, putting us in contact with the regenerative ground. Foolo-sophistry then reverses the sophistical reasoning of the depths, to enact another form of ascent to the surface, bringing this rejuvenated knowledge to bear on the world of human affairs.

The opening section of *The Praise of Folly* thus presents, in miniature, the movement of Erasmus's text. While the text as a whole appears, at first glance, to follow a different structural logic, I claim that *Praise* is, in essence, a perverse work that adheres to a structure of ascents and descents with the aim of redeeming the here and now.

The text is classically divided into three sections and three attitudes to foolishness: 1) folly is a source of worldly joy that creates the illusions which make life tolerable; 2) folly causes state and church leaders to neglect their responsibility to the people; 3) folly lets the Christian transcend worldly wisdom in the name of religious joy (Miller xxi).

In the first section Folly begins by opposing the happy ignorance of the foolish to the melancholy of the supposedly wise and learned. Children, the elderly, and the less intelligent are happier because they have a greater share of folly (20). Folly thus appears as an illusion, a refusal to confront the sobering facts of life, but this illusion is also the only source of joy in human life, and indeed this illusion is necessary to sustain life. Comparing life and the illusions of folly to a play, Folly says:

If someone should try to strip away the costumes and makeup from the actors performing a play on the stage and to display them to the spectators in their own natural appearance, wouldn't he ruin the whole play?...This deception, this disguise, is the very thing that holds the attention of the spectators. Now the whole life of mortal men, what is it but a sort of play, in which various persons make their entrances in various costumes, and each one plays his own part until the director gives him his cue to leave the stage....True, all these images are unreal, but this play cannot be performed in any other way (43-4).

In the first movement of *Praise*, folly is thus presented as a series of lies or illusions that act against our ascent toward the truth but that are nonetheless necessary to make life bearable. In this way folly is a purely negative force, deflating the truth and bringing it down to earth.

Yet almost immediately Folly moves away from her description of folly as illusion to identify it as natural and truth-giving. She states that folly is a part of man's nature and in adhering to folly we are only following this nature (50). This is a form of truth, as "Nature hates disguises" (52). Folly does not blind us to the reality of the world; rather it is learning and wisdom that blind us, while folly shows our true nature and a direct knowledge of how things are. The fools "alone speak the plain, unvarnished truth" (55). From the perspective of the heights, of the convert, folly could only appear as a deflation of truth and wisdom, but having descended to the depths we can now see how folly contains within it a generative force of material life. There is a piece of foolishness in every sexual act, Folly tells us, crediting with a role in the generation of the human race (18-19). But while Folly here gets its power from the bodily and the depths, it is not content to remain at that level and must rise again to the surface. Folly becomes that which nourishes the surface and the soul of the ascent: "What good would it do to stuff the belly with so many hors d'oeuvres, so many tidbits and delicacies, unless the eyes

and ears too, indeed unless the whole mind be replenished with laughter, jokes, and witticisms?” (30) Folly must go beyond the merely corporeal to nourish both the surface and the heights, but without losing contact with the depths. This is the conjunction of corporeal and ideal, the re- and desexualized, as well as the sliding between them. The first section of *Praise*, like the opening passage discussed above, thus demonstrates the perverse movement of Christianity in miniature. However, the later sections seem to complicate this reading.

The second section of *Praise* is devoted to a critique of important figures, both political and religious. This section considers folly mostly in its negative aspect. Whether through their self-important attitudes or their overemphasis on the letter of the law at the expense of its spirit, the people considered in this section all suffer and cause those they are meant to serve to suffer as well: leaders neglect their people (85), theologians forget faith and become bogged down in subtle reasoning (92), and priests neglect their duties to their congregations (111). Here folly, in its more traditional sense, is a form of false wisdom that stops men from fulfilling their duties. In this section we see the critique and deflation of the lofty ideals that drove those in power but there is no counter movement that would lead back to the surface. For such a re-ascent we have to wait until the third section, where Folly positions Christian foolishness against the wisdom of the world.

Folly begins this section by contrasting the foolishness of mankind with the wisdom of God, for next to the omniscience of the Creator all men know nothing. Folly is thus a sign of our inability to know God in all His infinite complexity: “all mankind is foolish, the title ‘wise’ applies to God alone” (120). Or to put it differently: God is the only moment of good sense in a world of nonsense. However, in the following passage Folly goes on to describe Christianity itself as folly and the foolish as God’s chosen ones. God reveals his truth to the poor and foolish,



and He likens his followers to sheep, one of the most foolish animals (127). To the man of the world, Christianity can only appear as foolishness with its focus on the otherworldly. “Paul testifies very clearly on this point when he says ‘What is foolish to the world, God has chosen,’ and when he says God was pleased to save the world through folly because it could not be saved through wisdom” (129). Folly thus offers a vantage point beyond the world from which to judge the world. However, at this moment Erasmus veers dangerously close to a paradigm of ascent. Contrary to the movement of the first section, his Folly here speaks of the need for the Christian to ignore earthly and material things in favour of the invisible and the spiritual (136). *The Praise of Folly* seems to end as an endorsement of irony and philosophy of the heights, finishing with God in heaven and a world beyond, against the perverse humoristic movement of the first section.

However, Erasmus is able to save the work from drifting away into the heights at the last moment. Just when the work seems to demand a final closing statement, affirming the kingdom of heaven against earth, Folly wavers. She refuses to provide the final statement that would close off the work and establish a clear message of otherworldly transcendence:

I see that you are waiting for an epilogue, but you are crazy if you think I still have in mind what I have said, after pouring forth such a torrent of jumbled words. The old saying was ‘*I hate a drinking-companion with a memory.*’ Updated, it is ‘*I hate a listener with a memory.*’ Therefore, farewell, clap your hands, live well, drink your fill, most illustrious initiates of folly (138, original emphasis).

Folly does not, in the end, affirm the transcendence of heaven against the material world. The wine, the clapping of hands, and the reference to a feast pull the text back to the surface, a last minute deflation and a resexualization of the ideal. The text cannot directly deny the power of

God, as this would mean moving into a subversive or rebellious paradigm; rather the text masquerades as conversionary, extolling the virtues of God, while at the same time pointing indirectly to God's lack. If God and Christianity are folly, are they not subject to the same limitations of the other forms of folly? Is folly not in itself inherently deflationary and degrading? By associating God with folly, Erasmus is able to affirm Christian's desire for a beyond, while at the same time exposing God's lack and undermining his omnipotence: God is lacking because he is foolish. The absence of an epilogue compels the reader to look back over the text and draw her own conclusions. She will then consider God's folly next to the joyous folly of materiality and the dangerous folly of those in power. The text thus leads the reader to consider how the folly of religion and the folly of depth can come together to energize the human world.

## **VI. Rabelais: From the Grotesque to the Perverse**

Like Erasmus, Rabelais emphasizes the importance of humour in achieving true wisdom. Understanding laughter is essential to understanding the world because "laughter is natural to man" (Rabelais 1). In the prologue to *Gargantua*, Rabelais writes that the reader must "interpret in a higher sense what, by chance, you might think was said in a lighthearted way" (3). There is thus a serious intention behind this seemingly trifling text, and the reader must understand the nature of Rabelais's humour in order to grasp his writing.

While an inattentive or superficial reading of *The Praise of Folly* might suggest that the text follows a conversionary, rather than perverse, paradigm, our initial reading of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* suggests a text at the other extreme of the cosmological-geographical spectrum of thought. At first glance the text seems concerned entirely with the bodily and the earthly at the

expense of heights. Pantagruel and his companions spend most of their time feasting (41), hurling obscenities (85-6), or discussing flatulence (130). In such a reading, Rabelais's text would be subversive rather than perverse, drawing thought down to the earth but lacking in the second step of the dialectical movement by which thought is led back to the surface to begin the movement of humour again. This reading of Rabelais as a subversive and chthonic thinker, is the position advanced by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. To better understand Rabelais's particular engagement with perverse humour, I will thus contrast Bakhtin's reading with the Deleuzo-Žižekian-Kierkegaardian framework I developed above.

Bakhtin argues that Rabelais's work functions as a subversion of official aristocratic and theological values by means of the unofficial values of the folk tradition, and he goes so far as to say that it is impossible to understand Rabelais without an understanding of folk humour (3-4). Bakhtin claims that Rabelais's texts are fundamentally opposed to the fixity and domination of law, whether religious or political: "No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook" (3). Rabelais thus operates in the unofficial space of the folk culture, entirely separated from any form of officialdom.

While we see from the above quote that this space is fundamentally open and generative, it is also important to note the emphasis that Bakhtin places on the body and the earth in his argument:

The mighty thrust downward into the bowels of the earth, into the depths of the human body, is reflected in Rabelais' entire world from beginning to end. This downward movement animates all his image, all the leading episodes, all the metaphors and

comparisons. Rabelais' world in its entirety, as in every detail, is directed toward the underworld, both earthly and bodily (370).

Bakhtin sees everything in Rabelais in terms of a downward movement into the depths, citing the underworld as the new centre of the universe instead of the religious heights (369). For Bakhtin, this downward movement is what defines the grotesque as such. Yet while Bakhtin describes everything in Rabelais as a degradation or deflation, there are still moments of generation and creation. What separates the grotesque body from the merely satirical is that it is generative as well as destructive. The grotesque body always breathes new life into what it brings down to earth, reinvigorating it and filling it with the productive power of the earth (369). However, with this in mind we must ask: What causes these new forms to raise out of the body and the depths? How do new forms and shapes emerge from the grotesque body of the earth?

There are numerous points of connection between Bakhtin's grotesque body and the partial objects and body without organs that define the depth for Deleuze: both are unfinished and constantly changing, present an absolute variety of forms, and offer no clearly defined limits. However, within the depths as Deleuze describes them there are no fixed forms and no permanence (133). By descending to the depths we can gain access to a reinvigorating and transformative productivity, but in order to take on a new and definitive shape, to be reborn rather than remain in the limbo of infinite flux, we must climb out of the depths to the surface. Pure corporeality (and sexuality) does not on its own constitute humour. The bodily depths must be complemented by a desexualized principle of reason. It is only in this final movement that the process of regeneration can be considered complete. Humour is not the pure senselessness of depths but the tension between this nonsense and the good sense of the heights. Through its exclusive focus on the body and depths, Bakhtin's account ignores the ascendant and theological

dimension of Rabelais's work. By over-privileging folk culture and the unofficial, Bakhtin misses the key ways in which Rabelais makes use of the official and the religious as part of his humorous discourse.<sup>12</sup> While Rabelais makes extensive use of the grotesque to degrade or deflate the official law of the heights, this movement is always supplemented by another gesture upwards toward the spiritual.

During a feast, Gargantua and his drinking companions remark:

“God made the planets, and we make plates neat.”

“I have God's word in my mouth: *Sitio*” [i.e. I thirst]

“The stone called asbestos is no more extinguishable than the thirst of my Paternity”

(Rabelais 14).

The thirst here is most obviously literal, but the reference to God also evokes spiritual thirst. While the giant and his friends are most immediately concerned with physical nourishment, they never forget the needs of the spirit. The footnote to this section also notes that *Sitio* was one of Christ's last words on the cross, which gives the banquet a strongly religious overtone (footnote to 14). In a later passage Rabelais also refers to vines used for wine as “God's body,” again drawing a connection between nourishment of the body and nourishment of the spirit (50). While Rabelais's characters thus turn to the material for life and generation, they do so while always keeping in mind a divine beyond which lifts them again out of the depths. Their merriment has an ultimately spiritual aim.

In another section Rabelais associates flatulence with medicine and the divine airs of poetry. He describes how the king of Rauch lost his holy flatulent wind:

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<sup>12</sup> Schwartz notes that many Rabelais scholars disagree with Bakhtin's claim that *Gargantua and Pantagruel* derives all of its subversive force from the folk and unofficial. Schwartz considers Rabelais's engagement with the official and learned to be just as important to the latter's project: “Indeed, much that is subversive in Rabelais is not popular, but erudite evangelical and humanist” (2).

Somebody had robbed him of a full-bodied fart...He had kept it religiously, like another Holy Grail, and had cured several grave illnesses with it merely by letting loose and distributing to patients as much of it as would go into a virginal fart—which is what our Sanctimoniales call sonnets (137).

The fart is a definitively bodily form of wind, but here it is associated with the holy and the virginal when its healing powers are described. In other words, the earthly becomes creative when it is again raised to the surface by the divine. The fart in itself can only deflate the pretensions of the high-minded; it becomes generative and productive only through a re-ascent through association with the religious.

We thus find in Rabelais, despite the ostensible focus on the depths of the bodies, the same perverse movement of humour that animates *The Praise of Folly*, the movement that defines perverse Christianity. Rabelais turns toward the earthly, the folk, and the unofficial to move beyond the law, but he always returns to the holy in some respect. The official is overly sterile, but the bodily must still have some image of the beyond to give it shape and lift it out of the depths. Rabelais's recognition of the lack at the heart of Christianity allows him to turn beyond the law, but he returns to the spiritual to bring the energy of the depths to bear on the surface. It is the theological dimension of Rabelais's thought that moves it from being merely satirical or subversive to perverse.

## **VII. Conclusion**

We have thus seen how Christianity, in its perverse dimension, brings to light the eventual or virtual potentiality latent in the law, using the tension of the many dualities that constitute the incongruity between the heights and the depths—the ironic and satirical, the desexualized and

the sexual, good sense and non/pre-sense—to (re)invigorate the human world. While Christianity appears, on a superficial level, to be a religion of transcendence, its core structure is really a movement to revitalize the immanent here-and-now. Christianity evokes a transcendent beyond, but only through a disavowal, using the transcendent beyond of the heights, in conjunction with the depths, to serve the immanent.

Yet while Christianity may not be an unfaltering ascent to the sky, it still relies on the dimension of the heights, and indeed the heights are a necessary component of perverse-Christian humour. The movement of humour as described by Deleuze would never begin if not for the original ironic question (“What is X?”). Humour moves to subvert this question, but the question is still a vital step in the dialectical movement. And even if we do away with this initial question, in the schema of Christian humour the principle of the heights is also part of what compels the ascent from the depths back to the surface. What, then, would humour look like without this connection to a transcendent dimension? What new dualities or contradictions, what strange new forms of laughter, might we discover when humour loses its contact with reason and transcendence? The disappearance of transcendence does not nullify or do away with humour, but it does change the form that this kind of humour takes on. An examination of this new form of humour, humour without a transcendent beyond, will be the focus of the next chapter.

# The “Funniness” of Bicycles: Modernity, Mechanism, and Humour in *The Third Policeman*

## I. Humour without Transcendence

In the previous chapter, we explored how humour can pervert ironic or conversionary structures of thought and how the humorous can energize the now through the tension or incongruity between the heights and the depths. But what happens when the structure of transcendence, an ethereal beyond of Truth or reason, disappears completely? Žižek says that the necessary consequence of Christianity is atheism, but while Christianity may pave the way for a world without transcendence, its structure of belief—and its humour—is still not adequate for such a world. To understand this new form of humour we must now look to more modern sources, writers who approach the question of humour in a world where Christian structures and beliefs no longer function, a fallen world without any notion of reason or transcendence. In short, our focus will be the moments of incongruity and the dualities that define being and thinking under modernity.

One particularly prominent incongruity or duality of the modern can be seen in the confrontation between the human and the mechanical or, from a slightly different perspective, the living and the material. This incongruity figures prominently in the theories of modern humour advanced by Henri Bergson and Wyndham Lewis. While Bergson and Lewis have (almost) opposite views on how humour arises from this duality, they both privilege one term of the dyad as originary or fundamental (the living for Bergson, and base matter for Lewis). Both thinkers thus attempt to address the problem of humour in relation to modernity, but each fails to address the incongruous on its own terms. To really understand the humorous duality of the



modern would require an approach capable of thinking this doubleness without seeking to reduce it to the one.

Such an approach to modern humour can be found in *The Third Policeman* (1967) by Flann O'Brien. "Is it about a bicycle?"—this is the question at the heart of the O'Brien's novel, and it expresses the text's concern with the ambiguous and incongruous space between the human and the material. In the novel's strange world, humans transform into machines and matter behaves as if it were alive. This chapter thus aims to develop a theory of modern humour through a close analysis *The Third Policeman*, read in dialogue with Bergson's and Lewis's theories of humour. Through such a reading, I will demonstrate how O'Brien's novel expresses the incongruity between human and machine/matter that defines being under modernity.

## **II. The Explosive Arrival of Modernity**

To understand O'Brien's humour, we must first understand the nature of his world. The bulk of the action in *The Third Policeman* takes place in the aftermath of a "something happened" (O'Brien 23). When the narrator reaches under the floorboards to retrieve a cash box, he senses a sudden and indescribable alteration in the world around him:

It was some change which came upon me or upon the room, indescribably subtle, yet momentous, ineffable. It was as if the daylight had changed with unnatural suddenness, as if the temperature of the evening had altered greatly in an instant or as if the air had become twice as rare or twice as dense as it had been in the winking of an eye; perhaps all of these and other things happened together for all my senses were bewildered all at once and could give me no explanation (23).

The narrator struggles, in vain, to understand what has transpired, arriving at only a vague sensation or intuition that something is different. But while the exact nature of this change is unquantifiable and almost intangible, it has a very real effect on the world that the narrator inhabits. The novel begins as a realistic and straightforward confessional autobiography—“Not everyone knows how I killed old Phillip Mathers...” (7); “I was born a long time ago...”—but after this “subtle, yet momentous” change, the novel shifts its focus to a world of fantastical happenings and logic-defying contraptions (23). From Sergeant MacCruiskeen’s stupefying inventions, to bicycles that come to life, and the wondrous properties of omnium—all of these appear in the wake of this imperceptible yet earth-shattering “something happened.”

At the end of the novel, we discover that this “something” is the explosion of a mine, planted by John Divney to kill the narrator (197). We are told that the narrator’s bizarre and torturous adventures are all part of his torment in hell, a punishment for killing Phillip Mathers (198). If the policemen and their unusual objects seem to violate the laws of reality, this is only because such laws no longer apply in the supernatural setting of the novel. But while the novel is literally set in (a kind of) hell, the setting also reflects the conditions of a ‘hellish’ modernity. The strangeness of the world is the strangeness of modernity itself, the unsettling feeling of living in a time that is hostile and disorienting. The explosion of the landmine thus represents the advent of modernity. Modernity erupts as a hole in the symbolic order, a traumatic rupture or wound that challenges long-established orders of meaning and undermines all sense of coherence or unity. This change signals the collapse of the transcendent heights, the ironist’s dream of a pure principle of reason untainted by the nonsense of materiality. If the modern world is comparable to hell, this is because the former is its own kind of damned and fallen world. With

the advent of the modern, the world changes irredeemably and the strange adventures of the narrator are the result of this absolute rupture.

The rupture also signals the breakdown of the alliance between good sense and common sense. After such a disorienting and traumatic event there is no longer a principle of unity or identity that will ensure overall coherence; this unity has been shattered, exploded, fragmented. The various senses or meanings we gather will no longer cohere but rather contradict. Much of the previous criticism on this novel has explored the rupture and the strangeness of *Policeman's* world from this epistemological perspective. The explosion thus suggests a loss of order in the organization of human knowledge and an overall breakdown of reason. Booker has argued that O'Brien's novel is a critique of the totalizing epistemic project, prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century, which would seek to master the world through knowledge. He argues that the book is a "commentary on the general twentieth-century crisis in authority on the modern lack of faith in any one approach to knowledge (52)." Anne Clissmann argues that the novel is a demonstration of what happens when an ordinary man is confronted with the "nullity" of philosophical and scientific abstraction (181). In other words, *Policeman* is a book about how supposed "knowledge" alienates us from reality. In a similar vein, Keith Hopper claims that *The Third Policeman* is an early post-modern masterpiece that celebrates metafiction and a multiplicity of (epistemological) perspectives (11). Charles Kemnitz, focusing on the book's relation to contemporary physics, considers the novel's strange world a "literary appropriation of the language and conceptual models of relativity current during the nineteen-thirties" (56).<sup>13</sup> All of these approaches capture the way in which the advent of modernity pollutes the purity of

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<sup>13</sup> Mary O'Toole makes a similar argument to Kemnitz, but she focuses instead on the relationship between *The Third Policeman* and the theory of serial time developed by J. W. Dunne in *An Experiment with Time*.

scientific reason through the encounter with unassimilable matter, undermining the transcendent principle of reason and the unity of common sense that can be used to understand the world.

But while there is extensive writing on the epistemological commentary of O'Brien's novel, much less has been written on O'Brien's ontological position in the novel.<sup>14</sup> The collapse of the heights has implications not only for systems of thought but for being as well. Not what does it mean *to know*, but what does it mean *to be, to live* in the strange setting of modernity? In other words how does the ontological impact of the advent of modernity reconfigure our relation to humour? In a letter to William Saroyan, O'Brien cites his book's supernatural setting as a means for exploring new comic possibilities: "When you are writing about the world of the dead—and the damned—where none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks (200). We will thus seek to discover the nature of the "back-chat and funny cracks" appropriate to the hellish modernity of *Policeman's* world.

### **III. Bergson and the Humour of the Mechanical**

Immediately we can say that any naturalistic or revitalizing conception of humour will be a poor fit. Many such views of the comic see humour as a form of rebirth, a return to nature, and a revitalization of the social order. This type of comedy affirms the vitality of the human by forging a renewed connection to the natural. As Maurice Charney puts it, "The comic hero...needs to declare himself the patron of everything real, physical, material, enjoyable, and the enemy of all abstractions, moral principles, seriousness and joylessness. This is a matter of

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<sup>14</sup> One potential exception to this rule is Hugh Kenner, who argues that while *At Swim-Two-Birds* presents a queer text in a normal world (i.e. epistemological strangeness) with *The Third Policeman* the world itself has become queer and unsettling (i.e. ontological strangeness) (62).

basic allegiance to the life force” (qtd in Stott 79). But nothing could be further from the world of *The Third Policeman*. Nature hardly makes an appearance in the book, and when it does it is always sterile and lifeless. In most of the novel the narrator is surrounded by the technological trappings of modernity, but even when he does encounter what could be called traditional nature, the setting strikes him with a feeling of “strangeness” (39). Everything appears artificial, “too perfect, too finely made” and the narrator thus experiences an alienation from the natural (39). The notion of harmonious and balanced nature is a carryover from the pre-modern system of common sense, where each thing has its place in the “natural” order. However, this notion becomes untenable after the advent of modernity. The collapse of the transcendent principle of reason or good sense from the heights also has consequences for humour’s relationship to the depths and the material: Without the structuring force of the heights to impose a definite shape on the forces of the depths, the swirling energy of the material appears in a chaotic and disruptive, rather than regenerative form. The nonsense of the depth constantly challenges the forms of the surface, disrupting and disturbing without reinstating any new stable form or structure. As Richard Witt has argued, O’Brien’s novel is an anti-naturalist text, written against a poetic tradition depicting Ireland as idyllic and pastoral (135). Nature has no place in O’Brien’s strange modern world, and so his humour has nothing to do with naturalistic concepts like revitalization and rebirth.

What we need instead is a theory of humour that accounts for the hostility of modernity and the ubiquity of industrialization. The philosopher Henri Bergson offers just such an account in his treatise *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic* (1900). For Bergson, humour is a matter of machines. He states that humour arises out of “something mechanical encrusted upon the living” (30). In other words, we laugh at the absurdity of a living organism behaving like a

machine. When a human being stutters, repeats, or behaves rigidly our reaction is laughter. In Bergson's vitalist philosophy, life is pure movement, an infinite flux and metamorphosis of boundless energy. Any interruption in the flow of this vital energy or *élan vital* reduces the living to the level of things (5), and this for Bergson is the source of a great humorous effect:

What, therefore, incited laughter was the momentary transformation of a person into a thing...Let us then pass from the exact idea of a machine to the vaguer one of a thing in general. We shall have a fresh series of laughable images which will be obtained by taking a blurred impression, so to speak, of the outlines of the former and will bring us to this new law: We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing (33-34).

Laughter is a means of purging this "thingness" from ourselves; we laugh at those who fail to live up to the demands of life and whose mechanical rigidity poses a threat to the overall health and vitality of the social order. Writing in a Hobbesian vein, Bergson sees laughter as a form of social ridicule designed to weed out negative behaviors and encourage those more salubrious to society at large (8).

However, we can only ever go so far in purging ourselves of the mechanical. We can never entirely escape our "thingness," for we require a certain relation to the material in order to live, namely, our bodies. Following a long comic tradition, Bergson thus identifies the body as a source of humour. However, this is not the naturalistic and affirmative body described by Charney, but rather the body as it is encountered negatively, as a limitation or interruption in the movement of the soul. The Bergsonian comic body is, like the body described by Andrew Stott, "exaggeratedly physical, a distorted, disproportionate, profane, ill-disciplined, insatiate, and perverse organism" (79). Humour thus arises when we witness "the body taking precedence of

the soul,” when our corporeal “thingness” draws attention to itself and interrupts the flow of life (Bergson 31).

But while Bergson agrees with many other theorists of the comic in depicting the body as humorous, the corporeal in his theory is of a different nature than the traditional comic body. Following the research of Plessner, Simon Critchley argues that physical comedy is a response to the gap between “being” and “having a body” (31). Historically this duality has been presented as the opposition between the animal (body) and the angel (divine soul) in the human (36). This is the same duality between height and depth that animates the Christian humour of Erasmus and Rabelais. However, in Bergson the soul is reconfigured as a vital force and the body is presented as mechanical. It is no longer a question of the border between human and animal but between human and machine, life and inert matter. To put Bergson’s theory in terms of sense, from one perspective the good sense of the human form is interrupted by the breakdown into mechanical nonsense; but the flow of life, constantly changing, could equally be read as a form of nonsense that slides into moments of fixity, where it can then be captured or understood as a pseudo good sense. We will return to the question of sense and nonsense later on, but for now we will examine how Bergson’s theory of humour plays out in the absurd modern world of *The Third Policeman*.

The tendency for life to behave like a thing is the source of much of the humour in O’Brien’s novel. In the book, the living has a strange affinity to matter and the mechanical. As a result of an accident as a young man, the narrator has “one leg made of wood” (O’Brien 9). Even before the novel’s shift in setting to the strange world of hellish modernity, the narrator thus recognizes the presence of the inert and mechanical within himself. “Wooden” is also evocative of the rigidity and inflexibility that Bergson attributes to the comic. The narrator may be alive,

but there is a non-expellable part of his being that is already mere inert matter. There are numerous other examples of people behaving like machines throughout the book: Mathers's eyes look like "mechanical dummies" (24); Finnucane has an arm as strong as "steam machinery" (45); and MacCruiskeen behaves as if he "was on wires and worked with steam" (76). In *The Third Policeman* life, as such, is already infected with the mechanical—and this mechanical element poses a threat to the living. The core of inert matter at the heart of the human body threatens to undermine life itself. The narrator senses this threat to his vitality represented by the wooden leg:

I had a curious feeling about my left leg. I thought that it was, so to speak, spreading—that its woodenness was slowly extending throughout my whole body, a dry timber poison killing me inch by inch. Soon my brain would be turned to wood completely and I would be dead (115).

Like Bergson, O'Brien recognizes the danger that acting mechanically poses to the individual. But while the mechanical at the core of the human represents a terrible danger, O'Brien also exploits the incongruity of the human behaving like a machine to great humorous effect. Gilhaney, behaving like a bicycle, falls over as soon as he stops moving (113).<sup>15</sup> Mathers behaves like a machine when he mechanically answers "No" to every question he is asked, regardless of context or consequence (30). In these cases, O'Brien's humour relies on the absurd fact that, in the face of modernity, man has come to resemble a machine. The human is at once living and dead, man and machine.

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<sup>15</sup> We will return to the question of bicycles later in this essay, but for now it is enough to note that Gilhaney behaves like a machine.



#### **IV. A Thing Behaving like a Person: The Comic Absurdity of Life**

While O'Brien recognizes the mechanical in the living as a dangerous (even if humorous) threat, life itself already seems to be a tenuous and unstable thing even without any external threat. O'Brien presents life as immaterial and fragile, something that could fade away at any moment. The fictional philosopher and scientist De Selby refers to human existence as "an hallucination" and he calls death "the supreme hallucination" (3), suggesting that life is not real at all. Martin Finnucane, a robber and cutthroat the narrator meets on the road, also struggles with the elusiveness and indefinability of life:

Is it life? Many a man has spent a hundred years trying to get the dimensions of it and when he understands it at last and entertains the certain pattern of it in his head, by the hokey he takes to his bed and dies! He dies like a poisoned sheepdog. There is nothing so dangerous, you can't smoke it, nobody will give you tuppence-halfpenny for the half of it and it kills you in the wind-up. It is a queer contraption, very dangerous, a certain death-trap. Life? (45)

For Finnucane, life is not a primal force interrupted by the mechanical. It is not life but matter and the physical that are primary. If life is to prove its worth, it must justify itself in terms of the material and the economical, which it here fails to do. Life is thus something superfluous added on after the fact, a valueless and intangible addition. Finnucane accepts Bergson's metaphysical framework of life-machine-thing but he challenges the privileged position that Bergson affords to life. By what right does life assert supremacy over matter? Why is it better to be alive than dead? However, such questions are themselves absurd because Finnucane can only ask them from the perspective of being alive. The humour in this situation arises from the incongruity and

circularity of Finnuccane's reasoning: Life is useless and immaterial but we can only say so because life enables us to do so.

The narrator and his soul, Joe, attempt to counter these arguments about the fragility and ultimate emptiness of life by suggesting that life can be grounded in the beauty of nature, the wonder of a "grand lively day" or "[f]lowers in the spring, the glory and fulfillment of human life, bird-song at evening" (44). These attempts at a refutation rely on a pre-modern idea of life, one founded on a notion of the vital force of the Earth and the eternal beauty of nature. As discussed above, the idea of beautiful nature is an anachronistic attempt to harken back to the world of common sense. However, in the modern world of *The Third Policeman*, such explanation loses all validity, and its absurdity in this context provokes the reader to laughter.

We can also see the fragility and tenuous nature of life through O'Brien's treatment of names. A name represents the singularity and uniqueness of each living thing, that which separates each organism from every other. The narrator says that: "Even a dog has a name which dissociates him from other dogs and indeed my own soul, whom nobody has ever seen on the road or standing at the counter of a public house, had apparently no difficulty in assuming a name which distinguished him from other people's souls" (40). Names thus signal the uniqueness of life and its separation from matter, the difference in kind between the living and non-living.

However, the narrator's comment also suggests the fragility of this separation. From one perspective, names are a response to the individuality of each organism: people and dogs really are different and so we call them by different names. However, from another perspective it is only the name that originally establishes this difference. All dogs are unremarkable and interchangeable, and it is only by assigning names that we can distinguish between them. The name is the attempt to impose a minimal fixity (or good sense) on the nonsensical flux of matter.

When the narrator tries to file a report about his lost watch, Pluck says: “If you have no name you possess nothing and you do not exist and even your trousers are not on you although they look as if they were from where I am sitting” (62). In other words, it is the name itself, and not some singularity inherent to life, that makes the human unique. If the name is what distinguishes life from matter, it also reveals this distinction as arbitrary, imposed from without rather than responding to an already existing difference.

De Selby’s theory of names, presented alongside the narrator’s own musing, develops a similar line of thought: “Going back to primitive times, [De Selby] regards the earliest names as crude onomatopaeic associations with the appearance of the person or object named—thus harsh or rough manifestations being represented by far from pleasant gutturalities and vice versa” (40, footnote). This theory encapsulates the duality of names first presented in the narrator’s comments. On the one hand, names are a manifestation of an individual’s physical characteristics, and in this way they respond to the uniqueness of the living thing. But on the other hand, the representation of physical properties through sound recalls MacCruiskeen’s machine, which transforms light and matter into sound, producing a unique human scream each time (108). Every organism may have a unique name or sound associated with it, but so does every bit of matter. The name, which tries to separate the living from the material, also reveals that life is fundamentally rooted in bare matter. The absurd nature of names thus becomes a comic point for O’Brien.

While at times O’Brien does present humour in terms of the mechanical interrupting the living, at other moments he suggests that life is a superfluous addition to the material, that life itself and not the mechanical is the source of humour. While the Bergsonian theory of humour thus seems to account for some of O’Brien’s humour, it falls short in considering the particular

absurdity or “funniness” of life in itself. The discussion of life and of names in *The Third Policeman* more closely resembles the vision of humour presented by Wyndham Lewis, Bergson’s contemporary and interlocutor, than Bergson’s own. Wyndham Lewis employs a schema for describing humour that shares many key similarities with Bergson’s, but the role of each of the terms is reversed.

For Lewis, as for Bergson, humour arises out of the incongruity between life and thing, mind and matter. But where Bergson sees humour as an interruption of life force by matter, Lewis, in his short essay “The Meaning of the Wild Body” (1927) argues that humour arises from the fact that matter behaves as if it were alive:

The root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are all *things*, or physical bodies, behaving as *persons*. It is only when you come to deny that they are 'persons,' or that there is any 'mind' or 'person' there at all, that the world of appearance is accepted as quite natural, and not at all ridiculous. Then, with a denial of 'the person,' life becomes immediately both 'real' and very serious (Lewis 247).

It is not that people behave like things but that they are people, which is the source of humour. In other words, humour arises out of the fact that life exists at all, that matter behaves as if it were something other than inert mass. Lewis claims that we naturally see all other people as ridiculous, and it is only because we have become accustomed to a certain kind of being that it does not evoke absurd laughter (248). We recognize the customs of other nations and cultures as absurd, and we would feel the same way about our own if it were not for habit. Similarly, we think of a plant sitting down to read a book as something ludicrous, but we fail to recognize that a human doing the same is no less absurd (249). Matter, and not life, is primary here. It is when

life attempts to be something other than matter that the comic appears. Lewis describes a man as humorous because “[h]e did not identify himself with his machine” (250); that is, he tried to present himself as something other than base matter:

His *eye* I decided was the key to the absurdity of the effect. It was its detachment that was responsible for this. It seemed to say, as he propelled his sack of potatoes—that is himself—along the platform, and as he successfully landed the sack in the carriage:—  
'I've not much "power," I may just manage it:—yes, *just!*' Then in response to our gazing eyes, 'Yes, that's me! That was not so bad, was it? When you run a line of potatoes like ME, you get the knack of them: but they take a bit of moving.' (Lewis 249-50)

For both Bergson and Lewis it is the incongruous duality between life and matter, human and machine, that creates the comic but their formulae are the exact reverse of each other. We might say that, for Lewis, humour is a response to the living encrusted onto the mechanical. For Lewis, the sensical and understandable world of matter is interrupted by the absurdity or nonsense of life. This second kind of humour is also at work in O'Brien's novel, as has been demonstrated through the examples of life's immateriality and the absurdity of names given above. Is the humour in this book a result of life's interruption, its coming to stutter, or is it that life tries to act as if it were alive but can never escape the bodily machine?

## **V. A World of Vital Matter**

Yet it is not only in people or living things that matter in *The Third Policeman* acts absurdly. Contrary to Lewis's claims about the “seriousness” of inert mass, matter in O'Brien's book is imbued with a certain kind of vitality. Objects seem to take on a life of their own, confounding reason and the ordinary laws of nature. Sergeant MacCruiskeen has a box with an

indefinable colour inside of it, a piece of matter with the capacity to make men go mad if they see it (O'Brien 155). The matter in this world is also made up of omnium, a substance of infinite energy that can transform into anything (110-112). Sergeant MacCruiskeen's machine, mentioned earlier, which can transform light into the sounds of human screams, further suggests a fundamental connection between matter and the human voice (109). Matter as such is already capable of speaking like a living thing; it is home to a certain vital power. The difference between the energy of matter and the life of an organism seems to be only a matter of perspective.

In this world of dangerous and energetic matter, part of the policemen's responsibility is to ensure that matter itself stays in check, to make sure that the world continues to function and to uphold the physical laws of the world. The policemen are thus officers of the metaphysical law, tasked with ensuring the continued regulation of the substance of the universe. If the world of *The Third Policeman* is already strange, it is also always in danger of getting worse without police intervention. The policemen are belated agents of reason who attempt to restore (or maintain) order. But while they can prevent the world from falling into complete nonsense, there is no hope of returning to a pre-modern world of common sense. The best they can do is to achieve a world of humour, positioned in between sense and nonsense, through their continual attempts to impose order on nonsense.

To ensure the stability of the universe, the policemen take a set of daily readings from Eternity, based on which they must make adjustments. As Pluck explains to the narrator:

'You would be astonished at the importance of the charcoal...The great thing is to keep the beam reading down as low as possible and you are doing very well if the pilot-mark is steady. But if you let the beam rise, where are you with your lever? If you neglect the

charcoal feedings you will send the beam rocketing up and there is bound to be a serious explosion.’ (138)

The strange matter of this world moves on its own and is always threatening to explode and unravel the fabric of the universe. Pluck hints at this in describing the daily readings but the danger inherent in matter becomes more evident when the policemen enter an extreme panic because of an unusually high reading on the lever (163). Though the policemen avert catastrophe, the sense of ever-present danger insistent in matter remains. Matter in *The Third Policeman* is always already absurd, always already comical.

Regulating the measurements from Eternity and ensuring the balance of the universe is an important aspect of the policemen’s jobs, yet most of their day-to-day activities do not concern Eternity or the whole of the universe but rather bicycles. The first question the policemen ask when anyone walks into their station is always: “Is it about a bicycle?” (58). Pluck also conceives of everything in terms of bicycles, reimagining the narrator’s lost gold watch as “a golden bicycle of American manufacture with fifteen jewels” (62). Considering how much time and effort the policemen devote to the management of bicycles there must be some connection between the bicycles and the metaphysical duties of the police officers.

To understand this connection it is important to remember that everything in O’Brien’s novel is a question of the incongruity between mechanical life and vital matter, and nowhere in *The Third Policeman* is this incongruity more apparent than in the case of bicycles. Sergeant Pluck describes a strange physical property of O’Brien’s world in what he calls the “Atomic Theory” (83). The basic principle of the Theory is that objects that come into repeated contact or spend extended periods of time in close proximity with each other exchange atoms, so that some of the first object enters into the second and vice-versa. Pluck gives the example of a blacksmith

striking a metal bar with a hammer: “Some of the atoms of the bar will go into the hammer and the other half into the table or the stone or the particular article that is underneath the bottom of the bar” (85). The consequences of the Atomic Theory start to become troubling once a human is involved. Like all other objects, a human exchanges some of its atoms with any object with which it comes into repeated contact. The object in question will then become part human while the human becomes part object, blurring the line between life and matter.

## **VI. The “Funniness” of Bicycles**

These consequences become even more problematic for the policemen when they consider the case of humans and bicycles. Because many of the characters in O’Brien’s novel spend long periods of time on their bicycles, they all have a high number of bicycle atoms in them, and the bicycles in turn contain a high number of human atoms. Sergeant Pluck tells the narrator that he would be surprised at the “number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles” (85). When this kind of intermixing occurs, people begin to behave like bicycles, “lean[ing] against the wall” when they stand, and bicycles start to come to life, moving on their own (90).

As part of their metaphysical duties, it is thus the policemen’s job to regulate the cross-contamination of people and bicycles and to attempt to instill some manner of stable boundary between the living and the material. This is an attempt to preserve the separation between good sense and nonsense, order and chaos. After helping Gilhaney locate his stolen bicycle, Pluck reveals that he is the one who stole it and that he must steal the bike every Monday to prevent Gilhaney from becoming more than half bicycle (82). Furthermore, the Sergeant also keeps his own bicycle locked up for fear that it could act on its own (87). He also tells the narrator that



allowing people and bicycles to overmix would be catastrophic: “If you let it go too far it would be the end of everything. You would have bicycles wanting votes and they would get seats on the County Council and make the roads far worse than they are for their own ulterior motivation.” (90). The regulation of the boundary between human and material is thus just as, if not more important, than the regulation of matter itself. The minimal semblance of order in O’Brien’s chaotic world depends on the tenuous distinction between these terms.

Yet in many cases this is a losing battle for the policemen. There is no way to prevent the human mixing with the material, as even if one eschews riding a bicycle, walking too far “makes a certain quantity of road come up into you” (90). It is only a matter of how best to limit the damage of this unavoidable mixing. In some of the cases that the policemen describe it also appears that the nightmare scenario they fear has already come to pass. When a man is charged with murder the policemen arrest both him and his bicycle to determine which has the greater part of the man. In the end they determine that more of him was in the machines and “it was the bicycle that was hanged” (104). The bicycle is always a part of us and we a part of it.

In this way, bicycles represent a form of abjection, but one specific to O’Brien’s hellish modernity. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which is both self and not self, matter that disturbs the boundary between self and other (13). For Kristeva, the presence of bodily fluids such as blood, excrement, or pus is the extreme manifestation of the abject. We experience the body in all of its disgustingness without any kind of symbolic mediation. As Kristeva writes,

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us (Kristeva 4).

However, as has been previously mentioned, in the hellish modernity of O'Brien's novel there is no place for the natural or revitalizing body. There is only life, the mechanical, and matter.

Within this framework, the abject Other is not bodily substance but the material or mechanical.

In the world described by O'Brien we must seek to enact our separation from the bare matter that threatens to consume us from within. The abject is thus a result of the material crossing into the living and life appearing in bare matter. The bicycle becomes the ultimate symbol of abjection: the human placed outside itself and the mechanical inside of us. We no longer have the abject of the body but the abject of machines or mechanical abjection, the incongruity of being both a person and a machine at the same time.

O'Brien further develops this notion of mechanical abjection in his treatment of bicycles and sexuality. If there is no ultimate difference in kind between the human or organic and the mechanical or material, what is to stop bare matter from becoming sexual? In the psychoanalytic formulation, sexuality is bare biological or animal need disfigured or transfigured by desire (as image or as signifier) (Zupancic 246). However, in O'Brien's world, bereft of the simply biological, this formula could be rewritten as sexuality = matter + vitality. The sexual is merely a species of matter that has been imbued with a certain type of vital force, and in such a case there is nothing to stop objects, which already contain a vitality of their own, from becoming sexual.

The narrator thus comes to encounter Pluck's bicycle as a sexual being:

The bicycle itself seemed to have some peculiar quality of shape or personality which gave it distinction and importance far beyond that usually possessed by such machines....the perfect proportion of its parts which combined merely to create a thing of surpassing grace and elegance, transcending all standards of size and reality and existing only in the absolute validity of its own unexceptionable dimensions. Notwithstanding the

sturdy cross-bar it seemed ineffably female and fastidious...I passed my hand with unintended tenderness— sensuously, indeed—across the saddle. Inexplicably it reminded me of a human face, not by any simple resemblance of shape or feature but by some association of textures, some incomprehensible familiarity at the fingertips (169-170).

The various components of the bicycle—the handlebars, the light, the seat—are all sexualized in the same way that erogenous zones become sexualized in the human through a distribution of energy over a bodily mass. Normally sexuality, as opposed to need, is understood as the unique province of the human as only humans have desire. Through the sexual bicycle, O'Brien thus demonstrates the deterioration of the boundary between human and mechanical. Objects can be sexual and humans are base matter. The sliding between these terms—the desexualized human and (re)sexualized matter—is the exact structure of perversion identified in the first two chapters. But while in our earlier discussion perversion was limited to a certain relation to sense and language or a structure of belief/attitude to the world, here being itself has become perverse. The ontology of the modern is an ontology of the perversely humorous. The mixing between human and bicycle, living and matter, is the humour of an incongruous world, a world that is always already absurd.

We can now finally turn to the question of the “funniness” of bicycles. We have already seen the absurd humour of humans behaving like things and of things coming to life. At times O'Brien seems to follow the Bergsonian model, creating humour out of man's fall into mechanism, while at other moments he appears to follow Lewis's theory, presenting the humorous emergence of life out of matter; and both of these trends also appear through the figure of the bicycle (humans falling over, bikes moving on their own). Where O'Brien differs, however, from both Bergson and Lewis, is in his refusal of a primary principle or substance.

Both of these thinkers rely on a dyad of life-matter, but each chooses one of these terms as primary. For Bergson life comes first and it is only sometimes encumbered by the mechanical, while for Lewis inert and serious matter is primary in relation to the merely incidental corruption by absurd life. Both thus retreat from the absurdity of the modern by trying to found their ontology in a grounding principle that can make sense of the world. But in O'Brien's world these two terms, matter and life, only exist insofar as they are interpenetrated, impure, mixed. Only O'Brien's theory of humour is adequate to the hellish and absurd ontology of the modern. There is no pure life or pure matter, only mechanical life and vital matter, as well as the minimal distance between them. This mechanical life always tends towards matter just as matter always swirls with energy, threatening to come to life. The two terms of this incongruous duality (the defining structure of humour) can no longer be separated from each other; the world has become irredeemably humorous.

This principle achieves its highest expression in O'Brien's treatment of bicycles: an inescapable interpenetration of man and machine. The human-bicycle combination thus represents the always-already mixed nature of matter and life. Matter and life appear naively as separate and opposed terms, but in O'Brien's world they exist only insofar as they are already mixed. We laugh at the absurd combination of these elements, always already stuck together and with only the thinnest and most tenuous dividing lines between them. The "funniness" of bicycles is both a "funny haha" and a "funny strange." It is both O'Brien's principle of humour, the dark laughter of modernity, the only reaction we can give to such a world, as well as his ontological principle, the absurdity or "funniness" of a world where matter and life are always crossing over into each other.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Clissman has argued that the humour of *The Third Policeman* relies on the absurdity and "nullity" of modern scientific and philosophical theories (181). While such an interpretation does have some validity in, for example,

While Lewis and Bergson ground their theories in a stabilizing primary term, O'Brien recognizes that there is no foundation behind this absurd dualism of vital matter and mechanical life. After leaving Policeman Fox, the narrator tries to make it back to his family home, in what would be a symbolic return to the world before the rupture of modernity. However, no sooner does he return home than he is led back to the strange police station, a moment which repeats a scene from earlier in the novel almost exactly with only small changes in the text (197-8). Despite the narrator's perseverance he is unable to escape modernity and its strange world. There is no outside or ultimate grounding principle that can redeem this world. The world of common sense and of transcendence is forever lost. There is only the "funniness" of bicycles and the problematic nature of life-matter, repeating again and again, every time absurd, every time comical, and every time irresolvable. "Is it about a bicycle?" (199)—The novel closes with a final repetition of this question, and the answer must be a resounding "Yes." Everything is, after all, a question of bicycles and of the inescapable "funniness" of the modern world—the being of humour and the humour of being itself.

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explaining O'Brien's critique of academia through the figures of De Selby and his commentators, this point ultimately ignores the fact that it is not only knowledge but also matter itself that has become strange in O'Brien's world. Even without abstract and empty intellectual theories, the encounter with modernity would still fundamentally reconfigure the nature of reality. I have thus sought to develop a theory of the comic in O'Brien's novel that responds to the ontological shift of modernity.

R. W. Maslen offers another interpretation of O'Brien's humour, seeing it as a response to the violent political upheaval in Ireland during the early twentieth century. He argues that "comedy for O'Brien is an often physically painful art form, with its roots in an oppressive past and its branches spreading into an equally oppressive potential time to come" (84). I have sought to capture some of the violence of this comedy in my description of the terrifying sliding between man and machine, but while Maslen frames his argument in terms of Irish history, I have chosen instead to consider O'Brien's humour from the broader perspective of modernity as an international (or at least European) event.

## Punchline or, A Very Brief Conclusion

Humour, wherever we find it, is an expression of duality, of a real incongruity that cannot be reduced to the one. We first encountered this incongruity through the duality of good sense and nonsense that defines all language. We also saw how this same incongruity expresses the duality of the human: the conscious, rational ego and the irrational, unconscious drives. Humour's sliding between rational discourse and the libidinal unconscious was also connected to the de- and resexualization of the pervert. Humour's relationship to perversion was then taken up in relation to the perverse belief structure of Christianity. We saw how Christianity uses the incongruity between the transcendent and the immanent, as well as the incongruity between the transcendent heights and corporeal depths to reinvigorate the human world of the surface. We then explored what happens to humour after the collapse of the transcendent dimension with the advent of modernity. Under modernity, we discover the incongruity between the human and the material (mechanical life and vital matter) that defines the ontology of the modern. This last duality signals the way forward for thinking (with) humour. Today, humour can no longer be treated as an isolated phenomenon or as a mere aberration from a structure of transcendent reason; humour has come to define our very being. Any method or system of thought that seeks to address the problems of our present situation must give adequate consideration to humour, both as an object to be thought and a method of thinking. We must learn to think humorously.

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