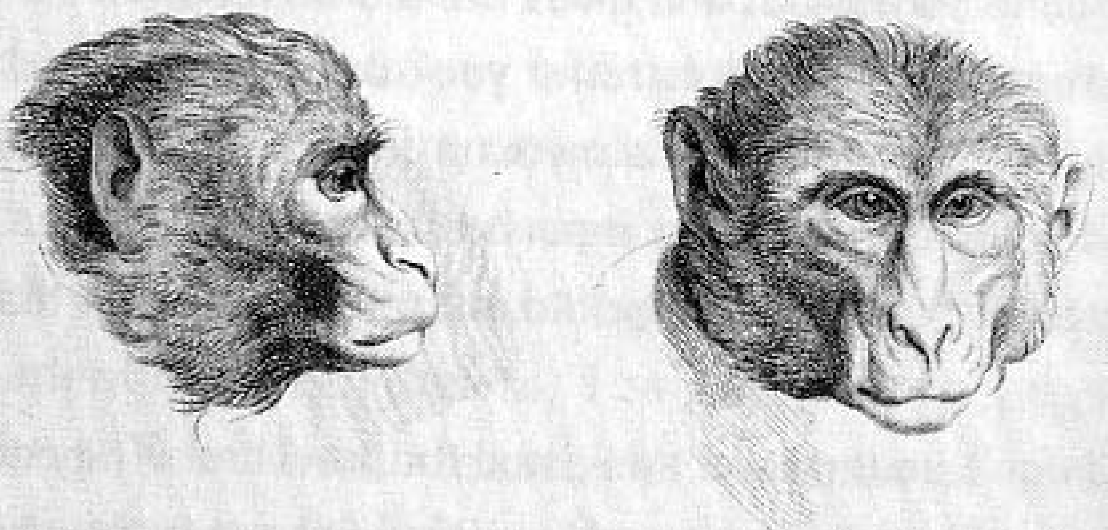

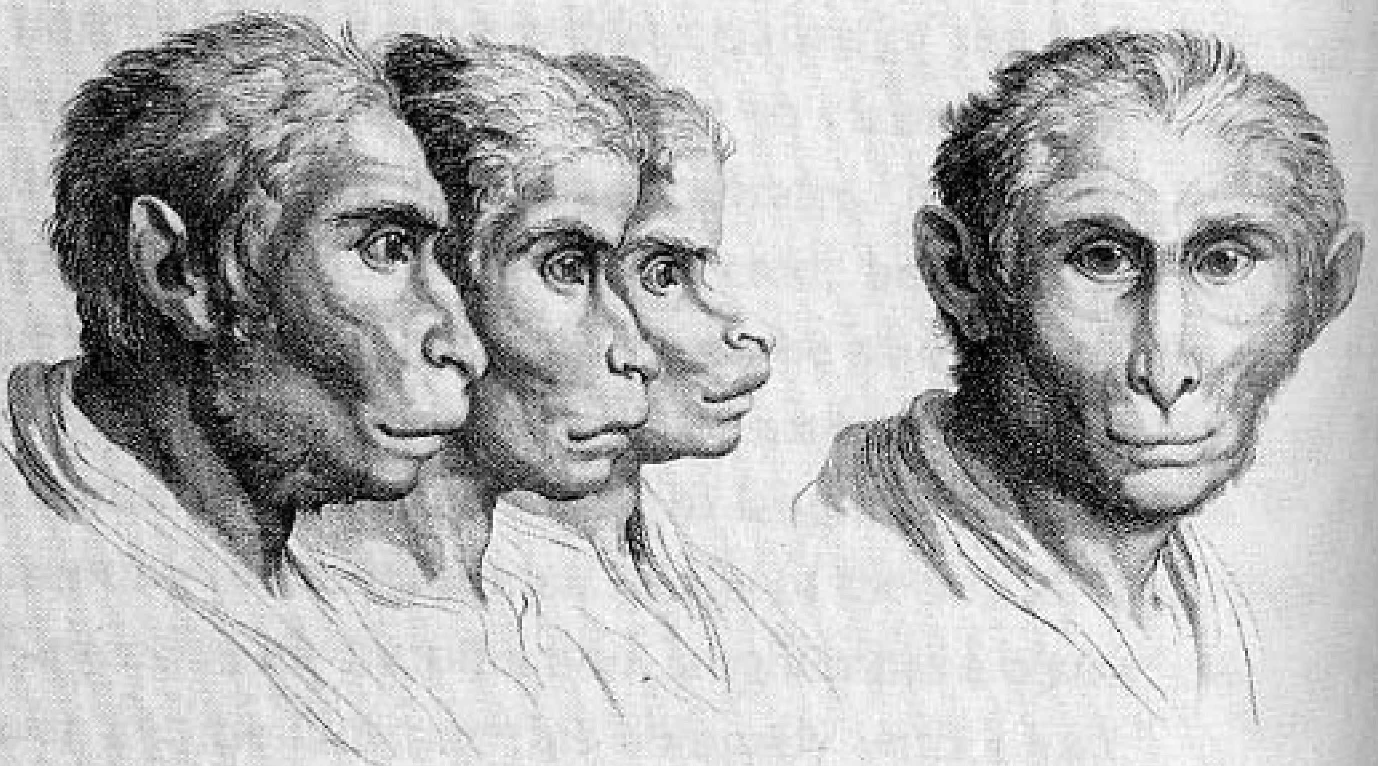

Two heads of monkeys and four heads of men in relation to the monkey
Source: Cnac-Mnam/Dist RMN. Charles Le Brun

Seven

Why the Super-Ego is Your Amigo – My Sense of Humour and Freud's

Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as is fitting, the most cheerful.

Nietzsche

In his seventy-fifth year, looking back nearly a third of a century to the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, Freud wrote, 'Insight such as this falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime'.[1] Unfortunately for his readers, Freud could not leave that insight alone throughout his lifetime. He kept fretfully going back to his *magnum opus*, fiddling with it anxiously, revising, expanding and adding sections, multiplying footnotes. This is what gives the book its rather flabby feel, which makes it, in my experience, a difficult though rewarding text to teach. One of the curious things about the 1905 *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, is that Freud never really went back to it, or indeed expressed that much interest in its main topic in the years after its publication. Oddly, given that topic, the *Jokebook* is arguably the most systematic of Freud's works, with a neat and clear tripartite division into 'analytic', 'synthetic' and 'theoretic' parts. Contrary to popular prejudice, it is also full of wonderful, if occasionally objectionable, jokes: 'what is it that men do standing up, women do sitting down and dogs do on three legs?' (I presume you know the answer.) So, it was after a gap of some twenty-two years that Freud sat down for five days in August 1927 to pen a paper on humour,

simply called 'Der Humor'.[2] Now, as even professional anti-Freudians acknowledge, quite a bit happened to Freud's views during the intervening twenty-odd years. Thus, much of the curiosity of the 1927 paper stems from how the phenomenon of the comic looks from the perspective of Freud's later theory of mind, namely what is called the second topography of ego, super-ego and id. So, how does it look?

FINDING ONESELF RIDICULOUS

With the telegraphic conciseness of his late style, Freud shows how the phenomenon of humour is the contribution made to the comic by the super-ego. Recall that the thesis of the *Jokebook* is that jokes are the contribution of the unconscious to the comic. What this means is that in humour, the super-ego observes the ego from an inflated position, which makes the ego itself look tiny and trivial. The core insight of the paper is that in humour I find myself ridiculous and I acknowledge this in laughter or simply in a smile. Humour is essentially self-mocking ridicule. The importance of this claim for my purposes is that Freud's sense of humour provides me with the normative criterion for my own sense of humour: namely, the distinction between laughing at oneself and laughing at others. As we saw in the discussion of ethnic humour, laughing at others has to be recognized, but is not to be recommended.

As always when he is at his best, Freud is detained and perplexed by an empirical item, in this case a joke, a case of what André Breton would call at the end of the 1930s, directly inspired by the 1927 paper, *l'humour noir*. In a real sense, all Freudian humour – indeed, all humour – is replete with the unhappy black bile, the *melan-cholia*. Freud speaks of a criminal who, on the morning of his execution, is being led out to the gallows to be hanged, and who remarks, looking up at the sky, 'Na, die Woche fängt gut an', 'Well, the week's beginning nicely'.[3] Freud asks himself: why is this funny? How is this funny? In the language of the second topography, the humour here is generated by the super-ego observing the ego, which produces *un humour noir* that is not depressing but rather liberating and elevating. Freud's precise words are *befreiend, erhebend*. He concludes the little essay on humour with the following words, 'Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children, just worth making a jest about'.[4]

So, humour consists in laughing at oneself, in finding oneself ridiculous, and such humour is not depressing, but on the contrary gives us a sense of emancipation, consolation and childlike elevation. The childlike aspects of humour are important and serve to bring out an interesting contrast between Freud's sense of humour and his early theory of jokes. He writes,

> Humour possesses a dignity which is wholly lacking, for instance, in jokes, for jokes either serve simply to obtain a yield of pleasure or place the yield of pleasure that has been obtained in the service of aggression.[5]

Freud is here unwittingly inheriting the Hobbesian tradition of the superiority theory of laughter discussed above. For Freud, Oedipalist that he was, the core of this superiority theory of laughter consists in the fact that in laughing at another's misfortune, I treat them as a child and myself as an adult.

Now, in adopting a humorous attitude towards myself it is precisely the other way around: I treat myself as a child from an adult perspective; I look at my childlike, diminutive ego

from the standpoint of the big, grown-up super-ego. And it is for this reason that Freud says that humour possesses a dignity or worth, *eine Würde*, that is lacking in jokes. That is, in jokes I laugh at others, find them ridiculous and myself superior. From a Freudian point of view, such laughter has to be analysed because it reveals all sorts of unresolved psychological conflict which ultimately – surprise, surprise – has a sexual aetiology. Thus, my excessively hearty laughter in the bar with the boys at a series of aggressively homophobic gags would be read by Freud symptomatically as the expression of a repressed desire to sleep with some or maybe all of those boys. Such laughter has to be analysed because it tells us much about the nature of unconscious aggression, but Freud is clear that it is not to be recommended. Therefore, humour for Freud – and in my view he is right in this – is ethically superior to the laughter of superiority expressed in jokes: laughter at oneself is better than laughter at others. This normative priority of humour over jokes can also be linked, as we will see presently, to the priority of smiling over laughter.

SUBJECT AS ABJECT OBJECT

So, how does humour fit into the landscape of the second topography and how, as I think it does, might humour be said to change that landscape? Let us conduct a brief survey of the terrain. In my view, the key insight that inaugurates the second topography is the splitting of the ego initially outlined in Freud's 1914 essay, 'On narcissism: an introduction'. But, for reasons that will soon become obvious, let me explain this briefly with reference to Freud's discussion of melancholia from the following year. About five pages into 'Mourning and melancholia', Freud speculates on the origin of conscience. He writes of the depressive that,

> We see how in him one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object. Our suspicion that the critical agency which is here split off from the ego might also show its independence in other circumstances will be confirmed by every further observation. We shall really find grounds for distinguishing this agency from the rest of the ego. What we are here becoming acquainted with is the agency commonly called 'conscience'; we shall count it, along with the censorship of consciousness and reality-testing, among the major institutions of the ego and we shall come upon evidence that it can become diseased on its own account.[6]

Freud here resolves a perplexity sketched earlier in the essay: namely, that if mourning is the response to the death of the beloved – what he somewhat cruelly calls 'object-loss' – then to what is melancholia a response, given that no one has died, that is, seemingly there was no object to lose? This perplexity is resolved by the fact that in melancholy the 'ego itself becomes an object'. What this means is that there is a splitting in the ego between the ego and a critical agency, the *Über-Ich*, the 'over-I' or 'super-ego' that stands over against the *Ich*, sadistically denigrating it. This is what Freud calls 'conscience', *das Gewissen*, the etymological semantics of which resonate in the Middle English notion of 'Inwit', recalled by Joyce, alluding to Langland, as the 'Agenbite of Inwit', the again-biting or guilty call of conscience. Thus the ego does not only become an object, it becomes what we might call *an abject object*, and it is with this insight that the third agency of the psyche, the super-ego, is born.

The subject becomes an abject object, and when the melancholic talks about himself it is as though he were talking

about some loathsome thing. This is why melancholics talk so obsessively about themselves; in a sense, they are talking about somebody else. If they experience themselves as worthless, then they do this in the noisiest and most wearisome way. One is reminded of Woody Allen's endless monologues, where he complains about himself in the most voluble manner, a technique of self-objectification and splitting of the ego brought to dramatic perfection in *Play it Again Sam*, where the super-ego who lacerates and consoles the abject Allen ego is literally objectified in the person of Humphrey Bogart.

MELANCHOLY PHILOSOPHERS

Now, whatever the reality of the accusations that the melancholic levels against himself – and an essential feature of Woody Allen's comedy is their obvious unreality – Freud concludes that there is no point contradicting him. We must accept his description as the right one for his psychological situation. Furthermore, Freud goes on in an interesting move, the melancholic might after all be *justified* in these accusations; namely, that he has achieved a higher degree of self-knowledge than the rest of us. Freud writes,

> When in his heightened self-criticism he describes himself as petty, egoistic, dishonest, lacking in independence, one whose sole aim has been to hide the weaknesses of his own nature, it may be, so far as we know, that he has come pretty near to understanding himself; we only wonder why a man has to be ill before he can be accessible to a truth of this kind.[7]

In short, the melancholic has deeper self-knowledge than other people, which raises the fascinating question as to why one should have to be sick to possess such insight. As Aristotle realized some millennia ago, the melancholic is a philosopher and the philosopher is a melancholic. One begins to compile a list of philosopher-melancholics with the names of Montaigne and Pascal scribbled at the top, but which would also include many others, perhaps even some of this book's readers. Freud illustrates the pathology of the philosopher-melancholic with the example of Hamlet, whose abjection is mirrored in the ghostly object of his father. We might also think of Dostoevsky's underground man as the paradigm case of melancholic self-insight. Freud wrote his fascinating study of Dostoevsky in the same year as his paper on humour, in 1927, where the super-ego and the parricidal identification with the father figures prominently.[8]

As Wittgenstein often reminds us, philosophy is indeed a kind of sickness. But perhaps the sickest thought is the belief that there is a cure for this malady through some spurious return to health, whether by simply leaving one's college and taking a walk into town, or by renouncing philosophy altogether and wandering back into the thickets of common sense. The melancholic philosophical ego is constituted in relation to what Freud calls 'an unknown loss', a narcissistic wound that imperceptibly rubs under one's clothes, irritating and agitating the ego. Because of this wound, the philosopher-melancholic – and one thinks of the late Nietzsche of *Ecce Homo* with chapters entitled 'Why I am so clever', 'Why I am a destiny' – experiences himself in a radical non-self-coincidence, as an abject object. This is why a sense of humour is essential in philosophy.

MANIC INTOXICATION

Melancholy shares many traits with normal mourning, apart from one, namely the loss of self-regard and the accompanying

feeling of worthlessness. This is diagnosed by Freud as a regression from what he calls 'object libido' to 'narcissistic libido', that is to say, from a relation to a beloved to a relation to self. It is this regression that splits the ego and produces conscience or the super-ego. The originality of the phenomenon of melancholy is that once investment or 'cathexis' in the object has been withdrawn, then the poles of subject and object are interior to the ego, or rather they are poles of a splitting in the ego where the latter itself becomes the object that is hated and treated sadistically. At this point, my self-insight and self-criticism can turn into the much nastier phenomena of self-hatred, and self-punishment.

In the 1915 essay, the escape from the self-hatred of melancholia lies in its counter-concept, *mania*. Freud writes, 'The most remarkable characteristic of melancholia . . . is its tendency to change around into mania'.[9] Here we have a classic example of what Freud describes in his essay on the drives – which is the first in the series of papers of which 'Mourning and melancholia' is the last – as an instinctual vicissitude, where something reverses into its opposite, the way love can flip over into hate, sadism into masochism, voyeurism into exhibitionism.[10] As such, mania is the same as melancholia insofar as they are opposed manifestations of the same complex, the only difference being that in melancholy the ego succumbs to the complex, whereas in mania it pushes it aside. Freud insists that manic states such as joy, exaltation and triumph depend on the samé psychical energy as melancholia. Freud's 'economic' speculation is that the discharge of energy which is suddenly available and free in mania and experienced as exaltation and joy, is the same energy that was bound and inhibited in melancholia. The point here is that melancholia and mania are two ends of the same piece of string, and the

relation between them is powerfully ambivalent. Melancholia can alternate with mania, sometimes within a single evening. Interestingly, this is Freud's explanation of alcoholic intoxication, where the manic elation of drunkenness is followed by the melancholy self-laceration of the hangover – a claim that I am sure that some of you have tested empirically.

HUMOUR AS ANTI-DEPRESSANT

After having now surveyed the second topography a little, let me go back to the paper on humour in order to see how that landscape might be reshaped a little. In 1927, looking over his shoulder to the arguments of the 1915 essay, Freud writes of 'The alternation (*die Abwechslung*) between melancholia and mania, between a cruel suppression of the ego by the super-ego and a liberation of the ego after that pressure . . .'. And it is here that the originality of the paper on humour can be seen, for Freud's remarks on humour constitute an unexpected development of the internal logic of narcissism which finds a positive place for the super-ego. The narcissistic splitting of the ego does not only produce the alternating pathologies of melancholia and mania, with their endless to and fro, but also produces humour – dark, sardonic, wicked humour: 'well, the week's beginning nicely'. In addition to the self-laceration of depression and the self-forgetfulness of elation – the morning after and the night before, as it were – there is a third way, namely humour. Humour has the same formal structure as depression, but it is an anti-depressant that works by the ego finding itself ridiculous. This can be illustrated with a favourite joke of Groucho Marx, which he relates in his autobiography,

> I'm sure most of you have heard the story of the man who tells an analyst he has lost the will to live. The doctor advises the melancholy figure to go to the circus that night

> and spend the evening laughing at Grock, the world's funniest clown. 'After you have seen Grock, I am sure you will be much happier.' The patient rises to his feet and looks sadly at the doctor. As he starts to leave the doctor says, 'By the way, what is your name?' The man turns and regards the analyst with sorrowful eyes.
>
> 'I am Grock.'[11]

The subject looks at itself like an abject object and instead of weeping bitter tears, it laughs at itself and finds consolation therein. Humour is an anti-depressant that does not work by deadening the ego in some sort of Prozac-induced daze, but is rather a relation of self-knowledge. Humour is often dark, but always lucid. It is a profoundly *cognitive* relation to oneself and the world.

I would argue that humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement*, not Promethean authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity.[12] Maybe, we have to conclude with Jack Nicholson in the 1997 movie of the same name, this is as good as it gets. And that realization is not an occasion for moroseness but mirth. The anti-depressant of humour works by finding an alternative, positive function for the super-ego, and it is this thought that I would like to explore.

SUPER-EGO I AND II

Some versions of psychoanalysis, and most versions of the ethics of psychoanalysis, have a problem with the super-ego. This is not surprising as it is the super-ego that generates the hostility towards the ego that crystallizes into the symptom. It is the position of the lacerating super-ego that the analyst has to occupy if the analysis is going to proceed with any success. Thus, the patient has to substitute the destructive relation towards the super-ego with a positive transference towards the analyst in order to break down the symptom. In the penultimate paragraph of the paper on humour, Freud acknowledges that 'In other connections we knew the super-ego as a severe master'. However – and this is what is so interesting about the 1927 paper – what is evinced or glimpsed in humour is a non-hostile super-ego, a super-ego that has undergone what we might call 'maturation', a maturity that comes from learning to laugh at oneself, from finding oneself ridiculous. We might say that in humour the childlike super-ego that experiences parental prohibition and Oedipal guilt is replaced with a more grown up super-ego, let us call it 'super-ego II'. Now, this super-ego is your amigo. Freud writes in the final paragraph of the 1927 paper,

> If it is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this will teach us that we still have a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego.[13]

True enough, Freud and his commentators have said many inconsistent things about the super-ego. My point, however, is simple: in humour, we see the profile of 'super-ego II', a super-ego which does not lacerate the ego, but speaks to it words of consolation. This is a positive super-ego that liberates and elevates by allowing the ego to find itself ridiculous. If 'super-ego I' is the prohibiting parent, scolding the child, then 'super-ego II' is the comforting parent. Or better still, 'super-ego II' is the child that has become the parent: wiser and wittier, if slightly wizened.

IDEAL SICKNESS

Yet, if that is so, then is 'super-ego II' not playing the role normally given to what Freud calls 'the ego ideal'? No, it is not. And I think we need to distinguish the super-ego from the ego ideal, a distinction that was not always respected by Freud. After initially distinguishing the ego ideal from the critical agency of conscience in the 1914 essay on narcissism, he came to identify the ego ideal with what was baptized the super-ego from 1923 onwards in *The Ego and the Id*. So, how should the distinction be made? I think that Annie Reich gets it about right in saying that 'The ego ideal represents what one wishes to be, the super-ego what one ought to be'.[14] That is, the ego ideal is the phantasy of a wish that I would like to see fulfilled. By contrast, the super-ego is a more normative agency which tells me what I should be, which is something which might most often simply conflict with the ego ideal. For example, I might still wish to play soccer for Liverpool FC, but I know that I really should carry out my duties as a philosophy professor. The ego ideal is the heir to what Freud calls 'primary narcissism', that is, the infantile illusion of omnipotence and the blissful feelings bound up with it. On a psychoanalytic view, the function of perversion is to bridge the gap between the ego and the ego ideal and, as it were, to restore the God-like majesty of the baby. The ego ideal is centred on the infantile belief that I am superman, I am a destiny, or am just somehow rather special. Such is what Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel calls 'the malady of the ideal', a sickness with which we are all more or less afflicted.

By contrast, the super-ego is not the heir to primary narcissism, but to the Oedipus complex, and the parental or symbolic prohibition to which the resolution of the complex gives rise. It can be a very severe master. My claim is that, on the one hand, humour makes the super-ego a less severe master, permitting a maturation of the super-ego function that can have extremely salutary effects. On the other hand, I think that 'super-ego II' is what takes the place of the ego ideal, and all the fantasies of primary narcissism: perversion, ecstasy, superman affirmation, fusion with God or your essential self, and a legion of other chimeras. Finally, perhaps it is the super-ego that saves the human being from tragic hybris, from the Promethean fantasy of believing oneself omnipotent, and it does this through humour. For, I am Grock, and you are too. Chasseguet-Smirgel writes,

> To accept the super-ego is to place oneself within a tradition, to become a link in a chain, to resign oneself also to being a human being. To be a superman is to refuse all that en bloc, that is, to refuse the human condition.[15]

LAUGHTER I AND II

Our self-understanding can be transformed, then, if we learn to laugh. But there is laughter *and* laughter. On the one hand, there is the laughter of what Nietzsche calls 'eternal return', the golden laughter of tragic affirmation, that so influenced Georges Bataille and his epigones.[16] This is the heroic laughter that rails in the face of the firing squad – 'Go ahead, shoot me, I don't care'. This is the laughter that I always suspect of emanating from the mountain tops, from the cool summits of lofty isolation. This is precisely a *manic* laughter in Freud's sense: solitary, juvenile, perverse, verging on sobbing. This is the ego bloated and triumphant in empty solitude and infantile dreams of omnipotence. As Beckett quips in his *Proust*, ' "Live dangerously", that victorious hiccup in vacuo, as the national anthem of the true ego exiled in habit'.[17] 'Live dangerously',

what does that mean? At best, you might end up like Austin – Danger is my middle name – Powers.

On the other hand, there is a weaker Freudian laughter, that is also, as my epigraph shows, present in Nietzsche. Such laughter insists that life is not something to be affirmed ecstatically, but acknowledged comically. This is the sardonic and more sarcastic comedy of someone like Sterne, Swift or Beckett, which arises out of a palpable sense of inability, impotence and inauthenticity. For me at least – although there is no accounting for taste – it is this second laughter that is more joyful (not to mention being a lot funnier), and also more tragic. As Beckett's Malone remarks, paralysed in his death-bed, 'If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window. But perhaps it is the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought.' This is quintessentially oxymoronic Beckett: the condition of possibility for the hypothesis 'if . . . then . . .' is an impossibility. Beckett's sentences proceed by falling apart in what he calls his 'syntax of weakness'. As I suggested above, this is a comic syntax: Groucho with his hand on Chico's pulse, 'either this man is dead or my watch has stopped'.

Let me give you two examples of a Freudian sense of humour with a pair of anecdotes: one concerns the French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, the other concerns the Hungarian philosopher and aesthetician, György Lukács. As many of you will know, Lukács was not a great admirer of the work of Franz Kafka, whom he declared to be an 'idealist' and a bad example of decadent aesthetic modernism. Now, Lukács was Minister of Culture in the Hungarian government in 1956, at the moment when the Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest. Lukács was arrested in the middle of the night and thrown into a military lorry along with other government officials. The lorry then disappeared off into the obscurity of the countryside for an appointment with an unknown but probably unsavoury fate. So the story goes, Lukács turned to one of the other ministers and said in German, 'Tja, Kafka war doch ein Realist' ('Kafka was a realist after all'). The essential feature of this joke is that in this situation, which is extremely bleak, Lukács ironizes himself. The humour consists in the fact that Lukács finds himself ridiculous because reality has conspired to bring about a situation which directly contradicts his aesthetic judgement, something which he admits willingly. It is similar in the second story, even if the situation is somewhat more quotidian. A French colleague of mine, Alain David, was taking tea with Levinas at the latter's apartment on the Rue Michel-Ange in Paris. After having finished their first cup of tea, Alain David asked, 'Monsieur, est-ce que vous en voulez une autre?', and Levinas answered, 'Non merci, je suis mono-thé-iste'. Once again, the essential feature of the joke is that Levinas was indeed a rather observant monotheist. Thus, the humour is here directed by Levinas against himself, he finds himself ridiculous. Both these anecdotes remind me of the great Tommy Cooper gag, 'So I got home, and the phone was ringing. I picked it up, and said "Who's speaking please?" And a voice said "You are"'.

SMILING – THE MIND'S MIME

Such anecdotes, it is true, make us laugh out loud. But when they are recalled or ruminated upon they also cause us to smile ruefully, even wistfully. It is this smile of knowing self-mockery and self-ridicule that interests me and that I would like to discuss in closing. George Meredith writes of, 'that slim feasting smile, shaped like a long-bow, was once a big round satyr's laugh'. Yet, it is this finely tempered smile that is, for him, the

'sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity'.[18] In an aphorism entitled 'Laughter and smiling', Nietzsche makes an analogous point,

> The more joyful and certain the mind becomes, the more we learn to forget loud laughter and put in its place a continual spirited smiling, a sign of its astonishment at the countless hidden comforts of a good existence.[19]

In many languages, smiling is a diminutive of laughter. In Latin, one distinguishes *ridere* from *subridere*, laughter from sub- or under-laughter. The same is true in French and Italian: *rire* and *sourire*, *ridere* and *sorridere*. In German, one has the distinction between *das Lachen* and *das Lächeln*, or 'little laughter'. This is also present in Swedish in the distinction between *skratta* and *småskratta*, and elsewhere. In English, being the bastard bunch that we are, 'laughter' comes from the shared old Germanic root, whilst 'smile' comes from the Danish *smile* or *smila*, which also means 'small laugh'.

Smiling differs from laughter because it lacks the latter's explosiveness. It is silent and subdued. The smile speaks, but not out loud. Its eloquence is reticent. The noisy physicality of laughter is substituted by a more gentle play of the facial features. The simple creasing of the lines around the eyes and mouth in smiling at once deepens, softens and opens the face. Smiling is comic relief that throws the face into relief, signifying a break in our usual flow of inhibitions. A smile, it is true, can mark the beginning or end of a laugh, but it can also take its place. Physical existence is framed by the smile of a new born baby and that which follows our death-throes.

Although he does not actually mention smiling, Freud notes that 'It is true that humorous pleasure never reaches the intensity of the pleasure in the comic or in jokes, that it never finds vent in hearty laughter'.[20] So, the yield of pleasure in humour is quite small. It is certainly not the buffonic back-slapping Rabelaisian guffaw of the carnivalesque, but rather the modesty of the chuckle or the humble smirk. Yet, for me, it is the smile that is powerfully emblematic of the human, the quiet acknowledgement of one's limitedness.

In a wonderful essay, Plessner calls smiling the mind's mime, *die Mimik des Geistes*.[21] What he means by this is that smiling, like thinking, assumes a certain distance from one's immediate surroundings and even from one's body, as we saw above. There is restraint and discretion in the smile. It is an expression that takes up a certain distance from expression – a diminutive expression. As such, I would wager, a smile is the mark of the eccentricity of the human situation: between beasts and angels, between being and having, between the physical and the metaphysical. We are thoroughly material beings that are unable to *be* that materiality. Such is the curse of reflection, but such also is the source of our dignity. Humour is the daily bread of that dignity.

THE *RISUS PURUS*

I shall leave the final words to Beckett, whose early hero Belacqua counted all the smiles in Dante's *Commedia*. Now, there are many significant smiles in Beckett.[22] For example, in *Watt*, our hero is described in terms which echo my discussion of peditological humour,

> Watt's smile was further peculiar in this, that it seldom came singly, but was followed after a short time by another, less pronounced it is true. In this it resembled the fart. And it even sometimes happened that a third, very weak and fleeting, was found necessary, before the face could be at

rest again. But this was rare. And it will be a long time now before Watt smiles again, unless something very unexpected turns up, to upset him.[23]

Again, in *Molloy* where Moran is hallucinating Youdi's words to Gaber,

Gaber, Gaber, he said, life is a thing of beauty, Gaber, and a joy for ever. He brought his face nearer mine. A joy for ever, he said, a thing of beauty, Moran, and a joy for ever. He smiled. I closed my eyes. Smiles are all very nice in their own way, very heartening, but at a reasonable distance. I said, Do you think he meant human life?[24]

One also thinks of the broad smile, 'toothless for preference', that cuts across the listener's face at the end of the 1976 dramatic piece 'That Time'.[25] But perhaps the most intriguing smile does not belong to one of Beckett's 'gallery of moribunds', but to Beckett himself. It is taken from a non-fictional text that was written for Radio Éireann (although there is no record of it ever having been broadcast) in June 1946. Beckett reflects upon his experiences working in an Irish Red Cross hospital in St-Lô, Normandy, after the devastation of the D-Day landings. After an intense Allied bombardment, St-Lô changed hands between the Germans and the Americans for six weeks and was referred to by the locals as 'the capital of the ruins'. Towards the end of the account, Beckett writes,

What was important was not our having penicillin when they had none, nor the unregarding munificence of the French Ministry of Reconstruction (as it was then called), but the occasional glimpse obtained, by us in them and, who knows, by them in us (for they are an imaginative people), of that smile at the human conditions as little to be extinguished by bombs as to be broadened by the elixirs of Burroughs and Welcome, – the smile deriding, among other things, the having and the not having, the giving and the taking, sickness and health.[26]

For me, it is this smile – deriding the having and the not having, the pleasure and the pain, the sublimity and suffering of the human situation – that is the essence of humour. This is the *risus purus*, the highest laugh, the laugh that laughs at the laugh, that laughs at that which is unhappy, the mirthless laugh of the epigraph to this book. Yet, this smile does not bring unhappiness, but rather elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation. This is why, melancholy animals that we are, human beings are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness.