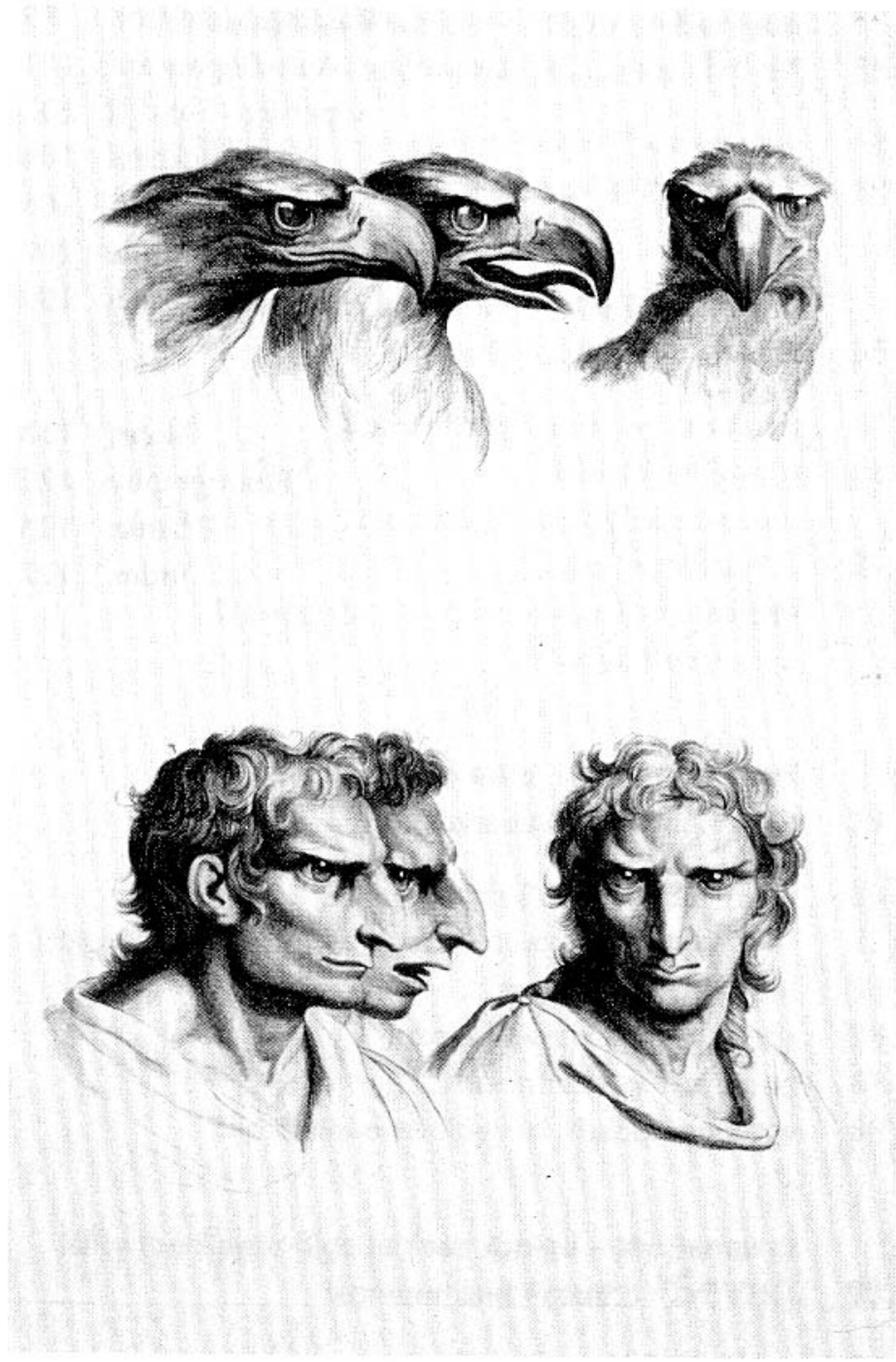

Three heads of an eagle and three heads of men in relation to the eagle
Source: Cnac-Mnam/Dist RMN. Charles Le Brun

Introduction

One

Human beings are troubled with the opinions (*dogmata*) they have of things, and not by the things themselves (*pragmata*).

Epictetus, as cited by Laurence Sterne

Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves. Examples are legion, from boy bishops reciting learned sermons, to talking dogs, hamsters and bears, to farting professors and incontinent ballerinas, to straight linguistic inversion: 'I could wait for you until the cows come home. On second thoughts, I'd rather wait for the cows until you come home'. Of course, this is hardly news. One already finds Cicero writing in *De Oratore*, 'The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh'. The comic world is not simply 'die verkehrte Welt', the inverted or upside-down world of philosophy, but rather the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters.

Of course, a similar tension between expectation and actuality might itself be claimed in the relation between the various objects of humour and any theoretical explanation thereof, the difference being that a theory of humour is not

humorous. A joke explained is a joke misunderstood. In this case, what might make one laugh – albeit as dramatic irony – is the audacity or arrogance of the attempt to write a philosophy of humour. For example, persons who might not otherwise feel themselves to be experts in metapsychology or French spiritualism somehow feel confident in dismissing Freud's theory of jokes or Bergson's account of laughter because they are either not funny or simply miss the point. When it comes to what amuses us, we are all authorities, experts in the field. We *know* what we find funny. Such a claim to implicit or tacit knowledge is interesting in itself, for reasons that I will endeavour to spell out in a later chapter. However, the fact remains that humour is a nicely impossible object for a philosopher. But herein lies its irresistible attraction.

THREE THEORIES OF HUMOUR

In an effort to approach this nicely impossible object, I have been filling much of my time lately reading books on humour and laughter. As a glance at my bibliography will reveal, it is a surprisingly vast field, and much of the empirical research is extremely pleasurable. The further one looks, the more there is to see, not so much in philosophy, but more in the areas of history, literary history, theology and history of religion, sociology and anthropology.

There are many explanations of laughter and humour, that John Morreall does well to distill into three theories: the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory.[1]

1 In the first theory, represented by Plato, Aristotle, Quintillian and, at the dawn of the modern era, Hobbes, we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, from 'suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others, or with our owne formerly'. Laughter is that 'passion, which hath no name', which would be forbidden to the virtuous guardians of Plato's imagined philosophical city. It is the superiority theory that dominates the philosophical tradition until the eighteenth century, and we shall have recourse to it in the discussion of ethnic humour.

2 The relief theory emerges in the nineteenth century in the work of Herbert Spencer, where laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy, but the theory is best known in the version given in Freud's 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, where the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity.

3 The incongruity theory can be traced to Francis Hutcheson's *Reflections Upon Laughter* from 1750, but is elaborated in related, but distinct, ways in Kant, as we shall see presently, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. As James Russell Lowell writes in 1870, 'Humour in its first analysis is a perception of the incongruous'. Humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest or blague: 'Did you see me at Princess Diana's funeral? I was the one who started the Mexican wave'. Although I will discuss the other theories below, I would like to begin by exploring this idea of humour as incongruity.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF A JOKE

Can we describe what takes place in a joke? How might we give what philosophers call the 'phenomenology' of a joke? First, joking is a specific and meaningful practice that the

audience and the joke-teller recognize as such. There is a tacit social contract at work here, namely some agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke. There has to be a sort of tacit consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking 'for us', as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognized as joking. That is, in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure – no social congruity, no comic incongruity. When this implicit congruence or tacit contract is missing, then laughter will probably not result, which can be the experience of trying – and failing – to tell a joke in a foreign language. Bergson explains what he calls 'the leading idea in all our investigations' in *Le rire*:

> To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. [. . .] Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification.[2]

So, in listening to a joke, I am presupposing a social world that is shared, the forms of which the practice of joke-telling is going to play with. Joking is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules. Wittgenstein puts the point perspicuously,

> What is it like for people not to have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It's as though there were a custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket.[3]

This is also what Mary Douglas has in mind in her groundbreaking anthropological work on the subject when she compares jokes with rites.[4] A rite is here understood as a symbolic act that derives its meaning from a cluster of socially legitimated symbols, such as a funeral. But insofar as the joke plays with the symbolic forms of society – the bishop gets stuck in a lift, I spread margarine on the communion wafer – jokes are *anti-rites*. They mock, parody or deride the ritual practices of a given society, as Milan Kundera remarks, 'Someone's hat falls on the coffin in a freshly dug grave, the funeral loses its meaning and laughter is born'.[5]

Suppose that someone starts to tell you a joke: 'I never left the house as a child. My family were so poor that my mother couldn't afford to buy us clothes'. First, I recognize that a joke is being told and I assent to having my attention caught in this way. Assenting to having my attention caught is very important and if someone interrupts the joke-teller or simply walks away in the middle of the joke, then the tacit social contract of humour has been broken. This is bad form or simply bad manners. Instead of throwing the ball back, I put it in my pocket. In thus assenting and going along with the joke, a certain tension is created in the listener and I follow along willingly with the story that is being recounted. When the punch-line kicks in, and the little bubble of tension pops, I experience an affect that can be described as pleasure, and I laugh or just smile: 'When I was ten, my mother bought me a hat so that I could look out of the window'.

What happens here is, as Kant puts it in a brilliant short discussion of laughter from *The Critique of Judgement*, a sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing ('ein Affekt aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts').[6] In hearing the punch-line, the tension disappears and

we experience comic relief. Rather than the tiresome and indeed racist examples of jokes that Kant recounts, involving Indians and bottles of beer, witness Philip Larkin (that celebrated anti-racist!) in a characteristic flourish,

> When I drop four cubes of ice
> Chimingly in a glass, and add
> Three goes of gin, a lemon slice,
> And let a ten-ounce tonic void
> In foaming gulps until it smothers
> Everything else up to the edge,
> I lift the lot in silent pledge:
> *He devoted his life to others.*[7]

The admittedly rather dry humour here is found in a combination of two features: conceptual and rhetorical. On the one hand, there is the conceptual disjunction between the wanton hedonism involved in preparing the gin and tonic, and the avowed altruism of the final line. But also – more importantly – there is the rhetorical effect generated by the sudden bathos of the final line in comparison to the cumulative and almost Miltonic overkill of what precedes it. Picking up on Hobbes's word, it is important to emphasize the necessary *suddenness* of the conceptual and rhetorical shift. Both brevity and speed are the soul of wit.

COMIC TIMING

Mention of the suddenness of the bathetic shift that produces humour brings attention to the peculiar *temporal* dimension of jokes. As any comedian will readily admit, timing is everything, and a mastery of comic forms involves a careful control of pauses, hesitations and silences, of knowing exactly when to detonate the little dynamite of the joke. In this sense, jokes involve a shared knowledge of two temporal dimensions: *duration* and the *instant*. What I mean is that when we give ourselves up to being told a joke, we undergo a peculiar and quite deliberate distention of time, where the practice of joking often involves cumulative repetition and wonderfully needless circumlocution. This is a technique brought to its digressive nadir in the 'shaggy dog' or 'cock and bull' story, such as *Tristram Shandy*.

> Digressions, incontestably, are the sun-shine – they are the life, the soul of reading, – take them out of this book for instance, – you might as well take the book along with them.[8]

In being told a joke, we undergo a particular experience of duration through repetition and digression, of time literally being stretched out like an elastic band. We know that the elastic will snap, we just do not know when, and we find that anticipation rather pleasurable. It snaps with the punchline, which is a sudden acceleration of time, where the digressive stretching of the joke suddenly contracts into a heightened experience of the instant. We laugh. Viewed temporally, humorous pleasure would seem to be produced by the disjunction between duration and the instant, where we experience with renewed intensity both the slow passing of time and its sheer evanescence.

LAUGHTER AS AN EXPLOSION EXPRESSED WITH THE BODY

It is important to recall that the succession of tension by relief in humour is an essentially bodily affair. That is, the joke invites a corporeal response, from a chuckle, through a giggle to a guffaw. Laughter is a muscular phenomenon, consisting of

spasmodic contraction and relaxation of the facial muscles with corresponding movements in the diaphragm. The associated contractions of the larynx and epiglottis interrupt the pattern of breathing and emit sound. Descartes puts the point much more exotically and powerfully in Article 124 of *The Passions of the Soul*,

> Laughter consists in the fact that the blood, which proceeds from the right orifice in the heart by the arterial vein, inflating the lungs suddenly and repeatedly, causes the air which they contain to be constrained and to pass out from them with an impetus by the windpipe, where it forms an inarticulate and explosive utterance; and the lungs in expanding equally with the air as it rushes out, set in motion all the muscles of the diaphragm from the chest to the neck, by which means they cause motion in the facial muscles, which have a certain connection with them. And it is just this action of the face with this inarticulate and explosive voice that we call laughter.

It is just this interruption of breath that distinguishes laughter from smiling, a revealing distinction which will be important for my sense of humour in the conclusion to this book (when all is said and done, it is the smile that interests me most). As a bodily phenomenon, laughter invites comparison with similar convulsive phenomena like orgasm and weeping. Indeed, like the latter, laughter is distinguished by what Helmuth Plessner calls 'A loss of self-control as the break between the person and their body' ('Verlust der Selbstbeherrschung als Bruch zwischen der Person und ihrem Körper').[9] In laughing violently, I lose self-control in a way that is akin to the moments of radical corporeal exposure that follow an orgasm or when crying turns into an uncontrollable sobbing.

Picking up on a word employed by Descartes, and used by a whole tradition extending to Charles Baudelaire, André Breton and Plessner, laughter is an *explosion* expressed with the body. In a lovely formulation, Kant speaks of 'die Schwingung der Organen', 'The oscillation of the organs'. When I laugh vigorously, I literally experience an oscillation or vibration of the organs, which is why it can hurt when you laugh, if you engage in it a little too enthusiastically. Of course, as Jacques Le Goff reminds us, the historical associations between laughter and the body cannot be overemphasized.[10] It is this link to the body that was the reason for the Christian condemnation of laughter in the early Middle Ages, its careful codification in the later Middle Ages, before the explosion of laughter in the early Renaissance, in the work of Rabelais and Erasmus.

CHANGING THE SITUATION

But is that an end to the matter? Hopefully not. For I want to claim that humour is not just comic relief, a transient corporeal affect induced by the raising and extinguishing of tension, of as little social consequence as masturbation, although slightly more acceptable to perform in public. I rather want to claim that what goes on in humour is a form of *liberation* or *elevation* that expresses something essential to what Plessner calls 'the humanity of the human'. We will have to wait until my final chapter, and in particular my use of Freud's conception of humour, before I can make good on this claim. But, as a provisional outline of the thought I am after, let me turn to the character of Eddie Waters, the philosopher-comedian from Trevor Griffiths's brilliant 1976 piece *Comedians*,

> A real comedian – that's a daring man. He *dares* to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what

> he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they *want*. A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to *liberate* the will and the desire, it has to *change the situation*.[11]

A true joke, a comedian's joke, suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extra-ordinary and the real rendered surreal, and we laugh in a physiological squeal of transient delight, like an infant playing peek-a-boo: nurse to uncooperative patient, 'We have to see if you have a temperature'; uncooperative patient to nurse, 'Don't be silly, *everybody* has a temperature'. Humour brings about a change of situation, a *surrealization* of the real which is why someone like the great surrealist André Breton was so interested in humour, in particular the unsentimental subversions of what he baptized 'l'humour noir'.[12]

This idea of a change of situation can be caught in Mary Douglas's claim that, 'A joke is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity'.[13] Thus, jokes are a play upon form, where what is played with are the accepted practices of a given society. The incongruities of humour both speak out of a massive congruence between joke structure and social structure, and speak against those structures by showing that they have no necessity. The anti-rite of the joke shows the sheer contingency or arbitrariness of the social rites in which we engage. By producing a consciousness of contingency, humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a *critical* function with respect to society. Hence the great

importance that humour has played in social movements that have set out to criticize the established order, such as radical feminist humour: 'How many men does it take to tile a bathroom?', 'I don't know', 'It depends how thinly you slice them'. As the Italian Situationist street slogan has it, 'Una risata vi seppellirà', it will be a laugh that buries you, where the 'you' refers to those in power. By laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed.

REACTIONARY HUMOUR

But before we get carried away, it is important to recognize that not all humour is of this type, and most of the best jokes are fairly reactionary or, at best, simply serve to reinforce social consensus. You will have noticed a couple of paragraphs back that, following Eddie Waters, I introduced the adjective 'true' into our discussion of humour. 'True' humour changes the situation, tells us something about who we are and the sort of place we live in, and perhaps indicates to us how it might be changed. This sounds very nice, but it presupposes a great deal. A number of items cry out for recognition here, some of which will be picked up in later chapters.

Most humour, in particular the comedy of recognition – and most humour *is* comedy of recognition – simply seeks to reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticize the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves. Such humour does not seek to change the situation, but simply toys with existing social hierarchies in a charming but quite benign fashion, as in P. G. Wodehouse's *The World of Jeeves*. This is the comic as sheer pleasing diversion, and it has an important place in any taxonomy of humour. More

egregiously, much humour seeks to confirm the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society, as in sexist humour, or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider. Thus, the British laugh at the Irish, the Canadians laugh at the Newfies, the Americans laugh at the Poles, the Swedes laugh at the Finns, the Germans laugh at the Ostfrieslanders, the Greeks laugh at the Pontians, the Czechs laugh at the Slovaks, the Russians laugh at the Ukrainians, the French laugh at the Belgians, the Dutch also laugh at the Belgians, and so on and so forth. Such comic scapegoating corresponds to what Hobbes means in suggesting that laughter is a feeling of sudden glory where I find another person ridiculous and laugh at their expense. Such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless.

The reactionary quality of much humour, in particular ethnic humour, must be analysed, which I will attempt in Chapter 4, where I claim that such humour lets us reflect upon the anxious nature of our thrownness in the world. What I mean by the latter is that in its 'untruth', as it were, reactionary humour tells us important truths about who we are. Jokes can therefore be read as symptoms of societal repression and their study might be said to amount to a return of the repressed. In other words, humour can reveal us to be persons that, frankly, we would really rather not be.

STRUCTURED FUN

Humour is being employed as a management tool by consultants – imagine, if you will, a company called 'Humour Solutions International' – who endeavour to show how it can produce greater cohesion amongst the workforce and thereby increase efficiency and productivity. This is beautifully caught in the slogan: 'laughter loves company and companies love laughter'. Some management consultants refer to such activity as 'structured fun', which includes innovations like 'inside out day', where all employees are asked to wear their clothes inside out, or 'silly hat day', which rather speaks for itself. Despite the backslapping bonhomie that such fun must inspire, it is difficult not to feel a little cynical about these endeavours, and the question that one wants to pose to the idea of 'structured fun' is: who is structuring the fun and for what end? Such enforced fun is a form of compulsory happiness, and it is tempting to see it as one further sign of the ways in which employees' private lives are being increasingly regulated by the interests of their employers.

I was recently in Atlanta, staying at a huge hotel, and had occasion to observe some structured fun from my breakfast table one morning. In one of the vast, anonymous, carpeted, windowless suites that pepper every large hotel in the USA, about fifty people from the same company were engaged in collective hopscotch, frisbee and kickball. It was quite a sight and much yelping and clapping was to be heard – the very soundtrack to happiness, I pondered. But looking at the sweating, slightly desperate faces of these mostly overweight grown-ups, one almost felt moved to tears. After breakfast, I found a huddle of employees standing outside, resolutely smoking in the Georgian January drizzle and we exchanged a few words. I was enormously reassured that they felt just as cynical about the whole business as I did, but one of them said that they did not want to appear to be a bad sport or a party pooper at work and that was why they went along with it. Also, he concluded, they were not really offered a choice. I think this incident is interesting for it reveals a vitally subversive feature of humour in the workplace. Namely, that as much as management consultants might try and formalize fun

for the benefit of the company, where the comic punch-line and the economic bottom line might be seen to blend, such fun is always capable of being ridiculed by informal, unofficial relations amongst employees, by backchat and salacious gossip. Anyone who has worked in a factory or office knows how the most scurrilous and usually obscene stories, songs and cartoons about the management are the very bread and butter of survival. Humour might well be a management tool but it is also a tool against the management.[14]

JOKES: GOOD, BAD AND GULLIVER

To talk, as I do, of true humour must presuppose some sort of normative claim, namely a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' jokes. However, such a claim must not be reduced to moral crispbread, but must be properly leavened and smeared with tasty examples. I will try and do this below when I make the distinction between *laughing at oneself* and *laughing at others*. In my view, true humour does not wound a specific victim and always contains self-mockery. The object of laughter is the subject who laughs. By way of preparation for this thought, we might cite a few of the closing lines from 'Verses on the Death of Dr Swift', an exquisitely bleak *apologia pro sua vita*,

> Perhaps I may allow the Dean
> Had too much satire in his vein;
> And seemed determined not to starve it,
> Because no age could more deserve it.
> Yet malice never was his aim;
> He lashed the vice but spared the name.
> No individual could resent,
> Where thousands equally were meant.
> His satire points at no defect,
> But what all mortals may correct;
> For he abhorred that senseless tribe,
> Who call it humour when they jibe:
> He spar'd a hump or crooked nose,
> Whose owners set not up for beaux.
> True genuine dullness moved his pity,
> Unless it offered to be witty.[15]

The critical task of humour, then, would not be sheer malice or jibing, but the lashing of vices which are general and not personal, 'no individual could resent,/Where thousands equally were meant'. Also, such lashing of vices does not point at a fundamental defect, 'But what all mortals may correct'. That is, true humour can be said to have a therapeutic as well as a critical function. The studied reversals of perspective and fantastical geographical displacements of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* offer, it is true, a devastating critique of the follies and vices of the modern European world, but the intent of the satire is therapeutic, to bring human beings back from what they have become to what they might be. Satire is often a question of scale, of the familiar becoming infinitely small or grotesquely huge, which can be seen in Gulliver's voyages from the littleness of Lilliput to the bigness of Brobdingnag. But, I would insist, from the studied savaging of modern mathematics, science and government in Laputa and the Academy of Lagado, through to the final descent into misanthropy caused by life with the fully rational animals of the land of the Houyhnhnms, Swift is offering a teaching of virtue that permits Gulliver and the rest of us to be reconciled to life amongst the vicious Yahoos. In my view, this is what Swift means when he complains to Alexander Pope in correspondence from 1725, 'I tell you after all that I do not hate mankind, it is *vous autres*

who hate them because you would have them reasonable animals, and are angry for being disappointed'.[16] For, after all, I am a Yahoo and you are too.

LAUGHTER'S MESSIANIC POWER

As well as being something of a revenge of the eighteenth century against the present, in this book I want to defend a two-fold claim: (i) that the tiny explosions of humour that we call jokes return us to a common, familiar world of shared practices, the background meanings implicit in a culture; and (ii) indicate how those practices might be transformed or perfected, how things might be otherwise. Humour both reveals the situation, and indicates how that situation might be changed. That is to say, laughter has a certain redemptive or messianic power. So, does this mean that true humour has to be religious?

The argumentation linking humour to religion is impeccable enough and much great comic writing is Christian, particularly when one thinks of Pope, Swift and Sterne. The briefest glance at M. A. Screech's *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* confirms the place of laughter in the Bible and in the self-understanding of Christianity through the ages.[17] From the standpoint of the worldly-wise, Christ appears to be a kind of madman. Where the world admires money, power and success, the Christian indifference to these values turns the secular world upside down. It is this folly of the cross that Erasmus understood so well, and which makes his *Praise of Folly* a powerful work of both comedy and confession. Christianity offers us a topsy-turvy world that inverts our worldly values. W. H. Auden is therefore quite right when he says that,

> The world of Laughter is much more closely related to the world of Prayer than either is to the everyday secular world of Work, for both are worlds in which we are all equal, in the first as individual members of our species, in the latter as unique persons. (. . .) In the world of Work, on the other hand, we are not and cannot be equal, only diverse and interdependent . . . those who try to live by Work alone, without Laughter or Prayer turn into insane lovers of power, tyrants who would enslave Nature to their immediate desires – an attempt which can only end in utter catastrophe, shipwreck on the isle of Sirens.[18]

If laughter lets us see the folly of the world in order to imagine a better world in its place, and to change the situation in which we find ourselves, then I have no objection to the religious interpretation of humour. True jokes would therefore be like shared prayers.

My quibble is rather the following: that the religious worldview invites us to look away from this world towards another in which, in Peter Berger's words, 'the limitations of the human condition are miraculously overcome'.[19] Humour lets us view the folly of the world by affording us the glimpse of another world, by offering what Berger calls 'a signal of transcendence'. However, in my view, humour does not redeem us from this world, but returns us to it ineluctably by showing that there is no alternative. The consolations of humour come from acknowledging that this is the only world and, imperfect as it is and we are, it is only here that we can make a difference. Therefore, the redemptive power of humour is not, as it is in Kierkegaard, the transition from the ethical to the religious point of view, where humour is the last stage of existential awareness before faith. Humour is not nuomenal but phenomenal, not theological but anthropological, not numinous but simply luminous. By showing us the folly of the world,

humour does not *save* us from that folly by turning our attention elsewhere, as it does in great Christian humour like Erasmus, but calls on us to face the folly of the world and change the situation in which we find ourselves.

SENSUS AND *DISSENSUS COMMUNIS*

Laughter is contagious – think of the intersubjectivity of giggling, particularly when it concerns something obscene in a context where one should be serious, such as listening to a formal academic paper. In such cases, and I am sure (or hope) that we all know them, the laughter can really hurt. One might say that the simple telling of a joke recalls us to what is shared in our everyday practices. It makes explicit the enormous commonality that is implicit in our social life. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 5, this is what Shaftesbury had in mind in the early eighteenth century when he spoke of humour as a form of *sensus communis*. So, humour reveals the depth of what we share. But, crucially, it does this not through the clumsiness of a theoretical description, but more quietly, practically and discreetly. Laughter suddenly breaks out in a bus queue, watching a party political broadcast in a pub, or when someone farts in a lift. Humour is an exemplary practice because it is a universal human activity that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives. It is practically enacted theory. I think this is why Wittgenstein once said that he could imagine a book of philosophy that would be written entirely in the form of jokes.

The extraordinary thing about humour is that it returns us to common sense; by distancing us from it, humour familiarizes us with a common world through its miniature strategies of defamiliarization. If humour recalls us to *sensus communis*, then it does this by momentarily pulling us out of common sense, where jokes function as moments of *dissensus communis*. At its most powerful, say in those insanely punning dialogues between Chico and Groucho Marx, humour is a paradoxical form of speech and action that defeats our expectations, producing laughter with its unexpected verbal inversions, contortions and explosions, a refusal of everyday speech that lights up the everyday, showing it, in Adorno's words, 'as it will one day appear in the messianic light'.[20] Some sundry examples:

1 'What'll I say?', 'Tell them you're not here', 'Suppose they don't believe me?', 'They'll believe you when you start talking'.
2 'Do you believe in the life to come?', 'Mine was always that'.
3 'Have you lived in Blackpool all your life?', 'Not yet'.
4 'Do me a favour and close the window, it's cold outside'. 'And if I close it, will that make it warm outside?'.
5 'Do you want to use a pen?', 'I can't write', 'That's OK, there wasn't any ink in it anyway'.
6 'Which of the following is the odd one out? Greed, envy, malice, anger and kindness'. (*Pause*) 'And'.
7 'Gentlemen, Chicolini here may talk like an idiot, and look like an idiot, but don't let that fool you. He really is an idiot. I implore you, send him back to his father and brothers who are waiting for him with open arms at the penitentiary. I suggest that we give him ten years at Leavenworth, or eleven years at Twelveworth'. 'I tell you what I'll do. I'll take five and ten at Woolworth'.[21]

TRISTRAM SHANDY, OR BACK TO THE THINGS THEMSELVES

To put it in a rather baroque formulation, humour changes the situation in which we find ourselves, or lights up the everyday by providing an 'oblique phenomenology of ordinary life'. The meaning of this claim will hopefully emerge as we proceed, but let me begin to illustrate it by recalling my epigraph from Epictetus, which itself provides the motto to Volumes 1 and 2 of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: 'Human beings are troubled with the opinions (*dogmata*) they have of things, and not by the things themselves (*pragmata*).' How is one to understand this epigraph in relation to Sterne's book? Tristram Shandy can evidently be viewed as an extended exploration of the fact that human beings are more troubled with *dogmata*, or their *hobby horses*, than with the things themselves. What Sterne calls 'the Shandian system' is entirely made up of digressions. For example, the digressions on the character and opinions of Mr Walter Shandy show him unable to view the world except through what Sterne calls his *hypotheses*: on names, on noses, on the best technique for birth in order to protect the delicate web of the cerebellum, and so on, and on, and on. And sweet Uncle Toby only sees things hobby-horsically through his obsession with the science of fortification and the attempt to reconstruct the precise dimensions of the siege of Namur where he received the terrible, but ever-obscure, blow to his groin.

Of course, the world viewed from a hobby-horsical, dogmatic perspective inevitably goes awry: Walter Shandy's son is given the wrong name, Tristram instead of Trismegistus, his nose is crushed following a forceps delivery, and the web of the cerebellum – seat of all wisdom – is irreparably crushed following a head-first birth. And I almost forgot to add that Tristram is inadvertently circumcised by a window sash. Uncle Toby exchanges his heroic campaigns with Corporal Trim on the bowling green for his *amours* with the Widow Wadman, which end in disenchantment when the good Corporal explains to Toby that Mrs Wadman's interest in the wound upon his groin is not simply born from compassion. As Sterne remarks, 'Endless is the quest for truth'.

Yet, where do all these digressions lead? What cosmic truth does the Shandian system reveal to us? Perhaps this: that through the meandering circumlocutions of *Tristram Shandy*, the story of 'a COCK and a BULL . . . and one of the best of its kind, I ever heard', we progressively approach the things themselves, the various *pragmata* that make up the stuff of what we call the ordinary life. That is to say, the infinitely digressive movement of Sterne's prose actually contains a contrary motion within it, which is progressive. We might think of this as a comic phenomenology which is animated by a concern for the things themselves, the things which show themselves when we get rid of our troubling opinions. Humourless dogmatism is replaced by humorous pragmatism. Although it is hardly a Cartesian discourse on the method, Sterne writes of his procedure in the book,

> For in this long digression which I was accidentally led into, as in all my digressions (one only excepted) there is a master-stroke of digressive skill, the merit of which has all along, I fear, been overlooked by my reader, – not for want of penetration in him – but because 'tis an excellence seldom looked for, or expected indeed, in a digression; – and that I fly off from what I am about, as far and as often as any writer in *Great Britain*; yet I constantly take care to order affairs so, that my main business does not stand still in my absence (. . .)

> By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, – and at the same time.[22]

This is why, to recall my earlier citation from Sterne, digressions are the sunshine, the life and the soul of reading, 'take them out of this book for instance, – and you might as well take the book along with them'. Inasmuch as the book digresses, it also progresses by a contrary motion. In my view, it is this combination of these two contrary motions – progressive and digressive – that is at the heart of humour. That is to say, through the endless displacement of seeing the world through another's hobby horse, through the eyes of a Walter or a Toby Shandy, one is brought closer to the things themselves, to the finally laughable enigma of ordinary life.