

Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic

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I

What does laughter mean? What is the basic element in the laughable? What common ground can we find between the (clown's) grimace, a play upon words, an equivocal situation in a burlesque (sketch) and a scene of high comedy? What method of distillation will yield us...the same essence from... so many different products...? The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a...challenge flung at philosophic speculation.

Our excuse for attacking the problem... must lie in the fact that we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing...we shall treat it with the respect due to life. We shall confine ourselves to watching it grow and expand.Maybe we may gain from this prolonged contact.... something more flexible than an abstract definition,--a practical, intimate acquaintance, such as springs from a long companionship. And maybe we may also find that, unintentionally, we have made an acquaintance that is useful.

For the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness. It dreams, I admit, but it conjures up, in its dreams, visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group. Can it then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination? Begotten of real life

and akin to art, should it not also have something of its own to tell us about art and life?

WHERE DO WE LOOK?

At the outset we shall put forward three observations which we look upon as fundamental. They have less bearing on the actually comic than on the field within which it must be sought.

1. HUMAN

The first point to which attention should be called is that **the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it...**

It is strange that so important a fact, and such a simple one too, has not attracted to a greater degree the attention of philosophers. **Several (philosophers) have defined man as “an animal which laughs.” They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same**

effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to.

2. ABSENCE OF FEELING

Here I would point out...the ABSENCE OF FEELING which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell... on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion.

I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection (aside) and impose silence upon our pity.

In a society composed of pure intelligences there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter; whereas highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter. Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said and done; act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel... give your sympathy its widest expansion:...Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy. It is enough for us to stop our ears to the sound of music, in a room where dancing is

going on, for the dancers at once to appear ridiculous. How many human actions would stand a similar test? Should we not see many of them suddenly pass from grave to gay, on isolating them from the accompanying music of sentiment? **To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.**

3. SOCIAL

This intelligence, however, must always remain in touch with other intelligences. And here is the third fact to which attention should be drawn. You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo...Our laughter is always the laughter of a group. It may, perchance, have happened to you, when seated in a railway carriage... to hear travellers (telling) one another stories which must have been comic to them, for they laughed heartily. Had you been one of their company, you would have laughed like them; but, as you were not, you had no desire whatever to do so. A man who was once asked why he did not weep at a sermon, when everybody else was shedding tears, replied: "I don't belong to the parish!" What that man thought of tears would be still more true of laughter. **However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary.**

How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and

ideas of a particular social group! To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one.

Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a SOCIAL signification.

POINT OF CONVERGENCE

Let us clearly mark the point towards which our three preliminary observations are converging.

The comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence.

What, now, is the particular point on which their attention will have to be concentrated, and what will here be the function of intelligence? To reply to these questions will be at once to come to closer grips with the problem. But here a few examples have become indispensable.

II

ACCIDENTAL COMEDY From EXTERNAL CAUSES

RIGIDITY and MOMENTUM

A man, running along the street, stumbles and falls; the passers-by burst out laughing. They would not laugh at him, I imagine, could they suppose that the whim had suddenly seized him to sit down on the ground. They laugh because his sitting down is involuntary.

Consequently, it is not his sudden change of attitude that raises a laugh, but rather the involuntary element in this change,--his clumsiness, in fact. Perhaps there was a stone on the road. He should have altered his pace or avoided the obstacle. Instead of that, **through lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, AS A RESULT, IN FACT, OF RIGIDITY OR OF MOMENTUM, the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else. That is the reason of the man's fall, and also of the people's laughter.**

MECHANICAL INELASTICITY

Now, take the case of a person who attends to the petty occupations of his everyday life with mathematical precision. The objects around him, however, have all been tampered with by a mischievous wag, the result being that when he dips his pen into the inkstand he draws it out all covered with mud, when he fancies he is sitting down on a solid chair he finds himself sprawling on the floor.... in every case the effect is invariably one of momentum. Habit has given the impulse: what was wanted was to (arrest) the movement or deflect it. He did nothing of the sort, but continued like a machine in the same straight line. **The victim, then, of a practical joke is in**

a position similar to that of a runner who falls,--he is comic for the same reason. The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain MECHANICAL INELASTICITY, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living (flexibility) of a human being.

The only difference in the two cases is that the former happened of itself, whilst the latter was obtained artificially. In the first instance, the passer-by does nothing but look on, but in the second the mischievous wag intervenes.

All the same, in both cases the result has been brought about by an external circumstance. The comic is therefore accidental: it remains, so to speak, in superficial contact with the person.

COMEDY from INTERNAL CAUSES

How is it to penetrate within?Suppose... we imagine a mind always thinking of what it has just done and never of what it is doing, like a song which lags behind its accompaniment. Let us try to picture to ourselves a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence, which (causes us to) continue to see what is no longer visible, to hear what is no longer audible, to say what is no longer to the point: ... to adapt ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present. This time the comic (resides) in the person himself;

it is the person who will supply it with everything--matter and form, cause and opportunity. Is it then surprising that the absent-minded individual--for this is the character we have just been describing-- has usually fired the imagination of comic authors?.....

NATURAL CAUSES which INCREASE COMIC EFFECT

There is a general law, the first example of which we have just encountered, and which we will formulate in the following terms: **when a certain comic effect has its origin in a certain cause, the more natural we regard the cause to be, the more comic shall we find the effect.** Even now we laugh at absentmindedness when presented to us as a simple fact. Still more laughable will be the absentmindedness we have seen springing up and growing before our very eyes, with whose origin we are acquainted and whose life- history we can reconstruct. To choose a definite example: suppose a man has taken to reading nothing but romances of love and chivalry. Attracted and fascinated by his heroes, his thoughts and intentions gradually turn more and more towards them, till one... day we find him (sleep-walking) among us . His actions are distractions. But...his distractions can be traced back to a definite... cause. They are not...cases of (simple) ABSENCE of mind,... they find their explanation in the PRESENCE of the individual in quite definite, though imaginary, surroundings. **Doubtless a fall is always a fall, but it is one thing to tumble into a well because you were looking anywhere but in front of you, it is quite another thing to fall into it because you were intent upon a star.** It was certainly a star at which Don Quixote was gazing. How profound is the comic element in the over-romantic, Utopian bent of mind!**these madmen who are yet so strangely**

reasonable, excite us to laughter by... setting in motion the same inner mechanism, as does the victim of a practical joke or the passer-by who slips down in the street. They, too, are runners who fall and simple souls who are being hoaxed--runners after the ideal who stumble over realities, child-like dreamers for whom life delights to lie in wait. But, above all, they are past-masters in absentmindedness, (but) their absentmindedness is systematic and organised around one central idea.

VICE

Now, let us go a little further. **Might not certain vices have the same relation to character that the rigidity of a fixed idea has to intellect? Whether as a moral kink or a crooked twist given to the will, vice has often the appearance of a curvature of the soul.** Doubtless there are vices into which the soul plunges deeply with all its pregnant potency, which it rejuvenates and drags along with it into a moving circle of reincarnations. Those are tragic vices. But **the vice capable of making us comic is, on the contrary, that which is brought from without, like a ready-made frame into which we are to step. It lends us its own rigidity instead of borrowing from us our flexibility. We do not render it more complicated; on the contrary, it simplifies us. Here, as we shall see later on in the concluding section of this study, lies the essential difference between comedy and drama.** A drama, even when portraying passions or vices that bear a name, so completely incorporates them in the person that their names are forgotten, their general characteristics effaced, and we no longer think of them at all, but rather of the person in whom they are assimilated; hence, the title of a drama can seldom be anything else than a proper noun. On the other hand,

many comedies have a common noun as their title.

AUTOMATISM AND SELF-DELUSION

The reason is that, however intimately vice, when comic, is associated with persons, it nonetheless retains its simple, independent existence, it remains the central character, present though invisible, to which the characters in flesh and blood on the stage are attached. At times it delights in dragging them down with its own weight and making them share in its tumbles. More frequently, however, (VICE) plays on them as on an instrument or pulls the strings as though they were puppets. Look closely: you will find that the art of the comic poet consists in making us so well acquainted with the particular vice... that in the end we get hold of some of the strings of the marionette with which he is playing, and actually work them ourselves; (and) this... explains part of the pleasure we feel. Here, too, it is really a kind of automatism that makes us laugh--an automatism, as we have already remarked, closely akin to mere absentmindedness. To realize this more fully, it need only be noted that a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious...he becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to all the world. A character in a tragedy will make no change in his conduct because he will know how it is judged by us; he may continue therein, even though fully conscious of what he is and feeling keenly the horror he inspires in us. But a defect that is ridiculous, as soon as it feels itself to be so, endeavors to modify itself, or at least to appear as though it did. Indeed, it is in this sense only that laughter "corrects men's manners." It makes us at once endeavor to appear what we ought to be,

what some day we shall perhaps end in being.

It is unnecessary to carry this analysis any further. From the runner who falls to the simpleton who is hoaxed, from a state of being hoaxed to one of absentmindedness, from absentmindedness to wild enthusiasm, from wild enthusiasm to various distortions of character and will, we have followed the line of progress along which the comic becomes more and more deeply imbedded in the person, yet without ceasing, in its subtler manifestations, to recall to us some trace of what we noticed in its grosser forms, an effect of automatism and of inelasticity.

TENSION and ELASTICITY

What life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence. TENSION and ELASTICITY are two forces, mutually complementary, which life brings into play. If these two forces are lacking in the body to any considerable extent, we have sickness and infirmity and accidents of every kind. If they are lacking in the mind, we find every degree of mental deficiency, every variety of insanity. Finally, if they are lacking in the character, we have cases of the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the causes of crime.

SOCIAL II

Society will ... be suspicious of all INELASTICITY of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign... of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity.

SOCIAL GESTURE – Laughter as Corrective

And yet, society cannot intervene at this stage by material repression, since it is not affected in a material fashion. It is confronted with something that makes it uneasy, but only as a symptom--scarcely a threat, at the very most a gesture. A gesture, therefore, will be its reply. Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of SOCIAL GESTURE. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity....Laughter, then, does not belong to the province of esthetics alone, since unconsciously (and even immorally in many particular instances) it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement. And yet there is something esthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art.if a circle be drawn round those actions and dispositions--implied in individual or social life--to which their natural consequences bring their own penalties, there remains...-a certain rigidity of body, mind and character, that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability. This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective....

III

THE MASK

.....What is a comic physiognomy? Where does a ridiculous expression of the face come from?

....A laughable expression of the face, then, is one that will make us think of something rigid and, so to speak, coagulated... What we shall see will be an ingrained twitching or a fixed grimace.**a comic expression of the face... is a unique and permanent grimace. One would say that the person's whole moral life has crystallised into this particular cast of features. This is the reason why a face is all the more comic, the more nearly it suggests to us the idea of some simple mechanical action in which its personality would forever be absorbed.**

Some faces seem to be always engaged in weeping, others in laughing or whistling, others, again, in eternally blowing an imaginary trumpet, and these are the most comic faces of all.... **Automatism, inelasticity, habit that has been contracted and maintained, are clearly the causes why a face makes us laugh. But this effect gains in intensity when we are able to connect these characteristics with some deep-seated cause, a certain fundamental absentmindedness, as though the**

soul had allowed itself to be fascinated and hypnotised by the materiality of a simple action.

We shall now understand the comic element in caricature. However regular we may imagine a face to be... there will always be discoverable the signs of some impending bias, the vague suggestion of a possible grimace, in short some favorite distortion towards which nature seems to be particularly inclined. The art of the caricaturist consists in detecting this, at times, imperceptible tendency, and in rendering it visible to all eyes by magnifying it. He makes his models grimace, as they would do themselves if they went to the end of their tether. Beneath the skin-deep harmony of form, he divines the deep-seated recalcitrance of matter. He realizes disproportions and deformations which must have existed in nature as mere inclinations, but which --- being held in check -- (have not become apparent)... (The caricaturist art,) which has a touch of the diabolical, raises up the demon who had been overthrown by the angel. Certainly, it is an art that exaggerates, and yet the definition would be very far from complete were exaggeration alone alleged to be its aim and object, for there exist caricatures that are more lifelike than portraits, caricatures in which the exaggeration is scarcely noticeable, whilst, inversely, it is quite possible to exaggerate to excess without obtaining a real caricature. **For exaggeration to be comic, it must not appear as an aim, but rather as a means that the artist is using in order to make manifest to our eyes the distortions which he sees in embryo.**

It is this process of distortion that is of moment and interest. And that is precisely why we shall look for it even in those elements of the face that are incapable of movement, in the curve of a nose or the shape of an ear. For, **in our eyes, form**

is always the outline of a movement. The caricaturist who alters the size of a nose, but respects its ground plan, lengthening it, for instance, in the very direction in which it was being lengthened by nature, is really making the nose indulge in a grin. Henceforth we shall always look upon the original as having determined to lengthen itself and start grinning. In this sense, one might say that Nature herself often meets with the successes of a caricaturist.our imagination.... in every human form ...sees the effort of a soul which is shaping matter...This soul imparts a portion of its winged lightness to the body it animates: the immateriality which thus passes into matter is what is called gracefulness. **Matter, however, is obstinate and resists. .. It (wants to) immobilize the intelligently varied movements of the body in stupidly contracted grooves, stereotype in permanent grimaces the (changing) expressions of the face, imprint on the whole person such an attitude as to make it appear immersed and absorbed in the materiality of some mechanical occupation instead of ceaselessly renewing its vitality by keeping in touch with a living ideal. *Where matter thus succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements and thwarting its gracefulness, it achieves, at the expense of the body, an effect that is comic.* If, then, at this point we wished to define the comic by comparing it with its contrary, we should have to contrast it with gracefulness even more than with beauty. It partakes rather of the unsprightly than of the unsightly, of **RIGIDNESS** rather than of **UGLINESS**.**

IV

MECHANISM

We will now pass from the comic element in FORMS to that in GESTURES and MOVEMENTS. Let us at once state the law which seems to govern all the phenomena of this kind. ... THE ATTITUDES, GESTURES AND MOVEMENTS OF THE HUMAN BODY ARE LAUGHABLE IN EXACT PROPORTION AS THAT BODY REMINDS US OF A MERE MACHINE. ... **The more exactly these two images, that of a person and that of a machine, fit into each other, the more striking is the comic effect, and the more consummate the art.... The originality of a comic artist is thus expressed in the special kind of life he imparts to a mere puppet.**

...The illusion of a machine working in the inside of the person is a thing that only crops up amid a host of amusing effects; but for the most part it is a fleeting glimpse, that is immediately lost in the laughter it provokes. To render it permanent, analysis and reflection must be called into play.

COMIC GESTURE IN PUBLIC SPEECH

In a public speaker, for instance, we find that gesture vies with speech. ...An idea is something that grows, buds, blossoms

and ripens from the beginning to the end of a speech. It never halts, never repeats itself. It must be changing every moment, for to cease to change would be to cease to live. Then (one would think) gesture (should) display a (similar) animation! ... it (should) accept the fundamental law of life, which is the complete negation of repetition! But (If we) find that a certain movement of head or arm...seems to return at regular intervals. **If (we) notice it and it succeeds in attracting our attention, and if we wait for it to occur and it occurs when we expect it, then we will involuntarily laugh. Why? Because (we) now have before us a machine that works automatically. This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it. It belongs to the comic.**

IMITATION

This is also the reason why gestures, at which we never dreamt of laughing, become laughable when imitated by another individual. ...our mental state is ever changing, and... if our gestures faithfully followed these inner movements, if they were as fully alive as we, they would never repeat themselves, and so would (not be susceptible to) imitation. **We... become imitable only when we cease to be ourselves. I mean our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person. And as this is the very essence of the ludicrous, it is no wonder that imitation gives rise to laughter.**

REPETITION

....This seems to me the solution of the little riddle propounded by Pascal in one passage of his Thoughts: "Two faces that are alike, although neither of them excites laughter by itself, make us laugh when together, on account of their likeness." It might just as well be said: "The gestures of a public speaker, no one of which is laughable by itself, excite laughter by their repetition." **The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living.** Analyze the impression you get from two faces that are too much alike, and you will find that you are thinking of two copies cast in the same mould... or two reproductions of the same negative,--in a word, of some manufacturing process or other. **This deflection of life towards the mechanical is ... the real cause of laughter.**

REPLICATION

And laughter will be more pronounced still, if we find on the stage not merely two characters, as in the example from Pascal, but several, (or as many as possible)... the image of one another, who come and go, dance and gesticulate together, simultaneously striking the same attitudes and tossing their arms about in the same manner. This time, we distinctly think of marionettes. Invisible threads seem to us to be joining arms to arms, legs to legs, each muscle in one face to its fellow-muscle in the other: by reason of the absolute uniformity which prevails, the very liveness of the bodies seems to stiffen as we gaze, and the actors themselves seem transformed into automata. Such, at least, appears to be the artifice underlying this somewhat obvious form of amusement. I daresay the

performers have never read Pascal, but what they do is merely to realize to the full the suggestions contained in Pascal's words. ...

We instinctively feel that the usual devices of comedy, the periodical repetition of a word or a scene, the systematic inversion of the parts, the geometrical development of a farcical misunderstanding, and many other stage contrivances, must derive their comic force from the same source,--the art of the playwright probably consisting in setting before us an obvious clockwork arrangement of human events, while carefully preserving an outward aspect of probability and thereby retaining something of the suppleness of life.

V

LATENT COMIC EFFECTS

...As we hinted at the outset of this study, it would be idle to attempt to derive every comic effect from one simple formula. The formula exists well enough in a certain sense, but its development does not follow a straightforward course. What I mean is that the process of deduction ought from time to time to stop and study certain culminating effects, and that these effects each appear as models round which new effects resembling them take their places in a circle. These latter are not deductions from the formula, but are comic through their

relationship with those that are...

Something mechanical encrusted on the living, will represent a cross at which we must halt, a central image from which the imagination branches off in different directions. What are these directions? There appear to be three main ones. ...

COSTUME AND DISGUISE

1. (The notion of) the mechanical and the living dovetailed into each other makes us ...(think of) **SOME RIGIDITY OR OTHER** applied to the mobility of life, in an awkward attempt to follow its lines and...its suppleness. **Here we (realize) how easy it is for a garment to become ridiculous. It might almost be said that every fashion is laughable in some respect.**

...When we are dealing with the fashion of the day, we are so accustomed to it that the garment seems, in our mind, to form one with the individual wearing it. We do not separate them in imagination. The idea no longer occurs to us to contrast the inert rigidity of the covering with the living suppleness of the object covered: (therefore it does not seem comic). ...

Suppose, however, some eccentric individual dresses himself in the fashion of former times: our attention is immediately drawn to the clothes themselves, we absolutely distinguish them from the individual, we say that the latter IS DISGUISED HIMSELF,--as though every article of clothing were not a (form of) disguise!--and the laughable aspect of fashion comes out of the shadow into the light.

....A man in disguise is comic. A man we regard as disguised is also comic. So, by analogy, any disguise is seen to become comic, not only that of a man, but that of society also, and even the disguise of nature.

Let us start with nature. You laugh at a dog that is half-clipped, at a bed of artificially colored flowers, at a wood in which the trees are plastered over with election (posters), etc. Look for the reason, and you will see that you are once more thinking of a masquerade.

CEREMONY

...Let us go on to society. As we are both in and of it, we cannot help treating it as a living being. **Any image... suggestive of the notion of a society disguising itself, or of a social masquerade...will be laughable.such a notion is formed when we perceive anything inert or stereotyped, or simply ready-made, on the surface of living society. There we have rigidity...again, clashing with the inner suppleness of life. The ceremonial side of social life must, therefore, always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view. It might be said that ceremonies are to the social body what clothing is to the individual body: they owe their seriousness to the fact that they are identified, in our minds, with the serious object with which custom associates them, and when we isolate them in imagination, they (immediately) lose their seriousness. For any ceremony... to become comic, it is enough that our attention be fixed on the ceremonial element in it, and that we neglect its matter (substance), as philosophers say, and think only of its form. ...Any form or formula is a ready-made frame into which the comic**

element may be fitted.

.the stiff and starched formality of any ceremonial suggests to us (a mechanism superposed upon life). ..as soon as we forget the serious object of a ceremony, those taking part in it give us the impression of puppets in motion. Their mobility seems to adopt as a model the immobility of a formula. It becomes automatism.

(Here Bergson says that the absurd and comic element of ceremony can be found in the person officiating. He says that when the “official” forgets the purpose and only remembers the form of his job he becomes ludicrous. He cites a newspaper report of a shipwreck off the coast France. Through great effort the passengers were rescued and brought to shore in a small boat. They were met on shore by some customs officials who greeted them by asking “if they had anything to declare.”)

....A mechanical element introduced into nature and an automatic regulation of society... are ...two types of laughable effects...(what happens if we) combine them?

The result of the combination will...be **a human regulation of affairs usurping the place of the laws of nature.**

....this idea of regulating life as a matter of business routine... is nothing else than art pretending to outdo nature.

SUBSTITUTING THE ARTIFICIAL FOR THE NATURAL

THE COMIC CLAIMS OF THE BODY

2. Our starting-point is again “something mechanical encrusted upon the living.” Where did the comic come from in this case? It came from the fact that the living body became rigid, like a machine.

Accordingly, it seemed to us that the living body ought to be the perfection of suppleness, the ever-alert activity of a principle always at work. But this activity would really belong to the soul rather than to the body....When we see only gracefulness and suppleness in the living body, it is because we disregard in it the elements of weight, of resistance, and, in a word, of matter; we forget its materiality and think only of its vitality, a vitality which we regard as derived from the very principle of intellectual and moral life,

Let us suppose, however, that our attention is drawn to this material side of the body; that, so far from sharing in the lightness and subtlety of the principle with which it is animated, the body is no more in our eyes than a heavy and cumbersome (dressing), a kind of irksome ballast which holds down... a soul eager to rise aloft. Then the body will become to the soul what, as we have just seen, the garment was to the body itself--inert matter dumped down upon living energy. The impression of the comic will be produced as soon as we (perceive)...this (overlay of) the one on the other. **And we shall experience it most strongly when we are shown the soul (TEMPTED) by the needs of the body: on the one hand, the moral personality with its intelligently varied energy, and, on**

the other, the stupidly monotonous body, perpetually obstructing everything with its machine-like obstinacy. ...the general law of these phenomena may be formulated as follows: ANY INCIDENT IS COMIC THAT CALLS OUR ATTENTION TO THE PHYSICAL IN A PERSON WHEN IT IS THE MORAL SIDE THAT IS CONCERNED.

Why do we laugh at a public speaker who sneezes just at the most pathetic moment of his speech? Where lies the comic element in this sentence, taken from a funeral speech and quoted by a German philosopher: “He was virtuous and plump”? It lies in the fact that our attention is suddenly recalled from the soul to the body. ...A PERSON EMBARRASSED BY HIS BODY is the image suggested to us in all these examples. The reason that excessive stoutness is laughable is probably because it calls up an image of the same kind. I almost think that this too is what sometime makes bashfulness somewhat ridiculous. The bashful man rather gives the impression of a person embarrassed by his body, looking round for some convenient cloak-room in which to deposit it.

This is just why the tragic poet is so careful to avoid anything calculated to attract attention to the material side of his heroes. No sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared. On this account, the hero in a tragedy does not eat or drink or warm himself. He does not even sit down any more than can be helped. To sit down in the middle of a fine speech would imply that you remembered you had a body. Napoleon, who was a psychologist when he wished to

be so, had noticed that the transition from tragedy to comedy is effected simply by sitting down. In the “Journal inedit” of Baron Gourgaud-- when speaking of an interview with the Queen of Prussia after the battle of Iena--he expresses himself in the following terms: “She received me in tragic fashion like Chimene: Justice! Sire, Justice! Magdeburg! Thus she continued in a way most embarrassing to me. Finally, to make her change her style, I requested her to take a seat. This is the best method for cutting short a tragic scene, for as soon as you are seated it all becomes comedy.”

MANNER OVER MATTER

Is it not... this idea that comedy is trying to suggest to us when holding up a profession to ridicule? It makes the lawyer, the magistrate and the doctor speak as though health and justice were of little moment,--the main point being that we should have lawyers, magistrates and doctors, and that all outward formalities pertaining to these professions should be scrupulously respected. And so we find the means substituted for the end, the manner for the matter; no longer is it the profession that is made for the public, but rather the public for the profession. Constant attention to form and the mechanical application of rules here bring about a kind of professional automatism analogous to that imposed upon the soul by the habits of the body, and equally laughable.

TRANSFORMING A PERSON INTO A THING

3. Let us then return, for the last time, to our central image: something mechanical encrusted on something living. Here, the living being under discussion was a human

being, a person. A mechanical arrangement, on the other hand, is a thing. 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 (notion) of a thing in general.

WE LAUGH EVERY TIME A PERSON GIVES US
THE IMPRESSION OF BEING A THING.

We laugh at Sancho Panza tumbled into a bed-quilt and tossed into the air like a football. We laugh at Baron Munchausen turned into a cannon-ball and travelling through space.

End of Part One