

## Ethical Consensus and the Truth of Laughter

SERIES: MORALITY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

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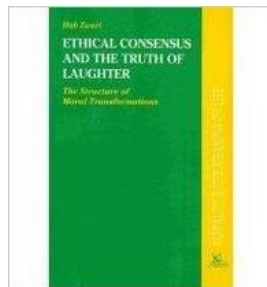
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# Ethical Consensus and the Truth of Laughter

The Structure of Moral Transformations

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## Table of Contents

Introduction: The Beginning of Moral Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem.....	6
Chapter 1: Established Morality and Discontent.....	13
1. The current status of moral philosophy.....	13
2. The ethics of compartmentalisation and the waning of moral truth.....	16
3. The method of avoidance or the loss of problems.....	31
4. The case of Socrates: a buffoon who had himself taken seriously.....	37
Chapter 2: Laughter as a State of Mind.....	45
1. Despotic liberalism, rereading and gay laughter.....	45
2. Towards a philosophy of laughter: Bakhtin.....	46
3. Marx, or: judging grobianism.....	59
4. <i>Incipit parodia</i> : Nietzsche.....	64
5. Judging Zarathustra.....	72
6. <i>Sola experientia</i> : Bataille.....	77
7. Uneasy laughter: Foucault.....	81
Chapter 3: Judging Socrates.....	87
1. Mocking Asclepius.....	87
2. The truth of laughter.....	92
3. The absurd couple and the ill-mannered questioner.....	105
4. The problem of Socrates.....	110
5. Philosophies for sale.....	113
Chapter 4: Judging Luther.....	117
1. Preliminary remarks: the early sixteenth century as <i>ἀγών</i> .....	117
2. Nietzsche's judgement of Luther.....	119
3. Luther "Lie-gends".....	125
4. Luther as a contemporary of Rabelais.....	130
5. Rabelais and his world.....	131
6. The tower experience: the issue of locality.....	133
7. The excremental grid.....	142
8. Luther's biography as a sequence of chronotopes.....	149
9. Ambivalence.....	152
10. Luther's body of writing.....	153
11. Whether for the sake of their conscience or for the sake of their paunches.....	156
12. The court jester's privilege.....	160
13. Interminable analysis or final judgement?.....	164
14. Elimination or resurgence: towards a gelastic philosophy of laughter?.....	169
Chapter 5: The Transfiguration of the Moral Subject: a Rereading of <i>When We Dead Awaken</i> .....	176
1. Did Ibsen laugh?.....	176
2. Artistic calling.....	180
3. Transfiguration.....	187
4. Beyond cynicism.....	192
5. Laughter as remedy.....	199
Literature.....	206

## Introduction: The Beginning of Moral Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem

One of moral philosophy's most tenacious questions concerns its beginning. For instance, should it be located in the discovery, or in the justification of moral truths? As discovery precedes justification (chronologically speaking), it seems justifiable to argue that moral philosophy should begin with the discovery of moral truth, when an important moral insight reveals itself to us or forces itself upon us for the first time. Yet, one might object that the recognition of moral truth already presupposes a moral subject, someone who is susceptible to it, who already has some justified knowledge concerning duties, norms or values. In other words, moral experience is always responsive. In the absence of moral subjectivity, nothing would be of any value, and the world would be devoid of moral significance.

Moreover, another question concerning the beginning of moral philosophy may also vex us. Should we start from established morality, that is, from the moral consensus which manages to maintain itself and is guiding contemporary moral life, or from experiences of uneasiness or discontent? Should established morality be contested and criticized, or rather consolidated, reinforced and legitimized by moral philosophy? I will point out that in contemporary moral discourse something like a *consensus sapientium* has emerged among moral philosophers, which basically consists of the idea that it is the goal of moral philosophy to strengthen and justify established morality, and to secure and immunize it against experiences of chronic discontent. The basic objective of this book, however, will consist in the effort to contest some of these established truths which are mistakenly considered beyond contestation. Instead of reconstructing and consolidating established morality – the “Aristotelian” option so to speak (in terms of ancient Greek morality) – I will opt for a “Socratic” approach, challenging what is mistakenly taken to be self-evident, exposing the established consensus to instances of obfuscated moral truth, which it seems unable to incorporate.

The basic contention put forward in this book is that both the logical and the chronological beginning, of moral philosophy as well as of morality as such, is to be found in the subversive experience of laughter. It is in the experience of laughter that the vulnerability of established morality finds itself exposed, that moral truth reveals itself to us, and that moral subjectivity is in fact produced. I presume that this remarkable claim demands some preliminary elucidation before being elaborated more fully in the subsequent sections and chapters of this book.

Moral philosophy is a particular branch of philosophical reflection which focusses on morality as such. Basically, it confronts us with the question why we consider a certain act or a certain state of affairs justified, problematic or even repulsive from a moral point of view. The basic difference between ethics and

morality, between moral philosophy and moral opinion is said to reside in the fact that, in the case of moral philosophy, moral judgements are accompanied by an effort to justify or ground them, that is, by a well-considered, more or less systematic moral account. However, as opinions often happen to be accompanied by some kind of justification or other, while moral philosophies often contain some elements which remain ungrounded or unexplained, I consider the difference between morality and moral philosophy of a relative and gradual rather than of a principal nature. Furthermore (but this will be more fully explained elsewhere), I consider moral subjectivity to be the outcome or product rather than as the starting point of moral experience. And finally, it is my conviction that the question regarding moral philosophy's beginning is too often thwarted by the fact that the notion "beginning" is interpreted in terms of an absolute origin or ground, whereas morality's (or moral philosophy's) point of departure must rather be considered to be of a situated, historical and responsive nature. Moreover, the beginning of morality is something which is continuously recaptured and resumed once a certain moral regime manages to establish itself.

Yet it cannot be denied that the history of morality displays some decisive ruptures or instances of discontinuity in which a certain moral regime suddenly finds itself fundamentally contested and challenged by unprecedented and incompatible moral experiences. Its apparent self-evidence suddenly finds itself exposed to subversive laughter, an experience which, under certain historical conditions, might even announce the commencement of a new moral epoch. This commencement, however, is never a transition from the immoral to the moral, or from primitivism and deficiency to enlightenment – although, once the new regime has finally established and secured its domination, its prehistory often tends to be represented that way. It is quite clear that this must be considered a strategy of self-justification rather than an effort to discern the true nature of the change. What is at stake here is a transformation of the basic way in which moral truth is experienced, articulated and interpreted. Somehow, the basic conditions of moral life have changed and unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity and moral experience are produced. It is not a transition from immorality to morality, however, nor an absolute commencement or a creation *ex nihilo*. Rather it is an answer to a question, a solution to a problem. It is the replacement of certain basic forms of moral subjectivity by others which are incompatible with it, and efforts by the old regime to incorporate them or silence them turn out to be of no avail.

But perhaps the most remarkable aspect of my claim, and the one most urgently in need of preliminary clarification, will be the connection between morality and laughter. At first glance, the very association of the two might seem ridiculous in itself. Morality seems to exclude, rather than to imply laughter – it seems a perfectly serious philosophical (or theological) genre. Let me therefore provisionally explain why and how I consider them to be connected, although the bulk of the argument will of course be elaborated more carefully (and, I hope, more convincingly) in the

remainder of the book. I already indicated that morality's beginning is of a relative nature and that there is no absolute transition from the non-moral to the moral. Morality is a world we enter. Even a completely transformed morality is a response to something else which was already there. Moral subjects are formed or constituted by a moral life already existing, in which they inevitably become involved. It is, to use an image borrowed from Ricoeur (1975), like a conversation which had already been going on for quite some time before we entered it, and which is bound to be continued should we disappear from the scene. We take the floor when others have already spoken.

But why should morality be something to talk about and to discuss, and even to contest, rather than something which could or should be taken for granted? What incites us to participate in the debate – and in some cases even to become moral philosophers ourselves? The answer is to be found in our discontent with the discourse of others. Had it not been for the unsatisfactory nature of the conversation already existing, we would never have commenced speaking ourselves. For some reason or other, we consider current moral discourse one-sided and defective. We sense that it presents us with a reduced and distorted picture of the moral world. Something is absent or forgotten, something still remains to be said, a basic truth seems to be neglected. We reject, but at the same time remain highly dependent on the discourse which already came into existence before we ourselves became involved in it. Most of the concepts and arguments we rely on in our effort to recover concealed or forgotten aspects of moral truth were already introduced by others. We did not coin them ourselves, but borrow them, either from the very discourse we came to reject as basically defective, or from previous or contentious genres of discourse. In other words, although established discourse might seem to conceal important aspects of moral life, it at the same time enables and allows us to address the issues at hand more adequately.<sup>1</sup> We would not have noticed the importance of these hidden or forgotten issues, nor would we have been able to formulate them, had it not been for the existence and the defectiveness of what is already established, had it not been for the efforts at articulation already made by our predecessors or contemporaries. Moral philosophy, therefore, is a secondary mode of speech – a series of critical glosses on the speech of others, its merits and its defects. It is not a *prima philosophia*, but rather a way of reading or listening. Moral philosophy is never merely meta-ethical, but always proves to be normative in the end. Meta-ethics can serve as a temporary technical device, but eventually our personal commitment to moral truth – our *δαμόνιον*, as Socrates called it – is bound to reveal itself.

Now there are several strategies for exposing the defects of the discourse of the others, one of which is critical argumentation. However, under certain specific historical circumstances, the apparent self-evidence of established moral discourse

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gadamer (1960/1990): we speak a language already spoken by others; we use words, concepts and arguments borrowed from others, instead of inventing them ourselves. Even the questions we raise in response to its deficiencies are triggered by the discourse we enter.



has gained such dominance, such a capacity of resistance or incorporation, such an ability to conceal its basic vulnerability that its validity simply seems beyond contestation. Notwithstanding the moral subject's basic discontent, he or she remains unable to challenge the dominant discourse effectively by means of critical argument. Or, to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault, individuals find themselves faced with a certain rationality, a moral regime that dominates moral discourse to such an extent that they cannot offer any resistance without raising the suspicion of being unreasonable. They (that is, we) find ourselves confronted with a discourse quite unable to recognize its own deficiencies. Although we are forced to accept its basic claims, our chronic discontent nevertheless persists. That is, although we are forced to participate in this discourse, we remain basically ambivalent, and our attitude towards established morality contains both a Yes and a No.

Then, all of a sudden, the basic vulnerability of the dominant regime dawns on us or is revealed to us – and this is the experience of laughter. Although given the circumstances established morality cannot be criticized, it can be ridiculed. And thus commence our efforts to articulate a neglected and disregarded moral truth that had been forcing itself upon us and vexing us, although we remained unable to discern its significance for quite some time. Moral criticism, and the subsequent dawning of a new moral discourse or moral regime, is preceded by the experience of laughter. All the crucial ruptures in the history of morality were accompanied by and made possible by laughter. It challenged and undermined the dominant forms of moral subjectivity, constituted by the old regime, and allowed for unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity to emerge and to constitute themselves. True laughter is the ground and starting point of moral transformations, and an experience of epochal significance. The basic scenario of laughter can be discerned in the moral transformations such as occurred during the fourth century B.C. (chapter three), the first half of the sixteenth century A.D. (chapter four), and at the end of the nineteenth century A.D. (chapter five).

The first two chapters of this book will be of an introductory nature. In chapter one, I will present an outline of the unsatisfactory “discourse of the other”: a particular moral logic called liberalism (or the compartmentalization of moral life). For although this particular logic does not constitute the actual subject matter of my book, it is what made me embark on my effort to retrieve the philosophy of laughter obscured by it. It entails a particular understanding of moral life which, rather than being indisputable or self-evident, must be considered the temporary outcome of a certain historical development, an outcome whose basic “platitudes” (Rorty) are bound to find themselves exposed by laughter. Furthermore, liberalism presupposes, instrumentalises and reinforces certain forms of moral subjectivity, disqualifying others as backward, unreasonable or immoral. Yet, this moral regime which managed to become established and now seems unable to recognize its own deficiencies, still finds itself accompanied by a sense of uneasiness which already points to something which is hidden or neglected, a moral truth about to reveal itself in the experience of

laughter – an experience which entails a challenge to the established consensus. Furthermore, I will claim that moral philosophy, rather than being a more or less scientific discourse elaborated on the basis of certain stable and secured moral principles or truths, basically and originally is a comic genre, and I will indicate the extent to which an abstract or even misguided understanding of moral subjectivity is bound to hamper our conception of moral experience as such. Notably, I will indicate the way the significance of laughter tends to be misrepresented in contemporary moral discourse. Attention will be drawn to the efforts of the current moral regime to contain or incorporate laughter by reducing it to “irony”.

In the subsequent chapter, I will turn to some representatives of a rival approach, that is: to philosophers who can be considered as “philosophers of laughter”, namely Mikhail Bakhtin, Friedrich Nietzsche, George Bataille and Michel Foucault, in order to retrieve a basic understanding of laughter as a phenomenon of philosophical significance. Several forms of laughter – notably “true” versus “subdued” laughter – will be distinguished, and several genres of laughter (notably parody and irony) will be discussed. Finally, in the decisive chapters of this book, I will turn to three epochal figures (a philosopher, a theologian and a playwright) whom I consider as prominent protagonists (or even “heroes”) of laughter, representing the moments of transition and transformation already indicated above: Socrates (fourth century B.C., chapter three), Martin Luther (sixteenth century A.D., chapter four) and Henrik Ibsen (nineteenth century A.D., chapter five). Their work (or, in the case of Socrates, his speech acts, his verbal performance, as recorded by Plato) will be subjected to what I will refer to as a rereading, a careful analysis from the point of view of laughter, a way of reading based on the contention that for strategic reasons, the serious aspects of their achievements have been persistently overemphasized, disregarding the significance of laughter. In other words, rereading is a way of reading that recognises the extent to which certain texts, although generally supposed to be in support of, or at least in tune with established morality, are basically alien to it; a way of reading that focusses attention on those aspects of the text which came to be disregarded as residual (Or *residual*: as something merely comical).

Moral philosophy will not to be regarded as *prima philosophia* (as a rational reconstruction of a universal moral truth grounded in certain indisputable principles), but rather as an effort to *respond* to what is said by others, to a moral discourse already unfolding. Moral truth is not seen as something which can be captured in certain formula or propositions, but rather as something which reveals itself in the very process of reading and writing and therefore cannot be isolated from its “context of discovery”, nor secured and justified in a systematic way. In other words, instead of containing a systematic series of arguments, this book is the account, the record of a reading practice, as moral philosophy is basically regarded as a practice of writing, while writing is basically a way of reading – or rather: rereading; a way of reading which reveals the extent to which certain discursive ingredients, allegedly supportive of the established consensus (and whose incompatible and disturbing features have

been pacified by biased readings and strategies of revision), are basically at odds with it.

This book was originally meant to be a revised version in English of my thesis in Dutch – a review of moral theories on ethical consensus formation in both moral philosophy and health care ethics, published in 1993 and aiming to show how certain basic experiences of uneasiness were effectively silenced by established, consensus-oriented discourse. From what has been said above, however, it will be clear that some changes have occurred. Rather than containing a systematic reconstruction of the Dutch version, it became a book in its own right, belonging to the same “responsive” and “explorative” genre, being the outcome of a similar “responsive” reading/writing process. It is a continuation, rather than a recapitulation of previous research. The research is reported “immediately” as it were: an instance of reading aloud, rather than systematically presenting and justifying my “results”. Furthermore, in the course of the writing process, some important shifts occurred. In view of the international and more general character of the new book, all references to (Dutch) health care ethics were dropped. As to moral experiences which can be considered as contesting or at least as questioning the established ethical consensus (the basic issue of both books), the emphasis on the tragic that dominated the Dutch version gave way to an emphasis on the comical in this one. And finally, the sections on Socrates, Luther and Ibsen, being concise, provisional paragraphs in the original book, grew into decisive chapters in this one.

Kierkegaard, in his book on irony (1989), allowed his style to suit his subject. As a contemporary reviewer phrased it, the work not only treated of irony but *was* irony. Kierkegaard conceded that the form of his treatise “departed somewhat” from conventional scholarly methods, but asked the reader to forgive his jocundity, just as he himself sometimes sang while he worked, in order to lighten the burden. The basic objective of my book is not to set off the reader laughing, although I do hope that it will contribute to the effort of making some forms of laughter possible again by retrieving the comic origins of moral criticism as a genre. All the same, I suspect that my way of reading and writing may be considered by many as somewhat too carefree. For instance, I do not profess to have written an exhaustive summary of the philosophical literature on laughter. On the contrary, some remarkable omissions will be noted. I will rely on Nietzsche rather than Kierkegaard, for instance, on Bakhtin rather than Bergson. I agree beforehand that much remains to be said. As to my use of foreign languages, all titles and quotations in the main text are translated (with a few exceptions, but in those cases the translation is usually provided in a footnote). In the footnotes, I often prefer to cite the original text, usually in German, French or Latin.

Apart from the philosophers mentioned in the text, I am greatly indebted to the editors of the *Morality and the Meaning of Life* series (Bert Musschenga, Paul van Tongeren and Kristin De Troyer), to Lucy Jansen for correcting my use of the English language, to my fellow-participants in the 7th International Bakhtin Conference (Moscow, 29 June 1995) who allowed me to present a draft version of some sections

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Nijmegen (18 February 1996; 450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Luther's death / Carnival's Eve)

# Chapter 1: Established Morality and Discontent

## 1. The current status of moral philosophy

The history of moral philosophy is not a tale of scientific progress, one that relates the gradual accumulation and elaboration of expert knowledge, where real progress has been made and some chronic misconceptions are finally dismissed once and for all. Rather, it is a more or less cyclical tale about the recognition, concealment or rejection, retrieval or recurrence of moral truths. The claim that moral philosophy is not yet a science, but could (and therefore should) be transformed in such a way that it might become a science, prevents us from recognizing the truly “ethical” in ethics. We will never be able once and for all to define rigid criteria for moral action, and indeed, every epoch has formulated its own criteria. But this does not imply that it is utterly pointless or even ridiculous to reflect on what constitutes moral behaviour, even if we will never be able to produce an exhaustive account of moral life for all eternity.

For several reasons, moral philosophy or ethics (I consider these terms as synonyms) has been compared to medicine. For instance, although medicine and ethics offer general rules of conduct, both still rely to a significant extent on sensible judgement in concrete problem situations. That is, both contain practical knowledge, lacking the exactitude usually ascribed to (for example) physics and its engineering applications, and therefore remaining dependent on the sensibility, discernment and experience of the individual practitioner involved. Practical knowledge has to be applied to the specific circumstances of the case at hand, and this implies uncertainty, ambiguity and interpretation. On the other hand, in the case of medicine, remarkable scientific progress has been made, notably during the last decades. In fact, medicine has succeeded in becoming a science, in accumulating and elaborating extensive bodies of expert knowledge and in abolishing countless misconceptions and delusions once and for all. Medicine had tried to become a modern science ever since the days of Descartes and Harvey and now it seems that it has finally succeeded in achieving this goal. Although Descartes himself was somewhat reluctant with regard to moral philosophy’s scientific potential, others cherished similar hopes in the case of ethics. And yet, ethics (or moral philosophy) still finds itself in much the same situation as medicine did before it was placed on a scientific footing.

Indeed, before the dawn of modern science, the art of medicine found itself in a rather difficult position. It lacked most of the scientific knowledge and technical means which today are taken for granted. Hippocratic medicine, for instance, although considered almost sacred by subsequent medical traditions, suffered from a bad reputation in its own time, and the modern reader is struck by the defensive mode

of speech in which the bulk of the Hippocratic corpus was actually written. In ancient Greece, medicine was mocked and ridiculed by popular opinion as well as by contemporary philosophers and poets, and this situation continued for many centuries. The seventeenth century French playwright Molière, for instance, gave voice to a popular tradition of long standing when he ridiculed medicine and its practitioners in several of his comedies. In one of them, *L'amour Médecin*, it is claimed that the physician's competence consists in nothing but translating into Latin what everyone already knows, namely that the patient is ill. And when four physicians are asked for their opinion on a certain case, two of them start a theoretical debate on an ancient dispute which apparently carries more weight for them than the well-being of their patient, while the other two invoke the authority of Hippocrates and suggest that nothing at all should be done, and that one should refrain from all medical interventions in order to prevent any harmful consequences from occurring.

In the case of ethics, a similar risk of ridicule still constitutes a serious threat. Whereas medicine has been transformed into a scientific (evidence-based) practice, ethics has remained "pre-scientific" and traditional in view of the fact that it still combines its diagnostics of the actual moral condition with a continuous rereading, a permanent and critical appropriation of its philosophical inheritance – and this inevitably implies hesitancy and reserve when it comes to making decisions, because the philosophical legacy is notorious for its lack of consensus, apart from its being untimely and the problems of application which result from this. In short, ethics still remains a practice which consists of and combines two basic skills: the ability to "read" or judge moral cases, and the craft of exposing oneself to philosophical discourse. While medicine was transformed from a dissatisfactory practice into a modern, scientific endeavour, similar efforts in the field of ethics did not produce the same effect. In the case of ethical discourse, one can still recognize the attachment to ancient writings as well as the chronic lack of consensus – in short: the very features that popular wisdom ridiculed and attributed to medicine for centuries. And the same goes for the tendency towards restraint when it comes to real life decisions and applications.

It is against this background that a certain tendency in contemporary ethical discourse has gained prominence, a tendency which basically consists of the effort to secure a common ground, an ethical consensus which would allow moral philosophy to become more like a standard science, and to escape persistent public ridicule. It is claimed that there are certain basic moral principles or ideas which cannot be contested by anyone without being inconsistent, unreasonable or simply immoral. It should be the ethicist's objective to reconstruct and justify in a more or less systematic way such a set of basic moral claims which count as non-controversial and self-evident, and which actually shape our moral and social life. Once such a set of basic claims or principles has been secured, a more or less systematic application of these principles to a broad range of moral or policy problems becomes possible, and the ponderous burden of reading and rereading the philosophical corpus will become

less inevitable, while chronic dissension can be significantly diminished. Now the question is whether this effort to escape public ridicule does not fall subject to a more fatal, *philosophical* type of laughter.

The attempt to turn ethics into a more serious genre, and perhaps even into an academic one (for university discourse is serious by definition), is remarkable if the history of moral philosophy as a genre is taken into consideration. For some reason or other, contemporary ethics does not seem very familiar with its own history. Notably the fact that, since time immemorial, moral criticism used to be intimately connected with comedy and laughter became increasingly obscured. From a historical point of view, my effort to connect (or rather, reconnect) morality and laughter is not as astonishing as it might seem. But why should ethics care about its history? What is wrong with contemporary ethics trying to become a more serious genre? What objections can be raised against the effort to secure a common ground, a set of non-controversial moral principles and basic ethical techniques if it could be of some assistance in solving matters of public policy in a fair and reasonable way?

In order for such questions to be answered in a convincing manner, the contemporary effort to transform ethics into a more serious, more academic discipline should be discussed at length, as I tried to do in some previous publications (Zwart 1993, 1995). As to the present study, however, such an endeavour, inevitable as it may seem, would put me in a difficult position. For although my uneasiness with certain prominent aspects of the established ethical consensus is what induced me to write this book, the established consensus itself is not the principal target of my research. On the contrary, the greater part of the book will be devoted to the moral significance of laughter as an experience of contestation. Such an exercise, however, would undoubtedly remain incomprehensible without at least some explanation as to the reason why, that is: without at least a hint as to how it relates to the present context. Indeed, the ultimate objective of my “exercise in retrieval” (Taylor 1989, p. xi) of the time-old connection between ethics and laughter is to understand current technocracy. Therefore, in this first chapter I will present a picture of the kind of discourse I happen to reject, but hasten to add that it is not intended as a thorough exposition of contemporary moral discourse as such. Those in favour of the contested view will perhaps claim that, instead of producing a fair picture of what is being rejected, I simply laugh it off by means of a mere caricature, lacking sufficient academic *ακρίβεια*. On the other hand, to be more explicit about what one rejects than about what one embraces would be inordinate as well. Therefore, let me emphasize beforehand that, as the picture of the contemporary ethical consensus presented in this chapter intends to summarize an understanding elaborated more carefully elsewhere, it is not in itself an effort to convince those in favour of the established consensus that they are hopelessly mistaken. My purpose simply is to clarify why I consider an effort to retrieve the ancient connection between ethics and laughter worthwhile. My subsequent rereading (from the point of view of laughter) of some remarkable episodes in the history of morality will point out that laughter is bound to reveal the

limited and temporal nature of an established discourse that mistakenly considers itself to be extra-temporal and incontestable. As to the present, I basically will content that the established consensus, as liberating and broad-minded as it may seem, entails severe restriction and constraints that cannot be brought to light as long as its basic convictions remain unchallenged. In fact, I am convinced that, in order to produce an adequate and convincing judgement regarding the present situation, a retrieval of the truth of laughter will prove indispensable. In chapter five, when the moral significance of laughter has been sufficiently explored, an effort will be made to determine its significance for coming to terms with the present more accurately.

## **2. The ethics of compartmentalisation and the waning of moral truth**

The effort to turn ethics into a more serious genre by securing a common ground (or “ethical consensus”) can be identified by means of certain typical terms and phrases. To begin with, this effort often involves a shift from “content” to “procedure”. Furthermore, moral life is compartmentalized into a “public” and a “private” realm, into public regulation and private emotions or attachments. In the public realm, the individual is expected to behave reasonably, to respect others, and to negotiate rights, interests and claims in order to achieve the best possible solution to a given problem for all of the parties involved, taking into account all the rights and interests at stake. In the private realm, however, one is allowed to commit oneself to any particular worldview or moral ideal (however ridiculous), undisturbed by the fact that such a view or such an ideal might seem untenable or even absurd to others, as long as such a commitment does not result in harm to others, or in impeding the process of consensus formation in the public realm, conducted by ethical experts. In the public sphere, we are to comply with an ethic of peaceful negotiation and regulation. By regulating public behaviour, the right to privatised eccentricity is said to be secured. I will refer to this view as “liberalism” but hasten to add that what I have in mind is an articulation of the basic structure of contemporary public discourse *as such* (as it is apparently shared by an impressive number of individuals of widely differing political and religious denominations) rather than any political conviction in particular.

What is implied in such a view is basically a “method of avoidance”; an effort to turn all controversial items into private matters, thereby “de-listing” them from the public agenda.<sup>2</sup> It is an effort to pacify public life by means of effective compartmentalization. This reduced and minimalized agenda for ethics, basically containing a set of procedural solutions to policy problems, is justified by the claim that eventually the only alternative to such a strategy of avoidance is moral warfare

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase ‘method of avoidance’ was coined by Rawls (1987), one of its most prominent protagonists. The phrase ‘de-listing’ was coined by Callahan (1981), in order to criticize such an approach. Cf. Zwart (1993).



(or even civil war). The objective of moral deliberation is not to reveal the ultimate moral truth of human existence, for this has become a personal matter, but to maintain a situation of peaceful co-existence of incompatible worldviews and basic commitments. As to the ultimate moral truth of human existence, pluralism is inescapable. Ethics (at least the social or policy branch of ethics) should withdraw itself from the realm of incompatible “comprehensive” doctrines, of substantial understandings of moral life, and transform itself into an allegedly neutral or even procedural discourse. It should not aim at solving theoretical problems which will remain unsolvable and which are bound to remain the object of endless struggle and contestation. Rather, ethics should restrict and limit itself to the non-controversial and the procedural. The compartmentalization of moral life into a public and a private realm implies the exclusion of moral truth from public debate.

This self-restriction is justified by a historical account, a typical narrative or “standard account” (Toulmin 1990), the plot of which can be summarized as follows. Premodern society was grounded in a shared understanding of moral truth, a common, substantial view of moral life. In the sixteenth century, the self-evidence of this truth gave way to pluralism, a process which before long resulted in massive, violent confrontations between mutually incompatible moral truths. Subsequently, the Enlightenment emerged as an effort to develop a rationalistic ethic acceptable to all moral subjects regardless of their particular worldviews or their traditional religious attachments. The project of Enlightenment, however, although it succeeded in liberating modern individuals from many pre-modern constraints, still contained an appeal to a certain moral truth, a normative ideal of moral subjectivity, a substantial view of human nature which is supposedly realized progressively in history. In the present, “postmodern” condition, even this limited appeal to the progress of reason and to the rational nature of humans has become problematic and is considered an untenable, “metaphysical” remnant. Indeed, the appeal to reason is giving way to the more limited demand to be “reasonable”, that is, to a philosophy of moral deliberation and mutual respect which is still reminiscent of the Enlightenment in certain respects but refrains from the effort to ground this ethic in a substantial moral view of human existence. Ethics should basically restrict itself to formulating the ideal conditions for moral deliberation. Although no one can be forced to accept the claim that human beings are rational, or that ethics can be grounded in a “law of reason” allegedly beyond contestation, everyone can be expected to behave reasonably in the public realm – whatever picture of human life is cherished in private. In private life, responsibility and human freedom may well be ridiculed, but in the public realm an ever-increasing amount of responsibility has to be accepted.

In this chapter I will indicate why I consider this historical account, as well as the effort to reconstruct a non-controversial, reasonable consensus justified by it, as basically flawed. To begin with, the basic conditions of public deliberation, to be accepted by all reasonable human beings, are far from neutral. Rather, their origin must be located in certain specific and historical, indeed, substantial claims regarding

the moral truth of human existence. Furthermore, instead of allowing pluralism to flourish, they in fact entail severe constraints on moral life; they are restricting rather than restricted. Finally, they mistakenly take for granted and assume a certain kind of moral subjectivity which is in fact produced and reinforced by them.

In *Cosmopolis*, Toulmin (1990) already dismissed some misguided assumptions underlying what he refers to as the “standard account of modernity”. One of them is the claim that, whereas in the Middle Ages the church had severely impeded science, reason and individual autonomy to flourish, in the seventeenth century ecclesiastical constraints on science and human life were relaxed instead of reinforced, and theological commitments were less rigorous and demanding than before. According to Toulmin, the very reverse was true. While the sixteenth century was indeed a period of remarkable freedom and open-mindedness, during the seventeenth century a rigid ecclesiastical, theological and etatistic regiment was imposed which corresponded to a similar attitude of toughness in the realm of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Much like the Counter-Reformation on the theological level, seventeenth-century philosophy should be regarded a “Counter-Renaissance” in which the tolerant, practical, sceptical and, above all, humoristic attitude of Renaissance thinkers like Erasmus and Montaigne was replaced by a theoretical quest for certainty and firm foundations. Although Erasmus in *Praise of Folly* had ridiculed philosophical and theological discourse, he did not aim at replacing it by an indisputable and incontestable stable ground. Progress and Enlightenment in the realm of philosophy, Toulmin claims, meant restriction and constraint rather than free-thinking.

A similar claim could be made for the subsequent transformation from the modern (or “rationalistic”) ethics of Enlightenment to the postmodern (or “liberalistic”) ethics of compartmentalization. Whereas the new, postmodern ethics might seem less demanding and less restrictive at first glance, I maintain that its basic gesture is one of exclusion and restriction. Indeed, it is my contention that postmodern constraints on public moral discourse are more rather than less severe than the ones preceding it. Postmodern individuals find themselves forced to participate in public deliberation and the process of consensus formation while tendencies among individuals or sections of the population to remain hesitant to participate in it, are increasingly considered problematic. Moreover, although it is suggested that the deliberation process is able to tolerate virtually all possible contributions, certain speech acts are disqualified and excluded beforehand as being “fundamentalistic” or as disturbing the process of consensus formation, or as representing views which are not considered acceptable to other reasonable individuals. In short, what we are dealing with here is an ethic of deliberation in which a compulsion to take part in a certain kind of public discourse is intrinsically connected with a tendency towards exclusion. Or to put it

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<sup>3</sup> The Russian philosopher M. Bakhtin, who will be introduced in chapter two, agrees with this. Cf. “The fifteenth century was an age of considerable freedom in France” – there was, for instance, “no sharp line between familiar speech and ‘correct’ language” (Bakhtin 1968, p. 320), and many similar remarks.

otherwise, in order to be granted access to public discourse, we have to become a certain kind of moral subject – someone willing to negotiate, willing to refrain from making any public appeals to “private” moral truths. We post-moderns have to consent to a particular form of moral exchange in order to find ourselves included among its participants, and we are denied the right to commit ourselves publicly to deviant discursive modes. The compartmentalization of moral life implies that we agree to settle for consensus at the expense of truth – although we are of course still granted the right to remain susceptible to deviant moral demands in private. Any effort to present ourselves as public guardians of moral truth (as guardians of the inviolable significance of uncurbed nature, for example) is disqualified as being an inadmissible expression of fanaticism and intolerance. By means of these and other similar procedures of exclusion, the established consensus is permanently reproduced, maintained and reinforced at the expense of deviant discursive modes which are dismissed as obsolete relics, or rejected as symptoms of fundamentalism. In short, we find ourselves confronted with a moral regime that cannot be questioned without raising the suspicion of being unreasonable, and that successfully immunises itself against contestation, considering its basic principles self-evident and inevitable, unwilling to admit that its picture of moral life contains a substantial claim to moral truth (and therefore remains contestable by definition). The speech acts of those who remain hesitant to accept these restrictions and who refuse to consider their speech acts as either contributions to the consensus formation process or as articulations of private, highly idiosyncratic truths, are not taken into consideration. Their views are considered to be at odds with a moral regime whose basic objective is the reduction of public tensions by redefining them as conflicts of interests, that is, by compartmentalising moral language into a public and a private vocabulary.

My discontent with this established moral logic does not evolve out of the idea that it should be our objective to realize or at least approximate what Habermas (1987) referred to as an “ideal communication”, devoid of any strategic constraints, for such an ideal must not only be considered fictitious and utopian, it is grounded in a thoroughly misguided understanding of moral discourse. Every effort to articulate moral experience, or to establish an ethical discourse is bound to reveal certain aspects, while others are forgotten or concealed, and even the postmodern (or liberal) regime most certainly has its merits, apart from its defects. Rather, I would like to emphasise that what we are confronted with here is a discursive regime which presents itself as highly permissive, while it is in fact severely restrictive. In short, it is a regime which seems unable to recognize its own constraints, its own violence and domination, and therefore runs the risk of becoming a liberal ideology, a discursive coup d’état which no longer admits its strategic objectives nor recognises its effects.

Indeed, we must acknowledge that every moral discourse entails constraints. They can be contested, and moral discourse can be transformed, but this implies the replacement of the established constraints by others. We participate in this struggle, this process of contestation and transformation in order to promote a discursive

situation which allows the particular life form or moral practice represented and pursued by us to flourish. The idea that some constraints are neutral or at least generally acceptable, and therefore cannot be accused of encouraging or impeding certain ways of life as compared to others, is fictitious and bound to convey an ideological bias in favour of one of the ways of life at stake.

In short, what is advocated here is a picture of moral discourse as a strategic situation, a struggle between incompatible ways of life, where every discursive genre or mode of speech, indeed every single speech act and every single word is both revealing and concealing, both encouraging and restricting. There are no neutral forms of speech. It is a strategic or agonistic situation involving several discursive tendencies mutually impeding, contesting or reinforcing each other. What is advocated here is not simply a recognition, but an intensification of this *ἀγών*, rather than its avoidance – for avoidance merely implies the unquestioned domination of one particular discursive tendency at the expense of other possibilities.

It is an understanding of discourse supported by the views of the Russian philosopher and literary scientist Mikhail Bakhtin (1988) who describes social discourse in terms of a temporary ideological equilibrium which for a certain period of time manages to maintain a certain coherence and unity but finds itself faced with and penetrated by a continuing clash of “voices”, that is, finds itself permanently contested and “dialogised”, and remains involved in an agonistic and polemic situation. Every form of life produces its characteristic modes of speech, and modern society is a heteroglossia of voices, a plurality of speech genres: a permanent struggle of centripetal and centrifugal discursive forces. The dominant mode of speech of a certain epoch finds itself continuously challenged by the vocabularies, the modes of speech or dialects which are characteristic of more peripheral life forms. There are no neutral words, no neutral vocabularies. Every mode of speech is contested, contestable, contesting. Every speech unit has its own environment, its own history, belongs to a certain life form, a certain profession for instance, a certain view of life, and will subsequently find itself appropriated, exploited and transformed by those who participate in social discourse.

Bakhtin refers to contemporary society as a “living novel”. There are languages of generations, of trades and vocations, of parties and age groups, of the authorities as well as of various classes and circles. There are languages of officials, labourers and students, while even the languages of the military student, the high school student and the trade school student are different (p. 290).<sup>4</sup> Even languages of the day exist, as well as family jargons. All these languages serve their own specific socio-political purposes; each has its own slogans, its own vocabulary and emphasis (p. 263). In no way can they live in peace and quiet with each other and therefore social discourse is a perpetual struggle, although the internal stratification and differentiation of every

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nietzsche’s remark on the peculiar features of student’s German – notably its inclination toward irony (Human, All Too Human II, ‘The Wanderer and his Shadow’, § 228).

national language tends to be subdued somewhat by forces that serve “to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world” (p. 270) and to impose a “common” view, embodied in a common “neutral” language, that is, a verbal approach considered as normal for a given sphere of society. Every concrete utterance serves as a point where the centrifugal and centripetal forces of language confront one another. In the next chapter, Bakhtin’s views will be explored more carefully, but at this point I merely wish to emphasize that I take them to encourage and confirm the claim that an apparently neutral standard account of contemporary ethics can never be neutral (or non-controversial) from an agonistic, Bakhtin-like view on social discourse. A “common neutral language” is always a particular vocabulary or mode of speech, and as such it is the outcome of a particular history, expressing a substantial view of moral life, and encouraging certain life forms while impeding others. The compartmentalisation of moral life into a private realm of truth and a public sphere of restriction and regulation is far from self-evident or neutral. While apparently confirming the actual decline of moral truth in public life, it basically is an attempt of one particular truth, one particular substantial view of moral life to gain dominance over its rivals. Being neutral, or rather, seeming neutral, is an effect of domination.

Now what is this “substantial” view of moral life that is implied in the seemingly neutral strategy of compartmentalisation and where do we find the history which produced it? It goes without saying that an adequate reconstruction of the view involved as well as of its history is quite beyond the scope of this book, let alone a mere chapter. Still, a few significant aspects can be highlighted. In his book *The Flight from Authority*, Jeffrey Stout (1981) describes how, during the modern epoch, the decline of truth in public discourse gave rise to the differentiation of morality as a relatively autonomous domain and the subsequent development of moral philosophy into an autonomous academic discipline, disengaging itself from the constraints of traditional ecclesiastical authorities. Furthermore, his book contains a description of how the “crisis of authority”, brought about by the Reformation, stimulated the quest for a moral consensus, a public compromise between incompatible truths. By tracing the history of the established moral account, the assumption that there is an incontestable central core of human experience which has no history is questioned. This central core turns out to be a particular view, the outcome of a particular history. According to Stout, although the Reformation was basically motivated by the quest for an indisputable ground, it in fact produced a multiplication of authorities, with pietism (that is, the appeal to inner certainty as the standard of truth) as its ultimate result. The church as a body gave way to pious atoms. Every single conscience constituted a separate authority, bereft of any means to settle disagreement among truth claims, and unwilling to accept rational justifications. Furthermore, the pietistic turn implied an emphasis on the moral at the expense of the strictly religious and dogmatic aspects of faith, a development which eventually resulted in the separation of public and private morality.

Now pietism is not merely a particular version of Protestantism, nor simply a

certain doctrine or regional version of a creed. Rather it implies a certain form of moral subjectivity, grounded in the Protestant separation of the worldly and the spiritual realm or regiment (the Two Worlds Theorem). Whereas the public sphere (the worldly regiment) was left to the politics of power and calculation (although perhaps, under certain favourable circumstances, and in spite of corrupted human nature, a more or less just and reasonable policy could be realised), the essential domain of human life came to be located in the private and inner sphere. As a participant in public life the Christian individual restricted himself to advocating a settlement or compromise that would not constitute a threat to his basic spiritual and moral commitments. That is, he opted for a kind of equilibrium, a restricted, limited and reasonable status quo, in order to secure a pietistic inner world of truth. Whereas public compromise was motivated by prudent self-interest and calculation, religious and moral issues belonged to the sphere of moral sentiment and inner experience, inaccessible to criticism. This implied an active, negotiating attitude as a participant in social discourse, and a passive, receptive attitude in the private sphere. That is, it implied a willingness to subject oneself to “human law” up to the point where this human law prevented one from acting in accordance with personal conscience (“divine law”). In a perfect world the state would disappear, but in real life it was an inevitable evil which had to be accepted. All this implied a permanent tension between personal freedom and public compliance. The government both secured and threatened personal autonomy. It was considered incapable of, or at least unauthorised to pronounce judgement in matters of religious and moral truth, and therefore assigned a more restricted function: to recognize, respect and maintain personal autonomy in order to allow the individual to subject himself to certain (often highly idiosyncratic) religious demands. In his personal life, the individual was sovereign, and answerable only to God. The evolving equilibrium, however, was permanently at risk: the authorities might threaten personal autonomy, while a fanatic individual (expanding the spiritual regiment to the public sphere) might incite moral warfare. Public compromise guaranteed social stability, and allowed for the development of a public policy directed at public welfare. It had nothing to do with moral truth, however, which was considered a personal and not a public experience.

In short, Protestantism, notably pietism, prepared the way for liberalism, that is, for liberal etatism, a moral view presented by J.S. Mill in his essay *On Liberty* (1859/1974). According to Mill, liberalism is a social or political ethics, a reflection on the way power can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. It emphasizes a rigid demarcation between the public and the private sphere and defines the duties which can be enforced upon individuals in the public sphere, leaving ample room for the “right to eccentricity” in the private sphere. In the parts which only concern himself, Mill writes, the independence of the individual is absolute. Over himself, his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. This sovereignty is limited, however, by the moral demand not to inflict harm upon others.

The subject of Mill’s essay, therefore, is the nature and limits of the power which

can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. Liberalism is to provide an answer to the question how and to what extent individuals are to be governed, that is, it deals with the question how both individual and collective tyranny should be checked. In the nineteenth century, modern society had acquired the technical means to exercise social tyranny on a formidable scale, far beyond comparison with any previous kind of political oppression, leaving fewer means to escape and penetrating much deeper into the details of life. Thus, individual freedom had to be guaranteed. Still, Mill considered the enforcement of some restraints on human action inevitable: some rules of conduct simply had to be imposed. The question therefore was how to make the fitting adjustment between individual independence and social control. Now according to Mill, the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. The individual has the right to frame the plan of his own life so long as he does not harm his fellow creatures. Although at first glance this might seem to allow for only a limited range of interferences by the government, on further reflection it becomes clear that, as many of our acts do have implications for other human beings, liberalism came to encourage and justify a substantial and gradually increasing exercise of public power. That is, although liberalism apparently aims at restricting the impact of governmental action on private life, the “harm-principle” provides the modern state with a perfect justification for becoming increasingly involved, at least in a regulatory manner, in countless aspects of social intercourse – an involvement which is bound to intensify as society grows more and more complex and the mutual dependence of individuals will increase further. In order to protect others against the tyranny of the self and, by implication, the self against the tyranny of others, the individual becomes subject to an increasing number of restrictions – and this constitutes the basic aporia of liberalism. In ancient Greek or Roman societies, although at first glance their modes of exercising power were often far more despotic and far less democratic, the extent to which public policy penetrated social intercourse and interfered with individual life from birth to death, both in sickness and in health, was far less intense. Indeed, Michel Foucault (1989/1995) pointed out that, although contemporary liberalism’s basic concern appears to be the fear of governing-too-much, the actual extent of its involvement as a political regime in practically all the details of human life is truly astonishing. In fact, Foucault recognized that liberalism is basically a kind of “etatism”, a set of technologies for governing individuals. It is a political regime that exercises power over individuals in a remarkably efficient way, producing a stable consensus, securing an adapted form of moral subjectivity by inventing and utilising efficient techniques and instruments of power (Foucault 1980).

Indeed, liberalism presupposes (or rather, produces) a certain form of moral subjectivity. According to Mill, despotism (a more archaic form of etatism, a more primitive mode of exercising power) is legitimate when it comes to dealing with barbarians, and liberalism has no application to any state of things prior to the time

when mankind had become capable of improvement by “free and equal discussion”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, one has to comply with liberalism’s basic demands in order to find one’s right to eccentricity respected – that is, *only certain forms of eccentricity* are accepted while others are rejected as barbaric. Other, truly incompatible forms of life are faced with the prospect of tyranny, and in his *Discipline and Punish* Foucault (1975) has provided us with a vivid picture of the modern forms of tyranny which eventually allowed the liberal state to emerge and the corresponding forms of moral subjectivity to be constituted. Liberalism is basically a mode of exercising power, a technique for governing individuals, demanding and producing a certain kind of conversion and adaptation, a certain level of obedience and consent, a certain (trans)formation of moral subjectivity. Its basic gesture is the compartmentalisation of moral life into a private realm of eccentricity and a public realm of compliance.

Now the logic at work in both pietism and liberalism implies a rather restricted agenda for moral philosophy. It is no longer directed at the discovery of moral truth but rather at establishing a public compromise, allowing the individual to engage in eccentric quests for truth while preventing harm to others. Basic experiences of moral truth and moral embarrassment are excluded from the ethical agenda since ethics is strictly aimed at consensus formation and behaviour regulation. At best, two separate agendas for ethics are allowed: one for public and one for private use. Be this as it may, the picture of moral life implied in the ethics of compartmentalisation is far from neutral or non-controversial. Rather it contains certain substantial claims with regard to moral life which should be open to contestation. Moreover, it implies a certain form of moral subjectivity (the compartmentalised Self) which is the outcome of certain historical experiences and anything but universal or self-evident.

Notwithstanding the genealogical affinity between Protestant and liberalist views on government, important differences can be discerned as well. Whereas from a Protestant point of view public life is depicted in more or less negative terms, liberalism has a more positive and affirmative understanding of the management of public life. It is not merely a compromise, for the individual is basically a citizen and public policy can certainly be fair and reasonable. In short, what has occurred is a historical shift from a negative, more or less Protestant, to a somewhat more positive, liberal appreciation of the state. Whereas Protestantism is first and foremost concerned with the individual, with the way individuals are to guide their own lives in order to become a certain kind of moral subject, liberalism is not interested in private morality as such, but in the social conditions which have to be realized in order for certain forms of moral subjectivity to flourish and constitute themselves. Liberalism is first and foremost a social ethics, a perspective on the use of social power. It is a version of what I will refer to as etatism. Notwithstanding its explicit concern with

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<sup>5</sup> “Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one” (p. 69).



individual freedom, its main “subject” is not the individual but the state.<sup>6</sup>

The historical shift from a rather negative towards a much more positive appreciation of public policy and the public realm (that is, the shift from a Protestant to a liberal understanding of ethical consensus) is described by John Rawls in *The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus* (1987).<sup>7</sup> According to Rawls, ethics should opt for consolidation rather than contestation. It is the task of a philosopher to articulate a conception of justice acceptable to all “reasonable” individuals<sup>8</sup> in a pluralistic society, a conception which can be considered a general standard by means of which public institutions are to be permanently scrutinised. In a pluralistic society, such a consensus is absolutely indispensable. In order to understand our contemporary situation, however, one has to realize that the quest for consensus is an answer to a specific historical problem, a problem which constitutes the basic experience, the beginning and starting-point of modern times and has remained our basic problem – the problem of pluralism and the risk of moral warfare it implies. Modern society’s principal objective is to avoid a situation of massive and violent confrontation between incompatible moral or religious truths, to avoid the recurrence of religious wars such as the ones accompanying the dawn of modern times. This quest for ethical consensus is the outcome of a historical experience. The modern individual came to recognise that willingness to compromise in the public sphere in order to avoid irreconcilable conflicts, and to opt for a *modus vivendi* between incompatible truths, is inevitable and more reasonable than to persist in violent confrontation. At first this willingness to compromise was merely a matter of prudence, best-interest and calculation (the Protestant attitude) and the public consensus was accepted merely for strategic reasons. A corresponding transformation of moral subjectivity itself (the emergence of the compartmentalised Self) was not yet implied. At a later stage, however, the willingness to compromise was transformed into a moral issue and became part of moral subjectivity itself: one of the basic convictions that now constitute a reasonable moral subject. Dissension gave way to the constitution of a particular kind of moral subjectivity, to the establishment of a particular moral

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that although Protestantism originally started as a ‘bottom-up’ understanding of moral transformation, it became increasingly etatistic. This fate already announced itself in the case of Luther. In order to counter the fanaticism of those whom he polemically referred to as *Schwärmer* and who threatened to overthrow the still vulnerable compartmentalization between church and state as advocated by him, he supported the transformation of the Lutheran Church into an instrument of etatism. Faced with a violent confrontation between peasants and state, he decided to side with the state against the peasants, although initially he had supported (some of) their claims, while their revolt had (at least to a considerable extent) been inspired by the spiritual upheaval he himself had inaugurated; but more on this in chapter four.

<sup>7</sup> The fact that many prominent spokesmen of liberal ethics are political rather than moral philosophers, confirms the claim that liberalism is basically a social ethic.

<sup>8</sup> That is, all individuals who have successfully accommodated themselves to the dominant form of moral subjectivity.

regime, liberalism, which is still governing us, and which still provides the moral ground structure for our public arrangements. Modern individuals are forced to participate in modern society and to consent to the basic moral convictions it embodies, but are granted the right (albeit within restricted boundaries) to determine their own eccentric (but harmless) life plan.

In certain respects, however, Rawls' account seems rather concealing and ideological. It is suggested that the individuals involved were willing to undergo this transformation on their own accord. Others, like Marx in *The Capital Part I* and Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, revealed the violent nature of this change, which resulted in the constitution of the modern subject and the establishment of the liberal regime (i.e. the compartmentalisation of moral life). History reveals that reason is often, perhaps always preceded by force. In order for a certain moral regime to become established, a violent coup d'état seems inevitable. Henceforth, we no longer seem able to challenge its basic truth without raising the suspicion of being "unreasonable". All individuals are forced to comply with a particular standard for moral subjectivity. In fact, through education, punishment and labour, a certain form of conscience, of accountability or responsibility is produced. By neglecting or obscuring the violent nature of these historical events, philosophy tends to give way to an ideological justification of the established regime. Indeed, according to Rawls, philosophy's basic aim is consolidation and justification, while requiring of individuals that they finally accept the restrictive guidelines for moral deliberation, finally renounce their responsiveness to incompatible moral demands, that is: finally become converted. For the transformation of the moral subject which occurred during the modern epoch was in a very fundamental way a conversion, rather similar to the conversion which preceded it during the first half of the Middle Ages. Both conversions seemed rather superficial and violent at first, but gradually resulted in the internalisation of certain basic demands and in an exclusion of incompatible forms of life – supported by a technocratic exercise of power.

Eventually, we seem unable to challenge the basic moral convictions of established culture. The only way to reveal their being less self-evident than they seem, is to compare them with the basic moral convictions of a world we know comparatively well, although it is a world quite unlike ours, the moral world of ancient Greece and Rome. According to Nietzsche, this vanished world allows us to formulate certain experiences regarding the present that would otherwise remain incomprehensible.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Hans Achterhuis (1984) and others have pointed out, the ancient Greek and Roman world constitutes a comic mirror to the modern one, as both worlds are radically separated from each other by what can be referred to as a complete reversal and transformation of all values – an *Umwertung aller Werte*, as Nietzsche phrased it. The Greek, for instance, preferred idleness to work and considered the latter as utterly degrading. In the sixteenth century, however,

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<sup>9</sup> Human, All Too Human II, 'Mixed opinions and aphorisms', § 218.

Protestants like Luther (not coincidentally a miner's son) and humanists like Coornhert initiated the abuse of idleness and the praise of labour – a genre, a conviction which soon became one of the most omnipresent and quasi self-evident platitudes of the great ethico-political discourse of modernity. All of a sudden, the rural populace was depicted as excessively lazy, backward and prodigal by the spokesmen of official discourse (Achterhuis 1984, p. 40 ff.). While the popular masses of Europe, notwithstanding their fierce and large-scale resistance, were gradually transformed into a massive reservoir of labour, a new genre made its appearance, beginning with Moore's *Utopia*. The one thing all these perfectly organised, utopian societies, invented by Moore and his followers had in common was their persistent emphasis on the significance of labour. From the very start, however, this new genre found itself accompanied by a comic and popular double, a cycle of legends about a counter-utopian land of gluttony and idleness, the *pays de Cocagne* (Achterhuis, p. 84; cf. Bakhtin 1968, p. 297), in which popular resistance against wage work expressed itself in a popular (that is, comical and parodical) manner. In the Land of Cockaigne, the same harsh penalties that were directed against idleness in real life were employed as a punishment for being too eager to work.

The ideological features in Rawls' account apparently result from his unwillingness to recognize the power aspect of the particular moral logic it tries to justify – a logic which aims at establishing itself at the expense of other possibilities. Philosophy is reduced to the effort of supporting the established consensus (involving certain basic ingredients of moral subjectivity such as tolerance, willingness to compromise and negotiate, and fairness) and of producing certain guidelines and procedures for moral deliberation, instead of challenging the established truth regime. Of course, this is abolishing true pluralism rather than accepting it. Once we have adopted this kind of moral subjectivity, the moral logic supported by Rawls does seem inevitable, but this already requires the subjugation of real pluralism. Indeed, Rawls himself points to the fact that the increasing detachment of the modern individual from traditional and religious life forms and commitments, resulting in an unclear and indefinite identity, is bound to facilitate their participation in the democratic institutions of contemporary society (Rawls 1972) – much like the conversion to Christianity during the early medieval period was facilitated by the decline of traditional and local attachments and ways of life. The impetus at work here is the effort to secure and reinforce that which has been established (being itself the outcome of a previous transformation) and to reject any rival philosophical understandings, such as the Socratic one, which rather considers philosophy a practice of fundamental contestation, challenging what appears to be self-evident, revealing fundamental uncertainty and embarrassment, exposing the vulnerability of basic moral convictions, unwilling to accept compromise at the expense of moral truth or to support established consensus for the sake of securing established forms of moral subjectivity. Notably, in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates emerges as a fanatic of moral truth, appealing to a higher duty, a divine mission to irritate his fellow citizens, arousing

them from their ideological slumber and inciting them to question what seems firmly established. He acts as someone, furthermore, who displays a basic readiness to ridicule the moral answers generally accepted as true, and to mock the protagonists of the official, standard account. Rawls, when he embarks on his effort to elaborate procedures for ethical decision making, already “knows” (quite unlike Socrates) what kind of results such a procedure is supposed to yield, already knows the answer his philosophy is supposed to support or provide. His effort is fundamentally biased in favour of the established moral regime, the standard moral account. The method of avoidance (the ethics of compartmentalisation) is basically a strategy of consolidation, whereas the basic objective of philosophers like Socrates and Foucault is contestation.

In a more recent book *Political Liberalism*, Rawls’ version of the standard account of modernity is recapitulated and further clarified (Rawls 1993). The modern world is not taken for granted, but compared with its historic mirror, the ancient world. Ancient religion, Rawls tells us, was public in the sense that all citizens were expected to participate in public celebrations, although the details of what one believed in terms of doctrine were not of great importance. Medieval Christianity, however, was not only public but also doctrinal (with a creed that was to be believed), as well as “authoritarian”. Now although Luther and Calvin were at least as dogmatic and intolerant as their Catholic foes had been – they never intended to further tolerance – the Reformation must be considered the historical cradle of political liberalism. Gradually, as we have seen, toleration as a mere *modus vivendi* gave way to the discovery of the possibility of a stable pluralist society. Political liberalism is the answer to a question: how is it possible to maintain over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens in the absence of a shared comprehensive (religious, philosophical, or moral) doctrine? Such a thing is possible, Rawls claims, if one narrows the range of disagreement by avoiding those moral topics on which comprehensive doctrines diverge and by restricting the agenda of ethics to determining fair terms for cooperation and intercourse between free and equal citizens. Moreover, liberalism merely articulates the basic principles and ideas that already are implicitly accepted and recognized by all reasonable individuals. Those principles can, no *should* be endorsed by all citizens, whatever their religious views. In order for a just and stable cooperation of free and equal citizens to be maintained, the appeal to comprehensive truths should give way in public life to consensus, that is: to the primacy of the established political and moral regime.

Furthermore, the political sphere is explained by Rawls in an etatistic, top-down manner (p. 136 ff.). Political power is always coercive power, Rawls contends, and the government alone has the authority to use force. Yet, the exercise of political power is proper only when it is exercised in accordance with this basic structure all free and equal citizens will freely agree to.<sup>10</sup> Although the state has the power to

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<sup>10</sup> “[I]n a democratic society public reason is the reason of equal citizens who [exercise]

punish and to correct by force, the basic political values normally have sufficient weight to override all other values that come in conflict with it. Political values normally outweigh whatever values may seem at odds with them, as they articulate the basic framework of social life, the very groundwork of our existence, the fundamental terms of cooperation.

In the decisive section devoted to “The political conception of the person” (p. 29 ff.), however, Rawls agrees that a certain form of moral subjectivity is presupposed by liberalism. Ethical consensus as understood by Rawls implies that individuals have a double (that is, compartmentalised) identity: an institutional, political or public one and a non-institutional, non-political, non-public one. Besides their institutional identity, they have affections, devotions and loyalties that resist objective evaluation. Indeed, citizens normally have two views or: their overall view can be divided into two parts (p. 140). Yet, although our moral identity often changes considerably over time (usually slowly but sometimes suddenly) these changes or even conversions do not imply a change in our public or institutional identity. Therefore, the dominant form of moral subjectivity (the compartmentalised Self, including a stable institutional identity) has to be accepted by all individuals and may even be enforced. The principles of justice that constitute society’s basic structure are such as reasonable individuals normally comply with. They constitute a permanent feature of public culture, and normally need not be enforced by means of the oppressive use of state power (as had been the case in medieval society) because they imply a basic moral structure all “reasonable” individuals will readily assent to. We may, however, force individuals to be “reasonable”.

Moreover, Rawls admits that the problem of social stability had been on his mind from the very outset (p. 141). Eventually he claims, however, that liberalism will produce a fair amount of political stability, one strong enough to resist the “normal tendencies to injustice” (p. 142) by encouraging individuals to acquire a normally sufficient sense of justice so that they will generally comply with society’s basic institutions (p. 141 ff.). Political liberalism appeals not to force but to public reason, that is, to the sense of justice of free and equal citizens viewed as reasonable and rational. The fact of pluralism, moreover, is not an unfortunate condition of human life, but rather the outcome of the free exercise of free human reason under conditions of liberty (p. 144).

Once again, what is disavowed in such an account is a basic historical experience, namely that the “reasonable” individual, free and equal, and willing to accept “fair terms of cooperation” had to be produced by force, as a product of regimes of power. In *The Capital*, Part 1 Marx explains the emergence of the massive reservoir of labour power presupposed by the kind of society that was coming into existence at that time. In Marx’ account, the true origin of modern society is a history of violence, plunder and terror. Marx relates how, in the sixteenth century, self-supporting rural

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political and coercive power over one another” (p. 214).

populations were violently transformed into a massive labour reservoir by means of expropriating and oppression. All of a sudden, they found themselves deprived of their means of existence, were chased away from the lands they had commonly cultivated since time immemorial. Eventually, they became “free and equal” and were forced to accept the “fair terms of cooperation” of the emerging labour market. In fact, they were transformed into servile, dependent, poverty-stricken labourers. Those who dared to put up resistance became the victim of a ruthless policy directed at the extermination of “idleness”, “laziness” and “pauperism” by means of what Marx refers to as “grotesque-terroristic” punishment exemplified by a series of harsh disciplinary techniques such as the famous “Houses of Terror”. This transfiguration of the rural population into individuals that would comply with the new ideal of personhood called *homo laborans* was what made modern society possible. Rawls, in his anecdote about the “original position” and the historical shift from *modus vivendi* to liberalism, totally ignores the history that finally made individuals “reasonable” and willing to cooperate, taking for granted the idea that paid labour constitutes the basic structure of human existence. Actual history is a tragic-comic mirror bound to expose the ideological nature of nineteenth century “political economy” as well as of twentieth century “political liberalism”.

Indeed, what is disavowed is the fact that, compared to the “oppressive” and “authoritarian” Middle Ages, contemporary society’s basic feature is its astonishing uniformity in terms of the forms of life it is able to tolerate. Wage work and entrepreneurship have become basic conditions for admittance to public intercourse. This, the forced unification of forms of life, the demand that, whatever we do, we must remain “reasonable” and willing to work and, above all, willing to accept compartmentalisation, is what constitutes the groundwork of our existence. But let me not be misunderstood. I do not call for a relapse into a medieval world or for a fundamental political transformation of the present, nor do I consider the Land of Cockaigne a serious or even tempting prospect. What is advocated here is a philosophical recognition of the power dimension of moral life. Any effort to conceal this aspect, to present the established consensus as non-controversial and incontestable, must be exposed to the truth of laughter. In the next section, two further examples of consolidation and avoidance will be presented: the moral views of Peter Strawson and Richard Rorty. Special attention will be given to the latter’s understanding of Socrates, his initial appreciation of him as well as his subsequent rejection of him as a philosophical hero (before subjecting some of Plato’s Socratic dialogues to a more thorough rereading in chapter three).

### 3. The method of avoidance or the loss of problems

A perfect example of the “method of avoidance” or the “ethics of compartmentalisation” is provided by Strawson (1970). As was indicated above, there is a remarkable tendency in established moral discourse to start with a certain rhetoric gesture: a proposal to distinguish, that is, to separate. In the case of Strawson, it is the distinction between “the region of the ethical” (to be abandoned by moral philosophy) and the “sphere of morality” (to which moral philosophers should exclusively devote their attention). According to Strawson, all individuals will be fascinated by some personal moral ideal or other, seizing them, impressing them. These ideals are “true” in a very fundamental way. But moral philosophy will never succeed in integrating them into a coherent, comprehensive unity. He writes:

The region of the ethical is a region in which there are truths which are incompatible with each other. There exist, that is to say, many profound general statements which are capable of capturing the ethical imagination... They can be incorporated into a metaphysical system, or dramatized in a religious or historical myth. Or they can exist – their most persuasive form for many – as isolated statements such as, in France, there is a whole literature of, the literature of the maxim. I will not give examples, but I will mention names. One cannot read Pascal or Flaubert, Nietzsche or Goethe, Shakespeare or Tolstoy, without encountering these profound truths... In most of us the ethical imagination succumbs again and again to these pictures of man, and it is precisely as truths that we wish to characterize them while they hold us captive (p. 101).

Whereas the region of the ethical is to be explored by literature, moral philosophy should exclusively devote itself to the sphere of morality. Here, every individual is constrained by certain rules and regulations, implied by certain basic and non-controversial principles. For instance: do not harm others. These regulations, although we will never quite feel comfortable with them, are necessary, and the outcome of public consensus – there ought to be some rules to regulate and control social intercourse. The individual complies with them out of enlightened self-interest. Those issues, however, which belong to the “region of the ethical” are to be de-listed from the agenda of ethics proper, notably its social branch. Small wonder that, all of a sudden, a large number of basic moral issues seem either discarded beforehand or reduced to problems that can be easily solved by ethical experts. Indeed, Strawson’s proposal is bound to produce the kind of moral philosophy which suffers from what Wittgenstein referred to as a “loss of problems” – a malady which in my opinion must be considered fatal.<sup>11</sup> In chapter five I will claim that the basic issue of contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Manche Philosophen ... leiden an dem, was man “loss of problems”, “Problemverlust” nennen kann. Es scheint ihnen dann alles ganz einfach, und es scheinen keine tiefen Problemen mehr zu existieren, die Welt wird weit und flach und verliert jede Tiefe; und was sie schreiben, wird unendlich seicht und trivial’ (1984, § 456).

ethics concerns the way the so-called “public” and “private” aspects of moral life remain intimately connected, but this whole matter is “solved” beforehand by presenting one particular understanding of this connectedness as being self-evident. In Strawson’s proposal, all uncomfortable aspects of moral experience are simply considered irrelevant to moral philosophy. He does not seem to recognize the extent to which the moral weight of these apparently residual aspects is blatantly disavowed by transferring them to some “private” realm.

Another albeit more elaborate example of the ethics of compartmentalisation is furnished by Richard Rorty (1989). In 1980, Rorty had accused Plato of being the first philosopher to try to transform ethics into a science by introducing a standard or master vocabulary that would allow for the disqualification of all existing vocabularies incompatible (or, to use the phrase preferred by Rorty, incommensurable) with it, excluding them from philosophical discourse. These vocabularies were referred to as sophistry and were considered to be at odds with science. The demand of commensurability with the standard vocabulary as advocated by Plato was rejected by Rorty. Instead of producing commensurability, philosophy should be considered a practice of self-formation or edification by individuals. Rorty sided with the “marginal” philosophers who, rather than contributing to the transformation of moral philosophy into a science, participate in an endless conversation. The point of “edifying” philosophy is not the quest for truth. Rather it is a continuous effort to keep the conversation going. Rorty opted for a multiplication of language games. His philosophical hero was Socrates – not, of course, the mutilated Socrates as he is presented to us by Plato, but the original Socrates still recognizable in some of the dialogues in spite of Plato’s continuous effort to discipline, subdue and rectify his master. This is the Socrates who, mastering several vocabularies or language games, participates and excels in a conversation which remains under the sway of exciting disagreement, surpassing others in discursive flexibility, remaining tolerant towards the incommensurable.

Social intercourse was considered by Rorty a forum in the true sense of the term, a hermeneutical scene where protagonists of incompatible vocabularies meet and exchange their constructions of reality. The aim of their hermeneutical encounter is not to constrain or discipline but to understand the other’s language game, allowing him to take the floor. “Heteroglossia” (the Bakhtinian phrase to indicate a plurality of language genres) is encouraged, a “centrifugal” attitude towards social discourse affirmed.

Allow me to elaborate a Rorty-like position by means of a famous passage, taken from *Acts of the Apostles*. In Athens, Paul was challenged by some epicurean and stoic philosophers to defend his doctrine in public, as all the Athenians seemed to spend their time in nothing but philosophical debate. On the Areopagus he was subjected to mockery when he came to speak about the resurrection of the souls, but



others seemed willing to continue the discussion.<sup>12</sup> The Epicureans and Stoics, although weary of their interminable dispute and eager for something “new”, still opted for a hermeneutical position and were willing to allow an unknown vocabulary or language game to make its appearance on their discursive forum. Attention was given to the unprecedented and incommensurable. The agora was a locus for discursive exchange in which all free-born Athenians seemed eager to participate. Paul’s performance, however, is ambivalent. It can be considered an intensification of pluralism. He is challenged to appear on the Areopagus so that his teachings could be judged and considered more carefully. Although his message is ridiculed by some, others seem interested in carrying on the conversation. Paul himself, however, is not. On the contrary, his objective is to establish a truth regime, a standard vocabulary, abolishing polytheism. After his encounter with the Athenians, he prefers a more restricted audience, for instead of joining the philosophers’ interminable dispute, Paul withdraws among his fellow spirits.<sup>13</sup> What must be emphasized is that the mockery of the Athenians, after paying attention to Paul’s remarkable speech, is not simply a private event, nor mere irony. Rather it is an instance of public agonistic laughter resounding on an ancient market-square, the effect of an intense discursive struggle among incommensurable speech genres, incompatible forms of moral subjectivity.

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty (1989) tries to further elaborate this hermeneutical-liberalist view. Once again, he claims to renounce the quest for a master vocabulary that would solve all differences and pacify social and philosophical discourse. Yet he recoils before the social implications of such a gesture, and finds himself obligated to take refuge in the strategy of compartmentalisation we already encountered – that is: he takes refuge in the master vocabulary of liberal etatism. In fact, he sets out to draw a picture of what he refers to as a liberal utopia, which requires a rigid separation of the private and the public realms.<sup>14</sup> Philosophers like

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<sup>12</sup> Paul had seen how Athens was wholly given to idolatry. On Areopagus, he told the Athenians things that were strange to their ears. Amidst “superstition” he found an altar for the unknown god, the Lord of heaven and earth, who dwells not in temples made with hands. Some mocked him but others said, we will hear thee again on this matter” (Acts, 17:17-21).

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche considered the Renaissance an Athenian agora on a European scale, whereas he considered Luther’s attitude towards the Renaissance as reminiscent of Paul’s attitude towards ancient Athens. There is some truth in Nietzsche’s view, although, undeniably, there are other, more ‘centrifugal’ aspects at work in Luther as well, challenging official discourse, introducing popular linguistic modes, resisting ‘monoglossia’ (Bakhtin), allowing the Word to be released instead of being disciplined and rectified by scholarship, etc. (cf. Chapter 4). Furthermore, we somehow still discern an astonishing continuity between first century (Hellenistic) Athens, visited by Saint Paul, and ancient Athens as it must have been in the fourth century B.C., inhabited by Socrates. In the dialogues, we already encounter the typical Athenian, eager to hear something new, and we already witness the crowd of philosophers involved in their interminable disputes, mocking and challenging each other. Somehow, Christianity really managed to impose a new truth regime; abolishing paganism and polytheism (cf. Chapter 3).

<sup>14</sup> He writes for instance: ‘The social glue holding together the ideal liberal society [...] consists in little more than a consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that goal requires, besides

Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault are now referred to as “ironists”, and their writings are of significance only for the private realm [sic!]. They merely aspire to attain personal autonomy and to “criticize” established morality by means of irony. Mill, Habermas, Rawls and others, however, address the issues of public life. Their work tries to answer the question of how we could succeed in establishing a just society, with the aim of inflicting as little pain to others as possible – these philosophers are fellow citizens rather than ironists. Insofar as irony claims to be of some significance beyond the private realm, it must be considered a failure. The ironic perspective on the human condition is valuable on a private level, but it cannot advance the social or political goals of liberalism.

Rorty’s book tries to show how things would look if we dropped the demand for a theory which unifies the public and the private and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet for ever incommensurable. Rorty’s new hero is the liberal ironist who behaves like Nietzsche in the private realm, while remaining a J.S. Mill in the public realm, and who agrees that there is no such thing as truth, that there is nothing beyond vocabularies, that these vocabularies do not refer to an internal or external reality which could be considered a standard for truth. Some vocabularies are more promising than others, but no single vocabulary can be rejected in an argumentative way because every argument derives its persuasive power from (and therefore remains dependent on) the vocabulary to which it belongs. In other words, the unit of argumentation is a vocabulary, rather than a proposition. Hegel is praised for being a philosopher who mastered several vocabularies and was able to switch from one vocabulary to another, but he is blamed for having suggested that his “ironic” narrative had any significance for public life and could contribute to answering the question of how a just, tolerant and peaceful society could be established. The books by Hegel, Heidegger and others are nothing but “autobiographies”.<sup>15</sup> Their irony is devoid of any social implication and any effort to apply their ironical game to real life is pointless and futile, even dangerous. The question of my study is, basically: why does such a proposal make me laugh?

According to Rorty, all human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions: their “final vocabulary”. An ironist is someone who has continual doubts about the final vocabulary he currently uses, doubts which

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peace and wealth, the standard “bourgeois freedoms”. This conviction would [...] be a conviction based on nothing more profound than the historical facts which suggest that without the protection of something like the institutions of bourgeois liberal society, people will be less able to work out their private salvations, create their private self-images, reweave their webs of belief and desire in the light of whatever new people and books they happen to encounter. In such an ideal society, discussion of public affairs will revolve around (1) how to balance the needs for peace, wealth, and freedom when conditions require that one of these goals be sacrificed to one of the others and (2) how to equalize opportunities for self-creation and then leave people alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities”.

<sup>15</sup> The only ‘ironist’ who, up to a certain point, would perhaps agree with Rorty’s “redescription” is the later Nietzsche who, in *Ecce homo*, contends that his Untimely Considerations “...im Grunde bloß von mir reden” (§ 3).

cannot be solved by argument. Therefore, he is someone who is never quite able to take himself seriously. He is aware of the contingency and fragility of his description of the world. A liberal, on the other hand, is someone who considers cruelty the worst thing possible, and therefore takes pains not to be cruel towards his fellow individuals. A liberal ironist is someone who refrains from cruelty, yet simultaneously affirms that any account that tries to consolidate liberalism into a moral principle merely appeals to platitudes – i.e. views which happen to be commonly accepted, but remain open to doubt or ridicule. According to the ironist, established moral criteria are never more than platitudes which define the terms of a final vocabulary currently in use, and ironical doubts cannot be overcome by argument. In order to be convinced by a particular argument, one has to accept the vocabulary to which it belongs. Philosophy is about redescription rather than argument, and dialectics is the attempt to play off vocabularies or redescriptions against one another. Indeed, Rorty claims that a more up-to-date word for dialectics would be literary criticism. Hegel is considered the founding father of ironist philosophy, someone who helped turn it into a literary genre.<sup>16</sup> Again: why does this make me laugh?

Now an obvious “argument” against Rorty’s ironic redescription of philosophy would be that this redescription is grounded in a platitude, indeed the platitude of platitudes, the one apparently most in need of creative and ironic redescription, namely, the quasi self-evident compartmentalisation of moral life into a private and a public sphere. Yet Rorty would probably be all but embarrassed by such a remark, and would readily admit it. Still it is a platitude Rorty’s redescription cannot do without, for it postulates liberal irony’s basic condition. I will claim, however (notably in chapter five), that this platitude, shielded against ridicule by Rorty, severely hampers our understanding of the present moral condition. In the next section I will already suggest that the best way to abandon it is to return to Rorty’s previous philosophical hero, Socrates, and the kind of laughter he represented, and which (inevitably) was profoundly misunderstood by Rorty. But first, I would like to illustrate how Rorty himself defends his position against two possible lines of criticism.

Rorty discerns or anticipates at least two basic objections to his own views. One is the sense that the liberal ironist’s willingness to respect his fellow citizens seems to imply that there is something within human beings which deserves respect and protection quite independently of the language one happens to speak. Yet Rorty maintains that a universal ethics, grounded in the imperative that we are not to inflict

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<sup>16</sup> ‘I want to defend ironism, and the habit of taking literary criticism as the presiding intellectual discipline, against polemics such as Habermas’s. My defense turns on making a firm distinction between the private and the public. Whereas Habermas sees the line of ironist thinking which runs from Hegel through Foucault and Derrida as destructive of social hope, I see this line of thought as largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions. Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics... Habermas [however] shares with the Marxists... the assumption that the real meaning of a philosophical view consists in its political implications’ (p. 83).

any pain upon each other, would be incompatible with ironism simply because it is hard to imagine stating such an ethic without some doctrine about the nature of man – the very type of doctrine Rorty aims to forego. Such an appeal to human nature would be the antithesis of ironism.

The second objection seems even more problematic. There is clearly something anti-social and irresponsible, even cruel and offensive in irony. The ironist is bound to destroy some values cherished by his fellow citizens, and will depict anyone who attaches himself to such a value as being prejudiced, foolish or vulgar. Rorty agrees that irony humiliates, but feels that it does so in a rather modest way. Instead of aiming at mastering and submitting other vocabularies (the basic objective of metaphysics) it contents itself with presenting an ironic redescription for the sake of those who happen to be susceptible to it. It is a redescription which does not force itself upon those fellow citizens who maintain their personal commitment to certain ideals, but remains a redescription for private purposes only. The ironist contents himself with redescribing the world; it is not (or rather, should not be) his ambition to transform it. Irony in the strict sense of the term does not imply any harm to others. The writings of Foucault, for instance, are to be considered merely an effort of the philosopher himself to gain personal autonomy. They do not really entail any implications for public or political life. The political impact and content of Foucault's work need to be subdued, in order for him to pass as an ironist. Rorty agrees that perhaps the philosophers involved would be hesitant, to say the least, to accept his redescription and rectification of their work as ironical, but we simply are not to accept the anti-liberal implications of some of these ironist's writings. According to Rorty, Foucault is an ironist unwilling to be a liberal, whereas Habermas is a liberal unwilling to be an ironist. But we should recoil from encouraging the private discontent addressed by irony to express itself within the public realm.

Now what happened to Socrates, Rorty's initial hero? In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he occupies a rather moderate position and is replaced by new heroes, Derrida and a few others. Rorty admits that Socrates is not a liberal ironist but a "liberal metaphysician", someone who still cherishes the hope that one day the inner and the outer man will become one and that irony will no longer be necessary, someone whose metaphysics falls subject to rigid redescription by Rorty's new philosophical hero Derrida, turning the metaphysical into the merely private and idiosyncratic.

Both Strawson and Rorty aim at compartmentalisation. Although Rorty, unlike Strawson, is quite willing to consider ironism a branch of moral philosophy in its own right, it is a philosophy of a rather private and literary nature, an ethic for literati, carefully separated from public discourse. The philosopher is either to provide some guidelines for public behaviour, or to embark on a private, ironic exercise. In my view, such a conception of philosophy is not only untenable and therefore open to derision, but also quite at odds with the philosophical practice of Rorty's one-time hero Socrates, as he in fact came to realize himself. In the case of Socrates, philosophy

meant contesting public consensus and established convictions, revealing the vulnerability of what was apparently self-evident. Socrates' objective was not consensus, but truth, and this truth was not of a merely private nature. In his famous apology, when Socrates finds himself confronted with the accusation that his teachings constitute a threat to public life and established conviction, he appeals to a higher sense of duty, a divine mission, a readiness to be addressed, a responsiveness to a divine inner voice (his demon, his δαίμόνιον). Any compromise is to be rejected, for one is to obey the divine powers rather than one's fellow citizens. Never will he adapt his behaviour or abandon what he considers his proper duty: to question, to irritate, to expose to laughter, regardless of the consequences for public life. He remains unwilling to accept the basic rules of established moral discourse, considers himself appointed by a divine power commanding him to interrupt the very discursive logic with which he refuses to comply: "Sentence me or set me free, but never will I refrain from my mission"; – The very opposite of self-conceited "ironism".

In my view, the quintessence of Rorty's ethics of compartmentalisation is his misunderstanding of laughter. There is clearly an awareness that laughter poses a threat to public regulation and that public mockery might imply political risks with regard to solidarity. Therefore laughter is subdued and reduced to irony, excluded from the agora, the market-square of unrestricted public discourse, and dispelled into the private sphere. Laughter is fundamentally transformed, and in the course of this transformation a certain form of moral subjectivity (the compartmentalised Self) is established. Rorty's new hero is someone who manages to split himself into Nietzsche and Mill (cf. Rawls' personal and institutional identity), someone who considers established morality quite unconvincing but still accepts that one is not allowed to laugh in public. In short, laughter is bereft of its public and political implications and the postmodern hero, the compartmentalised individual is supposed to laugh only in private. True laughter is replaced by irony. This picture of moral subjectivity either implies a rejection or a far-reaching rectification of Socrates as a philosophical hero, a mutilation and adaption far more drastic than the one undertaken by Plato (and apparently deplored by Rorty). Let me therefore allow Socrates to take the floor, and let us pay special attention to his laughter, so that we may acquire a rough idea of what is lost in Rorty's account, in order to prepare ourselves for a more careful and elaborate rereading of Socrates' philosophy of laughter in the subsequent chapters.

#### **4. The case of Socrates: a buffoon who had himself taken seriously**

In chapter three, I will emphasize the importance of final words, but first sentences are also important. The sentence with which Socrates, in Plato's *Apology*, makes his appearance on the stage (i.e. the court of law at Athens) already abounds in mockery and wit: "I do not know what effect my accusers have had upon you, gentlemen, but

for my own part I was almost carried away by them – their arguments were so convincing. On the other hand, scarcely a word of what they said was true” [17a]. Indeed, in the course of his speech, Socrates piles jest upon jest – “I was astonished ... when they told you that you must be careful not to let me deceive you – the implication being that I am a skilful speaker... I have not the slightest skill as a speaker – unless, of course, by a skilful speaker they mean one who speaks the truth” [17b].

Plato’s *Apology* is a vivid picture of the man Socrates must have been: straightforward, confident and, above all, someone who “always views the world of men with a bit of humour... whose argument is always mingled with amusement” (Treddennick 1961). He prefers to make his appearance in the open, public places of his city<sup>17</sup> and claims to speak in an inartificial tone of voice. He strongly rejects the accusation that he is one of those philosophers who have acquired the professional competence to “make the weaker argument defeat the stronger”, whom he ridicules by means of irony [18b].<sup>18</sup> Yet the basic mode of laughter at work in Socrates’ plea before the court is not of an ironic nature. Basically, his plea is parodical, a magnificent parody of the court plea as a speech genre. At first glance, all elements of this genre are represented in Socrates’ speech, but it does not escape the majority of his audience, the members of the jury, that they are in fact being mocked and ridiculed, and perhaps this is their main reason for convicting him and passing a death sentence on him. Let me give a few examples, although a thorough rereading would reveal that his speech simply abounds in parodical jest.<sup>19</sup>

Socrates starts at the beginning, with the charge. But instead of considering the charge at hand, he immediately turns over to another, previous and anonymous charge, thereby taxing the patience of his audience right away. And then, apparently in response to their signs of impatience and anger, Socrates suddenly inserts the following line: “Perhaps some of you will think that I am not being serious, but I assure you that I am going to tell you the whole truth” [20d] – certainly a stock line in

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, who refers to him as a street philosopher, lingering wherever an opportunity for idle conversation presents itself (Human, All-to-human I, § 433).

<sup>18</sup> ‘I think that it is a fine thing if a man is qualified [to educate people and charge a fee], I should certainly plume myself and give myself airs if I understood these things”, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Although the difference between parody and irony will be further clarified elsewhere, perhaps it is wise to start with a provisional definition of both modes of speech. Irony basically means: saying the opposite of what one has in mind (cf. the example just mentioned: ‘It sure is a fine thing to be able to educate people and charge a fee’). Furthermore, it applies to the level of a sentence, a speech act, or a phrase, rather than to a genre, a vocabulary, like parody. Parody can have two meanings. Originally, it was the effort to respond (not necessarily in a comical vein) to an already existing word or work of art in such a way that it produced a kind of revival, a work of art in its own right. Subsequently, it came to be considered a primarily comical device, exposing a serious genre to ridicule by meeting its conventions in an exaggerated or distorted way, or by straightforwardly applying them to a totally absurd topic, thus creating a comic double. Whereas irony is considered a refined and individualistic kind of mockery, parody is commonly associated with vulgar farce, but with more critical strength, because it ridicules the logic of a particular genre *as such*.

mock speeches of all time. After this, Socrates relates a series of scenes that also belong to the comical genres of all times, involving a wandering buffoon who puts ridiculous questions to the wise, which they are unable or unwilling to answer and then draws the conclusion that he is wiser than they are, because while it is an established fact that he himself understands absolutely nothing, they apparently understand even less.<sup>20</sup> The pilgrimage undertaken in obedience to his deity kept him “too busy to do much either in politics or in my own affairs. In fact, my service to God has reduced me to extreme poverty” [23b]. At a certain point, Socrates succeeds in parodying the genre of philosophical dialogue and that of a judicial plea simultaneously by introducing the particular truth game that made him famous (the Socratic dialogue) in court. However, his strategic device is somewhat impeded by the fact that on this occasion his partners are even more reluctant than usual to participate in his game and more than once Socrates is forced to come up with the answers himself.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the continuous laughter of the audience is almost audible.

But of course, like any other genius of comedy, his performance is not merely comical. The claim that God has appointed him to the duty of leading a philosophical life, examining himself and others, is serious up to the point of serenity.<sup>22</sup> And also his ridicule of the fear of death eventually implies a serious insight. Laughter recurs, however, when he claims in a most straightforward manner that, according to himself and quite unlike what is suggested in the official charges, no greater good has ever befallen the city of Athens than his relentless service to his God:

For this reason, gentlemen, so far from pleading on my own behalf, as might be supposed, I am really pleading on yours, to save you from misusing the gift of God by condemning me. If you put me to death, you will not easily find anyone to take my place. It is literally true, even if it sounds comical, that God has specially appointed me to this city, as though it were a large thorough-bred horse which because of its great size is inclined to be lazy and needs the stimulation of some stinging fly. It seems to me that God has attached me to this city to perform the

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<sup>20</sup> “But how is it that some people enjoy spending a great deal of time in my company? You have heard the reason, gentlemen; I told you quite frankly. It is because they enjoy hearing me examine those who think that they are wise when they are not - an experience which has its amusing side” (p. 19). Later on, he claims to expect that death will be “rather amusing” (p. 25) provided he is allowed to continue the Socratic truth game with the inhabitants of the underworld.

<sup>21</sup> “Is not this the case? Of course it is, whether you ... deny it or not”; “If you do not want to answer, I will supply it for you”; “Is not that so? It is. I assume your assent since you do not answer” (p. 13).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, who refers to the “wonderful seriousness” with which he maintained his divine calling even before his judges (*The Birth of Tragedy*, § 13), although elsewhere, when he comes to talk about Socrates’ self-awareness as a divine missionary, he adds that it is difficult to tell how much Attic irony, jest and love of mockery is at work even here (*Human, All Too Human II*, ‘The Wanderer and his Shadow’, § 72).

office of such a fly, and all day long I never cease to settle here, there, and everywhere, rousing, persuading and reproving every one of you. You will not easily find another one like me, gentlemen, and if you take my advice you will spare my life [30d/e].<sup>23</sup>

This is not someone who is begging the jury to spare his life the way he would have been expected to do under the circumstances (given the conventions of the genre), but rather someone who pursues his sheer mockery, his parodical mode of speech at all costs, regardless of the consequences. Although (in accordance with the official genre conventions) he does include a line about sparing his life, he formulates it in such a way that it becomes an “advice” rather than an entreaty.<sup>24</sup>

But the summit of mockery is reached at the very moment of decision. After Socrates has been found guilty of the charge, a fitting penalty must be determined – and the death penalty has been demanded. And this is the moment in which Socrates reveals himself as the kind of man he is – the perfect jester who simply will not stop at anything. To begin with, he impudently and explicitly skips the part where the accused is expected to make passionate appeals, but proceeds directly towards the final question. What penalty would be appropriate for having been the man he is and having lived the only life he considered to be of significance? Free maintenance at the state’s expense! Once again, a roar of laughter is almost audible – the apology is Socrates’ greatest comic performance. But he is still not finished with his antagonists. What other proposals could be made? Imprisonment and exile are out of the question, for it would impede him to pursue his life of ruthless examination. Perhaps a fine? At this point, when one would expect Socrates to try to save his own life, he comes up with his final joke: “You will not believe that I am serious”, he exclaims [37e] as he continues to persist that a life, not of public responsibility, but of permanent examination is the best thing a man can do, whereas life without it is not worth living. In view of his way of living, Socrates claims that he is not accustomed to think of himself as someone deserving punishment. Therefore, he ends up suggesting (in view both of his innocence and of his poverty, resulting from his way of life) the lowest

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<sup>23</sup> And this is how he continues: ‘If you doubt whether I am really the sort of person who would have been sent to this city as a gift from God, you can convince yourselves by looking at it in this way. Does it seem natural that I should have neglected my own affairs and endured the humiliation of allowing my family to be neglected all these years, while I busied myself all the time on your behalf, going like a father or an elder brother to see each one of you privately, and urging you to set your thoughts on goodness?’ (p. 17).

<sup>24</sup> The picture of Socrates as jester, the way he emerges for instance in the novels of Rabelais, was also discerned by Nietzsche. Under certain historical circumstances, he claims, where authority still presides over reason, the critical philosopher is a buffoon. Socrates was a remarkable case, because he was a buffoon who managed to have himself taken seriously and put to death: ‘Überall, wo noch die Autorität zur guten Sitte gehört, wo man nicht begründet, sondern befiehlt, ist der Dialektiker eine Art Hanswurst: man lacht über ihn, man nimmt ihn nicht ernst. – Sokrates war der Hanswurst der sich ernst nehmen machte: was geschah da eigentlich? – ‘ (*The Twilight of the Idols*, § 5).



possible fine: a mina. “I suppose I could probably afford a mina. I suggest a fine of that amount” [38B]. After Socrates’ final jest, a ruthless parody of court plea as a serious genre, his fate is sealed.

Kierkegaard (1989) refers to a contemporary expert on Socrates called Ast who felt indignant over the vulgar, ludicrous manner Socrates behaved himself in the *Apology* as well as over the bold confidence with which he spoke, thereby expressing his contempt for others. According to Ast, he even “slipped into the comical” [!] when he declared himself to be ignorant yet at the same time wiser than all others. In the eyes of Ast, the summit of ridicule is reached when Socrates explains that the death penalty holds no punishment for him because it will not keep him from questioning those dwelling in the underworld. And Kierkegaard adds: “It is undeniable that here Socrates almost lapses into the ridiculous in his zeal ... and who can keep from smiling when he imagines the sombre shades of the underworld and Socrates right there in the middle, indefatigably interrogating them” (p. 40).<sup>25</sup> Instead of suggesting that Socrates is “slipping into the comical” or “lapsing into the ridiculous”, however, it must be stressed that he is ridiculous on purpose. Rather than exalting himself he is able to laugh at himself by including himself, as well as his famous truth game (the Socratic dialogue), in his mockery. The straightforward application of the conventions of a certain genre (such as the court plea or the Socratic dialogue) to a ridiculous situation is one of parody’s basic techniques. As will be explained more carefully in chapter three, Socrates applies the parodical strategy of overcoming fear (for example, fear of death) by transforming the terrible (for example, the sombre prospect of a life coming to its end) into something completely ridiculous.

Due to the vivid and life-like performance of the brilliant parodist presented to us in Plato’s dialogue, we find that his basic technique is not irony but parody. Whenever Socrates is considered primarily an ironist, his laughter is subdued and reduced. Irony is a case of reduced laughter. It is negative, individualistic, furtive, dissatisfied with itself. Parody, however, is gay, *a laughter that really laughs*. It is public laughter, and travesty. A serious genre is ridiculed, ruthlessly reversed, turned upside down, in public, before a live and laughing audience. All stock elements of the serious genre are systematically abused. It is straightforward, challenging and irresistible. Its effect on official discourse is devastating. In the next chapter, where several philosophies of laughter will be reviewed, the difference between irony and parody will be explored more carefully. Moreover, as I already announced, in chapter three the case of Socrates will be subjected to a more thorough rereading. Yet there still is one issue

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<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin points out that such a scene is a stock element in the popular tradition of carnivalization of the nether world (“gay hell”) where representatives of different sections of society and different historical periods meet on equal terms and enter into familiar contact with each other (1968, p. 109). Bakhtin also points out that this comic scene of Socrates’ visit to the underworld was used (and exaggerated, of course) by the Cynics later on: “In the comic afterlife visions of Menippean satire, the heroes of the [past] and living contemporaries jostle with one another in a most familiar way” (p. 26).

that has to be dealt with here. Socrates is not a liberal ironist, and Rorty was quite right in admitting this, for two reasons.

To begin with, he is not an ironist. Although it is beyond doubt that irony is one of the ingredients in his comic speeches, he is basically a parodist – but this will be explained more adequately elsewhere. The second reason, the one that will be dealt with here, is that he is not at all a liberal either. And any effort to present him as a supporter of liberalism would imply a rectification and adaptation of Socrates with the intention of attuning him to the standard account of contemporary ethics. Even in the *Apology*, although apparently the one dialogue which lends itself most easily for a liberal redescription (freedom of speech, etc.), the compartmentalisation of moral life is not at all respected. Even here, where the personal, idiosyncratic aspects of the Socratic truth game are so strongly emphasized, its public and political aspect decidedly manifests itself.

In section 31C, Socrates' plea suffers a somewhat unexpected turn. "It may seem curious", he says, "that I should go round giving advice like this and busying myself in people's private affairs, and yet never venture publicly to address you as a whole" [31C]. He explains that it is his daimonion or inner voice which bars him from entering political life and office. And rightly so, for no man who opposes public wrongs and illegalities can possibly escape with his life. "The true champion of justice, if he intends to survive even for a short time, must necessarily confine himself to private life and leave politics alone" [32A]. Now if anything, these lines appear to contain a perfect articulation of the Two Worlds Theorem of liberalism, and Socrates' daimonion appears to be perfectly in tune with a compartmentalisation of moral life into a public (political) and a private (ironical) sphere. Socrates' ethic already seems to have accepted the compartmentalisation of ethics and to settle for ironism long before liberalism was born. True virtue can only be acquired in private life, while irony does not apply to public life. Such an understanding of the Socratic truth game, however, is thoroughly misguided.

Socrates' basic claim is rendered meaningless should it be considered an articulation of liberal ironism, for he justifies his public behaviour by appealing to his God: "It is literally true, even if it sounds rather comical, that God has specially appointed me to this city" [30E]. An ironic reading is bound to reduce this claim to a mere rhetorical phrase. And yet, it is a perfect and revealing articulation of Socrates' basic position. Although Socrates is clearly not an etatist, the nature of his guardianship is political. Let me explain once more what I mean by etatism. It entails a top-down perspective on politics as the art of exercising public power. Plato's philosophy is a perfect example of a top-down, etatist perspective. In order to reform the individual, the state has to be reformed beforehand. In order to educate the individual, one must constitute a state and regulate public life. Now there are several historical forms of etatism, ancient despotism being one of them, while the Roman empire, notably during its final, Christianized epoch, is another one. It goes without saying that socialism is a kind of etatism as well, but today the most important form is

liberalism, a version of etatism which seems to correspond to present historical conditions most adequately. For as was explained above, although liberalism is often associated with a distant and reserved kind of public policy, in reality it has produced the omnipresent modern mega-state, penetrating public life in all its aspects and regulating social intercourse in a most severe manner, in order to allow the individual certain eccentricities in the private sphere. It is, clearly, a top-down perspective on the art of government. A state has to be constituted in order for the individual to become an autonomous subject.

Socrates is not an etatist, neither of the totalitarian nor of the liberal kind. Rather, his perspective is bottom-up and his starting point is the reformation of the individual. The individual, however, is not considered an end in itself by Socrates, and he does not consider the saving of souls to be his mission (Socrates is not at all a Christian). The individual is to be reformed in order to make him a better politician. His bottom-up perspective is of an aristocratic kind, and the individuals he is particularly interested in are the ones who are bound to become the politicians of the future. They are the ones who are to be reformed, not for the sake of their private lives or happiness but for the sake of the future well-being of the city state of Athens. Indeed, Socrates' God is not of a Christian but of a pagan kind. He is not concerned with individuals, but with the political polis, and that is the reason why He, according to Socrates, appointed him, in order to effect a major change.

In fact, Kierkegaard also considered Socrates primarily as an ethicist who wanted to improve the individual rather than the state, someone who considered the state a "necessary evil". But at the same time Kierkegaard agreed that this did not imply that he distanced himself from public life, and this is an issue of significance. Socrates considered the public space as an agon and the fact that he refrained from taking active part in political affairs did not at all imply that he was unpolitical or that he considered his philosophy a matter for private use only. Unlike the politician in an etatistic sense he was primarily concerned with what kind of person (or politician) his pupils would be. He exemplified a certain way of living, a certain form of moral subjectivity (the examined Self) which was shortly to become important, ethically as well as politically.

It has been suggested by Nietzsche that perhaps the Athenians were right to sentence him to death, and that apparently Socrates did succeed in corrupting their youth.<sup>26</sup> No doubt the etatists at that time recognized that his performance indeed

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<sup>26</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, Introduction. Cf. Kierkegaard (1989): 'Whether the Athenian state committed a glaring injustice in condemning Socrates, whether we are right in voluntarily joining the scholarly professional mourners and the crowd of shallow but lachrymose humanitarians whose blubbing and sighing because such a good man, such an honest human being, paragon, and cosmopolitan all rolled into one, became a victim of the meanest envy, whose blubbing and sighing, I say, still echo through the centuries; or whether the Athenian state was completely justified in condemning Socrates [...] all this we shall not discuss further here' (p. 167-168). According to Kierkegaard, the Apology testifies to Socrates' negative relation to the established order, his inability to contract any real relationship to it, having

entailed a basic challenge to established morality, a basic contestation of the moral foundations of the state. Socrates himself was quite frank in this respect. The basic objective of the Socratic truth game was to transform established moral subjectivity,<sup>27</sup> preparing the way for the emergence of a quite different political regime, less attached to those forms of life or moral subjectivity which grounded power relationships in ancient Athens.<sup>28</sup> Socrates' ethics was a political ethics, but of a bottom-up, non-etatist kind. His basic objective, the reformation of moral subjectivity, was not effectuated by the establishment of a certain political regime, but grounded in the experience of laughter which ruthlessly undermined the serious and established moral truths. His fellow Athenians who sentenced him to death knew perfectly well what they were doing. His laughter would have resisted any strategy of containment, and his followers – the gay, idle, aristocratic Athenian youth – had already been infected by it.

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totally emancipated himself from it and refusing to accept any kind of public responsibility. Instead of being a citizen in the Greek sense, he hung about the streets and boulevards, exempting himself from carrying the burdens of civil life. Yet he did not distance himself from public life as such but remained in very lively contact with it. He was a virtuoso in casual contacts. By lifting others out of their natural position, he actually did do evil. He truly was a seducer of the youths, awakening certain longings in them without assuming any responsibility for their later life.

<sup>27</sup> How he managed to achieve this, and what the “established form of moral subjectivity”, as well as the “unprecedented, Socratic one” consisted in, will be explained in the next two chapters.

<sup>28</sup> The basic feature of moral subjectivity in ancient Greece was the attachment to life and Socrates' redescription of Greek life, apparently the summit of health, as an illness was a remarkable, subversive act indeed (cf. chapter two and three).

## Chapter 2: Laughter as a State of Mind

Was ich finde, was ich suche -,  
Stand das je in einem Buche?  
Ehrt in mir die Narren-Zunft!  
Lernt aus diesem Narrenbuche  
Wie Vernunft kommt – “zur Vernunft”!  
(F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human II*, Prelude)

### 1. Despotic liberalism, rereading and gay laughter

In the previous chapter I explained how a certain moral regime (referred to as “liberalism” or the “method of avoidance” and grounded in what Rorty would refer to as its basic platitude: the compartmentalisation of moral life) managed to impose itself on contemporary moral discourse and to immunise itself against possible criticism, either by rejecting all instances of fundamental contestation as fundamentalist, immoral or ridiculous, or by reducing them to private laughter or private embarrassment, in short: to irony. In contrast to these established moral platitudes, I advocated the idea that the basic objective of moral philosophy should remain a Socratic one, namely contestation rather than justification or consolidation. Instead of presenting the established consensus as non-controversial, experiences of discontent are to be articulated, its basic vulnerability is to be revealed, and its basic platitudes are to be contested. But what would such a Socratic strategy amount to under the present circumstances? I have already referred to Nietzsche who recognized the comic nature of Socrates’ verbal performance. In § 5 of *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche refers to the despotism of ancient Greek morality which succeeded in rendering critical arguments futile, irrelevant and impotent. In order for established morality to be challenged, another more effective discursive strategy had to be pursued – laughter.

Indeed, to the question that Nietzsche raises – “What happened in the case of Socrates, the buffoon who had himself taken seriously?” – I would propose the following answer, one which will be reconsidered and elaborated in subsequent sections. Socrates was not at all the serious philosopher who was so unfortunate as to find his critical arguments ruthlessly ridiculed by moral authority. On the contrary, he himself was the one who recognized and utilised the strategic potential of ridicule. Whenever a certain moral regime has turned despotic, has successfully immunised itself against critical argument, that is, against a particular discursive strategy called criticism, the moral philosopher has to take recourse to another discursive strategy, namely parody or laughter. This is a strategic insight which was perfectly realised by Socrates, whose seriousness was of a gay and merry nature and whose wisdom

abounded in knavery.<sup>29</sup> But a similar line of reasoning might hold for the present despotism of ethical liberalism as well. Unlike irony (or reduced laughter), parody (or gay laughter) is much more difficult to contain and poses a much more “serious” challenge to any established set of platitudes, including those of liberalism.

In chapter three, a thorough rereading of Socrates’ mode of speech will reveal that gay laughter was indeed his basic tool. As has already been indicated in the introduction, rereading is the philosophical method which I will employ, a way of reading which is aware of the fact that established morality has biased (or “guided”) our reading of certain parts of the philosophical (or theological) corpus for too long, and that the established way of reading, which has dominated our reception and current understanding of discursive events like Socrates, not only conceals important aspects of the modes of speech involved but also constitutes an important stronghold for the established moral regime itself. The subsequent chapters will contain a similar rereading of Luther and Ibsen, focussing on the way their laughter challenged established morality in the sixteenth and nineteenth century respectively. In the present chapter, however, our philosophical understanding of laughter, and notably the difference between reduced and gay laughter, will be deepened. The philosophies of laughter that will guide my subsequent rereading of Socrates, Luther and Ibsen will now be introduced, starting with the one elaborated by the Russian philosopher and literary scientist Bakhtin already mentioned.

Although philosophers have increasingly come to recognise the philosophical importance of his work, Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) was first of all an expert in the field of literature studies. His most important books were on Dostoevsky and Rabelais. This section will chiefly summarise the Rabelais book and the philosophy of laughter it contains. Bakhtin’s account is both historical and systematic. His objective is to gain a thorough understanding of laughter as a basic mode of thought as well as to produce a description of the way gay (or: popular) laughter came to be subdued and reduced by the serious genres of modernity. His philosophy of laughter is a basic ingredient of his “agonistic” theory of discourse, elaborated throughout his writings, a theory which I consider to be fundamentally congenial with those of Nietzsche, Bataille and Foucault, although there are important differences as well.

## 2. Towards a philosophy of laughter: Bakhtin

According to Bakhtin’s “agonistic” theory, a discourse, either social or moral, is a strategic field of genres, mutually mocking, parodying, intimidating, challenging and influencing each other. Furthermore, Bakhtin emphasises the basic ambivalence of every word that makes its appearance in such a strategic field. There are, according to Bakhtin, no neutral words, only artificially neutralised ones. This basic conviction,

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human II*, ‘The Wanderer and his Shadow’, § 86.

elaborated throughout his writings, also dominates his book on Rabelais. To understand Rabelais, Bakhtin (1968) claims, one must recognize his basic affinity with the popular culture of laughter of the medieval and Renaissance market-place. Rabelais' work is an encyclopaedia of popular genres, idioms, dialects, proverbs and abuses. Its strategic field was constituted by the basic opposition between the established, official genres (serious and dogmatic) and the popular, unofficial genres (relying on parody and laughter). During the (allegedly "dark") Middle Ages, popular laughter was tolerated, within certain boundaries, by official discourse. In the sixteenth century official discourse collapsed and popular laughter temporarily gained the upper hand, only to give way to the establishment of the new official and serious discourses of modern rationalism and Protestantism during the Counter-Renaissance. Popular laughter continued to exist, however, as an indestructible undercurrent, time and again exposing the vulnerability of what was presented as self-evident and beyond contestation by official discourse.

This popular culture is referred to by Bakhtin as "carnavalesque", although we find its basic principle (gay laughter) at work in many other manifestations besides carnival proper. Gay laughter defies ("carnivalises") all instances of authoritarianism, dogmatism, seriousness and narrow-mindedness, and its basic device is parody. Even the most serious genres of official discourse were parodied by the laughing people of the Middle Ages, and found themselves accompanied by a comic double. The predominant, official truth, held to be eternal and indisputable, was time and again exposed to ridicule or comic imitation and exaggeration. Moreover, there were no clear demarcations between seriousness and laughter; no ideologically reliable words or genres, and medieval monks and abbots produced learned treatises as well as *parodia sacra*. The number of manuscripts parodying ecclesiastical, philosophical or juridical genres is immense. For the medieval parodist, everything without exception was comical, and everywhere the world seemed to manifest its gay and festive aspect. In modern times, however, parody ("gay laughter") became subdued and transformed into irony ("reduced laughter") – a laughter that does not really laugh. Or it is considered a merely comical and, above all, merely negative phenomenon. In gay laughter or parody proper, however, a basic positive force is at work, and its basic aim is renewal and affirmation rather than destruction. Furthermore, whereas modern reduced laughter is a private phenomenon, gay laughter is a collective experience; a laughter of all the people. True parody is basically ambivalent: it both mocks and affirms, defies and unites.

To understand the positive force at work in parody, one has to recognise its basic affinity with the grotesque. The popular culture of laughter was closely connected with bodily life, notably the body's lower stratum, with food, drink, defecation, procreation and intercourse. In the grotesque conception of the body, emerging in the writings of Rabelais, the needs, appetites, extensions and potentials of the body are grossly exaggerated. The grotesque body is fertile, abundant and grandiose. Official discourse is carnivalised and degraded by transferring it to material, bodily existence.

Not a single saying of the Scriptures was left unchallenged if it could provide some hint of equivocal suggestion that could be travestied and transposed into the language of the material bodily lower stratum, that is: reinterpreted in terms of eating, drinking, sweating, urinating or sexual intercourse (p. 86).<sup>30</sup> The Word is made flesh, and attention is concentrated on the mouth, the belly and the reproductive organs, on swallowing, defecation, copulation, pregnancy and birth. This “degradation”, however, is basically an ambivalent phenomenon. Again, its ultimate aim is not degradation as such, but renewal and affirmation.

Gay laughter defies any pretention to absolute, extra-temporal truth, and reveals the origin and limitations of such a truth.<sup>31</sup> The representatives of established truth are referred to by Rabelais as “agelasts”: they cannot and do not wish to laugh, are unaware of the inevitable, namely that time is bound to turn their speeches into ridicule and that they are in fact already ridiculed by their laughing audience. The Sorbonne (i.e. official, serious knowledge), for instance, is represented in Gargantua by a character called Janotus, although Rabelais was forced to replace the word “Sorbonnite” by “sophist”. His oration is an excellent parody of the Sorbonnite’s method of argumentation, while the diction suggests and imitates the sounds of coughing, spitting, and shortness of breath.

In early modern times, the grotesque conception of the body was rejected by the canon of classicism, by the aesthetic of the beautiful and the sublime, and regarded as hideous, disproportionate and deficient. We ceased to understand the grotesque “logic” long ago and came to accept the pejorative use of the word “grotesque” as self evident. The grotesque did not die, however, but was merely expelled from the sphere of official art and confined to the non-canonical, popular and burlesque genres. At the same time, the state encroached upon popular festive life, and either turned it into an official parade or transferred it to the private sphere.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, a literary controversy broke out in Germany about the character of Harlequin, a constant participant in dramatic performances at that time. Some demanded his expulsion, being at odds with the demands of the sublime, but others recognized that the parodical and the grotesque have their own criteria of perfection. From that time onwards, Europe witnessed a revival of interest in medieval parody, with its *festa stultorum*, its *Societies of Carefree Lads* and its *risus paschalis*. Parody and the grotesque were rehabilitated by the Romantic canon. Yet Bakhtin emphasises the basic difference between medieval

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. for example Christ’s last words in the Gospel of John: “Sitio” (‘I thirst’) and “Consummatum est” (‘it is accomplished’), deliberately distorted into ‘Consumatum est’ (‘it is consumed’), a minor change (the omission of merely one letter) and yet a debasing transposition that successfully transforms a solemn tragedy into a jovial scene – or ‘Postea sciens Iesus quia omnia consummata sunt, ut consummaretur scriptura, dixit: Sitio... Cum ergo accepisset Iesus acetum, dixit: Consummatum est’ (19:28-30).

<sup>31</sup> In his discussion of Aristophanes’ comedy *The Clouds*, Kierkegaard (1989) also claims that parody (or ‘laughter for laughter’s sake’) is a “corrective element” that makes the phenomenon at hand (either a person or a situation) intelligible through exaggeration, cf. chapter three.



or gay laughter (parody proper) and modern or sombre laughter (the Romantic versions of laughter, notably irony and sarcasm). In the case of gay laughter, something terrifying (for instance, the gloomy and intimidating eschatology of late medieval ecclesiastical discourse) was transformed into something gay and comic (the grotesque monsters of the carnivalesque parade). The devil was presented as a gay and jovial fellow, and the buffoonery in him eclipsed the terrifying and alien. In the case of Romantic or sombre laughter, however, something frightening is revealed. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind the grotesque-Romantic mask. The devil is presented as melancholic and sarcastic. Romantic laughter is the sardonic laughter of a lonely eccentric. It is purely destructive, lacking the positive, regenerating element.

A somewhat similar development occurred with regard to the discourse on women. In late medieval discourse, women were either idealized (the chivalrous tradition) or associated with the devil and presented in a negative way as an object of fear (the ascetic tradition). But in the popular, comic tradition, Bakhtin claims, womanhood is connected with both the principle of debasement and the principle of renewal, and both aspects merge in the popular theme of cuckoldry: the festive uncrowning of the old husband. According to Bakhtin, the modern, satirical view on women is more akin to the ascetic than to the popular tradition. It has lost its positive tone and has become decidedly negative.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, in order to understand gay laughter – the basic principle at work in the parodical and the grotesque – it must be clearly distinguished from the merely satirical and negative laughter of the, predominantly Protestant, pamphleteers who were Rabelais’ contemporaries. These pamphleteers, often referred to as “Grobianists”, used the parodical and the grotesque merely as rhetorical devices to support a serious, abstract idea. Their satirical mockery served a serious goal and was aimed at moral condemnation of “vices” like gluttony, idleness and excess. In the writings of Rabelais, however, laughter is not merely a device. Rather, it has a deep philosophical meaning in itself. It is one of the essential forms of truth concerning human existence. Certain aspects of the world are only accessible to laughter (p. 66). Gay laughter is a universal philosophical principle, revealing a basic truth, and fundamentally akin to both the philosophical laughter of Democritus and the eternal laughter of the Gods. No one can resist the truth of laughter.

Laughter as a philosophical principle was associated by Rabelais with Hippocrates (“the gay physician”) and Democritus (“the gay philosopher”), and also with Aristotle’s famous formula that of all living creatures, only humans are endowed with the faculty of laughter.<sup>33</sup> But the most prominent ancient protagonist of

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<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche’s view on women constitutes a perfect example of this: it is modern, negative and ascetic, rather than gay.

<sup>33</sup> “The fact that human beings are susceptible to tickling is due ... to their being the only creatures that laugh”. Aristotle (1937/1961) *Parts of Animals*, III 10 (673A); – not in *De Anima*, as is suggested by Bakhtin (p. 68). As a matter of fact, his references to philosophy are

philosophical laughter was Socrates, whose critical philosophy is presented by Bakhtin as devoid of narrow dogmatism, and as capable of being tested in the crucible of laughter (p. 121). According to Bakhtin, carnival forms of antiquity fertilised the Socratic dialogue and freed it from one-sided rhetorical seriousness. True seriousness fears neither laughter nor parody, even demands it as its corrective complement. In the prologue to *Gargantua*, the gay ambivalent discourse of abusive praise and praiseful abuse in which nothing is stable or reliable, is merged with humanist scholarship and a parody of Plato's *Symposium*. Alcibiades' comparison of Socrates with Silenus was popular among humanists and cited by Erasmus in his works. Socrates is depicted as an ill-shaped, ridiculous figure with the face of a fool and ways that mark him as a simpleton, hopelessly unfit for public office, forever laughing, forever drinking. And yet, his mockery conveys lucid knowledge and deep understanding. Rabelais associates Socrates-Silenus with the drugstores in the streets of early modern Paris: statuettes containing popular drugs and remedies, quite familiar to his readership. In gay and jocular discourse, almost every word is ambivalent, an instance of the praise/abuse which characterizes parody as a genre. The reference to the *Symposium* emphasizes the gaiety and freedom of philosophical table talk. Rabelais boldly states that he writes only while eating and drinking and his articulation of gay truth is the exact opposite of the gloomy serious tone and gothic darkness of late medieval philosophy, but it is even more in contrast with modern Protestant seriousness, while the immense interest in food and dishes is the exact opposite of asceticism. The emblem on Gargantua's hat portrayed "a man's body with two heads facing one another, four arms, four feet, a pair of arses and a brace of sexual organs, male and female. Such, according to Plato's *Symposium*, was human nature in its mystical primordially.<sup>34</sup>

Elsewhere, in his book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin points out that the Socratic dialogue, together with the Menippean satire and other ancient literary forms, belongs to a series of genres referred to as serio-comical (Bakhtin 1973, p. 87 ff.). They originate from the age-old popular traditions of carnival and are permeated by a carnivalesque attitude to the world through and through. Unlike epic and tragic genres, their subject matter is the present, and they persistently convey an atmosphere of freedom, jolly relativity and familiarity. Due to the absence of epic or tragic distance, their themes and figures are dealt with in a crudely direct and familiar way. Even persons of eminence become familiarized. In the case of historical figures, behavioural peculiarities are emphasized and peculiar features of their bodily exterior are rendered visible.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, in defiance of the demand for generic unity, the serio-comic genres usually contain a vivid mixture of seemingly incompatible generic elements, a *mésalliance* of comic and serious modes of speech. Although as a literary

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somewhat careless at times, due no doubt to the difficult circumstances under which he worked.

<sup>34</sup> *Gargantua*, Book 1, Chapter 8; cited in Bakhtin 1968, p. 323.

<sup>35</sup> Pericles, for instance, is stripped of his helmet so that his egg-shaped head is revealed (Plutarch 1959, 5).

form it came to be identified with Plato, the Socratic dialogue was a widespread genre in its time, and Socratic dialogues were not only written by Plato, but also by Xenophon, Aristotle, Antisthenes, Aeschines, Phaedo, Euclid, Alexamenos, Glaucon, Simias, Criton and others, although only those of Plato and Xenophon have survived. Unlike official monological modes of speech, the Socratic dialogue does not claim to be in possession of an already discovered and indisputable truth. Rather, it conveys the sense that truth is of a dialogical nature and that only be discovered in the course of a live dialogue (although later on, Plato's dialogues degenerate into monological pseudo-dialogues so that the rather mechanical and predictable answers of the pupils fail to contribute anything whatsoever to the course of the argument). Also the localities in which the Socratic dialogues are set (*Protagoras* and *Symposium* in an Athenian mansion, *Phaedo* in a prison cell, etc.) are in accordance with serio-comical genre conventions. Like the Menippean satire, moreover, the Socratic dialogue serves a philosophical end. Its objective is to put a philosophical idea, a philosophical issue of the day to the test (for instance the issue of whether virtue is teachable in *Protagoras*). For this reason, the Socratic dialogue is referred to by Bakhtin as a form of "moral-psychological experimentation" (p. 95).

In short, the Socratic dialogue constitutes an important episode in the history of philosophical laughter, and this explains its prominence in the oeuvre of Rabelais. Campaigns of seriousness tried to condemn laughter in order to establish an intolerant mood of asceticism. Public laughter was under pressure from the fourth century onwards, but as soon as the fever of fanaticism subsided, human voices would give in to laughter again (1968, p. 73, p. 92). In popular strata of society, the culture of gay laughter, of travesty and merriment, often relying on ancient local pagan celebrations, persisted with a remarkable obstinacy and stubbornness, notwithstanding top-down limitations, restrictions and prohibitions. Gay laughter as well as frank and unrestricted speech could never be silenced completely, but continued to exist, for instance in the laughing freedom and gay vocabulary of philosophical table talk and prandial discourse. Gay laughter made its appearance in official medieval manuscripts as chimeras or drôleries – comic grotesque scenes, involving devils, jugglers, and popular figures. For Bakhtin, these illustrations are not cryptograms which secretly convey a "repressed" message. Rather, they are the products of a gay and carefree mood.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the Renaissance represented the collapse of gloomy late medieval eschatological discourse that had managed to establish a regime of terror and intimidation. It was the victory of gay laughing, liberating public discourse

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<sup>36</sup> Drôleries (fanciful marginal designs) are "a characteristic feature of Northern gothic manuscripts ... Their subject matter encompasses a vast range of motifs: fantasy, fable, and grotesque humor, as well as actually observed scenes from everyday life, appear side by side with religious themes. The essence of drôlerie is its playfulness, which marks it as a special domain where the artist enjoys almost unlimited freedom. It is this freedom, comparable to the license traditionally claimed by the court jester, that account for the wide appeal of drôlerie during the later Middle Ages" (H.W. Janson 1962/1986, p. 354).

from seriousness and fear. Gay laughter is not a camouflage of a serious truth that would have been formulated in a more serious vein had there been no “repression”. It reveals a basic, comic aspect of the world, coexistent with and fundamentally equal to the serious one. True laughter is devoid of the moralizing and critical tendencies of “Grobianism”.

The seventeenth century was marked by stabilization and seriousness again, by the establishment of absolutism in the realm of politics, of rationalist philosophy and classicist aesthetics. As to Rabelais, his novels were either rejected as coarse and crude or reinterpreted in allegorical terms, with the implications that all its characters and images represented (and could be replaced by) real historical figures and political events (the disguised rationality of criticism). This tradition of deciphering the “hidden meaning”, of reducing the text to a series of cryptograms, a rather prominent technique of containment in the eighteenth century, failed to understand that the grotesque had its own logic and content. In this same period, the grotesque concept of the body was replaced by a mechanistic conception of bodily life: the body-machine. Rabelais was appreciated mainly for his anticlericalism, but was no longer venerated as the author who claimed to write only while eating or drinking. In his *Temple du Goût*, Voltaire describes an ideal library, referred to as God’s library, in which nearly all books are abridged and revised by the muses, stripped of their dialect and their indecencies, of everything considered superfluous, residual and incomprehensible. According to Bakhtin, Voltaire’s own famous laughter does not really laugh, but is merely satirical and almost entirely deprived of the regenerating and renewing element. All that is positive is placed beyond the sphere of laughter and transformed into an abstract idea. And although in Rococo literature the gay tone of carefree speech is preserved, it is at the same time subdued by transferring it to the boudoir atmosphere of chamber intimacy and erotic frivolity.

During the French Revolution Rabelais was mistakenly considered an enemy of royal power and a conscientious propagandist of systematic anti-clerical atheism. His grotesque exaggerations were either considered a device to gain popularity among the masses or confused with moralizing satire – the enormous amount of food, drink and clothes spent on Gargantua, for instance, were understood as criticizing the royal expenses imposed upon the people. In short, the grotesque was reduced either to political (that is, serious) satire, or to the merely amusing literary genres of reduced laughter. Contrary to this distorted and misguided reading of Rabelais, Bakhtin emphasizes the revelatory tone of laughter at work in Rabelais’ novels, constituting a ground which allows particular comic utterances or images to emerge. It cannot be reduced either to humanism or anticlericalism, since it is the expression of something primordial and elementary, which notably manifests itself in religious practices, ranging from ancient cults up to Catholicism, although there are always struggles or tensions with the forces of seriousness. Bakhtin emphasizes the intrinsic connection between laughter and truth. Laughter is a basic mood, a mode of thought that allows a basic aspect of the world to emerge. It is not a satirical camouflage of an abstract idea

or serious truth. Rather, the comical and the rational are two basic constituents of human reflection. A century later, however, Spinoza saw the path of truth as demanding that the human mind purge itself from laughter: *non ridere... sed intelligere* was his motto (p. 141).

At this point, a brief comparison of Bakhtin's understanding of laughter with the one articulated by Bergson (1940/1969) may help to clarify the singularity of Bakhtin's view. Bergson starts his analysis of laughter with three basic observations: (1) the comical is a human phenomenon (to laugh, or to be laughable, is human); (2) laughter presupposes indifference towards its object and (3) laughter is always the laughter of a certain group, it reverberates, is eager for response – it is a phenomenon of complicity. Yet, although Bergson intends to deal with laughter and the laughable as such, it is nonetheless clear from the very outset that he focuses on the laughter of one particular era: the seventeenth century, the world of Descartes and Molière (much like Bakhtin focuses on the laughter of Rabelais). Molière is Bergson's model and although Descartes himself is never mentioned, he tends to read Molière from a Cartesian perspective. One has the impression that the latter's philosophy provides Bergson with his one basic image: the machine-like aspect of human behaviour, notably of bodily movements. Like Bakhtin, Bergson contends that comedy is intrinsically connected with the body and with bodily life, but in a way quite different from how they are connected in the world of Rabelais. According to Bergson, not the grotesque but the mechanical is comical. We laugh whenever the body gives the impression of functioning automatically and in a mechanical manner, like a puppet or a mechanism, a machine with springs, cogwheels and so on. We laugh when someone's movements or speech acts become mechanical and resemble the dull, obstinate patterns of machines (p. 38 ff.). We laugh whenever a human being seems to be transformed into a thing, an automaton. The moral function of laughter is to remind us of the fact that we human beings run the risk of losing our responsiveness and flexibility, of becoming a machine. Laughter corrects certain "mechanical" forms of discourse, for instance, by introducing an absurd element into the mechanism. In such a case, what is laughable is not the absurd element as such, but the obstinate, inflexible way the established mechanisms are applied to it. Like Bakhtin, that is, Bergson credits laughter with a moral function, but once again, its functionality is quite different from what it amounts to in Bakhtin's view. According to Bergson, laughter is a correction of the individual, a penalty for being stubborn and inflexible, for relying excessively on one's routines. By means of laughter, society urges the individual to adapt himself, to recover his alertness and flexibility, instead of relying on his conditioned reflexes, and in that manner society forces him to modify his maladjusted, eccentric behaviour. From a Bakhtinian point of view, such an understanding of the moral functionality of laughter would rather seem an instrumentalisation of laughter by the demands of modern bourgeois forms of life. In Bakhtin's view, laughter sides with the individual rather than with society. What is "corrected" is not the individual, but certain mechanical aspects of established culture

and its representatives (like the mechanical discourse of the Sorbonnites). Laughter is a phenomenon of resistance rather than adjustment.

In the world of Rabelais, Bakhtin claims, gay laughter is in opposition to the official and the canonical. It is omnipresent in the unpublished spheres of speech, where the dividing lines between persons, objects and phenomena are drawn differently than in the prevailing picture of the world. In these unpublished spheres of speech there are no indifferent or neutral words. Gay laughter is in permanent opposition to the stabilizing tendencies of official, monotone discourse, to the official, sufficiently neutralized and generalized nomenclatures. It transfers the official to the material and prandial. The grotesque banquet image conveys an affirmative mood and its gross exaggerations adhere to the universal and utopian. Therefore, they constitute the very opposite of ascetic criticism or moralistic satire.<sup>37</sup>

And yet, to the embarrassment of at least some of his readers, Bakhtin is not always consistent in his rejection of a reductive reading of the Rabelais novels. Notably in his final chapter (chapter seven) but in earlier passages as well, he himself has recourse to a strategy of reading which seems to reduce the parodical and the grotesque to the status of vehicle for a line of thought which is (in itself) serious, abstract and progressive. Already in Chapter one, it is suggested that during the Renaissance gay laughter became the form of a “critical historical consciousness” (p. 97). And elsewhere (p. 113) Bakhtin claims that during the French Revolution “Rabelais’s deeply revolutionary spirit” was well understood. Initially rejecting the misguided opinion that Rabelais was an enemy of royal power, he later corrects this by explaining that “Rabelais was never an enemy of this power but on the contrary perfectly understood its progressive meaning in his time” (p. 119). On page 208 it is claimed that during the Renaissance the parodical and grotesque forms, developed over a period of thousands of years, came to serve “the new historic aims of the epoch” (p. 208). Claims such as these seem to suggest something like a progressive historical scheme supported by Rabelais. Or rather (more plausible hypothesis) they suggest that Bakhtin (working in socialist Russia) felt forced every now and then to pay tribute to the powers in sway via politically correct phrasings.

Toward the end of his book, these ideological reconsiderations or rectifications, putting laughter in the service of progress, become increasingly problematic. On page 380, for instance, it is claimed that certain carnivalesque gestures of Gargantua prepared the soil for a new, bold, free and sober human seriousness, as well as for the development of free, experimental and materialistic knowledge. On page 406 it is claimed that Herder’s concept of human progress builds on a letter written by

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<sup>37</sup> For instance, Bakhtin rejects the interpretation of the German academic critic Schneegans who in his *Geschichte der grotesken Satire* (published in 1894) explains the grotesque as a conflict between the displeasure caused by the impossible and improbable nature of the grotesque image and the pleasure caused by moral satisfaction at finding depravity degraded. He rejects this view because it considers exaggerations and excess as something negative and condemnable, ignoring its positive aspects.

Gargantua. On page 438 it is claimed that, although Rabelais never adopted any official point of view, he appreciated the “relative progressiveness” of certain policies and that, although Rabelais did not speak in a “conceptual language”, he did “prepare the soil for a new seriousness” (p. 439). On page 446 it is suggested that *Gargantua* is intimately connected with the political events and problems of the period and that there is even “an element of straight satire against the emperor’s aggressive policy” at work in it, while at the same time being in support of the rights of nations to fight for their independence and of the distinction between just and unjust wars. Finally, on page 452, Bakhtin claims that:

In the political conflicts of his time Rabelais took the most advanced and progressive positions. Royal power was in his eyes the expression of the new principle to which the immediate historic future belonged, the principle of the nation state. Therefore, he was equally hostile to the claims of the papacy and to those of the empire seeking supranational power. In the claims of both Pope and emperor he saw the dying past, whereas the national state reflected the new, youthful, popular and political historic life (p. 452).

All sorts of politically “progressive” positions are suddenly attributed to Rabelais, whereas it is claimed that in certain chapters of *Pantagruel*, we hear “a direct and an almost entirely serious speech... a new form of speech, a progressive speech, the last word of the epoch and at the same time Rabelais” completely sincere opinion” (p. 453). Moreover, gay laughter is suddenly reduced to the prudent insight that there are limits to seriousness and progress, although at the same time Bakhtin admits that Rabelais always leaves a gay loophole, allowing even relative seriousness and progressiveness to be ridiculed – for “Rabelais ... never exhausts his resources in direct statements” (p. 454).

Now it seems clearly inconsistent to claim, on the one hand, that gay laughter is in itself an “essential form of truth” and, on the other hand, that laughter merely “prepares the soil” for a progressive, serious truth which is eventually to be formulated in a serious and therefore more adequate mode of speech. As Bakhtin formulated his views under the watchful eye of an extremely repressive-progressive regime (his book on Rabelais was written in Stalinist Russia in 1940), demanding rigorous political correctness, it might be suggested that inconsistencies such as the ones just cited are to be considered as superficial efforts to accommodate his views to the established, official “truth” of etatist socialism (while laughter as such remains profoundly at odds with this dogmatic truth), rather than as reflecting a basic ambivalence or uncertainty in Bakhtin’s own mind. This implies that, to be faithful to Bakhtin’s philosophy of laughter, we sometimes must be more consistently Bakhtinian than Bakhtin himself. Thus, it would still be possible to maintain that Bakhtin’s recognition of the philosophical significance of laughter as an “essential form of truth” is to be regarded as his basic achievement – even if some of his subsequent elaborations of this basic revelatory insight happen to strike us as

inconsistent at times. Like other forms of discourse, Bakhtin's own work is also a strategic, agonistic field in which incompatible discursive forces compete with each other (the truth of laughter versus the truth of rationalism or progress for instance).

Still, there may be more to Bakhtin's inconsistencies than Stalinist censorship. We must address the question whether Bakhtin's view of laughter, while apparently in opposition to the repressive truth of Stalinism, may not also be considered as congenial with it in some respects (that is, the question as to what extent the Stalinist regime can be considered as popular and grotesque in its own right). Notably the show trials in the context of which high ranked officials were suddenly exposed as foreign agents and the mass congresses held in gigantic, gargantuan palaces, with their never-ending rounds of applause, were staged as carnivalesque events. And what about Stalin as a carnivalesque, gargantuan, folkish version of a Czar? Of course, the genuine Bakhtinian question is not whether Stalinism *is* an instantiation of laughter, but rather: how to develop a diagnostics of communism or Stalinism as a force field in which the truth of laughter and a regime of terror collide and interact. The relationship between the official truth regime of Stalinism and Bakhtin's analysis of popular laughter is less equivocal than is sometimes suggested.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, instead of arguing that Bakhtin is either being inconsistent or simply adapting himself to external circumstances, there is yet another possibility, namely that we still fail to grasp what the "truth of laughter" really means, still fail to discern the basic difference between the *adequate* truth of propositional logic (of university discourse) and the *revelatory* truth of laughter. Therefore, I suggest to reconsider Bakhtin's view of laughter as a basic form of truth somewhat more carefully. Subsequently, in the next section, I will compare Bakhtin's view on the grotesque with Marx' canonical judgement of "Grobianism".

Bakhtin basically claims that, whereas reduced laughter lacks philosophical depth, true laughter is a universal philosophical principle (p. 16, p. 66, p. 70). Due to laughter's peculiar "logic" (p. 11) – a truth of reversal, of inside out and upside down – the entire world is perceived in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. The serious narrowness of official truth is rendered untenable by the irresistible and indestructible principle of laughter which allows us to escape the "truth of this world" in order to look at the world with eyes that are suddenly cleansed and freed from this truth (p. 49). Consequently, we are liberated from the restriction of narrow seriousness and political correctness that direct the prevailing understanding of the world. This latter understanding finds itself uncrowned and subverted. The principle of laughter

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<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin's ambivalent relationship with his Stalinist environment is suggested by phrases like "the triumph of the people as a whole" (p. 302). On page 341 he writes: "The body ... has nothing to fear. Death holds no terror for it. The death of the individual is only one moment in the triumphant life of the people and of mankind, a moment indispensable for their renewal and improvement". Bakhtin's rereading of Rabelais must be considered both as a criticism and as a product of the Stalinist era; much like Luther is both a foe and a product of the late medieval gothic age.



challenges and destroys limited seriousness and pretence, indeed: any claim to extra-temporal validity. It frees human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities and possibilities. “For this reason”, Bakhtin claims, “great changes, even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way” (p. 49). Yet, laughter is not a disguised version of some abstract, adequate truth in the sense that, had there been no repression, truth would cast off the clown’s attire and would speak in serious tones (p. 93). On the contrary, “laughter ... cannot be transformed into seriousness without destroying and distorting the very content of the truth which it unveils” (p. 94). Laughter is “another truth” (p. 94, p. 95), a form of truth in its own right. Laughter liberates, not from censorship, but from “the great interior censor”, fear. Laughter is not a camouflage of some abstract tendency or idea, but conveys “something else, something far more meaningful, profound ... the comic aspect of the world” (p. 134).

In order to determine what kind of truth Bakhtin has in mind whenever the phrase “the truth of laughter” is used, Heidegger’s distinction between truth as revelation (*ἀλήθεια*) and truth as representation (*adaequatio*) is indispensable. “Adequacy” refers to truth in the sense of correspondence (*veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*): a certain proposition or doctrine is considered true insofar as it adequately represents or corresponds with an actual state of affairs. But, as Heidegger (1927) point out, in order for reality to be represented adequately, it has to emerge, has to be brought to the fore in a certain way. This original event of revealing or bringing forward, of disclosure, is something which cannot be brought about by the established truth regime itself. Its adequate logic, based on certain basic presuppositions, is made possible by the revelatory force of laughter.

Contrary to scientific discourse, the experience of laughter does not contain a systematic and propositional representation of reality. The definition of truth as the correspondence (*adaequatio*) of propositional knowledge with its objects, does not apply to laughter. Rather, the experience of laughter allows reality to appear and to emerge in a certain light.<sup>39</sup> In terms of Heidegger’s distinction, therefore, the truth of laughter is an experience of revelation. Bakhtin likewise speaks about laughter as a (collective) mood or state of mind that allows reality to appear, rather than as a propositional or doctrinal form of truth (i.e. a truth that can be captured in the form of a doctrine, a theory, a sequence or chain of propositional claims). Certain basic aspects of the world are revealed, rather than represented, by laughter.

This may be clarified further by an important passage in Bakhtin’s book on Dostoevsky. Laughter, Bakhtin tells us, is “a specific ethical attitude toward reality, untranslatable into logical language, a specific means of seeing and seizing the world” (1973, p. 137). Laughter seizes a phenomenon in a process of its transition, stressing relativity and inconstancy, the transient aspect of things, remaining incompatible with

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<sup>39</sup> Preserving the ancient pagan (Greek, Germanic) conviction that the creation of the world was brought about (must be attributed to) the laughter of the gods (Bakhtin 1968, p. 71). Real (creative) laughter is Dionysian, ecstatic, god-like.

the basic will to power at work in adequate seriousness holding sway in normal science, for instance, as the permanent effort to represent the world in such a way that it allows us to secure and determine our convictions by means of theories, definitions and laws. Certain aspects of the world are revealed by laughter in defiance of the official representation of the world produced and sustained either by theological, doctrinal seriousness or by the seriousness of the academic expert.

In short, laughter allows the world to become visible and accessible in a revelatory, ecstatic way. A scientific understanding of the world is rendered possible by moments of genuine laughter because laughter produces the kind of subjectivity presupposed by science. Remember the story about Archimedes. While taking a bath, he noticed that the level of the water in the tub rose as he got in, and realised that this effect could be used to determine the volume of an object, a body, such as his own body, or a certain part of his body, such as a leg. At that very moment, Archimedes must have *laughed*, must have experienced genuine laughter. All of a sudden, reality appeared in a new light and a new (serious, adequate) research practice was born. Laughter gave birth to truth. And Archimedes was so ecstatic and excited that he took to the street naked shouting εὕρηκα: I have found it (in other words: truth had founded a new science). Likewise, Mendel must have laughed when he discovered the 3:1 ratio. Laughter produces a kind of subjectivity which no longer feels intimidated by the chaotic, overwhelming boundlessness of reality, by its unfathomable complexities and depths. Reality is familiarized by laughter and “persuaded” to reveal itself. Therefore, the truth of science is preceded by, and rendered possible by the truth of laughter, but this does not imply that laughter is merely a temporary truth, replaced by science, or that it is merely a rough and intuitive grasp, to be clarified by systematic observation, propositional representation and appropriation. Laughter remains the inspiring undertone as a world-revealing force in its own right, fuelling curiosity, offering new possibilities for renewal, new ways of escape, even from the very truth-games rendered possible by it. Likewise, laughter does not contain some moral doctrine or other, nor can it be reduced to any particular set of scientific, moral or theological propositions. Under specific circumstances, certain forms of moral responsiveness are rendered possible by laughter, which opens up a basic form of “answerability” or responsiveness, the possibility of being addressed by a new insight, a basic possibility to respond to the invitation to enter a new world of research, a principal moral force which, under different circumstances, will manifest itself in different and often unpredictable ways, giving rise to a leap-like event, an epistemological mutation.

This also pertains to moral insights and ethical research. Laughter allows the kind of moral subjectivity (the moral mood) presupposed by the ethical discourse of a certain epoch to become established. Although laughter, under certain historical circumstances, may support and nourish a particular scientific, moral or political view, it will nevertheless retain its awareness of the relative, temporal and transient nature of this truth; and the alliance between truth and laughter is broken off as soon

as the scientific, moral or political view involved begins to standardise its truth, presenting its as absolute and extra-temporal. The gay and festive aspects of all scientific, moral and political transformations must not be taken to imply that laughter as a philosophical principle can be instrumentalised. Although the principle of laughter may seem to be in support of a particular theology or policy, and in opposition to another one, laughter as such remains unreliable and destabilising, Dionysian rather than Apollonian. Laughter's affinities remain short-lived, she does not sell her birth-right for a limited amount of progress but always leaves a gay loophole open, allowing even allegedly minimalistic forms seriousness and progressiveness to be ridiculed – and this is laughter's "final" word.

### 3. Marx, or: judging grobianism

Apart from having greatly influenced Marxist politics (with its cold sense of humour), Marx' judgement of sixteenth century "grobianism" is of interest also for the philosophy of laughter more generally. Bakhtin at times refers to it, challenging or even rejecting it. Marx (and Engels) claim to side with the scientific viewpoint, discarding prospects opened-up by utopianism as laughable or even hilarious. Laughter (biting satire) is instrumentalised by Marx as a rhetorical means to humiliate opponents.

In his polemical essay *Moralizing Critique and Critical Morality: a Contribution to the History of German Culture*<sup>40</sup>, Marx (1847/1972) enters the ring against the German writer Heinzen who aimed to rehabilitate and promote a certain literary style referred to by Marx as Grobianism. He describes it as a crude, popular genre emerging shortly before and during the Reformation, which even at that time provoked aesthetic repugnance. The grobian genre, Marx claims, is unable to please anyone whose aesthetic taste has acquired at least some education. As the nineteenth Century, much like the sixteenth Century, was an age of transformation, Marx expects but also *resents* its temporary resurgence.<sup>41</sup> He describes it as vulgar, coarse and simplistic, expressing poorly educated plebeianism, abounding in references to bodily life, with a predilection for the excessive and the gigantesque, siding with ordinary existence against learning, contaminated by the physical agitation that had somehow infected the whole epoch, raging with the same excessive ferocity against progressive as it did

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<sup>40</sup> *Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritisierende Moral: Beitrag zur Deutschen Kulturgeschichte.*

<sup>41</sup> "Kurz vor und während der Reformationszeit bildete sich unter den Deutschen eine Art von Literatur, deren bloßer Namen frappt – die Grobianische. Heutzutage gehen wir einer dem 16. Jahrhundert analogen Umwälzungsepoche entgegen. Kein Wunder, daß unter den Deutschen die grobianische Literatur wieder auftaucht. Das Interesse an der geschichtlichen Entwicklung überwindet leicht den ästhetischen Ekel, den diese Sorte von Schriftstellerei selbst einem wenig gebildeten Geschmack erregt und schon im fünfzehnten und sechzehnten Jahrhundert erregte" (p. 331).

against conservative political forces. Due to lack of other talents, Marx claims, grobianism relied heavily on abusive language. It had all the characteristics of a puppet show taken from the medieval market square and transferred into print. Marx thought of it as a cul-de-sac rather than as culture. He considers Thomas Murner (nicknamed “Goose-preacher” by his contemporaries) as the writer who represents the genre in optima forma, someone who put his grobian talents in service of the catholic establishment against Luther. The genre was later refined, however, and put to use even by Shakespeare. In *Troilus and Cressida*, it is personified by the knave Thersites, who mocks and ridicules one of the tragic heroes (Ajax), calling him a peacock and an ass who is suffering from excessive wit but is unable to discharge it.

Some aspects of Marx’ essay are worthy of our attention. In the first place, although it is clearly his objective to ridicule his opponent Heinzen, the larger part of his essay is remarkably boring and of little substance. And although he too relies heavily on abusive language (the very language he claims to detest), Marx’ own laughter does not really laugh, but merely displays a cynical grin. That is, although he relies on a technique apparently borrowed from the very genre he rejects, Marx’ language is not grounded in a gay and laughing mood, but in a cold and sinister one. Furthermore, for someone who pretends to side with the popular strata of society, he displays a remarkable contempt towards what he refers to as a plebeian genre, expressing poor education and popular wit. On further consideration, however, his judgement is quite consistent with his political convictions. In the sixteenth Century the modern working class was still to emerge on the scene and this explains the political ambivalence or even the suspicion on the part of someone devoted to the cause of socialism and progress. The grobian literature excelled in squandering energy without accomplishing or changing anything, Marx argues. It aimed at exposing the world by means of ridicule, but with no intention of improving it. It abounded in indignation, but was bound to thwart any effort to translate plebeian discontent into a political program. Instead of promoting the resurgence of such a genre, therefore, Marxism aims to prevent the resurgence of this repressed and forgotten genre. Marx’s aim was the seizure of state power and the systematic exploitation and transformation of precisely those vital popular forces which grobianism tried to give a voice. Marxism as a top-down, etatistic (“proletarian”) dictatorship, brought about by political engineers like Lenin, aimed to put an end to popular laughter once and for all, so that an effective mode of exercising power could become established.

In view of Marx’ canonical judgement, Bakhtin’s effort to rehabilitate grobianism in Stalinist Russia was a rather delicate one indeed, although others, notably Gorki, had paved the way. Apparently, Bakhtin challenged the claim that everything should be put in the service of the revolutionary program. Laughter is appreciated by Bakhtin for its peculiar ability to reveal a basic moral truth and to perceive reality in a certain light. It serves neither as a hinge for class struggle, nor for that matter will it contribute in any way to furthering a particular political regime.

This does not imply, however, that true laughter – as opposed to sarcasm, cynicism or irony – is devoid of historical or political significance. On the contrary, by exposing a basic moral truth, the established forms of moral subjectivity are challenged or even subverted, and this prepares the way for unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity which are allowed to constitute themselves. In other words, true laughter defies a platitude which liberalism shares with Leninism, namely the understanding of politics as a technology for exercising power, as a technology for governing and regulating the behaviour of populations – an understanding which is referred to here as etatism. Although laughter does not provide any devices for solving policy problems, its political impact can be astonishing. In fact, all the major historical transformations (from the decline of the Greek city state via the dawn of modern Europe up to the collapse of the Berlin Wall) were accompanied by laughter. But laughter’s political impact is bottom-up and unpredictable rather than top-down and engineered, and therefore quite unlike the political technologies provided by Marxism, Leninism, liberalism and other versions of etatism.<sup>42</sup>

In his own writings, most notably the early, polemical ones, Marx himself relies on abusive language to a considerable extent. He seems clearly aware of the fact that criticism originally used to be a comic genre. Marx basic strategy was to refute his opponents’ point of view through ridicule. In *The Holy Family*, *The German Ideology* and other polemical works, a comic (albeit rather sardonic) mode of speech is employed. In *The German Ideology*, for example, Marx and Engels explain that it is their aim to ridicule the philosophies as well as the philosophers of their time (5, 23) and to bring out the “tragicomic” contrast between the authors’ illusions or pretensions and their actual achievements (5, 28). In fact, their treatise is a parody. They act as if attending a church fathers’ council, the “Leipzig Council”, an allusion to the fact that the works of the two “church fathers” criticized in this section, Bruno Bauer (“Saint Bruno”) and Max Stirner (“Saint Max”), were published in Leipzig. The whole section abounds in cynical allusions. Marx and Engels consider the philosophers of their time to be laughable, pseudo-Hegelian imitations of Hegel’s discourse (what begins as tragedy ends as farce). They admit that if, like Hegel, one designs a certain system or pattern of explanation for the first time, this cannot be achieved without great energy, keen insight and factual knowledge. But if one is satisfied with using an already existing pattern, applying it in a mechanical manner, like Bauer and Stirner allegedly do, the result “inevitably becomes comic” (1846/1976, p. 176); a line of thinking and an interpretation of the comical which is

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<sup>42</sup> Marxism can perhaps be regarded as a kind of despotic etatism considered indispensable by Mill whenever the transformation of moral subjectivity presupposed by liberalism (that is, by sophisticated etatism) has not yet been realized due to specific historical circumstances. Marxism’s basic objective was to rationalize society by seizing state power, “temporarily” opting for a proletarian dictatorship, although it was admitted that this dictatorship implied “governing-too-much”. Eventually the state was to disappear, although this may seem a laughable remainder of pre-scientific utopianism. Lenin (notorious for his sarcasm, as a person and as an author) transformed Marxism into a technology of power.

congruent with Bergson (1940/1969) who likewise points out that the mechanical application of certain established patterns of interpretation in an inflexible, obstinate manner strikes us as comical. The strategy of Marx and Engels basically comes down to keeping close track of their opponent's reasoning, reading it aloud as it were (Althusser & Balibar 1965/1970) while incessantly ridiculing it, for instance by comparing it to lines or sections taken from the Scriptures.

The opening lines of *The Holy Family*, for example, parody the language of the Gospels and reflect the Marx and Engels style of humour: "And Criticism [i.e. their opponents] so loved the mass that it sent its only begotten son, that all who believe in him may not be lost, but may have Critical life", etc. (1845/1975, p. 9). Often, Marx and Engels will isolate a peculiar phrase and repeat it time and again, until the reader is thoroughly convinced that it is indeed a rather ridiculous thing to say. Stirner, for instance, used the following line somewhere: "Robespierre, for example, Saint-Just, and so on". Since Marx and Engels feel that both Robespierre and Saint-Just were unique historical personalities, individuals beyond comparison, Stirner's line strikes them as odd – "Robespierre, for example", (for example!), "Saint-Just, and so on" (and so on!). To kill this odd phrase, they keep repeating it again and again until everybody agrees that it is a ridiculous phrase, symptomatic of the shortcomings of its author. Although the bulk of their critique is rather tedious, it is nonetheless comical at times. Still another comic technique used by Marx and Engels is comic reversal, which they notably applied to titles, for example: *The Poverty of Philosophy*, a critique of Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty* (1847/1976).

Moreover, the humour of Marx (or rather, of Marx and Engels) is more than just a figure of speech or rhetorical technique. Their philosophical way of reading allows them to detect the comic flaws and shortcomings of texts that appear to be serious at first sight. Take, for example, another opening line, a famous one often cited: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (1852/1979, p. 103). The revolution of 1848 was a parody, a comic replay of the revolutions of 1789 and 1793 and, Marx adds, the same goes for Luther who "donned the mask of the apostle Paul" (11, 104). Marx' basic objective is to turn Hegelian dialectics upside-down by acknowledging that the basic facts of history are material ones (concerning food, drink and bodily existence: we are what we eat, etc.) rather than the lofty themes of German idealism. Still it is clear from the very outset that his laughter is far from gay. It is cynical and sarcastic, similar in many respects to the "negative laughter" of the Protestant pamphleteers who were Luther's contemporaries. Although parodical devices such as comic reversal and comic repetition are used, Marx' basic mood remains cynical, and his humour is jeering rather than jesting. While writing with a cynical grin, his basic objective was to replace existing (laughable) discourse with a more serious, scientific approach that would put an end to the ridiculous balderdash of his opponents once and for all. Although Marx makes extensive use of laughter's peculiar logic, the logic of the

inside-out and upside-down (most notably in his early writings), laughter eventually remains a purely negative phenomenon (cold humour), instead of being a world-revealing force in its own right.

In chapter 1, I already pointed out how Marx, in *The Capital*, Part 1 explains the emergence of the immense reservoir of labour power presupposed by the kind of society that was coming into existence in the early nineteenth century (1962/1979). The starting-point of the whole process, the original accumulation of capital, was often explained (by advocates of the liberal regime) by means of “an anecdote from the past”, told with “sovereign earnestness”, but really a secular version of the theological account of the original sin. Whereas the Biblical story explains why we human beings, once expelled from Paradise, had to labour in the sweat of our faces, the accumulation anecdote explains why *some* human beings (the wealthy elite) are exempted from this scourge. In times long gone by, the story usually goes, there were two sorts of people; the diligent and intelligent versus the lazy rascals. Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, while the latter had nothing to sell except their own skins. And this original flaw allegedly explains the poverty of the great majority of workers who, despite their labour, still have nothing to sell but themselves, while the wealth of the few (the one time diligent) increases constantly, although they have long ago ceased to work (p. 741). In Marx’ counter-account, however, the true history of this “original” accumulation is revealed. It is a history of violence, plunder and appropriation which, notwithstanding its astonishing cold-blooded cynicism, provides a “comic mirror”, revealing the ideological nature of the liberal “standard account” still in vogue.

Indeed, the historical chapters of *The Capital*, Part 1 tell about the excessive exploitation and waste of human lives, the unrestrained vampirism that determined the real living conditions of the working classes during the terrible epoch known as the industrial revolution and for which Dante’s inferno provided the literary model (p. 261). Subsequently, Marx points out how the working classes, although completely overruled at first, gradually learned to put up some resistance. Yet, truly popular (that is, paradoxical) forms of resistance are hardly taken into consideration by him. When quoting from dialogues between child-labourers and a party of officials investigating working conditions in England, for example, he is startled by the children’s remarkable lack of education. Apparently, the comic nature of their responses, the mockery of their retorts escapes him. One of the interviewees, a twelve year old boy, did not know what country he lived in, did not know anything about England, believed God to be a little bird, the devil a good fellow, believed the king to be a queen (p. 274): lack of education and oxygen, according to Marx, or should such answers count as parody?

## 4. *Incipit parodia: Nietzsche*

*Freie Geister: Gesellen mit denen man lacht...*<sup>43</sup>

Bakhtin and Nietzsche shared a philosophical insight of crucial importance: that there is truth in laughter. This section sets out to explore the basic affinity as well as the basic tension between Bakhtin's concept of parody – elaborated in the Rabelais book – and Nietzsche's concept of gay science. It is my contention that both Bakhtin and Nietzsche draw attention to parody or gay science as a basic philosophical technique or mode of thought that enables philosophers to contest the apparent self-evidence of an established truth-regime and to reveal disavowed aspects of moral existence. There are other basic techniques or modes of thought such as argument or irony, but under certain conditions, parody becomes indispensable. Both Bakhtin and Nietzsche emphasize the negative as well as the positive aspects of laughter. On the one hand, laughter exposes the vulnerability of a prevailing truth, a predominant rationality. This aspect of laughter becomes important when we find ourselves confronted with an official truth-regime which presents itself as indisputable and beyond contestation. Laughter serves to reveal the lack of self-evidence, the fundamental vulnerability of such an adequacy. This is the negative aspect. There is, however, a positive aspect to laughter as well. As Bakhtin phrases it in his book on Rabelais, laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, being one of the essential forms of truth. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter (1968, p. 66).

In the previous chapter I pointed out that the gay and popular aspect of Socrates' performance was certainly recognized by Nietzsche. In section 190 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, for instance, the relationship between Plato and Socrates is defined in terms of the aristocratic versus the vulgar. According to Nietzsche, Plato desperately tried to give Socrates' performance some standing by systematically redescribing a basically vulgar way of reasoning, which he (Plato) picked up from the streets like a popular song or theme,<sup>44</sup> transforming it into something serious.<sup>45</sup> Of crucial importance, however, are the remarks on Socrates in the book in which Nietzsche elaborates a philosophy of laughter of his own, *The Gay Science*.

In the introduction to *The Gay Science* Nietzsche defines "gay science" as follows: it is the saturnalia – a term, of course, of some prominence in the Bakhtinian vocabulary – of a mind that has patiently resisted a persistent pressure of long standing. It is a kind of recovery, almost like a state of drunkenness, where many a

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<sup>43</sup> *Human, All Too Human* I, Preface, § 2.

<sup>44</sup> According to Nietzsche, Socrates' way of drawing conclusions "smells plebeian" (l.c.).

<sup>45</sup> Kierkegaard (1989) also presents Socrates as someone who belonged to crowded and noisy city life, not at all disturbed by the bustling work of the artisans, the braying of the pack-asses or the boisterous noise of the marketplace, someone who liked walking around and talking with all sorts of people, an ever quick-witted ironist who could begin anywhere and whose attention could be triggered by any subject or situation.



foolish and unwise thing will emerge.<sup>46</sup> According to Nietzsche, gay science reveals the basic connection between truth and laughter (I, §1). To be able to laugh at oneself is the summit of wisdom.<sup>47</sup> Laughter is an instance of truth and revelation, where a basic liberating insight finally breaks through.

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche draws a basic opposition between gay science on the one hand and stern morality on the other. Morality is an established truth, supposedly beyond contestation, whose basic vulnerability is nevertheless exposed by laughter. Morality's basic claim, according to Nietzsche, is: Thou shalt not laugh. The true philosopher, however, laughs at the basic values of morality. He perceives reality as a playful comedy, full of jest.

Yet, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche draws a second opposition, namely between morality and scientific truth, an opposition which seems to moderate the previous one between morality and laughter. It is Nietzsche's hope that, eventually, morality will give way to scientific truth. The truth of science is bound to hold its ground, even in the face of laughter (I, § 46). If, through laughter, we recover from the illness of morality, we will finally be able to think scientifically – and one cannot laugh at science. Science seems to be regarded by Nietzsche as an end in itself (III, § 123), whereas laughter appears to be merely a path to truth, a kind of purification. We need gay science to recover from morality and Christianity, Nietzsche argues, but ultimately laughter is to be subordinated to science. Real science is no longer “gay” but serious. We need the fool, the jester, to recover; it is a path to truth, toward science, but ultimately Nietzsche seems to agree with Spinoza: *Non ridere... sed intelligere*: we should not laugh, we should think.<sup>48</sup>

In this respect Nietzsche diverts from Bakhtin, who considers laughter ultimately irresistible. The view elaborated in *The Gay Science* can be found in other writings of Nietzsche as well. In *The Antichrist*, for instance, Nietzsche blames Christianity for having prematurely destroyed the formidable effort of the Greek and Roman elite to establish and foster a scientific understanding of reality. Christianity is blamed for having discredited reason, knowledge and enquiry, the will to perceive things as they truly are. For Nietzsche, Christianity (notably during the medieval epoch) is the victory of a faulty moral sensibility of the great majority of vulgar fools over the scientific sensibility of the rational elite<sup>49</sup>.

And here, a second basic tension between Bakhtin and Nietzsche emerges. For whereas Bakhtin appreciates parody as a popular medieval genre, Nietzsche throughout his writings displays a chronic contempt of all things medieval, popular

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<sup>46</sup> Introduction, § 1.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. De Unamuno (1954): “It is necessary to know how to make ourselves ridiculous, and not only to others but to ourselves” (p. 306).

<sup>48</sup> IV, § 133; cf. Bakhtin 1968, p. 141.

<sup>49</sup> A view confirmed by Luther who claims that the truth of faith is ridiculous from the point of view of reason and contrary to actual experience.

and vulgar. In fact, he considers it one of modern Christianity's great merits and achievements to have done away with a lot of vulgar, medieval rubbish, with a lot of popular heroes and popular lore. Indeed, he considers this to be Christianity's one great contribution to Enlightenment (III, § 122). The Middle Ages are referred to by Nietzsche as the great alcohol poisoning of Europe (III, § 134). Even Faust and Mephistopheles, two great figures of medieval popular culture, are considered by Nietzsche as representing a basic prejudice against knowledge, and therefore to be exorcised on behalf of the will to truth. In this regard, Nietzsche's views seem quite at odds with the basic attitude and sensibility of Bakhtin, who affirms and endorses parody and laughter as basic elements of medieval life and thought.

Bakhtin and Nietzsche do not seem to share the same aesthetic taste. Whereas Bakhtin appreciates medieval culture as a grotesque combination of a variety of heterogeneous elements, Nietzsche praises unity of style, which he allegedly finds in Provençal poetry, the very opposite of the medieval public square, which is considered the principal locus of laughter and resistance in Bakhtin's work. In Rabelais' novels, the Provençal idiom is merely one of the linguistic elements put to work, besides all sorts of popular devices, proverbs, school farces, *soties*, abuses, and sayings coming from the mouths of fools and clowns. Indeed, his novels are democratic and populist rather than aristocratic. It is the very culture of the market square that Nietzsche, because of his aristocratic taste, despises. He reproaches the German culture of his time for being merely an aggregate of influences and subcultures – too pluralistic, chaotic, yes: even “grotesque” – and refers disapprovingly to it as a popular fair.<sup>50</sup> The one basic feature of true culture, Nietzsche claims, is unity of style. In other words, a strong tendency towards asceticism and purification appears to be at work in Nietzsche's writings, something that is quite absent in the popular “grobianism” of Rabelais. Whereas the Rabelais novels discarded the demands of classical literary taste, and were therefore condemned by the classical canon in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, precisely for this reason, Nietzsche clearly appreciates the effort of classical French literature to conform to the rigid canons of unity to which the classicist poets subjected themselves, thereby removing all burlesque and buffo elements from the theatre as “crude” and “barbaric” survivals. With regard to the problem of truth we encounter the same tendency towards purification, restriction and expulsion in Nietzsche's writings. After having profited from Christianity's effort to do away with

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<sup>50</sup> In *Untimely Meditations*, Volume 1, German culture is reproached for excelling in “Stillosigkeit oder dem chaotischen Durcheinander aller Stile”, and he complains about the “Jahrmarktlärme der modernen Ideen”. True art implies mastering chaos. As to Hellenism, Nietzsche argues, although far from constituting a unitary style, it was not a mere aggregate of influences and subcultures. Nietzsche argues that Hellenism had succeeded in organizing the chaos. It was not a mere mixture, but rather a contest of styles, organized in such a way that it had to be appreciated from an artistic point of view. Bakhtin shared this positive judgement and referred to Hellenistic culture as a “living novel”, but extrapolates this to medieval culture as well, seeing it as a living novel.

a lot of barbaric insanity in the name of “truth”, Nietzsche argues, it is now time for European culture to do away with a lot of Christian insanity as well, in the name of *scientific* truth.

Yet at the very moment we are convinced that the scientific will to truth is Nietzsche’s basic commitment, he himself withdraws from such a conclusion, emphasizing that even science itself is constituted by a basic, moral conviction, ultimately without foundation (V, § 344). There seems to be a basic ambivalence at work in Nietzsche’s oeuvre when it comes to science. The final entries of *The Gay Science* are devoted to laughter and parody rather than to science. Here Nietzsche formulates the ideal of a more-than-human state of well-being, the final parody of all earnestness. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche indicates that *The Gay Science* was written in a certain “physiological state”, referred to as “great health”, which seems to be not merely a path but rather an ideal, a prospect. The summit of wisdom is the mood of laughter itself. In the introduction he had called his book a bit of merrymaking after long deprivation. Indeed, Klossowski (1963) is basically right when he claims that Spinoza’s classic formula *Non ridere, non lugere, necque detestari, sed intelligere* enabled Nietzsche to acquire a deeper understanding his own mode of thinking, namely as a mixture of these: as a philosophy of laughter, mourning and profanation, a philosophy which evolved out of a reversal of Spinoza’s maxim, instead of identifying itself with it.

Already in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche had pointed to a basic form of truth that came to be neglected and obscured but should be regarded as more profound than the limited truth of reason. In fact, he claims that Greek tragedy evolved out of the perpetual struggle between two basic principles, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Apollonian is the *principium individuationis*, the principle of measure and self-constraint, while Dionysian refers to a state of excessive physical excitement (the “glow of pleasure”), exemplified by the time-old image of a gay, wandering and boisterous crowd. It is the principle of fraternization among men as well as of reconciliation with the forces of nature.<sup>51</sup> In ancient Greece, Nietzsche claims, Dionysian unruliness and excess was checked and balanced by the moral, Apollonian principle of measure and self-constraint. Whereas the Apollonian principle provided a superficial veil, a reassuring picture of the real, the Dionysian principle was regarded as a deeper, more profound truth that allowed humankind to discern the real as such. Due to voices like Euripides and Socrates, however, the Apollonian principle was

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<sup>51</sup> And Nietzsche adds: “Auch im Deutschen Mittelalter wälzten sich unter der gleichen dionysischen Gewalt immer wachsende Scharen, singend und tanzend, von Ort zu Ort: in diesen Sankt-Johann- und Sankt-Veitanzern erkennen wir die bacchischen Chöre der Griechen wieder ... das glühende Leben dionysischer Schwärmer. Unter dem Zauber des Dionysischen schließt sich nicht nur der Bund zwischen Mensch und Mensch wieder zusammen: auch die entfremdete, feindliche oder unterjochte Natur feiert wieder ihr Versöhnungsfest mit ihrem verlorenen Sohne, dem Menschen ... [Jetzt] fühlt sich jeder mit seinem Nächsten nicht nur vereinigt, versöhnt, verschmolzen, sondern eins ... Singend und tanzend äußert sich der Mensch als Mitglied einer höheren Gemeinsamkeit” (§ 2).

replaced by the Socratic principle of criticism and reason, while the Dionysian principle was no longer considered as a basic form of wisdom. Instead, it was discarded as irrational and banished from the realm of rational truth (§ 19). Nietzsche, however, longed for the recurrence of the Dionysian truth of tragedy. Yet in his later writings he will put his hopes in the recurrence of a gay rather than a tragic “science”. Indeed, there is a shift of emphasis in Nietzsche’s work from the tragic (*The Birth of Tragedy*) to the comical (*The Gay Science*). Still, although tragic truth eventually gives way to the truth of laughter, both serve as a remedy to counter the one-sidedness of scientific truth (cf. chapter 3). Like Bakhtin, but decidedly less consistently, Nietzsche discerns that laughter is a basic form of truth, a philosophical principle whose truth cannot be reduced to, or identified with that of science.

In the next chapter, which is on Socrates, both the basic affinity and the basic difference between Bakhtin’s and Nietzsche’s philosophy will be further elaborated and clarified by drawing attention to one particular entry in *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche refers to Socrates’ famous final words cited by Plato in *Phaedo*. In this section, however, I want to pursue my reading of Nietzsche’s own philosophy of laughter by drawing attention to some glosses by commentators.

In his article on Nietzsche the jester – *Nietzsches Narrentum* – Walter Bröcker (1972) recalls several passages where Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of jest with regard to truth. On 4 May 1888 for instance, in a letter to Brandes, Nietzsche presents himself as someone who is mocking the most serious things.<sup>52</sup> And in *Ecce Homo* he confesses that he wants to be considered a buffoon – in German: a *Hanswurst* – rather than a saint. I am a buffoon, he claims, and yet I am a spokesman of truth. However, even in earlier writings, when he took science’s claim to knowledge more seriously than during his final episode, Nietzsche recognized that the buffoon had a special task as a herald of new truths. When he refers to the first volume of his *Human, All Too Human* as a fool’s book, *ein Narrenbuch*, he considers the fool as a guide on the path to truth. It is in the fool’s discourse that new truths first make their appearance. The fool is granted the privilege of uttering them for the first time. While being excluded from the established truths, the fool’s cap allows him to introduce new unprecedented ones.

Although Nietzsche’s style is often associated with an ironic attitude, he in fact shared Bakhtin’s negative appreciation of irony. He considered it a negative, pessimistic and even decadent mode of speech (Behler 1975) and insisted on moderate use (Bräutigam 1977). Furthermore, like Bakhtin he rejected the sense of complacency conveyed by it. For although the ironist considers himself superior to others, he remains unable to come up with anything positive or affirmative, he merely discards. Another reason for Nietzsche’s aversion was the fact that, in the nineteenth century, irony was generally associated with romanticism whereas Nietzsche, faced with the dispute between romantic and classicist aesthetics, claimed to be in favour of

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<sup>52</sup> Ich hänge den ernstesten Dingen einen Schwanz von Posse an...

classical taste. However, Behler and others point to the fact that, notwithstanding his apparent rejection of romanticism and its aesthetic devices, Nietzsche was “infected” by it to a much larger extent than he himself was willing to admit or recognize. He was both a romantic and a self-avowed anti-romantic (Del Caro 1983). I will return to this issue in depth in my review of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, but I do agree that there is a good deal of irony or complacent laughter at work in Nietzsche’s own writings. As pointed out by Behler, his rejection of romanticism was an aesthetical gesture, quite in tune with some of his basic theoretical views, but rather at odds with his personal literary inclinations as an author.

Moreover, there is a fundamental affinity between irony and one of Nietzsche’s basic devices – the use of masks. Van Tongeren (1989), Behler and others have stressed the fact that, although Nietzsche sometimes uses the term irony in a “pejorative” sense, on other occasions he emphasizes the original meaning of irony as εἰρωνεία, or *dissimulatio* – that is, irony as an adopted veil covering one’s true insights by feigning ignorance.<sup>53</sup> If one conceals one’s noble character and intellectual depths in order to spare others the painful recognition of their inferiority, irony (or dissimulation) is a manifestation of strength and sovereignty rather than of weakness and decline. Such an ironical attitude is part of the “pathos of reserve” which Nietzsche considers a mark of personal superiority and distinction.<sup>54</sup>

Yet Nietzsche’s basic mode of laughter seems to be parody, rather than irony (Van Tongeren 1989). This is also suggested by Gilman (1975), although he restricts himself to the importance of parody in Nietzsche’s poetry.<sup>55</sup> Gilman points out that, in Nietzsche’s appreciation and use of parody, two incompatible conceptions of this genre compete with each other: the classical or aesthetical one (formulated by Goethe) and the Romantic or psychological one (formulated by Schopenhauer). The classical conception indicates that, unlike mere negative “parody”, true parody is not merely comical or degrading. Rather, it is a successful reconstruction of the original and may become an independent and valid work of art in its own right. The perfect example of parody in the classicist sense of the term is *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare’s magnificent parody of Homer. Although parody is bound to generate laughter, the comical effect is not its main objective. This classicist conception of

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<sup>53</sup> According to Kunas (1982) εἰρωνεία had a negative, moral connotation and referred to insincerity, whereas dissimulation was a far more neutral, technical term indicating a rhetorical device.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. for example *Human, All Too Human II*, ‘The Wanderer and his Shadow’, § 175 where he explains that mediocrity may well be the mask of a superior mind who does not want to offend his less gifted fellow-men and for this reason takes on an outward posture that is not very likely to give the impression of actually being a mask (since mediocrity is what the great majority of individuals happen to have in common by definition).

<sup>55</sup> “It is in his lyric poetry that the use of the mode of parody is initially and most clearly presented. It is to this specific aspect of Nietzsche’s writings that the critic can turn prior to promulgating a general theoretical statement of the development of Nietzsche’s understanding of parody and its application in other contexts” (p. 53).

parody profoundly influenced the aesthetic sensibility of young Nietzsche and inspired several parodical, but certainly not degrading, adaptations of Goethe's poems. In 1865, however, while still a student, Nietzsche discovered Schopenhauer, who articulated a Romantic view on parody, stressing its comical and degrading aspects. Schopenhauer's understanding of parody made Nietzsche abandon the classical approach, although he never completely estranged himself from it, in favour of the psychological one expressed in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here, Nietzsche's understanding is "psychological" because the psychological function is now emphasized: parody is presented as a psychological device that meets certain psychological needs. Moreover, the sections concerned – notably § 40 and § 223 – once again reveal Nietzsche's basic inconsistency or ambivalence, time and again swaying between a positive and a negative appreciation of the phenomenon at hand.

In § 40, Nietzsche claims that everything profound desires a mask. Some psychic events are delicate to such an extent that they are in need of some crude concealment or other. One can even imagine, Nietzsche claims, that some people, in order to hide something vulnerable, roll crudely through life like a mouldy old barrel of wine, refusing to communicate their true content even to those who are quite near to them. Every profound mind is in need of a mask. According to Behler (1975) this aphorism implicitly refers to Socrates. Although he is not mentioned explicitly, Behler considers the barrel-image as a hint to the passage in Plato's *Symposium* which became a famous topos in world literature from the sixteenth century onwards (notably in the writings of Erasmus and Rabelais): Alcibiades' comparison of Socrates with the Σειληνός, a little wooden statue with a grotesque exterior but containing articles of value, a comparison which implied that Socrates, notwithstanding his buffoon-like ways and appearance, was really the summit of wisdom and sober-mindedness. In the case of Socrates, so it seems, parody is to be regarded as a mark of superiority.

In § 223, however, Nietzsche's appreciation of parody is much more negative. Instead of concealing some profound content, it is instead a camouflage for lack of content. Yet there is something positive in parody as well. According to Nietzsche, the European, ugly plebeian *Mischmensch* is in need of some costume or other, and uses history as a store-room of costumes, presenting himself as baroque, classic, romantic, and so on. Ours is the age of carnival, Shrove Tuesday laughter and Aristophanes-like mockery. Indeed, the realm of laughter is the only realm which allows us to be original to some degree as history's fools and God's buffoons.<sup>56</sup> Bereft of all other talents, we might still excel in laughter. Even with regard to parody, Nietzsche remains basically ambivalent. It can be a mark of superiority or decline, it might suit the intellectual elite as well as the rabble, it can function both as a camouflage of deficiency and as a vehicle of truth.

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<sup>56</sup> "Parodisten der Weltgeschichte und Hanswurstes Gottes – vielleicht daß, wenn auch nichts von heute sonst Zukunft hat, doch gerade unser Lachen noch Zukunft hat!"

If we once again try to compare the Nietzschean view on parody and laughter with the Bakhtinian one, it becomes clear that, first of all, both Bakhtin and Nietzsche recognized the importance of the jester as the herald and spokesman of a new truth. Furthermore, they share a negative appreciation of irony and seem to agree – more or less, for Nietzsche remains ambivalent in this respect – that the positive aspect of laughter is of a parodical rather than an ironical nature. Or, to put it in other words, both Bakhtin and Nietzsche recognized laughter’s ambivalent nature, but Bakhtin overcomes the ensuing inconsistencies in Nietzsche’s position by distinguishing between gay laughter (parody) and reduced laughter (irony). Finally, whereas Nietzsche’s position is marked by a chronic dispute between the romantic and the classical appreciation of laughter – a dispute which he, being an anti-romantic romanticist himself, was unable to solve – Bakhtin reverts to a pre-modern conception of laughter which still encompasses both the affirmative aspect, preserved in the classical conception (albeit stripped here of its grotesque nature) and the carnivalesque aspect, preserved (albeit in a rather reduced and negative manner) in the romantic conception. And at the intersection of all these considerations and ambiguities, the image of Socrates emerges. He is both jester and spokesman of truth, both ironical and parodical, both superior and vulgar.

The first four books of *The Gay Science* were written just before *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and are full of gaiety and wit, redescribing human existence as a comedy. They intend to affirm life, rather than pronounce a moral judgement on it. The time of the supremacy of gaiety, however, has yet to come, for humankind still lives in a time of tragedy, morality and religion. In the fourth book, two aphorisms are devoted to Socrates: § 328 and § 340. In the first one he is considered to represent knowledge in its struggle against stupidity. In the second one he emerges as a mocking pessimist.<sup>57</sup> He calls Socrates “the wisest chatterer there has ever been”. Nietzsche greatly deplores, however, the final words of the man who lived the most cheerful of lives but finally professed his basic pessimism by mockingly depicting life as a kind of sickness. Throughout his life his cheerful appearance had merely been a mask covering a profound pessimistic insight, a veiled and hidden experience of life as futile suffering, which manifests itself in his final, disturbing, disconcerting joke.

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<sup>57</sup> ‘I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in everything he did, said – and did not say. This mocking and enamoured monster and pied piper of Athens ... was not only the wisest chatterer of all time: he was equally great in silence. I wish he had remained taciturn also at the last moment of his life; in that case he might have belonged to a still higher order of spirits. Whether it was death or the poison or piety or malice – something loosened his tongue at that moment and he said: “O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster,” suggesting that death is a recovery of the illness called life. This ridiculous and terrible “last word” means for those who have ears: “O Crito, life is a disease.” Is it possible that a man like him, who had lived cheerfully ... should have been a pessimist? He had merely kept a cheerful mien while concealing all his life long his ultimate judgement... Socrates suffered life! And then he still revenged himself – with this veiled, gruesome, pious, and blasphemous saying’ (Nietzsche 1974, p. 272). Nietzsche is aware of the parody, he puts the genre (“last word”) between quotation marks, while the phrase ‘for those who have ears’ is borrowed from the Scriptures.

Nietzsche had already expressed his uneasiness with Socrates' final jest in the first book of *The Gay Science* where he states that, unlike the Roman emperors Augustus and Tiberius, who died in silence, thus showing themselves not to have been comedians, Socrates finally had to strip himself of his mask, unable to refrain from being indiscrete, by uttering his final joke, which amounted to the confession that his gay and merry life – his apparent high spirits and *joie de vivre* – had been a comedy: *comoedia finita est*.<sup>58</sup> I will of course come back to this judgement of Socrates in my own rereading in the next chapter.

Book V of *The Gay Science* bears the title “We Fearless Ones”. Here Nietzsche clearly recognizes the basic opposition between gaiety and fear. At the same time, however, he maintains that the fearless, laughing ones are confronted with a “terrible question”, one that is not overcome by laughter but already casts a shadow on *The Gay Science*, and an even darker one on Nietzsche's subsequent achievement, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

As our “final” judgement of Socrates will be suspended until the next chapter, I would now continue my comparison of Bakhtin and Nietzsche by subjecting the latter's most important literary achievement to a Bakhtinian literary assessment in order to ascertain the extent to which it actually adheres to the aesthetics of laughter (as suggested in his conception of gay science). Or, to put it more frankly, I want to argue that Nietzsche's achievement as a philosopher of laughter (in *The Gay Science*) surpasses his limited achievements as a poet (in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).

## 5. Judging Zarathustra

“I would like to give away and distribute, until the wise among men will once again have come to enjoy their foolishness and the poor their richness” (Zarathustra).<sup>59</sup>

I do not share the opinion of Dannhauser (1974) and others that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is Nietzsche's greatest work nor the opinion that it is a magnificent work of art from a literary point of view. Rather, with the exception of the promising opening passages, I consider it tedious, wordy and artificial. As to the basic reason for Nietzsche's artistic failure, I believe that he himself did not fully recognize nor consistently exploit the parodical nature of his undertaking, although it is in fact already suggested by the title as such: the phrase “thus spoke...” is biblical and its

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<sup>58</sup> *The Gay Science* § 36. Cf. Luther on the difference between the emperor and the jester: “Wir haben einen frommen Kaiser... Er ist stille und fromm. Ich halte, er redet in einem Jahr nicht so viel als ich in einem Tage” [*Tischreden* 3:3245]

<sup>59</sup> “Ich möchte verschenken und austeilen, bis die Weisen unter den Menschen wieder einmal ihrer Torheit und die Armen wieder einmal ihres Reichtums froh geworden sind” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prelude, § 1).



German version, *also sprach*, was often used by Luther. The book is studded with allusions to the Bible, particularly the New Testament<sup>60</sup> and Dannhauser adds that “it is only to be expected that most of these take the form of parody” (1974, p. 244). I have already emphasized, however, that the laughter at work in *Zarathustra* is reduced and negative, rather than gay and parodical. However, before pronouncing a judgement, let me subject the text, greatly appreciated by Nietzsche himself, to a more careful reading.

Several of *Zarathustra*’s acts are indeed reminiscent of those of his biblical Predecessor. Dannhauser refers for example to the fact that at the age of thirty *Zarathustra* goes into solitude for ten years, thus “out-doing” Jesus, who spends “only” forty days in the desert. It should not escape us, however, that this “out-doing” is of a parodical nature; that it is in fact a case of grotesque exaggeration, a literary technique used abundantly in Rabelais’ novels for instance. Yet the possibilities inherent in parody as a genre are not fully recognized or exploited, neither by Nietzsche himself nor by his commentators. Its laughter is often reduced to sarcasm, at other occasions silenced by seriousness. In general, it suffers from Nietzsche’s (or *Zarathustra*’s) persistent effort to preach the serious, cheerless, even gloomy truth of atheism and nihilism.<sup>61</sup>

The prelude to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* describes *Zarathustra*’s “*Untergang*”, an ambiguous phrase which is perhaps best translated as his descent, although it contains a more negative connotation as well – exposure to the risk of corruption and decline. After an ascetic withdrawal, having lived the life of a mountain hermit for ten years, *Zarathustra* wants to become human again, to share his wisdom with other human beings. The first person he meets on his way down is a saint. They laugh at each other and at each other’s words, but it is a laughter that does not really laugh. Like sarcasm or other forms of reduced laughter, *Zarathustra*’s laughter conveys a sense of egocentric superiority. He laughs at the elderly saint because he has apparently not yet been informed that God has died. It is a laughter that laughs at ignorance. From the very first sections it seems obvious that the book is not written in a gay and merry but in an ascetic mood. Exposure to the world implies risk of corruption. Although there is much talk of abundance and gaiety, *Zarathustra*’s basic experience seems to be an ascetic, averting and defensive one.

This basic ambivalence at work is confirmed in the third section when he finally arrives at the market-square where he encounters, not the laughing chorus of Rabelais, but a hostile, diabolical crowd, representing the “masses” despised so much by Nietzsche. The inhabitants laugh at *Zarathustra*’s teachings, but their laughter is of a negative, sarcastic mode. “And all the people laughed at *Zarathustra*”, a scene reminiscent perhaps of Paul on the Areopagus, but their laughter lacks the positive

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<sup>60</sup> Weichelt (1922) listed 107 allusions to the Bible, 78 of which are to the New Testament.

<sup>61</sup> From the point of view of a truly gay science, the truth of atheism would be a gay instead of a gloomy one, a subject for laughter instead of bewilderment – perhaps God has laughed Himself to death?

element and merely discards. After having delivered one of his rather tedious speeches, Nietzsche points out how he decides to fall silent due to lack of understanding.<sup>62</sup> It is an experience of estrangement rather than unification.<sup>63</sup> The laughter of the populace, instead of revealing a merry truth, refuses Zarathustra's serious, vulnerable, ascetic truth – a truth of purity, an intimidating, eschatological truth – *Wehe! Es kommt die Zeit...* And when Zarathustra's eschatological discourse is interrupted by the cries and laughter of the pack, he claims that these people are full of hatred, even when laughing – in fact, their laughter is cold as ice.<sup>64</sup> It is a negative laughter, full of hatred. But Zarathustra's soul is not corrupted by it: it retains its ascetic purity.

Then, a tight-rope walker makes his appearance, but his performance does not provoke general merriment. On the contrary, it reinforces the gloomy atmosphere of hatred and estrangement. Having gotten half way across, he is joined by what at first appears to be a gay and popular market-square figure.<sup>65</sup> But while shouting "Go on, cripple-foot", he willingly causes the rope-walker's death. His laughter is far from gay: it is sardonic and completely negative. His voice is terrible ("fürchterlich") and his whole performance dreadful and frightening. This is not gay, but sombre laughter. Instead of transforming the apparently frightening and terrible into the comical, as gay laughter does, the apparently comical is transformed into the terrible. Many elements of his performance and speech somehow still remind us of the gay, popular laughter of the medieval market-square: the verbal abuses – Lahmfuß, Faultier, Schleichhändler, Bleichgesicht, etc. – as well as his curvets and pranks, but all these elements are mere fragments, emptied of their Dionysian content. Before long, uneasy laughter gives way to gloomy terror and this is reflected in the tight-rope walker's final words before he dies<sup>66</sup>: the comical (the comic devil, pulling people's legs) gives way to the terrible (the gloomy devil, condemning them to hell and damnation). The pied jester is revealed as the personification of something dreadful and diabolical, lurking behind a quasi-comic veil. A terrible emptiness lurks behind his apparently comic mask, while dark terror is omnipresent, the town is full of hatred, and Zarathustra only manages to escape because its inhabitants laugh their diabolical

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<sup>62</sup> 'Als Zarathustra diese Worte gesprochen hatte, sah er wieder das Volk an und schwieg. "Da stehen sie", sprach er zu seinem Herzen, "da lachen sie: sie verstehen Mich nicht, ich bin nicht der Mund für diese Ohren"' (§ 5).

<sup>63</sup> Instead of joining in with popular laughter, that is, with the "wisdom of folly", Nietzsche claims that wisdom is the whispering conversation of the lonely individual with himself amidst the hustle and bustle, the shouts and noises of the market-square (*Human, All Too Human* II, 'Mixed Opinions and Aphorisms', § 386).

<sup>64</sup> "Unbewegt ist meine Seele und hell wie das Gebirge am Vormittag. Aber sie meinen, ich sei kalt und ein Spötter in furchtbaren Späßen. Und nun blicken sie mich an und lachen: und indem sie lachen, hassen sie mich noch. Es ist Eis in ihrem Lachen" (§ 5).

<sup>65</sup> "[E]in bunter Gesell, einem Possenreißer gleich".

<sup>66</sup> "Ich wußte es lange daß mir der Teufel ein Bein stellen werde. Nun schleppt er mich zur Hölle" (§ 6).

laugh at him.<sup>67</sup>

There is a notable difference between the popular heroism of Rabelais and the anti-popular prophetism of Nietzsche. In the case of Rabelais, the “great man” is profoundly folkish (p. 241), also in a bodily sense: he eats, drinks, defecates, passes winds, laughs, argues, enters a dispute – in short he does all the things living human beings do, but on a grander scale: “Thus does the heroism of Rabelais” great men differ categorically from all other heroisms, which oppose the hero to the mass of other men as something out of the ordinary due to his lineage, his nature, the extraordinary demands and the exalted value he reads into life and the world (he is different, therefore, ... from the Nietzschean *Übermensch*)” (Bakhtin 1988, p. 241-242).

One of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*’s highlights is the Feast of the Ass, a quasi-comic scene, seemingly borrowed from popular culture, referring to one of the medieval *parodia sacra*. All of a sudden Zarathustra begins to cry Hee-Haw and blasphemies abound, apparently it is a scene full of gaiety and laughter and at first Zarathustra seems to enjoy the gaiety of his guests, but soon he deplores the fact that the ass’s bray will contaminate the vocation of the “higher ones”. They laugh, he says, but their laughter is not mine.<sup>68</sup> Then suddenly they fall silent and Zarathustra, to his bewilderment, witnesses the adoration of the ass. “You rogues, you fools!”, he cries, but in the end he seems to reconcile himself with the stubborn human inclination toward devotion – like a lenient Moses, so to speak. Kunnas (1982) observes that Nietzsche’s parody is negative instead of gay, it is sarcastic jeering, clearly part of an anti-Christian campaign, and the opposite of cheerfulness; Zarathustra as the Savonarola of anti-Christianity. There is always something spiteful and denigrating in his speeches. It is, at best, cold laughter, *Lächeln* rather than *Lachen* (p. 46).<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche is too serious to be truly comical. Zarathustra is an “agelast”.

Although the acts of Zarathustra seem to imitate and parody the Gospels, the comical aspect is eclipsed by the sombre presence of something negative: the negativism of nihilism. As to Zarathustra’s speeches, in *Von den Fliegen des Marktes* – On the market’s flies – for instance, humans are faced with two gloomy options: either the desolate isolation of solitary existence, or the sarcastic laughter of the market-place. Other speeches, like the one on chastity, or the one on young and elderly women, again confirm Zarathustra’s negativism. Womanhood is interpreted in

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<sup>67</sup> Later he regrets having visited the market-square. He now considers it a foolish act - why should the rabble’s noise be of any concern to him? ‘Als ich zum ersten Male zu den Menschen kam, da tat ich die Einsiedler-Torheit, die große Torheit: ich stellte mich auf den Markt... Mit dem neuen Morgen aber kam mir eine neue Wahrheit: da lernte ich sprechen “Was geht mich Markt und Pöbel und Pöbel-Lärm und lange Pöbel-Ohren an!”’ (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ‘Of Higher Ones’, § 1).

<sup>68</sup> *Dawn of Day*, § 1.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. “Je freudiger und sicherer der Geist wird, umso mehr verlernt er des laute Gelächter; dagegen quillt ihm ein geistiges Lächeln fortwährend auf”, *Human, All Too Human II*, ‘The Wanderer and his Shadow’, § 173.

accordance with what Bakhtin refers to as the ascetic tradition, not at all in accordance with the popular, grotesque one. The supposedly abundant and insatiable nature of women is experienced as threatening and corruptive. Zarathustra's gynophobic verbal abuses – “the bitch sensuality”, “the ruttish female”, etc. – are cynical and defensive rather than gay (“bitter ist auch noch das süßeste Weib,” etc.). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, laughter is jeering derision at best; its mockery is merely negative, at times even apocalyptic. In short, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is written in a sombre and monotonous, rather than a merry, polyphonic key. It at best conveys a kind of laughter belonging to the romantic period, “gothic” in the nineteenth-century sense of the term, but incongruous with the gay laughter of the Renaissance which it fails to equal.

This is quite remarkable because *The Gay Science*, a book that was written in the same period almost, was devoted to gay laughter. Although as a novelist Nietzsche's performance is rather at odds with the principle of laughter put forward by Bakhtin, his philosophical position appears to be much more congenial with it, at least in some important aspects. As indicated above, although irony and sarcasm certainly play an important role throughout Nietzsche's writings, Nietzsche experts (for instance Van Tongeren 1989) point to the fact that, in order to identify Nietzsche's basic technique of dissimulation, “parody” is a more adequate label than “irony”. Parody (mockery by means of comic imitation) as a literary technique was employed by Nietzsche as a vehicle for self-examination and self-criticism. Indeed, Nietzsche notably emerges as a philosopher of laughter in the French reception of his work (Bataille, Klossowski, Foucault).<sup>70</sup>

Although Nietzsche's own laughter conveys a modern, reduced, individualistic tonality, it prepares the way for a different and more lucid reading of Plato's dialogues, for a reassessment of Socrates' performance, not from a modern, but from a Greek perspective. Building on Bakhtin we may grasp Nietzsche's concept of “gay

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<sup>70</sup> Pierre Klossowski (1963) refers to § 333 of *The Gay Science*, devoted to Spinoza's *Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere!* The intellect should hold its ground against “the passions of the soul” – laughter, mourning and profanation. According to Klossowski, Spinoza's adage enabled Nietzsche to gain a deeper understanding of his own mode of thinking as a philosophy of laughter, mourning and profanation. Nietzsche considered philosophical reasoning as a particular strategy employed in a strategic situation in which several rival drives compete with each other (Triebe, die mit einander kämpfen). Why not admit that laughter, like seriousness, is a vehicle of truth? Why should the will to understand require the suppression of these other basic motives, rather than relying on them as vehicles of truth of equal standing? For Nietzsche, moreover, a truth is nothing but a lie which temporarily manages to impose itself, with the help of a caste of priests. Indeed, Nietzsche considers the Church the supreme achievement of a caste of talented imposters, and it took a plebeian buffoon like Luther, the impossible, ridiculous monk, to destroy their masterpiece, the last and final legacy of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Nietzsche's philosophy of laughter is basically connected with his final idea of eternal recurrence. Monotheism resulted from the fact that the other deities, confronted with the ridiculous demand that one of them be regarded as the one and only God, laughed themselves to death. Yet a similar roar of laughter might restore them to life again: “si les dieux meurent de cette rière, c'est aussi de cette rière qui éclate du fond de l'entière vérité que les dieux renaissent” (p. 227).

science” which, although lighting up in certain fragments, is easily lost again because, due to the absence of real laughter, Nietzsche’s laughter did not have the power to hold its ground. In chapter three, therefore, we will return to Nietzsche’s judgement of Socrates the jester. Before doing so, however, we will consult two other philosophers of laughter.

## 6. *Sola experientia*: Bataille

From the very beginning, laughter and parody play a prominent role in the writings of George Bataille. The opening line of *L’anus Solaire* for instance, claims that the world is thoroughly parodical.<sup>71</sup> Human existence as such is parodical. The prominence of laughter is also quite apparent in *L’expérience Intérieure*, one of Bataille’s most important works. According to Bataille, laughter is a phenomenon which still remains a mystery to us, and most philosophical efforts to explain its basic character (notably the one undertaken by Bergson) have failed. Although it is commonly believed that we laugh in order to express our feelings of joy, Bataille emphasizes that we also laugh when we are desperate, or for no reason at all. Indeed, he is considered a philosopher of laughter (Ten Kate 1994).

According to Ten Kate, it is Bataille’s principal objective to criticize a philosophical tradition of long standing (with Hobbes as its typical modern protagonist) which merely sees something negative and humiliating in laughter, whereas Bataille himself emphasizes laughter’s liberating impact and revealing force. Bataille views laughter as an instance of lucidity and revelation. Yet he also perceives a basic connection between laughter and anxiety, and stresses that both phenomena are genealogically akin. According to Darwin, the original function of laughter was to deter, although in the course of evolution it acquired a broader communicative function. There is something ambiguous or even preposterous in laughter, something which defies philosophical or scientific explanation. Moreover, Bataille does not merely describe the phenomenon of laughter but uses the language of laughter himself. His laughter is aimed notably at Hegel, and *L’expérience Intérieure* is at times a parody (A “petite récapitulation comique”, p. 56) of Hegel’s profound masterpiece *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. But is his laughter really “gay”, does it really laugh? In *L’expérience Intérieure*, the word “laughter” occurs 148 times (Ten Kate 1994), but does Bataille himself really laugh? What is the nature of his laughter? Let us take a closer look.

*L’expérience Intérieure* is indeed a phenomenology of laughter. Laughter is Bataille’s basic “inner” experience – an experience he claims to share with Nietzsche. Laughter is not merely comical, it is something divine, and Bataille discerns a basic

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<sup>71</sup> “Il est clair que le monde est purement parodique, c’est à dire que chaque chose qu’on regarde est la parodie d’une autre” (I, p. 82).

truth or insight to which laughter exposes us. Laughter is an experience of sovereignty, but not of superiority. We do not laugh at, or simply humiliate the other, and laughter does not aim at submission or degradation of the other. Rather, it is an experience of connectedness and sympathy.

On the first page of *L'expérience Intérieure* Bataille refers to Nietzsche's comment in *Ecce Homo* on *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche announces that a new ideal presents itself, excessive and divine, which parodies the earnestness of morality and duty and pushes away the curtain of tragedy. To be able to laugh at the sombre vicissitudes of tragedy, albeit with profound understanding and sympathy, is truly divine.

According to Bataille, laughter contains a basic critique of dogmatism and a profound understanding of tragedy. It transcends and questions the limits imposed on us by a prevalent and established dogmatism, and defies all forms of authority. This is its negative function. But this function reveals a basic truth concerning human existence. Laughter is a non-tragic way of discerning the fearful truth of tragedy. As such, it is not an experience of violence but of sympathy.

Paradoxically, while questioning all forms of authority, the experience of laughter itself becomes our sole authority. Laughter is basically an experience of contestation – laughter *is* contestation. This experience, however, has to be “dramatized”, has to be lived, for otherwise we would not really be able to laugh.<sup>72</sup> Laughter is primarily a practical or dramatic rather than a discursive phenomenon. It reveals in a dramatic way the actual impotence of dogmatic power. Indeed, practical laughter defies the dogmatism of language itself and silences the established discursive mode. And yet, the revelation of laughter is experienced suddenly – it is a sudden, decisive breakthrough in a continuous struggle against dogmatism. A basic truth is revealed, and dogmatism is overcome by the anti-authoritarian authority of this overwhelming experience, which is our sole authority – *sola experientia*. It is a bacchanal, an excessive plot of an ascetic effort. The morality of laughter contains a lucid insight regarding a basic, Dionysian truth, the laughter of the true, bacchanalian philosopher that transcends and defies established limits. This insight is a basic truth, a wisdom of which it is impossible to speak without being ridiculed.<sup>73</sup> But the negative laughter of ridicule is completely different from the divine laughter of true philosophers, who laughs in an unprecedented way, laughing with their whole body, no longer hiding behind a discursive mask, negating Descartes' device *larvatus prode* (“I come forward masked”) by actually taking the floor *unmasked*. The truth of laughter does not allow for any justification through argument; instead, it justifies itself, being its own authority.

Furthermore, as was already hinted above, there is a basic connection between

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<sup>72</sup> cf. ‘Une nécessité comique à dramatiser. L'expérience demeurait inaccessible si nous ne savions dramatiser’, (p. 136).

<sup>73</sup> ‘J’ai du divin une expérience si folle qu’on rira de moi si j’en parle’ (p. 45).

laughter and fear. Whereas Descartes remains fearful at heart (fearing an omnipresent, deceptive god), his fear was suspended by argument. Hiding behind a discursive mask, he rationalises it. But the gaiety of the laughing philosopher is excessive and generous, implying the complete loss of certainty (including: “I rationalise, therefore I am”).

In *L'expérience Intérieure*, Bataille recalls a particular biographical dramatization of true laughter. The dramatic scene occurred when, after an extended period of profound religious piety, his life was shattered by, and dissolved itself in laughter – an experience of revelation, revealing the ground of things.<sup>74</sup> He had read Bergson's treatise on laughter and was about to meet him in London. He was irritated by the book because he felt it failed to explore the true meaning of laughter. He himself considered laughter a kind of euphoria, providing him with what was to become his key philosophical question, but also a depressing and chaotic experience, as if he had been laughing too excessively. It had finally dawned on him that the ridiculous is simply a truth we do not yet dare to recognize and advocate. He eventually rejects his former hero Hegel – apparently Bataille had forgotten all about Hegel's profound understanding of laughter as truth, in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (*Das Wahre ist so der bacchantische Taumel, an dem kein Glied nicht trunken ist*) – to embrace Nietzsche, who claimed that any “truth” which does not provoke ridicule and laughter at least once, should be regarded as false. Hegel's philosophy of productive labour and discourse was to give way to a philosophy of laughter. Laughter is both a fundamental contestation, exposing the basic frailty of an established truth, and a dawn of day, liberating us from fixed boundaries and ties. Fear is overcome by laughter, which is a sovereign mode of thought, revealing the ground of things (p. 213), and there is no basic difference between laughing at something and understanding its truth (again an insight, I would argue, which is captured more profoundly and consistently by Hegel than by Nietzsche). Instead of considering certain scenes or themes as comical and others as non-comical, we should recognize that being as such is profoundly comical. In comical genres laughter is often stifled, while real laughter is boundless (p. 220). Laughter is an experience of sovereignty, not in the top-down sense of etatism, but as an experience of revolt, a release from servitude. Dialectically speaking: laughter, not labour, is what liberates the Servant from the Master.

A substantial part of Bataille's *Le Coupable* is devoted to the divine character of laughter: *La divinité du rire*, a text which summarizes Bataille's philosophy of laughter. While everyone is at work, he claims, the philosopher laughs – a laughter which is somehow considered divine, coming from “outside”. Whereas the philosophy of labour, i.e. Hegel, aims at suppressing laughter, Bataille (following Nietzsche) now endorses laughter as philosophy's basic mode of thought. Basically, laughter is lucid contestation, where contestation refers to laughter's negative and

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<sup>74</sup> “Le rire était révélation, ouvrait le fond des choses” (p. 80).

lucidity to its positive aspect. Philosophical laughter is ecstasy, quite different from bourgeois understandings of laughter. Bataille tries to explain the experience of laughter by comparing it to labour and poetry. According to Bataille, labour is an assault on nature, subjecting it to human objectives. Poetry, on the other hand, means subjecting oneself to nature, it is a kind of submissive idleness or passivity. Like labour, laughter takes a provocative, non-submissive stance towards nature. Its sovereignty implies questioning nature in a fundamental way. The divine freedom of laughter aims to subject nature, rather than being a gesture of submission.<sup>75</sup> But whereas labour remains a form of servitude, only laughter is truly sovereign. Laughter overcomes not only nature as such but also general human misery: the “natural” human condition. He who finally overcomes (human) nature is able to laugh in a masterly, divine manner.

Moreover, in *La divinité du rire* Bataille recalls a biographical experience of laughter. He describes how as a youth he once climbed Mount Etna. As night was already approaching, he entered a mountain hut surrounded by the blackest lava in order to escape from the cold and violent mountain wind. Before going to bed, however, he went outside once more, in order to satisfy a physical need – *pour aller satisfaire une besoin* (p. 366). The terrible cold strikes him and he is overcome by fatigue. Yet he longs to climb the mountain slope still further in order to approach its summit, its abyss. Passing the lee that had been protecting him, he is seized by the roaring wind and, finding himself at a stone’s throw from the crater, the darkness no longer subdues the excessive horror of the sight. At first he shrinks back from it, but then he musters his courage. The wind is so violent and the horror at seeing the volcano’s summit is so intense, that it is almost unbearable. Never before had the not-me, the inhuman aspect of nature seized him with such intensity. And yet, although physical exhaustion prevented him from laughing, he was convinced that what drove him towards the summit was nothing but boundless laughter. At last, he laughed.

This scene is pervaded by what Bakhtin referred to as the grotesque. Terror is transformed into laughter and also the bodily element is present. The terrible and diabolical – the mouth of hell: inhuman nature – is transformed through laughter. Still, although Bataille recognizes that laughter reveals and connects, there is still something individual and Nietzsche-like (or Zarathustra-like) in the way he laughs. His laughter has not yet distanced itself from what Bakhtin refers to as the “sardonic laughter of the eccentric individual”. It is (as Bataille himself phrases it in *Le Rire de Nietzsche*) Zarathustra’s laughter, a nihilistic mode of laughter which aims to reveal the absence of God rather than to unite.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, Bataille adds to our

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<sup>75</sup> ‘La divine liberté du rire veut la nature soumise à l’homme, et non l’homme à la nature’ (p. 356).

<sup>76</sup> Note that Klossowski (1963) connected laughter not only with the disappearance but also with the joyful recurrence of the gods: both epochal events are accompanied by laughter.



philosophical understanding of laughter and his insights will prove of value, most notably in the chapter on Luther.

## 7. Uneasy laughter: Foucault

As has been emphasized by Michel de Certeau (1994) and others, Michel Foucault, following in the footsteps of Nietzsche and Bataille, was also a philosopher of laughter, someone who wrote in a laughing mood. Yet, although his philosophy of laughter shares several basic insights with the ones previously discussed, his philosophical laughter seems to be of a peculiar, idiosyncratic nature. Let us consider some passages in his work where his laughter manifests itself, in *History of Madness* (1961/1972), *Words and Things* (1966) and his essay on Nietzsche (1971).<sup>77</sup>

In *History of Madness*, Foucault (1972) emphasizes that the Renaissance experience of madness differed considerably from classical and modern ones (Zwart 1995). Madness was considered to be basically akin to laughter – an experience which is retained in the French word *folie*, meaning both madness and folly. Furthermore, madness/folly was held to be omnipresent and inescapable. Another distinctive feature of the Renaissance experience of madness/folly was its fundamental connection with truth. There was something lucid and revelatory in laughter. Madness/folly revealed the futile and ridiculous nature of that which, according to the official established views, should count as serious and important. It was a kind of wisdom that turned official knowledge into folly, a profound insight and truth, a striking and revealing view on life. In short, it was an experience of madness/folly that Foucault felt was articulated brilliantly in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. Foucault stresses, however, that the Renaissance experience of madness/folly was in itself ambiguous and unstable, containing both a tragic and a critical aspect. Whereas *Praise of Folly* primarily represented laughter's critical aspect ("folly"), the tragic aspect ("madness") notably emerged in the comical/terrible paintings of Jeroen Bosch. The critical aspect indicates that gay laughter reveals certain aspects of the world that are usually neglected and concealed by more serious truth games. The tragic aspect entails a sombre, threatening and violent truth which is subdued by gay laughter. In subsequent classical and modern experiences of madness, however, this delicate union of the tragic and the gay is lost. According to Foucault, the modern experience of madness is one-sided because the basic connection between madness and folly as well as between madness and truth has been obscured.

Already in the classical experience of madness, which gained sway during the seventeenth century, madness/folly is excluded from official life and discourse. Human subjects are forced to abandon their basic ambivalence and to "choose"

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<sup>77</sup> In chapter five, I will also discuss his lecture on frank or unrestricted speech: *παρρησία* (1983).

between madness/folly and reason, to commit themselves to official truth (adequacy). They are no longer allowed to suspend or ridicule the serious, adequate truth of reason. Those who persist are submitted to practices of power, like forced labour, in order to be transformed into rational subjects. Moreover, the choice between madness and reason is presented as a moral choice, preceding rational discourse as its basic condition, while the houses of correction that emerged during this period are considered “fortresses of the moral order” (Zwart 1995). Although the threatening, tragic aspect of madness is incarcerated, the critical aspect as such maintains itself, but is radically divorced from laughter: it becomes serious and rationalistic, or satirical and sarcastic at best, but it is no longer experienced as gay folly. Laughter is reduced to satire.

During the modern period, the efforts to discipline and normalize madness were intensified by the emergence of the human sciences, notably modern psychiatry. And yet, Foucault maintains, in the margins of established discourse, some isolated voices retained the awareness of the basic connection between madness, folly and criticism which was omnipresent during the Renaissance. Their writings, quite at odds with established truth regimes, are grounded in a basic experience of laughter, transcending the limits of serious, scientific or philosophical discourse and basically contesting established morality. They recognize the basic connection between folly and truth and between the tragic and critical aspects of laughter, and this sense of connection is the basic experience which constitutes the ground and origin of their philosophy. But before turning to epistemological laughter as it emerges in *Words and Things* and to Foucault’s appreciation of Nietzsche, I will point to some aspects of Foucault’s account of the Renaissance experience of laughter in *History of Madness* more carefully.

At the end of the fifteenth Century, Foucault claims, the grimace of eschatological fear gave way to the cheerful countenance of folly. And until it was finally subjected to reason in the course of the seventeenth century, folly remained connected with all the major experiences of the Renaissance (p. 18). The literary and pictorial image that indicated the emergence of its reign was the “Ship of fools”, depicted by Brandt the poet, Bosch the painter and many of their contemporaries – an image referred to by Foucault as folly’s “satirical vessel” (p. 19). Instead of being caged in prisons and fool’s towers, fools were granted a wandering existence and dispersed all over the country side. In the theatre they acted as custodians and spokesmen of truth while outside the theatre they became the heroes of popular fairs and feasts with their “spontaneous religious parodies” (p. 25). Moreover, many foolish academic games and disputes (*discours bouffons*) emphasized folly’s proximity to truth. Indeed, folly seemed closer to truth than reason itself.

Even death was deprived of its seriousness. Fear and death were ridiculed and conquered by permanent irony and laughter. Gay madness succeeded in overcoming death, and terrifying gothic symbolism was demolished. Notwithstanding its absurd features, folly emerged as a form of knowledge, nullifying the diabolic and

apocalyptic triumph of the Antichrist that had intimidated the late Middle Ages. The world regained its gay and cheerful aspect, and abounded in folly to such an extent that, as Erasmus phrased it in *Praise of Folly*, a thousand minds like Democritus would not suffice to mock at it. The world's terrors were subdued by an almost superhuman and divine ("Olympic") laughter.

In short, Foucault's account of Renaissance laughter is remarkably similar to Bakhtin's in several respects. Even the Silenus, containing something quite different from what is suggested by its grotesque outward appearance, is mentioned by Foucault (p. 42). Indeed, folly was a paradoxical form of truth, and folly and wisdom were fundamentally akin. Foucault emphasizes, however, that Renaissance folly was not merely gay. In itself, it was a form of moral satire, of moral criticism. Folly was a critical experience; it conveyed a moral lesson (p. 36-37). Renaissance laughter was critical, even didactic. And its connection to the "tragic" experience of madness was temporary and unstable. In the course of the seventeenth century folly was reduced to criticism and satire proper, whereas the tragic experience of madness was obscured (although never completely abolished) by reason. In short, the Renaissance experience of truth was short-lived and was to give way to the rectitude of rational thought before long. Folly was stripped and disarmed and appropriated by reason.

A similar development is described by Bakhtin. Unlike Bakhtin, however, Foucault stresses that even Renaissance laughter was never truly and completely gay. It never succeeded in standing on its own legs but remained ambiguous and vulnerable, and its final defeat was inevitable – Renaissance laughter was a brief episode in the history of progress and the incessant labour of reason. Ultimately, because of reason's decisive coup de force in the seventeenth century (p. 56), the truth of laughter was subjected to the truth of reason as one of its instruments or devices (i.e. satire). It no longer conveyed a truth of its own.

Notwithstanding this deplorable plot, it is important to note that Foucault clearly recognized the moral significance of folly. It was basically a form of moral criticism. The values of a certain age, a certain morality, were questioned.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Foucault seems to suggest that, even in a rather delicate position, subdued and instrumentalised by reason and put to the service of reason's objectives, folly's basic playfulness managed to maintain itself. Yet in comparison to Bakhtin's understanding of laughter, the forms of laughter that Foucault portrays are never really gay: there is always something hesitant, something ironical or satirical at work in them. Unlike Bakhtin's conception of true laughter, Foucault's laughter is never simply gay but is always connected with a basic sense of uneasiness. Folly remains unstable and vulnerable and it is ultimately overcome by seriousness and fear. In fact, reason and seriousness infected folly from the very beginning. Throughout his work, Foucault remains faithful to this experience of uneasy laughter which he already presents in his history of madness.

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<sup>78</sup> 'Folie, où sont mises en question les valeurs d'un autre âge... d'un autre morale...' (p. 48).

It is not at all astonishing that laughter (folly) was granted such a prominent position in a book devoted to the history of madness. It is more astonishing however, that laughter likewise gained a prominent position in Foucault's book on the archaeology of the modern human sciences. Laughter is the alpha and the omega of *Words and Things* (Foucault 1966). It is a basic experience of truth, of revelation and contestation, surpassing the adequacy-truth of modern sciences, revealing their limited, temporary and vulnerable nature. The very first lines of Foucault's book describe an experience of revelation, of laughter, an experience which is revoked in the final sentence of its decisive, penultimate chapter – the famous one on the death of the modern human subject.

In the very first lines of *Words and Things*, Foucault explains that the book was written because of a text by Borges describing a Chinese encyclopaedia which conveys a way of perceiving and understanding the world quite different from that to which we are accustomed: a perception and arrangement of things which at first glance is bound to strike us as utterly absurd and ridiculous. The laughter evoked by the reading of this text, however, is not mere mockery. Rather, it is uneasy laughter, for it seems to contest some apparently quite solid and quasi-self-evident practices of perception. It is a kind of laughter that is accompanied by discontent (*malaise*).<sup>79</sup> The taken-for-granted foundation of our ways of connecting language and knowledge, words and things, proves contestable.<sup>80</sup>

This uneasy laughter reflects the general uneasiness that emerged at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when apparently incontestable structures of knowledge and argumentation were suddenly transformed into something basically ridiculous and unconvincing. This event was represented by Cervantes' Don Quixote. Foucault emphasizes, however, that we nowadays find ourselves on the threshold of another fundamental transformation, affecting the very foundation of knowledge, language and perception. Modern man's "anthropological slumber" (i.e. the basic conviction that the Cartesian ego / the Kantian subject is the ground of knowledge) is on the verge of being subverted by an epistemological "dawn of day": the recognition that "humanity" as we have come to understand it is but a temporary fold, a recent invention and bound to disappear completely without a trace. Those who remain unwilling to think without presupposing that it is the human subject who does the thinking are to be confronted with philosophical laughter – *un rire philosophique* (p. 354) – a laughter which interrupts the monotonous, anthropocentric discourse of the modern human sciences, and forces us to recognize that its grounding is suddenly obliterated.<sup>81</sup>

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79 'Ce texte de Borges m'a fait rire longtemps, non sans un malaise certain' (p. 9)

80 'La gêne qui fait rire quand on lit Borges est apparentée sans doute au profond malaise de ceux dont le langage est ruiné' (p. 10).

81 Cf. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* I, § 16 – 'the *Ding-an-sich* merits Homeric laughter', expressing the awareness that, once its history, its genealogy is revealed, such an idea, such an effort to save or repair the classical, eighteenth century picture of the world

Around 1970, Foucault's archaeology of medical, psychiatric and psychological knowledge is transformed into a genealogy of power. This transformation is already apparent in his transitional essay on Nietzsche ("Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire") in which genealogy is presented as a kind of laughter, a form of historical research which laughs at the metaphysical quest for lofty and divine "origins" (Foucault 1971). Instead of searching for the origin of things in the sense of *Ursprung*, genealogy points to their origin in the sense of *Herkunft*. That is, it reveals the vile, ridiculous and accidental features of historical beginnings, degrading the metaphysical, top-down account and replacing it with bottom-up accounts, drawing attention to bodily and material forces and circumstances at work. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, for instance, the ascetic ideal is connected with certain basic, physiological phenomena. Unlike *Ursprung* (origin in the sense of ideal foundations) the *Herkunft* of moral ideas proves to be something unstable and accidental. Genealogy laughs at metaphysics, just as Nietzsche-the-adult laughed at Nietzsche-the-youth who still bothered himself with the question whether God was to be considered the origin (*Ursprung*) of evil. Historical beginnings are vile and accidental, rather than lofty and divine. When it comes to origins, genealogy points to the body, to nutrition, digestion and physical constitution, rather than to metaphysical grounds. Genealogy reflects a "gay", "coarse", and "uncivilized" attitude.

Moreover, genealogy is parody: it parodies the attitude towards history referred to by Nietzsche in the second of his *Untimely Meditations* (1874) as "monumentalism". According to this attitude, history is to be perceived as a series of monumental achievements. The history of philosophy, for instance, is presented as a sequence of astonishing intellectual highlights. By totally neglecting the circumstances that produced them, these highlights are transformed into something incomprehensible and divine instead of being interpreted as the accidental effect or outcome of a particular and contingent constellation of forces and conditions. Instead of rejecting the monumental attitude, as he had done in 1874, Nietzsche eventually came to parody it, using it in a way that defied its original purpose. At first, he too seems to treat the history of philosophy as a series of astonishing highlights – Heraclites, Socrates, Plato, etc. Yet he ridicules the very predecessors with which he most intensively bothers himself (such as Socrates and Luther) instead of venerating them, as would have been expected in view of the genre conventions of monumentalism. The monumentalistic attitude is degraded and transformed into its parodical counterpart. Furthermore, genealogy aims to subvert the nostalgic nineteenth century practice of adopting substitute identities, of feeling at home in historical circumstances long since forgotten, turning history into a masquerade. He considers Wagner a personification of a desperate view on Germanic and medieval history which Nietzsche now tries to ridicule. History is acted out, but transformed into buffoonery. Foucault refers to the famous section 223 of *Beyond Good and Evil*

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becomes defenceless.

already cited above, where it is claimed that only as history's buffoons, in a carnivalesque mixture of styles and disguises can modern man hope to attain his share of originality.

In *History of Madness* Renaissance laughter is connected with criticism and truth, although it subsequently becomes as a playful device and instrument of reason (classical or satirical laughter). In *Words and things* laughter emerges as an epistemological event, an experience of revelation. Subsequently, however, laughter seems to disappear from Foucault's writings. Although genealogy is identified with laughter in the transitional essay on Nietzsche, parody and gay science seem to be extinguished completely in the genealogical studies that Foucault embarks upon during the seventies. *Discipline and Punish* conveys a serious, gloomy mood. The spectacular type of punishment related in the first chapter uses the grotesque language of dismemberment – a human body is treated as fowl or pork in a kitchen, with this difference that the convict suffering from such a treatment is conscious and alive, almost until the very end. He is boiled in tallow and pitch, poached, drawn and quartered, cut to pieces and roasted. Yet before long such grotesque forms of torture give way to the non-corporal punishments of panopticism. Panoptic society bears a grim countenance and faces grim resistance. Laughter is silenced by the omnipresence of power, and becomes powerless or even absent. The disquieting transformation of human bodies into mechanical, machine-like artefacts is not, as Bergson's analysis would imply, corrected by laughter. In Foucault's impressive account of the massive struggle between panopticism and disciplinary power on the one hand and popular or peasant resistance on the other, the outstanding manifestation of popular resistance (namely parodical laughter) seems absent.

This twilight of laughter lasts for a decade. In the fall of 1983, in a lecture at Berkeley on *παρρησία* or unrestricted speech, Foucault presents modern criticism as a genre whose history is intimately connected with laughter. Special attention is given to a particular tradition of laughter called Cynicism. A similar and simultaneous effort to rehabilitate cynicism as a philosophy of laughter was made by Peter Sloterdijk (1983) in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Several basic genres of laughter can be distinguished. Whereas in the nineteenth century Kierkegaard and others stressed the importance of irony, and whereas satire can be regarded as the "classical" form of laughter, Foucault and Sloterdijk underline the importance of Cynicism (in the *original* sense of the term, as "kynicism": Sloterdijk 1983), while Nietzsche and Bakhtin emphasise the importance of parody.

In the upcoming three chapters I will contend that, in view of the present moral condition as outlined in chapter one, parody must be regarded as a decisive form of laughter, and I will analyse it via three remarkable cases histories of moral transformation. Finally, in the concluding section (chapter 5, § 4) the relationship between parody and other forms of laughter, notably cynicism as presented by Sloterdijk and Foucault, will be discussed.

## Chapter 3: Judging Socrates

He pretends to people and always has his joke with them,  
believe me, dear drinking companions! (Alcibiades).

CALLICLES: Tell me, Chaerephon, is Socrates in earnest or joking?

CHAEREPHON: In my opinion, Callicles, he is in deadly  
earnest, but there is nothing like asking him.

CALLICLES: By heaven, that is just what I am anxious to do. Tell  
me Socrates, are we to consider you serious now or jesting? For if  
you are serious and what you say is true, then surely the life of  
us mortals must be turned upside down and apparently we are  
everywhere doing the opposite of what we should (Gorgias, 481B).

### 1. Mocking Asclepius

In the previous chapter I already pointed at a particular entry in *The Gay Science* where Nietzsche refers to Socrates' final words, cited by Plato in *Phaedo*: "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius". At first these "final words" seem rather ridiculous, but Nietzsche indicates that they in fact convey Socrates' basic view on human existence – a view quite in accord with the line of argument elaborated in the course of the dialogue. These words imply that life is a kind of illness, and death the soul's recovery to a state of health. Socrates, about to die (that is, about to recover from this illness called life) owes the customary tribute to the deity of medicine, Asclepius. His last words contain a jest.<sup>82</sup> He is, in a very fundamental way, a jester, and to jest is Socrates' way of revealing truth.<sup>83</sup> Let us submit *Phaedo* to a more careful rereading.

There are many more instances of parody in *Phaedo* than we might at first expect. For instance, when the cup of poison is handed over to him, Socrates asks the prison guard whether he should pour a libation to a deity from his cup of poison – an act of mockery or even insult – and asks a question which provokes a comical debate with the guard whether the amount spilled by the libation would in fact lessen the effect of the poison, etc. Socrates' speech acts, abounding in laughter, represent a genre which may perhaps be compared to "the language which mocks and insults the deity and which was part of the ancient comic cults" (Bakhtin 1968, p. 16). Indeed, comic pledges and oaths belonged to ancient cultic forms of abuse and derision (p. 352).<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. De Unamuno (1954): 'Life is ... a comedy for those who think... Those who put thought above feeling die comically... The mockers are those who die comically (p. 315-316).

<sup>83</sup> In fact, as Bakhtin points out, the 'gay death' plays an important, liberating part in the Rabelais imagery as well (p. 51).

<sup>84</sup> These abuses, Bakhtin claims, were ambivalent: they humiliated, but at the same time revived and are mistakenly considered as indicating that the pagan convictions were losing

Socrates is parodying what should have been a tragic scene and therefore, by parodying the conventions of tragedy, Socrates is contesting the predominant view of life and death articulated by this literary genre, for tragedy presupposes the affirmation of life as valuable in itself. It presupposes that the hero clings to life, attaching a very positive value to human life, and yet discerns that he has encountered something of more value even than life itself, something for which he is willing to sacrifice his own life – a gesture which would not be tragic at all if the hero did not sincerely appreciate being alive. Socrates, however, claims that, from a truly philosophical point of view, the tragic understanding of life must be considered untenable. As Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he leaves this world without a trace of the natural “instinctive” fear of death (I § 78). Parody is the path toward liberation from the natural fear of death, presupposed by tragedy<sup>85</sup>. Socrates emerges as tragedy’s major foe, where tragedy refers not merely to a certain literary genre but to a certain form of moral subjectivity, to a tragic way of life. Socrates’ rejection of tragedy implies a rejection of established moral subjectivity, of an unexamined life, affirmed and taken-for-granted in an unreflected manner.<sup>86</sup> This contributed to the death of tragedy, allowing for unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity to establish themselves: more theoretical forms of life (*Birth of Tragedy*, § 1).

There is one particular passage in *Phaedo* where the parody becomes rather obvious:

“You, Simmias and Cebes, and the rest”, [Socrates] said, “will go hereafter, each in his own time; but I am now already, as a tragedian would say, called by fate, and therefore it is about time for me to go to bath; for I think it is better to bathe before drinking the poison, that the women may not have the trouble of bathing the corpse” (p. 393).

This is parody (albeit mingled with misogyny: the neurotic fear of being physically touched by women, even after death). Socrates is parodying the tragic conventions in order to reveal the vulnerability of the view of life conveyed by them. That we are in fact dealing with an instance of parody is already indicated by the phrase “as a tragedian would say”. And indeed, the parodical nature of Socrates’ speech acts cannot escape us here. A tragic hero might utter something like “I am called by fate”, but would never add “and therefore it is about time for me to go to bath”. Once we

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credibility. In the contrary, these rites and cults of laughter still had to be tolerated in parallel to official Christian cults long after the more serious pagan celebrations had vanished.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard (1989): ‘Socrates’ death is not basically tragic ... because death has no validity for Socrates. For the tragic hero, death has validity ... Admittedly the tragic hero does not fear death, but still ... it has validity if he is condemned to die’ (p. 271). The only punishment Socrates considered appropriate was a punishment that was no punishment, one that amounted to nothing. The death penalty was no punishment for him because he did not know whether death was something to be feared.

<sup>86</sup> With his rejection of an instinctive life, Socrates condemned both established art forms and established ethics – human existence is to be “corrected” (*The Birth of Tragedy*, § 13).



have noticed the jest, the parody, it can hardly escape us. Socrates aims at destroying the persuasiveness of the tragic view of life from which the Athenians (at least some sections of society, notably youth from the higher social strata) were already distancing themselves at that time. Indeed, there appears to be something parodical in everything he says, it is a pervasive tone of voice.

And this is rather remarkable, for in his lectures on the history of philosophy Hegel refers to Socrates' farewell-scene as truly tragic – "Das Schicksal des Sokrates ist so echt tragisch" (1971, p. 514; "Socrates' fate was profoundly tragic", p. 446).<sup>87</sup> Philosophers have been reading Plato's light-hearted dialogues with too much earnestness, it seems, they noticed the irony, but the parody escaped them. But surely he is joking, even when he seems to be speaking in earnest. His audience, however, noticed it: "By Zeus, Socrates, I don't feel much like laughing just now, but you made me laugh", says Simmias.

The following argument reads like a specimen of Rabelais-like parody rather than of serious rational debate:

SOCRATES: Do you agree [that beautiful things are beautiful through beauty]?

CEBES: I do.

SOCRATES: And great things are great and greater things greater by greatness, and smaller things by smallness?

CEBES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And you would not accept the statement, if you were told that one man was greater or smaller than another by a head, but would insist that every greater thing is greater than another by nothing else than greatness, and that it is greater by reason of greatness, and that which is smaller is smaller by nothing else than smallness and is smaller by reason of smallness. For you would, I think, be afraid of meeting with the retort, if you said that a man was greater or smaller than another by a head, first that the greater is greater and the smaller is smaller by the same thing [the head], and secondly, that the greater man is greater by a head, which is small, and that it is a monstrous thing that one is great by something that is small. Would you not be afraid of this?

And Cebes laughed and said: "Yes, I should" ... (p. 347).

At a certain point in the course of his argument, even Socrates himself laughs and says: "I seem to be speaking like a legal document, but it really is very much as I say" – a parodical laugh indeed, frankly identifying the official speech genre whose figures of speech are borrowed and whose conventions are purposely mocked by its comic philosophical (dialectical) double (p. 351).

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<sup>87</sup> His fate was tragic, Hegel claims, for instead of being merely deplorable, it reflected the collision between two basic moral forces, each of them to be considered as justified in their own right. Although I agree that Socrates was a figure of 'world-historical significance' (1832/1971, p. 441) and that his performance exemplified a moral collision, I would maintain that this decisive turning point in history was comical rather than tragic, that all crucial moral transformations are brought about by laughter and that Socrates' speech acts belong to a comical rather than a tragic genre.

If submitted to a closer reading, many more instances of parody can be revealed. Nietzsche drew attention to Socrates' basic technique with the phrase *incipit parodia*. Of course, in *Phaedo* there are many instances of argumentation, irony, and other modes of thought as well, but parody seems fundamental. Many apparently serious arguments and conjectures, for instance, are bound to strike us as rather ridiculous and unconvincing if we read them carefully and unprejudiced. Moreover, we can discern several instances of irony but they likewise seem less important and do not convey the truly Socratic laugh. Irony implies that one is in fact saying the opposite of what one really wants to convey. It is a kind of "reduced laughter", as Bakhtin calls it (p. 120), "laughter without laughter", a "modernized" laughter which does not laugh (p. 45), which has lost its regenerative power and joyful tone (p. 38). It is a mode of laughter directed at utterances rather than whole genres of discourse, expressing a negative, critical attitude. Parody, however, implies laughing in a more frank and generous way, contesting the established truth in a more jovial and fundamental way – the truth, not of a specific proposition, but of a speech genre as a whole.

This is how Socrates is presented by Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*: everything he says seems exaggerated, buffo; he undermines a certain speech genre by caricaturizing it (§ 4). His very appearance marks the victory of something ordinary and vulgar. What was the meaning of this event, Nietzsche asks himself: how could aristocratic sensibility become subverted by vulgarity, disguised as "dialectics"? According to the aristocratic mind, whatever is in need of justification ought to raise suspicion. Indeed, Socrates was a buffoon who succeeded in having himself taken seriously.<sup>88</sup> What had happened was that custodians of the official moral regime finally came to recognize that the peaceful coexistence between two incompatible forms of moral subjectivity (their strategy of containment, thus tolerating the vulgar truth of popular laughter), had come to an end: established morality was faced with a parodical and apparently overpowering and irresistible intrusion of laughter into the official modes of speech.

At this point, having moderated the importance of irony in Socrates' performance, it nevertheless seems unavoidable that we take up Kierkegaard's reading of the Socratic dialogues. In *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* he focusses on irony rather than parody as Socrates' basic device. According to Kierkegaard, irony refers to a basic attitude as well as to a certain figure of speech. As a figure of speech, irony basically means saying the opposite of what one has in mind. For instance, saying something earnestly that is not meant in earnest. As an attitude, it is the expression of a philosophical principle referred to by Hegel as subjectivity. As such, it is sheer negativity, devouring everything without being able to establish anything. It conveys the sense that, in the eyes of the ironic subject, the actual world has lost its validity, but an alternative to the present one is not suggested. Moreover,

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<sup>88</sup> 'Was geschieht da eigentlich? Vor allem wird damit ein vornehmer Geschmack besiegt: der Pöbel kommt mit der Dialektik obenauf... Socrates war der Hanswurst, der sich ernstnehmen machte: was geschah da eigentlich?' (The *Twilight of the Idols*, § 5)

irony conveys a sense of self-conceited superiority, and by means of ironical speech the ironical subject distances himself from his fellow human beings and from the actual world. He does not wish to be understood immediately and looks down on the kind of plain and simple talk that everyone can promptly understand. The ironical subject isolates himself rather than wishing to be generally understood (“he relishes his joy in private”, p. 249). Kierkegaard points out that irony particularly appears in the higher circles – it is a sophisticated form of speech: “Just as kings and princes speak French, the higher circles ... speak ironically so that lay people will not be able to understand them” (p. 249). A diplomat’s view, for example, is often ironic, and irony can also function as political prudence (p. 253).

Kierkegaard does not distinguish clearly between “irony proper” and other modes of laughter. With regard to medieval laughter, for example, he points out that the *parodia sacra* must be interpreted as a kind of irony, indicating that the Catholic faith had apparently lost its validity in the eyes of the individuals concerned: “in the Middle Ages [the Catholic Church] tended to rise above its absolute reality at certain times and to view itself ironically – for example, at the Feast of the Ass, the Feast of Fools, the Easter Comedy, etc. A similar feeling was the basis for allowing the Roman soldiers to sing satirical songs about the victor... [Likewise] there was much irony in the lives of the Greek deities” (p. 253). Apparently he fails to recognize that parody is a form of laughter in its own right, conveying a different basic mood and even giving rise to comic cults – without the implication that the religious beliefs expressed by them had lost their credibility. Quite the contrary, to produce and tolerate a parodical double is a sign of vitality and strength. At times, however, Kierkegaard does seem to admit that in particular instances of laughter there might be something more than irony at work. Commenting on the first book of Plato’s *Republic*, for instance, he writes: “On the whole, the irony in this whole first book is so excessive and ungovernable, sparkles so inordinately, frolics with such wantonness and fieriness [that it has] a certain resemblance to the grotesque figures that appear and the equally grotesque leaps that are made in a *Schattenspiel an der Wand* [shadow play on the wall] and it is almost impossible to keep from laughing when Socrates says: “Thrasymachus made all these admissions not as I now lightly narrate them, but with much balking and reluctance and prodigious sweating, it being summer” (p. 113-114). Besides the “grotesque” reference to bodily functions, the “ironical” relationship with indirect speech is indeed absent here. Unlike irony proper, where the phenomenon is at odds with the essence, the literal meaning with its content (p. 114), this seems to be a case of laughter for its own sake, of laughter per se, pure comedy.

Apart from this one reference to the *Republic*, however, Kierkegaard as a rule tends to ignore the parody, the travesty, the parodical play with official genre conventions in the dialogues. But Socrates’ basic attitude is parodical rather than ironical. His laughter is plebeian rather than elite. Moreover, unlike irony, Socratic laughter decidedly has a positive aspect. Instead of simply rejecting the actual, Socrates aimed to established and exemplify an alternative: a moral “solution”. Rather than simply

distancing himself from ancient Greek culture, in which life itself had become a problem, his basic objective was to make life possible again by exemplifying (living-through) a cheerful and carefree alternative.

## 2. The truth of laughter

Nietzsche's rediscovery of the parody at work in *Phaedo* and his understanding of Socrates as buffo brings him closer to the Bakhtin of the Rabelais book than *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* does. In the prologue to *Gargantua*, supported by a quotation from *The Symposium*, Socrates is staged as the ridiculous jester whose speech acts nevertheless contain something of great value: gay truth. His ways stamp him as a simpleton, hopelessly unfit for any office in the polis, forever laughing and drinking, forever hiding his divine knowledge under a mask of mockery. As indicated, Alcibiades' comparison of Socrates with Silenus (Dionysus's vulgar companion), was often used by sixteenth century humanists and cited by Erasmus in three of his works (Bakhtin 1968, p. 169). This scene, about these "buveurs très illustres", presented by Rabelais in the prologue to *Gargantua*, conveys a combination of abuse and praise which is truly parodical.

"There can be no doubt as to the carnivalesque origins of the Socratic dialogue", Bakhtin claims (1973, p. 108). The "original nucleus of the genre", he tells us, were the agons of ancient Attic comedy, the carnivalesque-folkloristic debates between, for instance, life and death, permeated with "the pathos of jolly relativity". Yet he admits that in Plato's dialogues, this type of laughter is already subdued to the extent that, although we can still discern its footprints, we no longer hear laughter itself: "Thus in Plato's Socratic dialogues ... laughter is reduced (though not completely), but it remains in the structure of the image of the central hero (Socrates) and in the methods of developing the dialogue, and – most importantly – in the genuine dialogicality itself... But here and there in the dialogues of the early period laughter goes beyond the structure of the image and, so to speak, bursts out into a louder register. In the dialogues of the later period laughter is reduced to a minimum" (p. 137-138). Yet, although Bakhtin emphasized the importance of the Socratic dialogue as a serio-comic genre, he himself refrained from analysing any one of them extensively.

The Socrates of Rabelais (and, by implication, of Bakhtin) is the Socrates of *Symposium* (Plato 1951), a dialogue conveying a carefree, laughing mood from the outset, where Socrates makes his appearance as the continuously jesting master of a band of carefree lads. Plato's dialogue presents us with a "banquet for laughter's sake" (Bakhtin 1968, p. 5), a comic protocol: a set of speeches attributed to some of Socrates' contemporaries, which are in fact parodies of the styles involved (Hamilton 1951, p. 12). The dialogue is written in a far from serious vein. For example, as Aristophanes is suffering from hiccups, Eryximachus speaks before his turn. He is presented as a pompous and oracular pedant – "His analysis is ... mechanical,

catalogue-like, and forced, and must have seemed so even to readers to whom the scientific theories on which he relies were living and credible” (Hamilton 1951, p. 15). In fact, he reminds us of the “gay physician” (Bakhtin 1968, p. 67-68, 179) who restores health by provoking laughter, a practice as can be found throughout the Medieval literature of laughter summarized by Rabelais. Finally, he is deliberately made to misinterpret a famous theory by Heraclitus. When, after this rather absurd performance, Aristophanes takes the floor, he relates “a humorous fantasy of the nature of the first human beings and their rebellion against the gods, which has often been called Rabelaisian” (Hamilton 1951, p. 16). After Zeus has bisected the impudent, quadruped human rascals, Apollo “turned round the faces, and gathering together the skin, like a purse with drawstrings, on to what is now called the belly, he tied it tightly in the middle round a single aperture which men call the navel. He smoothed out the other wrinkles, which were numerous, and moulded the chest with a tool like those which cobblers use to smooth wrinkles in the leather.” And should there be “any sign of wantonness in them after that, and they will not keep quiet, [Zeus] will bisect them again, and they shall hop on one leg” (Plato 1951, p. 60-61). Yet in the course of his gay-hearted story an important truth is brought to light, revealing a basic aspect of human existence “only accessible through laughter”, as Bakhtin phrases it: we will forever remain unable to satisfy our most fundamental desire. Agathon’s speech, taking the floor after Aristophanes, is merely a parody of the conventional rhetoric and diction. Finally, even Socrates’ own speech parodies a contemporary genre: the language of the mystery religions of his day, revolving around the prophetess Diotima.

The narrative parts abound in jest as well. In the very first lines, Apollodorus (the narrator) is mocked; reference is made to “a little fellow who always went about barefoot”, who happened to be at the party and was considered “one of Socrates’ greatest admirers in those days” (p. 34), whereas Socrates himself – deliberately and jestingly misquoting a citation from Homer – is introduced in the following vein: “I met Socrates fresh from the bath and with shoes on his feet, two circumstances most unusual with him”. He arrives late at the party, having taken up his famous position in a neighbour’s front porch, where he is said to have made some important discovery. Although many translators have made quite some effort to conceal the omnipresence of carefree laughter, in order to emphasize what they consider the serious aspect of the piece, all participants jest unceasingly and Socrates is presented as the prince of fools who “spends his whole life pretending and playing with people” (p. 103). A drunken Alcibiades devotes his famous mock-panegyric to him, cited in the Prologue to *Gargantua*, in which he compares him to a Silenus, the constant companion of Dionysus, a bald, dissolute old man with a flattened nose, usually riding an ass, and yet considered something of a prophet:

Anyone who sets out to listen to Socrates talking will probably find his conversation utterly ridiculous at first. But if a man penetrates within and sees the content of Socrates’ talk exposed, he will find that there is nothing but sound sense

inside, and that this talk is... of the widest possible application; in fact that it extends over all subjects with which a man who means to turn out a gentleman needs to concern himself (p. 110-111).

A speech that raised general laughter, as the Socratic way of life produces the very reverse of what established morality would consider a perfect gentleman.

The truth revealed by Socrates is not the truth of argument or logic – it is the truth of laughter, and dialectics is a comic rather than a serious genre. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche again stresses the fact that, unlike many of his disciples, Socrates emerged from the lower social strata, a fact clearly emphasized by his outward appearance. He was, as Nietzsche phrases it, buffo, a term connoting popular jest. With Socrates, vulgarity takes the floor: popular jest, indecent manners and, Nietzsche adds, a vulgar genre, a vulgar mode of thought – dialectics (for a Master's discourse does not see itself as fundamentally questionable). Socrates indicates the point in history where aristocratic taste is overcome by “vulgar” genres. For Nietzsche, dialectics is associated with the lower social classes.<sup>89</sup> To a truly aristocratic mind, whatever has to be demonstrated by means of argument either raises suspicion or is considered sheer knavery, for one has recourse to dialectics only when all other means are lacking: it is a sign of weakness, of being on the defensive (§ 6). The dialectician is a buffoon, someone to be ridiculed.

While reading this crucial series of aphorisms, one inevitably gets the impression that Nietzsche is in two minds about Socrates. I would, therefore, propose the following explication. Dialectics is a vulgar mode of speech, siding with the Servant against the Master, but it relies on laughter rather than on “argument” and “logic” – unless it is admitted that laughter, as Bakhtin phrases it, has a “logic” of its own. Perhaps Nietzsche's puritan taste is at work here, but in *The Antichrist* the inclination toward reason and argument is suddenly considered the expression of an elite rather than a vulgar understanding of life, one supported by the upper classes of society. If one agrees that dialectics is a vulgar genre, this means that it is a comic mode of speech and that laughter (the popular mode of thought) rather than propositional logic is Socrates' basic device.

In the *Symposium*, Socrates is the master of parody playing games with serious arguments. The dialogue is a carnivalesque scene where members of the upper classes (like Agathon) temporarily become drunk and mingle with the vulgar (represented by Socrates), so that they engage in parodying the official truth and official rhetoric of their own daily routine – they become merry rather than rational. They engage in a comic protocol, subject themselves to an inverted canon, a carnivalesque regime for the sake of laughter (which for example formally defines the amount of alcohol to be consumed and the manner in which the mock-speeches are to be delivered), but they are bound to resume their official life and duties and the restrictive rhetoric that comes with it before long. It is a temporary suspension of official routines, of certain moral

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<sup>89</sup> ‘[D]er Pöbel kommt mit der Dialektik obenauf’, § 5.

or aesthetic sensibilities, a temporarily sanctioned relapse into vulgarity by way of festive, carefree laughter and affectionate, mutual mockery.

Several of the speeches delivered can be compared to the so-called “grammatical” parodies often practiced in learned scholastic circles during the Middle Ages, directed at mocking official genres by exposing their basic grammatical and rhetorical devices. And Socrates, with his persistent claim of being serious, mocks all of them at once, by presenting a parody of what is supposed to be a philosophical discourse or debate. The very persistence of his claim that he is serious ought to raise suspicion because it is a stock line of all comedians. His apparently “rational” performance is kindred to the carnivalesque debates such as performed by medieval vagrant scholars. His lines of “argument” are for the most part unconvincing or even ridiculous – although for centuries a large part of his philosophical readership seems to have refrained from reading them in an unbiased way.<sup>90</sup> A basic truth is revealed by what he says, but it is not the truth of argument, nor is it grounded in argument; it is the truth of vulgar laughter. His philosophy is “tested in the crucible of laughter”, and he himself is “directly linked with the carnival forms of antiquity that fertilized the Socratic dialogue and freed it from one-sided rhetorical seriousness” (Bakhtin 1968, p. 121).

Modern readers will notice the “modern”, “reduced” modes of laughter at work in Socrates’ performance, will notice the irony, but often fail to appreciate true, parodical laughter as being Socrates’ basic device – a device which reappeared in intellectual discourse during the sixteenth century, was abolished during the subsequent age of Protestant theology, classical aesthetics, scientific rationalism and the Enlightenment, only to be rediscovered by philosophers such as Nietzsche, Bakhtin and others, but first and foremost by literary authors, for laughter is invincible and ineradicable.

Nietzsche stresses that when Plato (a talented, promising youth from the upper classes of high Athenian society) met Socrates (a popular buffoon) it changed him completely. It was a change that affected his basic mood and way of life, and was accompanied by a change of genre: he switched from tragedy to dialogue. Indeed, Socrates transformed young Plato (who had aspired to become a tragic playwright) into a “novelist”, for according to Nietzsche the Socratic dialogue is the origin, the example and forerunner of the modern novel. Nietzsche considered Plato as someone who mastered all literary styles in vogue in ancient Athens and whose genre, the Socratic dialogue, assimilated all these genres, setting the example for the future novel (Verweij 1993, p. 189 ff.). Like the modern novel, the Socratic dialogue successfully absorbs many elements from genres such as tragedy and lofty philosophical poetry into a generic mixture, discarding the requirements of generic and stylistic unification and creating a form of art that was subsequently pushed to its

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<sup>90</sup> A student assignment phrased it as follows: ‘I came to these works with a similar belief, expecting reverently to find a serious discussion from which I would walk away with profound wisdom, but found instead dialogues I could hardly accept and at times I found simply laughable. And they are laughable... the truth is not in the argument but in the laughter’.

ridiculous extreme by the cynics.<sup>91</sup> Like Nietzsche, Bakhtin (1988) argues that the Socratic dialogue constitutes a crucial episode in the genealogy of the modern novel. In Bakhtin's view, the novel has a lengthy prehistory, going back thousands of years. The symposium as a genre was the prototype, the ancient precursor. The dialogues, notably *Symposium*, represented a multiplicity of genres, a loosely organized competitive struggle between genres (p. 5, p. 7); an art form that successfully parodied other (higher, serious and official) types of discourse, notwithstanding their stubborn effort to preserve their canonical form (thus exposing the conventionality of their language).

The speech of Eryximachus mentioned above, for example, which was a relentless parody of ancient medical discourse, might serve as a perfect specimen of parodical dialogue as a literary technique. The genre of the symposia, of which Plato's famous dialogue is just one example among many, which for some reason has been preserved, is permeated with laughter and irony, with parody and self-parody. Its basic feature is indeterminacy or open-endedness: it is unfinished. It is a genre that is both critical and self-critical. As Bakhtin points out, the Greek had a gift for language, for dialects (either local, social, or professional), and this is rather apparent in the Socratic dialogues, where every character has its own accent, its own typical figures of speech, its own professional jargon and idiom – almost like a nineteenth century novel. Moreover, whereas the “higher” genres will idealize the past (a feature which gives their wordings something of an official air) the comic genres focus on contemporary life, their locality is familiar, their characters are contemporaries, acquaintances and friends. According to Bakhtin, contemporaneity cannot become an object of representation for the higher genres since it is too closely associated with unofficial language and unofficial thought, with familiar speech and profanation (1988, p. 19-20). In ancient Greece, contemporary life was a subject of representation only for the lower, comical genres, rooted in the common people's culture of laughter. Their contemporaries and the spirit of their time became the objects of ambivalent laughter, and this applies to the Socratic dialogues as well as to the Roman satire, the Menippean satire and the *Satyricon* of Petronius (p. 21-22).

In Socratic dialogues, like in these other genres, the subject is portrayed “without any distance, on the level of contemporary reality, in a zone of direct and even crude contact” (p. 22-23). Or, as Jaspers (1964/1975) formulated it, Socrates is the first philosopher who is presented to us “large as life”.<sup>92</sup> Distance is essential to all higher

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<sup>91</sup> ‘Wenn die Tragödie alle früheren Kunstgattungen in sich aufgesaugt hatte, so darf dasselbe wiederum in einem exzentrischen Sinne vom platonischen Dialoge gelten, der, durch Mischung aller vorhandenen Stile und Formen erzeugt ... das strenge ältere Gesetz der einheitlichen sprachlichen Form durchbrochen hat; auf welchem Wege die zynischen Schriftsteller noch weiter gegangen sind, die in der größten Buntscheckigkeit des Stils ... auch das literarische Bild des “rasenden Sokrates”, den sie im Leben darzustellen pflegten, erreicht haben ... Wirklich hat für die ganze Nachwelt Plato das Vorbild einer neuen Kunstform gegeben, das Vorbild des Romans’ (*Birth of Tragedy*, § 14)

<sup>92</sup> ‘Er ist der erste Philosoph, der körperlich leibhaftig vor uns steht. Er war häßlich, die



genres, and the absence of it is a basic feature of forms of comedy: “As a distanced image, a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity” (Bakhtin, 1988, p. 23). Laughter demolishes fear and piety by turning a person or situation into an object of familiar contact, thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it: familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible realistic scientific and artistic creativity in European civilization (p. 23). This, according to Bakhtin, was what happened in the fourth Century B.C. as well as during the Renaissance. Due to lack of distance, the object was laid bare, became ridiculous, approachable. Indeed, the comic myth told by Aristophanes in the *Symposium* can be considered a perfect condensation of the genre, described by Bakhtin as “a comical operation of dismemberment” (p. 24). The operation is described quite literally, as an operation which happens before our eyes. As to the Socratic dialogues, Bakhtin writes:

We possess a remarkable document that reflects the simultaneous birth of scientific thinking and of a new artistic prose model for the novel. These are the Socratic dialogues. For our purposes, everything in this remarkable genre ... is significant. Characteristically it arises ... as transcripts based on personal memories of real conversations among contemporaries; characteristic, also, is the fact that a speaking and conversing man is the central image of the genre. Characteristic, too, is the combination of the image of Socrates, the central hero of the genre, wearing the popular mask of a bewildered fool – almost a “Margit”<sup>93</sup> – with the image of a wise man of the most elevated sort... Characteristic also is the ambivalent self-praise in the Socratic dialogue: I am wiser than everyone, because I know that I know nothing... Around this image, carnivalesque legends spring up (for example, Socrates’ ridiculous relationship with Xanthippe); the hero turns into a jester... Characteristic also is the proximity of its language to popular spoken language, as near as was possible for classical Greece... Characteristically, this genre is at the same time a rather complex system of styles and dialects, which enter it as more-or-less parodied models of languages and styles (we have before us therefore a multi-styled genre)... It is, finally, profoundly characteristic – and for us this is of utmost importance – that we have laughter, Socratic irony, the entire system of Socratic degradations combined with a serious, lofty and for the first time truly free investigation of the world, of man and of human thought. Socratic laughter (reduced to irony) and Socratic degradations (an entire system of metaphors and comparisons borrowed from the lower spheres of life)... bring the world closer and familiarize it in order to investigate it fearlessly and freely” (p. 24-25).

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Augen quollen vor. Stülpnase, dicke Lippe, dicker Bauch, gedrungener Körperbau ließen ihn den Silenen und Satyrn ähnlich scheinen” (p. 82).

<sup>93</sup> The ancient Greek version of the medieval *Hans Wurst*.

Like Kierkegaard, Bakhtin subsequently stresses that “it is canonical for this genre that even an accidental and insignificant pretext can serve as the ... immediate starting point for a dialogue” (p. 25-26). Finally, he points out that Menippean satire (a Cynical genre) is usually considered a product of the disintegration of the Socratic dialogue, although here the familiarising role of laughter is even more powerful, sharper and coarser, more plebeian. Like the Socratic dialogue, however, its plots and situations all serve one goal: “to put to the test and to expose ideas and ideologues; these are experimental and provocative plots” (p. 26).

I am in complete agreement with Bakhtin’s observations. Socratic dialogues are discursive *experiments*: world views are tested and analysed in the crucible of laughter. Socratic laughter, although often reduced in modern readings to irony, basically and originally conveys a gay, cheerful and parodical mood. Being ironic implies subtle, degrading criticism, but the parodical (rather than ironical) nature of these dialogues has (I hope) been sufficiently substantiated by now. The relationship between Socratic laughter on the one hand and “free and fearless investigation” on the other, however, still deserves some further consideration since it borders on the pivotal question concerning the relationship between the truth of parody and laughter and the truth of science and experimentation.

In chapter two I referred to Nietzsche who in *Birth of Tragedy* explained how (in the fourth Century B.C.) the Apollonian principle of ancient Greek culture (the moral principle of measure and self-constraint) was replaced by the “Socratic” principle of reasoning, while its Dionysian counterpart (the principle of depersonalization and excess) was suddenly rejected as “irrational”, instead of being considered a basic form of knowledge in its own right, allowing us to discern a profound and startling truth about the natural world and human existence. From now on, the wisdom of Dionysian laughter was banished from the realm of scientific truth. Subsequently, however, Nietzsche reconsidered his initial judgement of Socrates many times. In *The Gay Science*, he thinks of Socrates as exemplifying “gay” inquiry rather than “science”, laughter rather than argument. Moreover, scientific investigation is regarded as a particular form of knowledge, a considerable improvement compared to religious mystifications, but the ultimate form of insight is bound to be Dionysian and gay.

In the case of Bakhtin, a similar ambiguity can be found. On the one hand it is suggested that laughter is a basic form of truth in its own right and that certain aspects of the world are “only accessible through laughter”. On the other hand it is proclaimed that laughter merely heralds and clears the ground for a rational and scientific mode of speech, liberating it from fear, as an epistemological obstacle. Eventually, the truth of laughter is absorbed and overtaken by new forms of scientific seriousness. In my view, this is the key issue for any philosophy of laughter: its connection with truth, and with the truth of science. I will argue that we should resist the persistent inclination (omnipresent in the philosophical discourse on laughter) to consider laughter merely as a preparation for and as instrumental with regard to something else. Laughter is a form of knowledge in its own right, enabling “free and fearless investigation”, but this

“free and fearless investigation” remains intimately connected with the speech genres of laughter itself. Although laughter may further scientific investigation by challenging the constraints of certain dogmatic convictions, its positive truth cannot be reduced to its negative function (overcoming dogmatism). Rather, the truth of laughter exemplifies a truth event, a moment of ἀλήθεια, allowing the world to appear in a certain manner and in a certain light, replacing an ambiance of gloom with an ambiance of openness. But as a basic, grounding truth or mood, it continues its revelatory and inspirational presence as an ambiance or logo-scape, as an inherent dimension of the actual (adequate) research practices it enables to evolve.

We already alluded to Archimedes and his bath experience. Something similar may happen to more modern researchers as well. When the world suddenly opens up before their eyes, when scientists suddenly experience a dawn of day for culture as such, on such moments researchers are likely to be struck by an experience which Plato refers to as “divine madness”, θεία μανία (*Phaedrus*, 244–256). While working in their laboratories, scientists may suddenly behold a realm of existence, a dimension of life which had previously remained invisible (for nature is want to hide herself); for instance when a microscope reveals and opens up the microbial world for the very first time. Such scientists behold strange and apparently ridiculous or ludicrous life forms, only accessible through microscopy, moving in ways that seem to parody our conception of movement as such, with the help of a weird flagellum for instance. They will experience bliss and jouissance, for the world suddenly sheds its tedious resistance and the laboratory becomes a “perfect world” (p. 295), while at the same time all the world becomes an inviting laboratory for research, as ordinary ponds and ditches suddenly become unknown worlds, teeming with life.

Similar experiences may befall humanities scholars when, struggling with impossible texts, they suddenly stumble across new possibilities for interpreting it from a tilted perspective, so that the text suddenly begins to speak and opens up, as if the unknown author becomes a close companion, whose text becomes a living world of thought: by adopting a reading style whose validity is subsequently tested in an experimental manner, by trying it out on various (previously opaque and recalcitrant) passages, concepts or phrases. A whole library may come to life, as on Raphael’s fresco *The School of Athens* in Rome, and artwork which allows us to approach Greek scholars as if they were contemporaries, engaged in their daily scholarly pursuits.

For me, this is the solution to the “problem of Socrates”, as Nietzsche refers to it in *Twilight of the Idols*. His mode of speech, his “truth game”, referred to as “dialectics” was in fact a comic genre, representing a comic, care-free mode of speech, the comic double of the more serious parts of Plato’s writings, most of which are now lost to us. For some reason beyond our knowledge, his comical, “literary”, less “serious” works survived, with Socrates figuring as a buffoon-like hero, conducting gay dialectical experiments by testing multiple conceptual options, although later on the dialogues become more and more serious. And even the earlier “Socratic” dialogues contain some hints pointing to the existence of a more serious and apodictic forms of

discourse, another genre in which Socrates is no longer needed, although his basic mood will still somehow be present there as well.

But may it not be the case that Plato, building on the shoulders of laughter as it were, subsequently reduced Socrates to a mere prelude (a form of intellectual parricide), presenting the dialogues as a comical, impious, jocular propaedeutic intro to his work, preparing us for something else, namely Plato's etatistic truth regime? This would imply that Socratic laughter actually became the victim of a strategy of containment or compartmentalisation. In those days, serious discourse was often flanked by a comic, parodical double, often provided by the author himself – a procedure quite common in ancient literature, and explicitly endorsed by Socrates in the *Symposium*. According to Bakhtin, there never was an official genre that did not have its parodic-travesty double, its comic counterpart. The most famous example was the so-called “fourth” drama, the satyr-play that followed the tragic trilogy.<sup>94</sup> All tragedians were writers of satyr-plays as well and Aeschylus (the most serious and pious of them all) was considered the greatest master of comedy (1988, p. 54). Homer himself was credited with writing a comic work now lost. Official discourse was always accompanied with “corrective laughter” (p. 55, p. 59), revealing its limitations and insufficiencies.

Therefore, although the comic features Socratic dialectics can hardly escape us,<sup>95</sup> Plato's appreciation of the significance of laughter may have differed considerably from that of his teacher. Rather than “immortalizing” Socrates (by portraying his comical talents) Plato eventually aims to replace his jocular performance with “true” philosophy, so that the impious, plebeian rogue (Socrates) has to give way in the end to the guardians of a new Master's discourse (inaugurated by Plato). In fact, this is how the Plato dialogues are composed. At first the reader's attention is completely absorbed by Socrates' wit, but eventually he becomes fed up with it, and it is at this point that the comic dialogue suffers an intrusion and is interrupted or even overwhelmed by seriousness, with the implication that eventually gay contest and jolly witticisms are to be replaced by serious monologue.<sup>96</sup> At that point the reader is already entering another genre: serious philosophical discourse – *comoedia finita est; non ridere, sed intelligere*. In defiance of Socrates' own recognition of the truth of laughter, the Socratic dialogues are preparing us for a more serious mode of speech.

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<sup>94</sup> Unlike ‘dogmatic’ seriousness, tragedy does not fear laughter and parody and even demands it as a corrective and complement (Bakhtin 1968, p. 121).

<sup>95</sup> A perfect artistic example of a neo-classicist, tragic understanding of Socrates, as articulated by Hegel and others, is the French painter David's *Death of Socrates*, a painting whose figures are ‘as solid – and as immobile – as statues’ (Janson 1962/1986, p. 597). Nobody laughs. Whereas the Socratic dialogue as a ‘serio-comic’ genre aimed at familiarizing Socrates, later on it became pacified and eclipsed, in spite of the atmosphere of jolly relativity conveyed by the dialogues, by seriousness.

<sup>96</sup> It has often been remarked that Plato's later dialogues are already monologues rather than dialogues since real conversation is lacking and the dialogical structure of questions and answers has become artificial, superfluous and tedious.

Meanwhile, it is astonishing that Plato (like Aeschylus) excelled in a literary genre he himself must have considered to be of secondary importance.

But given this strategy of rectification, are we justified in relying on Plato's portrayal of Socrates to such an extent? Apparently, Plato used his master as a means for achieving a philosophical goal which the real Socrates did not completely share. To address this question, I suggest an exercise in triangulation, approaching the issue from multiple perspectives by using different genres. In addition to Plato's dialogues as our initial source, we have two other sources at our disposal: Aristophanes and Xenophon. From a philosophical point of view, however, Xenophon seems to lack added value. In his unimaginative narrative he apparently failed to understand his teacher. As Kierkegaard (1989) phrased it, he depicted him as a good-natured, garrulous, droll character, someone who did not stand in anyone's way and uttered sheer nonsense. In his effort to show what a scandalous injustice it was for the Athenians to condemn him to death, Xenophon eliminated everything that was dangerous, controversial or embarrassing in him, thereby reducing him to insignificance. If Xenophon's understanding of Socrates is correct, Kierkegaard claims, the people of Athens probably wanted to get rid of him because he bored them.

Whereas Xenophon seems inadequate as a source, Aristophanes definitely seems more promising. His play (*The Clouds*) abounds in parody. But in accordance with the logic of laughter, if Socrates' actual performance is exaggerated (using exaggeration as a comic device for parodying him), then precisely this form of laughter may offer a magnifying glass which allows us to achieve a higher level of resolution so to speak.

The play's protagonist is a "stupid country yokel" called Strepsiades who grew up in a rural area but married a woman from Athens. He comes to Socrates in order to be educated, but soon he proves himself incapable of being refurbished. Moreover, whereas Socrates' dialectics preferably deals with scholarly items and abstract concepts, Strepsiades has something definite and ordinary in mind: he wants to learn the "new" logic taught by Socrates in order to rid himself of his creditors. This "new" logic is presented as a parody of logic proper, a rhetorical device that can be applied to make the wrong seem right. As we are predominantly interested in education and research, we will read this comedy from a tilted (oblique) perspective, focussing on the tools and devices used by Socrates to perform his enquiries and to educate his students. In other words, we are not primarily interested in the comic tale (the frontstage of the play) as such, but in the setting, the chronotope, as Bakhtin calls it: Socrates school, his *φροντιστήριον*, translated as "thinkery" or "think-shop" (i.e. conceptual workshop): the locality where Socrates conducts his teaching and performs his logical experiments.

When his spoiled son Pheidippides refuses to take the medicine his father prescribes for him (to make him change his habits), namely education (because Pheidippides regards philosophers as "imposters"), Strepsiades decides to enter the little gate into Socrates's think-shop himself (which is already part of the comedy, of

course: an elderly, uneducated man entering an establishment which is designed for quick-minded, urban adolescents). The phrase “imposters” indicates that science wars like the one unleashed by Sokal and Bricmont (1998) already raged in ancient Athens. By submitting a fake article to a journal in order to see how the journal would respond (whether the article would be taken seriously) Sokal (1996) conducted an experiment similar perhaps to the comic experiment conducted here by Aristophanes: what would happen if an old fool enters the φροντιστήριον, Socrates’ dialectical laboratory, how will this novice react to the “fashionable nonsense” to which he is exposed, for Aristophanes has designed his polemical drama, his comic trap, to demonstrate precisely this: that Socratic dialectics is nothing but fashionable nonsense.

When Strepsiades knocks on the door, he disturbs a student, so that the latter’s conceptual experiment or mental contraption miscarries. Although it is against the rule to inform outsiders about the research that is being conducted, the student explains that Socrates and his team are currently spending their time on insect anatomy (measuring the size of fleas and gnats with the help of melted wax). He also informs the elderly visitor that during the night, Socrates himself had been investigating the lunar orbit until a lizard befouled his eye. Such stories are reminiscent perhaps of the stories told by Swift in the context of the *Voyage to Laputa*, in which he tries to ridicule the type of research conducted by the budding Royal Academy of Science. When entering the think-shop, Strepsiades notices a group of students in grotesque postures who are likewise studying astronomy and geography, while Socrates himself uses a contrivance (a basket) to contemplate the sun. He is described as a bald and barefoot fool who takes abuse lightly and always remains self-confident. Strepsiades tells him that he “wants to learn to speak”, that he desires to learn that “other” logic that will supply him with casuistry, subtleties and circumlocutions, so that he may win the case when he is summoned to court. Socrates subjects him to a quick assessment (an intake as it were) to decide what kind of curriculum (what kind of “intellectual artillery”) should be brought to bear upon this candidate. But he soon concludes that Strepsiades is unable to learn anything and therefore advises him to send him his son instead.

The play abounds in buffoonish knavery, slapstick jugglery and practical jokes, as well as in references to bellies, dicks and paunches, and is comical par excellence. Kierkegaard refers to this play as “parodical” and “truly comic”: a “parodying shadow” (p. 145) of what Socrates’ actual practice must have been like. As was already pointed out before, for Kierkegaard the comical makes a situation intelligible via exaggeration. According to Kierkegaard, Aristophanes uses parody as a device in order to understand the new “principle” represented by Socrates. The actual Socrates was an “eccentric” no doubt, but he now becomes a truly comic figure, a target for laughter insofar as Aristophanes sees in him a protagonist of the new principle of subjectivity, threatening ancient Greek culture with destruction.

Therefore, *The Clouds* parodies a practice (Socratic dialectics) which in itself is already thoroughly parodical. While Socrates (with his practice of questioning) treats

his interlocutors as epistemological case histories, in *The Clouds* Socrates himself becomes an epistemological case history. The question addressed by Aristophanes is: what kind of knowledge does this think-shop produce? And he examines the practices and products of this think-shop by parodying them, using the magnifying-glass of laughter as his device, much like Nietzsche used a conceptual version of a physician's reflex hammer to examine the conceptual and discursive condition of texts.

But Socrates himself is doing something similar as well. We see Socrates at work: conducting research, supervising students (who are practicing astronomy and geometry) until a new candidate enters the scene. Socrates does an intake, puts him to the test: all this must have been normal practice, but the parody is that these questions and tests are applied to a buffoon, resulting in a parodical version of what is normally taking place in Socrates' φροντιστήριο. Yet, while Aristophanes desperately tries to expose Socrates as an imposter, as a by-product he nonetheless provides us with something valuable, namely a lively, contemporary account of dialectics *in practice*. Aristophanes may perhaps have drawn on personal experience, may have entered the narrow gate himself one day: he is our guide. The exaggeration is a magnifying glass, allowing us to peer into a laboratory which otherwise would only be accessible via Plato's dialogues (which increasingly reflect the research and teaching as conducted at Plato's own Academia, rather than the original Socratic version).

The framing of the question usually is how to retrieve the true Socrates, by-passing Aristophanes distortions, building on the supposition that laughter blurs the medium. How can we restore serious dialectics through comedy as a disproportional, deceptive intermediary? But taking laughter seriously means that we no longer see it as something which stands in our way or blurs our view. Rather, via exaggeration, something becomes visible which otherwise would fall victim to academic forgetfulness. In other words, Aristophanes portrayal reveals a basic truth. Yes, there is something irresistibly funny in climbing into a basket to observe the sun, or in staring at the moon all night. And yes, there is something ridiculous in studying grammar, because we already know the difference between masculine and feminine nouns, don't we, we use this knowledge every day: "STREPSIADES: why study what everyone already knows"; "SOCRATES: Why indeed?"

This is the morale. Yes, it does seem laughable to waste your days studying the sun, to spend your nights observing the moon, or to study grammar, or to trawl through philosophical libraries in search of concepts, yes there is something profoundly laughable about research, and yet it is the road to truth. Research as practiced in Socrates' think-shop is hilarious in a very profound way, but science and scholarship always are, and we need the magnifying-glass of Aristophanes to retrieve this basic truth. Socrates and his students are fully aware of the fact that they are making fools of themselves, that outsiders laugh at their exercises and experiments, but once you have entered the φροντιστήριο through the narrow gate you become exposed to and infected by the virus of research. Once you are called in, it becomes your vocation, until you experience your moment of divine madness. Laughter is not a

preparatory prologue to science: science *is* laughable, scientists (with their concepts, contraptions and contrivances) *are* laughable, and yet they are on the road to knowledge. It is by pursuing this high-spirited practice called science that knowledge is produced. Science is always *fröhliche Wissenschaft*, and every scientist, once in a while at least, will be aware of the absurdity of spending the best years of his or her life in laboratories or libraries, to check or replicate results the relevance of which may be definitely incomprehensible to outsiders. Yes, it is absolutely laughable to embark on an ocean voyage to the Dutch Indies in 1887 to search for the “missing link”, as Eugène Dubois once did, who discovered his *Pithecanthropus erectus* (Home erectus) skull on Java in 1891, something which seemed highly improbable or even “nearly impossible” (Shipman 2010, p. 1).<sup>97</sup> Indeed, the story of the Dutch anatomist who travelled to Indonesia to begin his clue-less digging for the missing link (until he, incredibly, succeeded) was certainly “a quixotic bid” (Papagianni & Morse, 2015). But Dubois laughed at all his sceptics and critics and unearthed his now famous skull, which became a reference point for paleo-anthropology ever since. As is indicated by *The Clouds*, moreover, it is not as detrimental as it may seem for a philosopher to be accused of being an imposter. What philosophers are exactly doing when they claim to do research and why, remains difficult to fathom for outsiders up to this day. And there is something comical in the fact that, while “fabrication” is generally considered a form of misconduct, *all scientific facts are fabricated* (in laboratories or otherwise), as indicated by the etymology of the word “fact” (which comes from *facere*: to fabricate).

Now that we have learned these lessons from ancient comedy, we may return to the way in which Socrates is presented to us by Plato. The basic objective of my rereading is to expose the comical in places where one perhaps would not suspect it, and to reveal the extent to which Socrates’ apparently serious discourse is actually comical. Of course, also in the case of Plato one may question the relationship between the “Platonic” and the “actual” Socrates: what belongs to Socrates and what belongs to Plato? Knowing that the early, “narrative” dialogues (*Apology*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo* and *Protagoras*) are generally considered to more “Socratic”: they begin with an apparently trivial, every-day situation, pay much attention to locality and circumstances, contain genuine dialogues, and end without a clear conclusion.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, these narrative dialogues seem to provide us with a relatively trustworthy impression of what actual Socratic practice must have been like.

But the key issue here is not to what extent Plato provides us with a trustworthy picture of the “real” Socrates. Rather, the key issue here is that scholarly inquiry (raising questions about things we normally take for granted) is inherently comical, so that the experience of laughter allows us to problematize what is generally regarded as obvious, thereby making research as a vocation possible. Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*,

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<sup>97</sup> ‘The carnival attitude ... is hostile to any final ending, for every ending is merely a new beginning’ (Bakhtin 1968, p. 138).



composed by one of the most prominent and lucid scholar of his era, has no other objective than to disclose the absurdity of all scholarly pursuits, – and yet they lead to knowledge. *Protagoras* counts as Plato’s most remarkable achievement from a literary point of view. Therefore, I will discuss the parody contained in it, before attempting a final consideration of “the problem of Socrates”.<sup>98</sup>

### 3. The absurd couple and the ill-mannered questioner

From a Bakhtinian perspective *Protagoras* is a dialogue of special interest. Interestingly, in the introduction to his translation, W.K.C. Guthrie (1956) indicates that, although the dialogue is second to none in giving a picture of Greek life, the reader interested in Plato’s philosophy would do well to pass over a substantial part of it, up to the discussion about pleasure and pain “when Socrates begins to speak in earnest”. In my rereading of *Protagoras* I will emphasize, however, that the preceding part may actually be the most important one, philosophically speaking, while it is highly questionable whether, in the discussion on pleasure and pain, Socrates really speaks in earnest. Even his apparently “serious” discourse abounds in comic ambiguities. Even serious research remains tainted by laughter, as we have seen.

From the very beginning it is clear that the dialogue conveys a gay and carefree mood. Note the opening line: “Where have you come from, Socrates? No doubt from pursuit of the captivating Alcibiades” – a conjecture which happens to be true. The dialogue is, as Guthrie pointed out, “a little comedy. Plato is amusing himself, laughing at everyone, including his beloved master”. For example, Plato draws attention to Socrates’ tiresome passion for verbal distinctions, as well as to the fact that, at least to a skilled sophist like Protagoras, not all of his arguments are as valid and convincing as is sometimes suggested – unless we discern the inherent connection with laughter. The main significance of *Protagoras*, however, revolves around the role of laughter in the search for truth.

Like *Symposium*, *Protagoras* includes a comic “doorway scene” – one of the stock ingredients of Socratic comedy.<sup>99</sup> Having reached the doorway of the house where Protagoras is staying, Socrates and his companion just stand there for a while and continue a discussion which had arisen between them on the way. When the porter finally opens the door and discovers them, he cries: “Ha, sophists!”. The subsequent description of the conversations that take place inside is again remarkably comical. It

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<sup>98</sup> Although the first book of *Republic* is not discussed here at length, its share of gaiety and merriment is considerable and of a parodical nature. The dialogue starts in a cheerful mood, with Socrates returning from a religious festival that included an all-night carnival. And in his dialogue with Thrasymachos, Socrates employs in a comical and parodical manner the official conventions of judicial discourse in order to mock and annoy his (Sarcastic) interlocutor.

<sup>99</sup> As Bakhtin points out: the threshold dialogue or *Schwellendialog* as a generic element was quite common in the serio-comic genres of ancient Greece (1973, p. 91, p. 95).

confirms Plato's excellence in the particular genre to which the dialogue belongs, his peculiar, philosophical version of the comedy of manners.

Protagoras boldly declares himself a sophist. The subject of his teaching is the proper care of personal affairs so that the pupil may learn how to best manage his own household as well as the state's affairs, and eventually may become a prominent person in the city, both as a speaker and as a man of action. This confession immediately provokes a discussion between Socrates and Protagoras as to whether virtue can be taught at all. Challenged by Socrates to demonstrate that virtue can be taught, Protagoras first decides to tell a story rather than give a reasoned argument. To secure the survival of the human race, the gods bestowed respect for others and a sense of justice on all human beings; for without those civil virtues a city cannot exist. A human being cannot exist without some share in justice, or he would not be human at all. Still, justice and moderation are not acquired automatically but through care and instruction and, if necessary, through correction and punishment until the individual is reformed into a virtuous citizen. If a state is to exist at all, then there should be no one who is a layman with respect to virtue.

Protagoras' speech is a perfect and elegant example of sophist rhetoric. Socrates' subsequent intervention aims at deconstructing his seemingly flawless and convincing speech by asking a series of questions intended to cause embarrassment and doubt. This involves, among other things, a not so very interesting debate on the forms and rules of the subsequent discussion itself. Furthermore, unlike other more complacent dialogues, Socrates' opponent is shown to have the better reason a number of times and Socrates not only occasionally appears to be advocating invalid ideas, but to do so in a most tedious and tiresome manner.<sup>100</sup> For example, while discussing courage and confidence, at a certain point Protagoras rightly claims that Socrates is being unfair: "No, Socrates, he said. You have not remembered rightly what I said in my reply. When you asked me whether the courageous are confident, I agreed, but I was not asked whether the confident are also courageous..." (p. 342).

The discussion also includes a careful analysis of one of Simonides' poems, but Socrates interrupts it because a conversation about poetry reminds him too much of wine parties. He claims to prefer sober discussion where each of the participants takes his turn to speak or listen – "even if the drinking is really heavy" (p. 340), remaining aware of the fact that philosophical truth was originally (that is, genealogically) connected with ancient Greek drinking-bouts. Furthermore, the participants occasionally mock, mimic and parody each other's speech – "Let us, he [Protagoras] replied, as you are fond of saying yourself, investigate the question..."

At a certain point, however, the discussion, and notably Socrates' part in it, becomes remarkably tedious and laborious. Socrates himself recognizes this – "'Now my good people', I went on, 'if you ask me what is the point of all this rigmarole, I

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<sup>100</sup> Kierkegaard points out that Protagoras ends with 'the curious turn that Socrates defends what he had wanted to attack and Protagoras attacks what he had wanted to defend'. As far as its philosophical content was concerned, he considered the whole dialogue to be ridiculous.

beg your indulgence. It isn't easy to explain the real meaning of what you call "being overcome by pleasure"..." (p. 346). Notwithstanding his appeal to indulgence, in the subsequent discourse Socrates continues to switch between seriousness and ridicule. Moreover, laughter becomes Socrates' main argument: "This position makes your argument ridiculous" (p. 346); "I fear that if our questioner is ill-mannered, he will laugh and retort: "What ridiculous nonsense"" (p. 346); "If we had answered you straight off that it is ignorance, you would have laughed at us, but if you laugh at us now, you will be laughing at yourself as well" (p. 348); "Prodicus laughed and assented, and so did the others" (p. 348). Laughter holds as a refutation, although it may function as an expression of consent as well.

It is the reference to the imaginary "ill-mannered questioner" just mentioned that seems particularly significant in this respect. Socrates is perfectly aware of the ambiguous nature of his discourse: both serious and ridiculous. He is aware that, to a sober-minded spectator, unimpeded by the demands of politeness, or by the demands of the genre, his line of argument would be considered ridiculous. There is something fundamentally comical about it, or, in other words, there appears to be a basic connection between dialectics and laughter. Even the dialogue's philosophical "nucleus" is permeated by laughter, by the carnival attitude to the world. Nothing is self-evident or reliable – that is the gay and liberating truth of Socratic dialectics. The importance of laughter is confirmed in the final passage:

It seems to me that the present outcome of our talk is pointing at us, like a human adversary, the finger of accusation and scorn. If it had a voice it would say: "What an absurd pair you are, Socrates and Protagoras" (p. 351).

Like the "ill-mannered questioner", this "human adversary" reminds us of the laughing chorus of ancient popular culture mentioned by Bakhtin, and Socrates is aware that his discourse is open to ridicule; that dialectical disputes retain something of the gay and festive spirit of laughter that guided ancient prandial ceremonies. Taking the floor means taking the risk of being ridiculed, for nothing is reliable or stable. Moreover, laughter has the final say: "What an absurd pair you are". This does not imply the futility of all philosophical debate, for this would be a merely negative and cynical conclusion. Rather it conveys a basic insight regarding the human quest for truth. The Socratic truth game is agonistic. No discursive option can be considered beyond contestation once and for all. What is to be feared is not so much inconsistency as ridicule; and yet, ridicule seems inevitable.

Although often concealed by rhetoric and rationalism, the vulnerability of human discourse is finally revealed by laughter. Parody or gay laughter is not simply a rhetorical device but the basic mood in which the dialogue is written. Its basic purpose is to expose the ridiculous nature of the quest for truth. The "human adversary" reproaching them is a comical rather than a serious figure, and the apparent scorn is nullified by the mood of laughter to which it adheres. It contains both an element of verbal abuse and an element of praise. To borrow a phrase from Bakhtin: the abusive

description of Socrates and Protagoras as an “absurd pair” is basically praiseful abuse, a stock element of all the genres of laughter. Rather than a serious reproach, it is an affirmation of a gay truth, indicating the limits of seriousness as they are recognized by the truly wise. Dialectical logic is “uncrowned” by gay laughter, and the rest is merriment.

*Protagoras* reveals Socrates’ reason for not wanting to be considered a sophist. To begin with, the sophists present their speeches as belonging to a serious genre and try to immunize it against the criticism of laughter by means of lofty rhetoric and verbal decorum. Socrates and the sophists exemplify incompatible verbal practices that can in no way live in peace and quiet with each other. Furthermore, although at first sight the sophists seem to opt for a bottom-up approach, educating the young and talented, etatism (a civil service job) is the goal and, should the individual offer serious resistance to the moral transformation required by the state, he must be reformed by force. In the final section of this chapter I will indicate how this differs from Socrates’ basic objective. Before passing a “final” ethical judgement on Socrates, however, let me once again address the question on what kind of laughter he relies.

The kind of laughter displayed by Socrates in *Protagoras* and other “Socratic” dialogues would not meet the criteria of laughter mentioned by Aristotle as befitting a gentleman. In his *Art of Rhetoric* he points out that in the course of a debate one may try to confound one’s opponent’s earnest with jest and his jest with earnest (1926/1959, III 18:7). Yet he adds that, in certain chapters of his *Poetics* that are lost to us, it is explained what kinds of jest there are and which of them can be considered becoming a gentleman. According to Aristotle, irony is gentlemanly while buffoonery (βωμολοχία) is not.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considers jest to be part of the kind of playful conversation that is becoming to a virtuous gentleman, that is, someone who is gifted with a sense of propriety (1926/1982, IV 8:1-11). Those who go to excess in ridicule, however, are buffoons and vulgar fellows who itch to have their jokes at all costs and are more concerned to raise a laugh than to keep within the bounds of decorum. The gentleman will go for wittiness or “urbanity” (εὐτραπελία), which is the proper middle position between dullness and ridicule. A gentleman is witty and versatile, but as most men are only too fond of fun and raillery, even buffoons are often called witty and pass for clever fellows; though for Aristotle it is clear wit is widely different from buffoonery. The middle disposition is further characterized by tact, saying only the sort of things that are suitable to a virtuous gentleman (IV 8:4-7). Aristotle adds that the difference between urbanity (εὐτραπελία) and buffoonery (βωμολοχία) may be clarified by the comparison of the old and modern comedies: “The earliest dramatists found their fun in obscenity; the moderns prefer innuendo, which marks a great advance in decorum.” The cultivated, urban gentleman is tactful or witty, the buffoon is someone who cannot resist a joke; he will not keep his tongue if he can raise a laugh, and will say things a man of refinement would never say.

Now although it would be somewhat inordinate to consider Socrates’ laughter

vulgar in the sense of being “obscene”, his plebeian laughter nonetheless seems much closer to that of the “old comedy” than the wit of Aristotle’s gentleman. If Aristotle’s criteria are accepted, the kind of laughter conveyed by Socrates in the Socratic dialogues must be considered as too buffoon-like and excessive to pass for urbanity. Perhaps we should say that, in the gay and playful atmosphere of ancient Athens, where matter for ridicule was “always ready at hand”, Socrates developed a practice which is corrected by Aristotle, who wants to make philosophy respectable enough to even enter a court.

Hegel not only considers Socrates’ performance as tragic rather than comic, as we have seen, but also refers to him as a perfect example of the Attic virtue of urbanity – “ein Beispiel der ausgearbeitetsten attischen Urbanität” (1971, p. 454). Socrates is depicted by Hegel as someone who is vivid as well as flexible, loquacious as well as sensible in conversation. In short, he considers Socrates a true gentleman in the Aristotelian sense of the term. In Hegel’s version, the comic Silenus of the *Symposium* is transfigured into a classic (apollonian) statue. Everything comic and grotesque is sublated into the sublime – exterior (the phenomena of comedy) gives way to nucleus (the noumenal logic). Indeed, Hegel refers to Socrates’ “immense stature”, mentioning him and Pericles in one breath as “plastic individuals”, as perfect exemplifications of the ancient Greek practice of self-edification (Zwart 1997). Like Pericles, Hegel claims, Socrates was one of those lofty Greek individuals who transfigured themselves into works of art by means of relentless moral exercise.<sup>101</sup> Subsequently, however, Hegel points out that, according to Plutarch, Pericles ceased to laugh ever since he became involved in politics. Indeed, Plutarch informs us that not only did Pericles have “a spirit that was solemn and a discourse that was lofty and free from plebeian and reckless effrontery”, but also that he had “a composure of countenance that never relaxed into laughter” (Pericles, 5; 1958, p. 13). According to the poet Ion, moreover, Pericles even displayed a presumptuous and arrogant manner of address, containing a good deal of disdain and contempt for others, but Plutarch hastens to add that, much like the tragic tetralogy was in need of a comic satyr-play, human virtue needed a farcical appendage as well. Pericles’ habit to avoid all forms of conviviality and familiar intercourse, and to withdraw into ascetic grandeur and turgid diction, testified of his nobility, but his policy of supplying the Athenian populace with a great number of official festivals and processions should be interpreted as an etatistic strategy of encroaching upon popular festive existence in order to diminish the general idleness of Athenian city life. By mentioning Pericles and Socrates in one and the same breath, Hegel’s neo-classical image of Socrates resembles the painting by David (mentioned above), but a close rereading reveals

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101 ‘Er [Socrates] steht vor uns ... als eine von jenen großen plastischen Naturen (Individuen) ... wie wir sie in jener Zeit zu sehen gewohnt sind, - als ein vollendetes klassisches Kunstwerk, das sich selbst zu dieser Höhe gebracht hat... Das höchste plastische Individuum ... ist Perikles, und um ihn, gleich Sternen, Sophokles, Thukyrides, Sokrates, usw.’ (1971, p. 452).

that, while Pericles exemplified the grand and lofty aspects of ancient Athens, Socrates constituted his comic double.

Yet, even Hegel is ambivalent when it comes to judging Socrates, for the gay “exterior” is not abolished completely in his account. In the case of Socrates, Hegel tells us, philosophy did not completely withdraw from the toils and pleasures of daily life (which was the subject matter of comedy), but flourished while remaining closely connected to urban existence. His philosophy exemplified the Athenian way of life, which basically consisted of idleness and endless conversation, lingering on the market-square; a way of life, Hegel hastens to add, that would nowadays be considered inappropriate and unbecoming. Socrates, however, strolled along and passed his time with nothing on his mind but verbal entertainment. His jest exemplified Greek gaiety, the gay and merry state of mind, mimicking the eternal laughter of the gods and incompatible with modern irony.<sup>102</sup> Hegel even admits that, quite unlike Pericles’ lofty prose, Socratic seriousness is often tedious and boring (p. 464). Socrates, he claims, treated moral philosophy in an outspokenly popular manner and his final performance, his *Apology*, was outright “popular philosophy” – “Die letzte Unterredung des Sokrates ist Populärphilosophie” (p. 511). Socrates’ jest, moreover, was *truly comical* instead of being merely funny because it revealed the inner conflicts of ancient moral life (p. 483).

In short, Hegel agrees that Socratic laughter was carefree and ludic rather than ironic. His carefree laughter revealed that the truly serious, tragic form of life which had flourished in ancient Athens for decades (and which had been idealized by ancient tragedy) had finally outlived itself, while the new seriousness of sophistic discourse could not avert the imminent transformation of moral life. After the unrivalled tetralogies of ancient tragedy (the artistic achievements of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides), Attic life was in need of more satyr-play. Ancient moral existence was suffering from a general uneasiness, was awaiting a new kind of hero to enter the stage, not a tragic but a comic one. Someone who, by exposing the turgid nature of sophistic discourse through laughter, would not only reveal the hidden inner conflicts of moral life (laughter’s negative aspect), but would at the same time present ancient Athens with a moral solution: laughter’s positive aspect, allowing moral life to reinvent itself under unprecedented circumstances and to flourish once again.

#### 4. The problem of Socrates

Do these considerations enable a comprehensive judgement regarding “the problem of Socrates”? Any effort to judge Socrates seems hampered by the fact that he is always presented to us by someone else, giving rise to the inclination to distinguish between the “true” Socrates (as he emerges in the apparently more vivid and life-like

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<sup>102</sup> ‘Von dieser Ironie unserer Zeit ist die Ironie des Sokrates weit entfernt’ (1971, p. 461).

sections of the dialogues) and the subsequent rectifications and additions by Plato. Some dialogues seem more truly “Socratic” than others, and it is clear that we have been focussing on the more Socratic ones: *Apology*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo* and *Protagoras*, clarifying some of their ambiguities with the help of ancient popular and comical genres on which these dialogues were apparently grafted. They constitute what Bakhtin refers to as the comic double accompanying more serious genres (such as philosophical lectures). Rather than being tragic itself, *Phaedo* parodies tragedy and its devices, in order to ridicule the tragic view of life. Yet, in Plato’s case, the genres of laughter eventually give way to a rationalistic, etatistic truth regime, bound to influence subsequent philosophical thought decisively at the expense of laughter, resulting in forgetfulness of the truth of laughter.

From an agonistic perspective, the dialogues convey a struggle between comical and serious, popular and aristocratic forces at work, where Socrates represents the popular and comical and Plato the aristocratic and serious aspects. Whereas Plato eventually sides with etatism, Socrates remains a hero of laughter. It is Plato’s merit as a literary writer, however, that he retained the truly popular, truly comical aspects of Socrates’ performance, exemplifying the culture of true laughter and its positive, affirmative truth. Thanks to Plato’s literary gifts, gay and carefree Socratic laughter managed to retain its regenerative power and joyful tone until today.

The “problem of Socrates” can be defined as follows. Yes, he represented laughter, and dialectics initially was a comic genre, but at the same time Socrates apparently inaugurated a truth-regime which eventually resulted in the repression of laughter. His devices build on popular culture, convey an affirmation of bodily life, but Socrates apparently uses them to articulate a negative appreciation of bodily life, seeing life as a disease. From a Nietzschean perspective, dialectics eventually resulted in an ascetic sensibility from which Nietzsche tried to liberate philosophy again – by means of gay, affirmative science.

The relationship between laughter and rationality, between popular and official forms of truth remains questionable, I will argue, and can only be convincingly addressed by deepening our understanding of laughter (*γέλως*), not as a mere physiological phenomenon, but as a *Gesamphänomen*, a basic mood, giving rise to a truly *gelastic* philosophy, a philosophy of laughter, which transcends restrictive dichotomies, such as ridicule versus seriousness, and mind versus body. Yet, precisely from a gelastic perspective, Socrates’ downgrading of life seems questionable indeed. Let us reconsider it once more.

*Twilight of the Idols* contains an important series of aphorisms on Socrates, reconsidering his final words in *Phaedo* which continued to bother Nietzsche. Apparently Socrates was fed up with life.<sup>103</sup> This caused him to confirm the “truth”

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<sup>103</sup> According to Nietzsche, the two great judicial murders of history – the killing of Socrates and Jesus – were actually cases of suicide: both victims wanted to die and chose to die (*Human, All Too Human* II, ‘Mixed Opinions and Aphorisms’, § 94). Kierkegaard (1989) points out that, in the eyes of Socrates’, his death was far from tragic since he considered life insignificant, and

recognized and endorsed by the sages of all times: that life is insignificant, that it lacks true meaning and value. Now according to Nietzsche, this remarkable *consensus sapientium* concerning life must not be regarded as an indication that this value claim is true, but rather as an indication that the sages of all times share the same physiology. They are tired of living. Their judgement with regard to life is a symptom of physical decline. What about Socrates? According to Nietzsche, the problem of his plebeian descent<sup>104</sup> was aggravated by the fact that he was unattractive: to the Greek mind a sign of retarded physical development, and therefore a refutation in itself almost. In ancient Greece, this would have sufficed to explain why there is an aspect of exaggeration and caricature in everything Socrates says or does. He was a buffoon, but one who succeeded in having himself taken seriously – what happened?

At first, Nietzsche sees Socrates' irony as an expression of resentment of the rabble against the higher strata of society, by excelling in a truth game which aristocrats will consider beneath their standing (§ 7). On the other hand, his dialectics introduces an unprecedented form of ἀγών, stirring the ancient Greek lust for competition (§ 8). And yet, neither one of these judgements grasps the quintessence of Socrates' performance. Socrates really seemed to have had a remarkably clear sense of what was actually happening at that time: the decline of ancient Greek culture, a process of which he himself was merely a symptom. During this situation of moral crisis, this moral intermezzo, human drives were in danger of becoming excessive and regressive and desperately needed a new "tyranny", a new form of organization on behalf of self-preservation, and Socrates personified a way out: an unprecedented form of moral subjectivity – a possible escape from anarchy. Human subjectivity was in danger of being overwhelmed by the tyranny of the Dionysian, and desperately in need of an antidote, such as the treatment recommended by Socrates, which consisted of constituting an unprecedented kind of moral subjectivity. Socrates was the one who, in the face of an advancing anarchy, succeeded in regaining mastery over himself. His case responded to a general experience of malaise and distress. In view of the widespread loss of self-mastery, his dialectics represented a cure (§ 9). He was the gay physician of post-traditional Greek culture.

But, having reached this lucid conclusion, Nietzsche finds it difficult to hold his grounds and, after rereading *Phaedo*, he starts wavering again. Perhaps Socrates was actually a symptomatic intensification of the decline, rather than a cure (§ 11), an illness rather than a return to health. Life is an illness, Socrates was fed up with it, and wanted to die – "Death is the physician we are in need of, not Socrates": those were his final words. Nietzsche's basic strategy consists of exploring several possible interpretations, considering Socrates both as a pessimist and as an optimist, both as a personification of the truth of laughter and as a spokesman of rationalisation. By

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he even felt bored by it and doubted whether death really constituted an evil. These tragedies were only tragic in the eyes of the beholders.

<sup>104</sup> 'Sokrates gehörte, seiner Herkunft nach, zum niedersten Volk: Sokrates war Pöbel' (*Twilight of the Idols*, § 3).



staying firmly on the trail of gelastic philosophy, however, a more consistent interpretation is possible. If we argue, for instance, that (a) disease is a physiological process (from infection via proliferation and crisis up to recovery), while (b) life is a physiological process too, we may conclude (c) that, ergo, life is a disease; – there is humour involved in drawing such an analogy between two processes that initially seem to move in juxtaposed directions (either towards health or towards death), and its discursive key is not a negative one. Likewise, there is something profoundly witty in the fact that bioactive substances can be both remedy and poison, usually both, albeit depending on the dose, as the gay physician Paracelsus already argued: a gelastic insight which underlines the relativity of health and disease, thereby opening up new avenues for research. For Socrates, life, and this especially applies to intellectual life, to *vita contemplativa*, can be transferred from one generation of scholars to the next. This *vita contemplativa* is the “gift” (both remedy and infection) which Socrates bestows on his disciples. Laughter liberates from the fear of death to such an extent that gay dialectics (*fröhliche Dialektik*) may even see death in a positive light: passing the rod, transferring the *vita contemplativa*, with all its gelastic symptoms (its gelastic seizures and preoccupations) to the next generation of (laughable and laughing) scholars. Even death can be coped with in a high-spirited, jocular way: why should this entail a negative view on life as such, as Nietzsche mistakenly claims?

Yes, Athenian life was facing a crisis of decadence and decay, so that established morality and established modes of exercising power were losing credibility. Laughter not only revealed the breakdown of established morality, however, but also released and gave the floor to the omnipresent free-floating energy that allowed for experimentation, so that Athens as a polis became a moral test-bed where unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity could be tested and establish themselves. His remedy is a bottom-up solution, albeit in the context of a temporary interval, for new forms of etatism were about to seize control. In this respect, the fourth Century B.C. is similar in many respects to the sixteenth Century A.D., which also was a kind of interregnum, providing room for manoeuvre for moral and epistemological experimentation, as will be discussed in the next chapter, focussing on another highly ambiguous figure, another language genius of humble descent, namely Martin Luther. But before leaping from Socrates to Luther, another important epoch in the history of laughter, namely Hellenism, must be discussed, in the final section of this chapter.

## 5. Philosophies for sale

The Hellenistic period is a period of transition, paving the way for what were to become the so-called Middle Ages, a pejorative term that was coined because, during this period, philosophy and literature were of a more practical, moral and didactic nature, and marked by a tendency toward appropriating, re-working and absorbing

materials already available (Lehmann 1922): an artisanal approach to scholarship despised in modern times because of the egocentric emphasis on being original. From a parodical or gelastic perspective, however, this modern prejudice is highly problematic. Parody always interacts with the discourse of others, by definition, and precisely this interaction can be highly creative and revealing, whereas so-called original ideas will often prove highly *zeitgemäß*, reflecting the ideological *zeitgeist* (the moral, epistemological and political correctness) of the epoch. Parody starts from the awareness that we take the floor when others have already spoken and that the very floor on which we (as authors) position ourselves consists of the writings of others. We cannot claim to “own” ideas, for they are always already there. We would not be able to think or write at all in the absence of a discourse already established, a stream of ideas and signifiers already thriving, and to which we can only marginally contribute. We dwell in the folds and margins of a *λόγος* that always already pervades and pre-structures our world. This concept (that authors learn to read and write in a pre-existing world of ideas) constitutes the backdrop of Hellenistic and medieval discourse. Hellenistic and medieval thinkers are *scholars*: literati, gelastic readers.

A prominent spokesman of Hellenistic laughter was Lucian of Samosata (125-180 A.D.), greatly appreciated and relentlessly imitated by both Erasmus and Rabelais.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, their work conveys a profoundly Lucian mood (Robinson 1979). Lucian’s main genre, satirical dialogue, was a playful combination of several literary forms already existing. The philosophical dialogue had evolved into an all-too-serious genre, and Lucian aimed to retrieve its parodical, satirical and burlesque elements, its comical and popular sources. As he explains in one of his dialogues (*The Double Indictment*) he aimed to revivify this all too respectable genre by blending comical elements with it. In a court case, “dialogue” now claims to have been wronged and maltreated, i.e. to have been degraded to the comical, the average. In other words, “dialogue” blames Lucian for ridiculing what had managed to become lofty and serious.

Lucian transposes the Socratic dialogues into an outright comic mode of speech. The typical scenes utilized by Lucian (the comic banquet, the mock trial, the assembly of the gods, etc.) are second hand. Furthermore, like in Molière, for instance, scenes, settings, characters and anecdotes tend to recur in subsequent works. They constitute the building blocks of his writings. To expose the protagonist as a parvenu, an effeminate debauchee or as an ignoramus are among his favourite techniques of vilification (Robinson 1979, p. 19). In *Lexiphanes* (a title which refers to the pretentious use of words) the protagonist has just written a parody on *Symposium*: a challenge to the son of Ariston (i.e. Plato), and after dinner the scholars involved will take a post-prandial ambulation in the Lyceum. Plato’s dialogue is stripped of its philosophical content and reduced to its extraneous details, so that nothing serious is

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<sup>105</sup> Bakhtin, however, disliked him: ‘Lucian’s laughter is devoid of true gaiety’ (1968, p. 387). Unlike authors like Rabelais or Shakespeare, he claims, Lucian did not fully exploit and explore the comic potentials of the popular tradition on which he relied. Let’s wait and see.

said at all. Like all comic writers, Lucian is highly sensitive towards peculiarities of diction, dialect and tone of voice. His works abound in parodical devices such as comic exaggeration or the application of serious conventions to totally absurd topics.

One of his most prominent plays, widely read in the sixteenth century, is entitled *Philosophers for Sale* (Βίων Πρᾶσις, literally: [philosophical] lives for sale). It conveys a market-square atmosphere and diction. Zeus and Hermes are staged as selling philosophers (philosophical lifestyles) to the public, presenting their (often rather dubious or even deplorable) qualities in a loud voice. In the case of the Cynics, for instance, the buyer is told that he will be taught to consider marriage, children and native land sheer nonsense, to behave impudently in public, using the coarsest language, and to choose the most ridiculous ways of satisfying his lust – he is sold for two dimes. In this manner, all of the philosophical sects are ridiculed. Democritus is presented as someone who laughs incessantly at everything and everyone, who considers all human affairs laughable and claims that there is nothing serious in them. Everything is hollow mockery, a drift of atoms. And Socrates is presented as someone who is eager to associate with handsome lads, whereas Plato dwells in a city of his own making where the laws against adultery have been abolished. Epicures is presented as a pupil of laughing Democritus and the drunk Aristippus – who himself surpasses his teachers in impiety. As for Aristotle, reference is made to his remark that man is the only laughing living being, an insight which incites Hermes to conclude that the basic difference between humans and asses resides in the faculty of laughter. In short, the play is a parody on market-square advertisement where the salesmen, instead of boosting about their merchandise, admit and frankly deplore the poor condition and ridiculous content of their human commodity (an example of parodical reversal) with the possible exception of Aristotle who is able to survive Lucian's laughter and, in fact, sells for a rather good price – twenty minas.

In his subsequent play, the philosophers have returned from the underworld in order to come after Lucian with the intention of stoning him to death, for having vilified them in his dialogue, until his mockery convinces them that their followers really are as impudent as Lucian has presented them.

How to read this satire from a gelastic point of view? It is clear that philosophy (scholarship in general) is staged as something profoundly laughable. Philosophers from various schools are put up for sale far below the initial price. Obviously, the public does not see much value in their teachings. Laughter is triggered mainly by the complacency of the scholars involved and in their boundless mutual rivalry. Even when they are in the defensive, they continue to fight each other instead of realizing their common interests. In the perception of the bystanders, their views hardly represent any social relevance whatsoever. They suffer from ridiculous self-overestimation or self-inflation. But the most laughable aspect is that they all claim to speak the truth, while they are continuously contradicting each other, so that every philosophy seems to have its own conception of truth.

This means, however, that Lucian points to a very important tension, namely

between knowledge and truth. All philosophies claim to produce true knowledge, but this does not mean that they actually discern (let alone own) the truth. Laughter reveals that truth-seekers will never capture *the* truth once and for all, and that endless internal arguments are an inherent part of scholarship, an indispensable ingredient of practices of truth. Furthermore, academics today are still forced to sell their trade and tools, by submitting proposals to Calls (with something like a 10% chance of being funded), or to top journals with staggering rejection rates, or by advertising their programs on the competitive market for students. Against this backdrop, self-overestimation is an important requirement, for how to seduce scholars into wasting their lives on finding the truth if not for the illusion that their work will be of lasting value; that they (rather than others) will be among the elect and decidedly on the right track. The truth of laughter reveals some key dimensions of what it means to become enrolled in a scholarly curriculum, to endorse a scholarly vocation, as an “impossible profession”, while most outsiders would shy away from such a course no doubt. And still, these laughable pursuits will enrich the lives of those involved and put them on the hazardous road towards truth.

As indicated in the *Introduction*, this book is not at all an encyclopaedia of gelastic philosophy, but rather devoted to a limited number of case histories. A systematic gelastic genealogy would open-up copious archives, most of which are beyond the limited scope of this exploratory study. Take for instance religious figures like Saint Francis, challenging established morality by posing as God’s simpleton and fool, inaugurating a mendicant order whose members referred to themselves as *ioculatores Domini* (Bakhtin 1968, p. 57), while at the same time enlisting some of the greatest scholars of occidental intellectual history (Bonaventura, Roger Bacon, John Duns Scotus, etc.). Hopefully more case studies can be added in the future, especially concerning the so-called Middle Ages. For now, the next chapter entails a leap into the sixteenth century A.D.

## Chapter 4: Judging Luther

Aber wohin gerate ich mit meinem Geschwätz... (Luther)<sup>106</sup>

### 1. Preliminary remarks: the early sixteenth century as *ἀγών*

On the first page of his book on Luther and Kant, Bruno Bauch quotes Adolf von Harnack who claims that, whereas the teachings of the early church, notwithstanding their dogmatic character, still constitute an object for philosophical reflection, no true philosopher will be able to appreciate Luther.<sup>107</sup> Although Bauch shares Harnack's sense of embarrassment regarding Luther, he nevertheless argues that it is possible to separate the philosophical *content* from its disagreeable but residual *context*<sup>108</sup> – and this refers to things like: Luther's impulsive and violent religious drive, his aversion to logic and sound reasoning, his grobian sense of humour, and his lack of proper education ("Bildung" in the sense of urbanity). Quite at odds with the position of Harnack and Bauch, the basic objective of my rereading of Luther that his philosophical significance precisely resides in the "grobian", "residual" aspects of his achievement. But before turning to Luther himself, I will first posit him as a Renaissance figure, subsequently drawing attention to Nietzsche's judgement of him; much like how in the previous chapter I used Nietzsche's judgement of Socrates to develop my understanding of Socratic laughter.

Unlike those who (like Nietzsche) try to distinguish the Renaissance from the early Reformation by regarding them as two mutually inimical and basically incompatible historical events, I will rather point out what they have in common. In my view, the Renaissance should be considered a strategic, agonistic situation in which several discursive forces competed with one another, at times impeding and at times reinforcing one another. Three of the major forces to be distinguished are: (1) sixteenth century humanism, that is: the rereading and rediscovery of ancient literature on an unprecedented scale and with an unprecedented intensity and satisfaction; (2) the early Reformation: the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular, partly as an expression of resistance against the clergy and Rome; and (3) a discursive mode that evolved from certain late medieval tendencies: the literature of

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<sup>106</sup> 'What's the use of all this baloney?' 'Eine Predigt Martin Luthers, daß man Kinder zur Schule halten solle'. M. Luther. Werke, 15 (2), p. 521.

<sup>107</sup> 'Ein Philosoph vermag die Mittel aufzutreiben, um die Dogmen der griechischen Kirche tiefsinnig und weise zu finden; kein Philosoph aber ist im Stande, dem Glauben Luthers irgend welchen Geschmack abzugewinnen' (Bauch 1904, p.1).

<sup>108</sup> ...das philosophisch Bedeutsame herausarbeiten (p. 5).

parodical (also referred to as “grotesque” or “grobian”) laughter. Erasmus, Luther and Rabelais represent these forces in optima forma. Yet if we read their works more closely, they cannot be considered homogeneous bodies of writing either, but rather constitute strategic fields in their own right. In the writings of Erasmus, for example, although undeniably dominated by humanist objectives, laughter is abundantly present, although in his case grobianism is subdued and refined compared to the language of Luther and Rabelais. Likewise, although grobian and parodical laughter is quite prominent in Rabelais’s books, humanist and anti-clerical forces are at work as well. Finally, Luther’s writings constitute an irresistible mixture of theological seriousness and grobian laughter.

The position adopted by Luther towards late medieval (“gothic”) discourse is not as univocal as is sometimes suggested. Although the effort to distance himself from the medieval state of mind is quite apparent, discursive devices such as rhetorical exaggeration and folkish parody are still at work. Several basic ingredients of Luther’s theology are already present in medieval theological discourse and mysticism. Where to locate the discontinuity with what went on before? In this chapter, I will primarily focus on the continuity with the late medieval state of mind, notably the excessive reliance on laughter as an access to truth. For although Erasmus, Luther and Rabelais all had a significance and identity of their own, laughter constitutes the basic mood or state of mind which was present and recognizable in all of them, a general mood or ground which allowed their genres of writing to emerge. Neither Erasmus nor Luther can be fully appreciated if one neglects the basic mood of laughter that is apparent in their writings (in the case of Rabelais this is obvious of course). Thus the basic mood of laughter allows for the emergence of Renaissance discourse as an agonistic, strategic situation. Yet laughter does not provide a “ground” in the sense of constituting a stable principle or basic condition of unity. Rather, it is the source of the instability which opens up the world and characterizes early sixteenth Century discourse: a quasi-ground, temporarily impeding and contesting all efforts to establish a coherent and serious, overarching or foundational discourse. It is a source of disorder and confusion rather than a constructive, centripetal force, unlike, for example, the kind of rationality which subsequently came to constitute itself in the writings of Descartes and Kant, aimed at securing a stable and homogeneous discursive field, abolishing laughter.

The Renaissance (the early sixteenth century) as an epoch must be regarded a kind of discursive interregnum in which the basic mood of laughter temporarily prevented the establishment of discursive homogeneity until modern rationality and mainstream Protestantism finally achieved a decisive coup d’état, expelling the quasi-principle of laughter to the burlesque undercurrents of official discourse. Subsequently, Renaissance discourse becomes subjected to a systematic process of rectification and purification, with the banishment of laughter as its major objective. Erasmus is appreciated as a humanist, but the sensibilities of classicism and Enlightenment allow only a thoroughly adapted (anti-papal) Rabelais to enter the scholarly library. In the

case of Luther, his grobian laughter increasingly constitutes a source of embarrassment to his followers, who make every effort to separate “content” from “residue”, and serious theology (the serious aspect of his work) from its all-too-primitive discursive ambiance (Luther’s remarkably grobian mode of speech). This, however, has resulted in a profound distortion. My reading of Luther is therefore a *rereading*, an exercise in retrieval, aimed at revealing the philosophical significance of his irresistible laughter.

I already referred to Toulmin’s criticism of the standard account of modernity, contending that the ecclesiastical and ideological constraints imposed on public and scientific discourse in the seventeenth century were far more rigid than the ones in vogue during previous centuries. Toulmin refers basically to Renaissance writers like Erasmus and Montaigne, Shakespeare and Rabelais, but he hardly mentions their contemporary Luther. Is he a medieval relic, a spokesman of the Renaissance or an anticipation of seventeenth century rigidity and intolerance? In the case of Toulmin, the dividing line between Renaissance and Counter-Renaissance remains contestable. For instance, Toulmin refers to seventeenth century Catholic art as “histrionic and grotesque”, and as a stratagem to resist “the temptations to disbelief” (p. 54), but labels like “histrionic” and “grotesque” happen to be the very terms which I will use to outline the peculiarities of Luther’s linguistic style. The negative appreciation of the grotesque (which up to this day seems taken-for-granted) is part of neo-classical aesthetics. How to deal with the histrionic and grotesque features of Luther’s language? To address this question, I will submit samples taken from the immense bulk of his writing to a process of rereading – notably those parts of his oeuvre which are often seen as “residual” (“risidual”). Before giving the floor to Luther himself, however, I will address Nietzsche’s judgement of him, particularly some remarkable ambiguities or inconsistencies in this judgement, which my rereading aims to overcome.

## 2. Nietzsche’s judgement of Luther

Luther hat es schon gesagt, und besser als ich...<sup>109</sup>

Ich habe nie bis jetzt stärker meine innigste Abhängigkeit  
von dem Geiste Luthers gefühlt als jetzt...<sup>110</sup>

Although of Lutheran descent, Nietzsche’s judgement of Luther does not seem to be based on a thorough acquaintance with either his work or his life. References to Luther preferably address a limited set of telling anecdotes concerning his

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<sup>109</sup> ‘Luther already stated it, and better than I did...’ [Dawn of Day, § 262].

<sup>110</sup> ‘Never did I experience my intense dependence on Luther’s mind as much as I do now...’ [Letter to Erwin Rohde, 28 February 1875].

personality. As Nietzsche regarded a person's ideas as largely determined by his psychological and physiological constitution, the argument ad hominem was not something considered improper. On the contrary, meticulous historical or biographical verifications would reduce the poignancy of such intuitive assessments.<sup>111</sup> Most of Nietzsche's judgements of historical personalities were in fact ad hominem evaluations of a quasi-psychological and quasi-physiological nature (often based on anecdotal information) – with “resentment” and “vulgarity” as basic items on Nietzsche's “personality scale”.

Hirsch (1986) and others have pointed to the fact that, in the course of his writings, Nietzsche's appreciation of Luther suffered a remarkable shift. In his earliest writings, notably *The Birth of Tragedy*, Luther was associated with the Dionysian principle, with “drive”, “music” and “health”.<sup>112</sup> He emerged as a heroic figure, an intellectual Hercules who put an end to the *vita contemplativa* of medieval asceticism, a Nordic double of the heroes of the Italian Renaissance, a true protagonist of the German soul who could still be of considerable use in the struggle against romanticism and, much like Wagner, a prominent spokesman of German gaiety.<sup>113</sup> Underneath the “visible” aspect of German culture, Nietzsche suspected a more vital, healthy, age-old, popular force which, during the Reformation, emerged suddenly and vehemently from its abyss – an event personified by Luther.<sup>114</sup> He even refers to the Lutheran chorale as a truly “Dionysian call”.

Of course, Nietzsche recognized that such a picture did not correspond to Luther's own basic objectives. Therefore, a second, apparently incompatible element was added: Luther was basically a plebeian buffoon who inadvertently became a hero, and his heroism was at odds with the original intentions of his spiritual revolt. However, due to his insufficient understanding of the art of government (that is, of the techniques of exercising power) he foolishly crushed the basic conditions for what he had in fact wanted to support: Christianity. Indeed, as far as his intellectual talents were concerned, he was rather the opposite of Nietzsche's real heroes – the calculating and shrewd Renaissance politicians and popes, who were Luther's principal foes. For Nietzsche, Luther's rejection of the *vita contemplativa*, for instance, did not evolve out of a well-considered judgement, and even less out of dislike for Christianity as such, but rather out of his crude and lumpish “peasant” judgement concerning the lives of Saints.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Untimely Meditations I; Werke I, p. 254.

<sup>112</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 23; Cf. *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*, where Nietzsche refers to the “healthy” mind of Luther-the-miner's-son.

<sup>113</sup> Untimely Meditations IV.

<sup>114</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 23.

<sup>115</sup> *Dawn of Day*, § 88. In a famous letter to Brandes (20 November 1888) Nietzsche refers to the Renaissance pope Cesare Borgia as the summit of Renaissance laughter, the perfect reversal of Christianity (“Cesare Borgia als Papst – das wäre der Sinn der Renaissance, ihr eigentliches Symbol”). Is Luther, the Counter-Pope at Wittenberg, a rehabilitation of Christian seriousness,



Before long, however, a different picture of Luther emerges in Nietzsche's writings. Although he still considers him a plebeian buffoon, he now recognizes that Luther had in fact saved Christianity from its impending ruin rather than devastating it, by bringing the Renaissance to a halt and provoking the Counter-Reformation with his lumpish and ridiculous stubbornness.<sup>116</sup> Nietzsche now sees him as a grim, violent, retarded and backward mind, restoring to life an epoch that had been on the brink of becoming expired. While the Renaissance is referred to by Nietzsche as the Golden Age of our millennium, the Lutheran revolt is considered her first and foremost foe.<sup>117</sup> In short, Nietzsche's judgement of Luther became unequivocally negative. Luther becomes the perfect lout, the perfect personification of "German lumpishness", the spokesman of the crudest of instincts.<sup>118</sup> The Reformation is now perceived by Nietzsche as a brutal, peasant version of Christianity, a pointless revolt that emerged out of the primitive indignation of simpletons,<sup>119</sup> a "peasant revolt" in the realm of morality, a ridiculous recurrence of the original "slave revolt", defying and despising everything aristocratic, refined and intelligent, while remaining at the same time eager to obey.<sup>120</sup> Due to a rather coincidental concurrence of political circumstances, Luther was not burned at the stake right away, but was allowed to succeed in preventing the Renaissance from achieving its magnificent goal.

In short, Luther had suddenly become one of the great pessimists whose basic motive was resentment.<sup>121</sup> In a remarkable section of *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche's revised judgement of Luther is abundantly clear.<sup>122</sup> At times, Nietzsche claims, Fortune's farces become dreadfully visible, like during the negotiations at Regensburg between Luther and the diplomat cardinal Continari. On the verge of a peaceful settlement, Luther's bony head – *knöchernen Kopf* – continued its struggle and resistance, full of suspicion and gloomy fear. For the sake of certain formula which, due to their ideological and theological nature and their lack of correspondence to any real objects or state of affairs, did not allow for any sensible

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or the summit of parodical laughter: a grobian, plebeian miner's son for pope!

<sup>116</sup>According to Erik Erikson (1958/1962), it was Jacob Burckhardt who taught Nietzsche to see in Luther the noisy German peasant who waylaid the march of Renaissance man.

<sup>117</sup> 'Dagegen [against the Renaissance] hebt sich nun die Deutsche Reformation ab als ein energischer Protest zurückgebliebener Geister, welche die Weltanschauung des Mittelalters noch keineswegs satt hatten', *Human, All Too Human* I, § 237; Cf. Nietzsche's remarks on 'der Bauernkrieg und Pöbelaufstand, der über den geistigen Geschmack im Norden Europas Herr geworden ist und welcher an dem großen "ungeistigen Menschen", an Luther, seinen Anführer hatte', *Nachlass*, III, p. 465.

<sup>118</sup> Cf.: 'Wenn auf Trunk, Trunkenheit und eine übelriechende Art von Unflättereie auch nur von ferne hingewinkt wurde, dann wurden die Seelen der älteren Deutschen fröhlich - sonst waren sie verdrossen' (*Human, All-Too-Human* II, 'The Wanderer and his Shadow', § 224).

<sup>119</sup> *The Gay Science*, § 358.

<sup>120</sup> *Dawn of Day*, § 207.

<sup>121</sup> *Dawn of Day*, § 3, § 68; *The Antichrist*, § 61.

<sup>122</sup> *Human, All Too Human* II, 'Mixed Opinions and Aphorisms', § 226.

discussion, Germany went up in flames. Forces were put to work whose magnitude remained unparalleled throughout modernity, but they were of a negative, catastrophic and deplorable nature rather than Dionysian.<sup>123</sup>

Hirsch claimed that this remarkable change in Nietzsche's judgement was caused by his accidental reading of the second volume of Janssen's *Geschichte des Deutschen Volkes*. Although this claim is controversial (Salaquarda 1986), Nietzsche did base his assessment of Luther on secondary sources, such as Janssen's, instead of on studying Luther himself – with one exception. During a decisive episode of his creative life, in which he produced *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche came to read (and greatly appreciate) the German Bible (Luther's translation of the Scriptures) intensively. In fact, he immediately proclaimed Luther's Bible to be the most splendid German book and Luther would have appreciated Nietzsche's judgement, for Luther himself considered his translation of the Bible his most important achievement as a writer. Compared to Luther's Bible, Nietzsche claimed, almost everything else in German was mere "literature".<sup>124</sup> Once again a rather ambiguous picture of Luther emerges. On the one hand, he is still considered a lout and a buffoon. On the other hand, he is the unrivalled master of German prose. The latter judgement was based on Nietzsche's own reading of Luther, the former on anecdotal evidence, provided by secondary sources.

Probably because of his intensive reading of Luther's Bible, Nietzsche even discerns a basic affinity with Luther – for example when he noticed that (apart from Nietzsche himself), Luther and Goethe were to be regarded the most decisive events in the history of the German language.<sup>125</sup> Hirsch and others pointed to the fact that Nietzsche's reading of Luther's Bible greatly influenced the language of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Allison (1990) emphasizes the extent to which Nietzsche, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, borrowed from and relied on some of Luther's basic rhetorical devices. I also quite agree with Hirsch, however, that Nietzsche's imitation did not succeed in equalling the original. On the contrary, compared to Luther's translation of the *New Testament* (an overwhelming and magnificent literary achievement) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is artificial, tedious and decadent. Instead of being untimely and anti-romantic, Nietzsche in many respects remains a perfect representative of the nineteenth century, notably because of his negative laughter, much like Luther was in many ways a perfect representative of the "golden" century of gaiety which Nietzsche admired so much, but could not equal, let alone surpass.

Nietzsche increasingly came to despise the vulgar, provincial, peasant-like aspects of Luther's personality. Yet at the same time he persisted in a rather positive and apparently incompatible appreciation for Luther's comic decorum. For example when

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123 The Gay Science, § 148.

124 Beyond Good and Evil, § 247.

125 'Ich bilde mir ein, mit diesem Z[arathustra] die Deutsche Sprache zu ihrer Vollendung gebracht zu haben. Es war, nach Luther und Goethe noch ein dritter Schritt zu tun'; Brief an Erwin Rohde, 22 Februar 1884.

Nietzsche claims that, in the case of great men, the coarse, the impudent and the excessive (the all-too-human so to speak) allows for their influence to be contained within certain boundaries, because of the suspicion it is otherwise bound to raise.<sup>126</sup> Although at times emphasizing the terrible and tragic events in Luther's biography, Nietzsche recognized that the larger part of his oeuvre belonged to the comical genres.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche writes that, if one day someone would interpret (in a truly psychological manner) the "real Luther", something powerful would emerge (§19). But what would this real Luther look like? Elsewhere in the same book (§2, §3) Nietzsche had already explained that Wagner's most cheerful episode had been the one in which he had concerned himself with Luther's marriage. Had he pursued his plans in this direction, Nietzsche claims, he would certainly have produced a wonderful Luther-comedy. Instead, he created *Parsifal*, the story of the perfect simpleton, as Nietzsche phrases it, infecting himself with Catholicism. Was Wagner serious, was Parsifal really a tragedy, or rather a farewell to tragedy? Was Parsifal with its excesses and wilful exaggerations a parody on the tragic genre as such, a comical piece in which Wagner finally reached the summit of artistic creation, being able to laugh at himself<sup>127</sup> with the implication that he had finally recovered from pessimism? In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche included a little scene that reads like a fragment from such a Luther comedy.<sup>128</sup> This comical scene (which in fact resembles or, rather, parodies some of the actual conversations between Luther and Melancthon recorded in the *Tischreden*)<sup>129</sup> presents us with the "real" Luther as perceived by Nietzsche: lumpish and gay, employing grotesque images, transforming the terrible into the comical by connecting it with the material body's lower half.

In Nietzsche's view, the bulk of Luther's theology can be explained by his peculiar, folksy logical instincts: his suspicion against arguments and etiquette<sup>130</sup> and, even more significant, his peasant conception of truth, considering truth to be something which someone "has", and someone else does not "have" – a rather comical and vulgar misunderstanding of truth, according to Nietzsche.<sup>131</sup> Luther-the-peasant, due to a deficient sense of reverence and etiquette, demanded the right to speak with "his" God directly, without mediation and without embarrassment. Indeed, his resistance against mediation by priests, popes or saints was for Nietzsche a

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<sup>126</sup> *Human, All Too Human* II, 'Mixed Opinions and Aphorisms', § 186.

<sup>127</sup> According to Nietzsche, an artist reaches his summit of artistic creation 'wenn er über sich zu lachen weiß', *The Gay Science*, § 3.

<sup>128</sup> Luther: Du redest heut' wahr wie ein Engel, Bruder!

Schwarzerdt (Melancthon): Aber es ist der Gedanke deiner Feinde.

Luther: So war's eine Lüge aus des Teufels Hintern ('What is Truth?'), *Human, All Too Human* II, § 66.

<sup>129</sup> Cf., for instance, 5:5428.

<sup>130</sup> *On the Genealogy of Morals* III, § 22.

<sup>131</sup> *The Antichrist*, § 53.

sign of peasant impertinence and rudeness.<sup>132</sup>

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the *Tischreden* (“Table Talks” or “Prandial Conversations”), collected and published posthumously, constitute a crucial part of Luther’s achievement, rather than being a collection of raw materials from which the theological content has to be carefully isolated by serious readers at the expense of an enormous residue of grotesque and histrionic waste. Indeed, it is a work where considerable support can be found for the picture of Luther as a popular buffoon. The time-old affinity of food with the spoken word, of eating with speaking provides the generic link between Plato’s *Symposium* and Luther’s prandial conversations. The laughing tone, the carefree vocabulary, the gross exaggerations, the fearless truth can be found in both. Luther’s bold (and often abusive) language constitutes a perfect example of what Bakhtin refers to as the “banquet form of speech, liberated from fear and piousness” (1968, p. 297). Allow me to give a few examples in response to Nietzsche’s judgement of Luther as commented on above, notably Nietzsche’s remark on the basically peasant-like logic Luther relied on.

One remarkable example of this logic is Luther’s version of proving the existence of God. According to Luther, the most convincing argument demonstrating God’s existence is the fact that a cow gives birth to a cow and never to a horse, and a horse to a horse, and never to a cow; ergo, there must be someone who is guiding this wonderful process of reproduction.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, Luther at times succeeds in solving some tedious theological issue or other in a grotesque and peasant-like manner. Take, for example, the way he responds to the question concerning God’s responsibility for the existence of evil in the world, which came up in the course of a discussion on how a certain section of the *Second Book of Samuel* had to be interpreted. Although in principle God is able to prevent all evil, Luther argues, He sometimes (for reasons that are bound to remain obscure to us) restricts Himself to alleviating or containing its harmful consequences. This is explained by Luther by means of the following example. If someone is about to shit somewhere, God may, instead of preventing it, induce him to retreat into some corner or other, rather than emptying his bottom on the table.<sup>134</sup> Such conversations read like scenes borrowed

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<sup>132</sup> Luther, diese beredtste und unbescheidenste Bauer... Luthers Widerstand gegen die Mittlerheiligen der Kirche (insbesondere gegen ‘des Teufels Saw den Bapst’) war, daran ist kein Zweifel, im letzten Grunde der Widerstand eines Rüpels, den die gute Etikette der Kirche verdross, jene Ehrfurchts-Etikette des hieratischen Geschmacks, welche nur die Geweihteren und Schweigsameren in das Allerheiligste einlässt und es gegen die Rüpel zuschließt. Diese sollen ein für alle Mal gerade hier nicht das Wort haben – aber Luther, der Bauer, wollte es schlechterdings anders... er wollte vor allem direkt reden, selber reden, ‘ungeniert’ mit seinem Gott reden... Nun, er hat’s getan (On the Genealogy of Morals III, § 22).

<sup>133</sup> ‘Hoc est optimum argumentum, quod me multum saepe movit, quod ex generatione specierum probat esse Deum: Ein ku gebür allzeit ein ku, ein pferd ein pferd etc.; kein ku gebür ein pferd nec equus vaccam... Ergo necesse est aliquid, quod ita gubernet omnia’ (5:5440).

<sup>134</sup> ‘Cum autem Semei male agere vult, so sagt Gott: Dem thues und sonst niemandts! Als, wenn einer scheissen will, das kann ich nicht weren, aber das ers hieher thue auff den disch, das

from popular farce, rather than as arguments in theological debates<sup>135</sup> – until one recognizes that the transformation of the terrifying (the bewildering thought of God as the omnipotent origin of evil) into the comical is Luther’s access to moral truth. It is part of what Bakhtin refers to as the “specific truth of table talk” (1968, p. 117).

But how could someone who argues in this manner, claiming that our apertures produce either truth or dung, while consistently comparing his adversaries to arse-holes and sows wallowing in the mire, actually succeed in preparing the way for modern moral experience? Bakhtin’s concept of parody and the grotesque will allow us to further our understanding of this question, which was raised rather than solved by Nietzsche. From a Bakhtinian perspective, Luther became the master of German prose because he acted as the spokesman of popular laughter; laughter is the basic, vital and Dionysian force at work in Luther’s language. This is the hypothesis that will be put to the test in the subsequent sections of this chapter, in which some of Luther’s writing will be submitted to a more careful rereading. I will discard the standard (pious) account, which can be found in almost every introduction to his writings, holding that the quintessence of Luther’s work must be carefully separated from those elements which seem merely anecdotal, as well as those which nowadays are considered disturbingly grotesque – in short those elements which have been “over-emphasized” by ill-disposed (notably Catholic) readers (such as this author).

### 3. Luther “Lie-gends”

Nietzsche based his appreciation of Luther mostly on anecdotes. Already during his life-time Luther was surrounded by a host of biographical or quasi-biographical legends – he himself referred to them as lie-gends (“Lügenden”). Some of them seem at least partially true, however, because they focus attention on certain significant aspects of his achievement which might otherwise escape us. In short, we should not reject them altogether. Moreover, they are part of the time-old carnivalesque tradition. Carnavalesque legends, Bakhtin tells us, debase the hero and bring him down to earth. They familiarize and humanize him and bring him up close, but they do so “without harming the genuinely heroic core of the image” (1968, p. 109).

Among the most obstinate of these Luther lie-gends (Van Bakel 1946) is the claim that he descended from a line of notorious drunkards and superstitious simpletons, while he himself appreciated what he euphemistically referred to as a proper drink.<sup>136</sup>

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will ich weren und sprich: in winckel!” (V, 5225).).

<sup>135</sup> Simons (1990) points out that, whereas in the case of a sermon scenes from every life provide a clue which enables one to focus attention on the spiritual (that is, the lower is connected with the higher), in the case of parody it is the other way around: the higher is degraded and reduced to the level of the lower (p. 74). Many prandial conversations are difficult to subsume with certainty either under the genre of parody or under the genre of the sermon – their generic identity remains ambivalent.

<sup>136</sup> ‘Wer nicht liebt Wein, Weib und Gesang, der bleibt ein Narr sein Leben lang’ is one of

It has often been claimed that the many physical ailments that disturbed him in his later years were caused by excessive food and drink,<sup>137</sup> and that he died from hitting the hay with an overburdened stomach. Another lie-gend holds that he firmly believed in the existence of devils, while others suggest that he encouraged gross sensuality and libertarianism (*pecca fortifer!*) and that his basic motive for starting the Reformation was his personal inability to hold on to celibacy.<sup>138</sup> All these lie-gends support the image of Luther as a popular buffoon, an impious, gluttonous, “impossible”, ridiculous monk, a character such as can be encountered in early modern novels and popular farces.

Furthermore, there is another set of lie-gends that persistently portray him as a hard-headed, stubborn peasant, wilfully blocking serious possibilities for consensus and reasonable settlement. Although these images of Luther are (at least partly) deplored and considered incorrect by scores of Luther experts, these experts do admit that (albeit most unfortunately) they are encouraged and nourished by some peculiar (but allegedly inessential) features of his achievement – notably the fact that his writings at times excel in coarseness and verbal abuse, while in some respects he remained attached to certain “gothic” remnants which, before long, came to be considered as offensive to reason, such as his rather traditional and “gothic” opinions concerning devils, and even his (from a modernistic perspective) semi-medieval understanding of the Communion. When he claims just a few days before his death to have spotted a devil sitting on a rain pipe, in the shape of a black dog exposing his behind, one is indeed reminded of the gothic, grotesque, demonic ornaments still to be seen on the roofs and drains of gothic cathedrals, borrowed from late medieval popular imagination.

All his biographers agree that the picture of Luther as a person contains several astonishing contradictions. During his student years, someone referred to him as *musicus et philosophicus*, a description which seems to point to the clair-obscure, the blend of gay and gloomy in his personality. At times he was quite gentle and indulgent, but at other times he was ferocious and inflexible. He was both a revolutionary and a conservative, both a scholar and a prophet, both a national figure and a *pater familias*. In short, he seemed to exemplify in optima forma the energetic but politically unreliable, early modern temper referred to by Marx as “grobian”.

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his most famous lines. In case one is tormented by temptation or nausea, or falls short of faith, Luther recommends sexual intercourse and substantial drinking [“*thue einen guten trunk*”], for a Christian ought to remain a gay sort of person, while the devil will attempt to turn him into a melancholic: *Ein christen soll ein frolich mensch sein* [Tischreden, 3:3298].

<sup>137</sup> “*Fressen und saufen*”. Cf. the passage in the Tischreden where he calculates what is consumed by him each year in view of his growing too fat, and is embarrassed and astonished at the result [Sedens et edens in mensa dixit... 3: 3258].

<sup>138</sup> In fact, one of the reasons for Luther’s father to object to his son becoming a monk was his prediction that Martin, in view of the innate physical temperament of the Luders, would not be able to endure a monastic regime (Luther’s family-name was originally spelled Luder).

There was already something remarkable in his physique, in the architectonics of his body. Instead of bowing his head while walking, as he was taught in the convent, he strode along with his head facing the sky. His face bears the expression of peasant firmness, stubbornness and humour. We are told that in his youth his glance was uncanny, almost unbearably so. During the examinations at Worms, his adversaries shuddered before his ghastly, demonic aspect and one of them, Nuntius Aleander, describes how Luther made his appearance with an idiotic expression of laughter on his face, which seems to have suggested something like a blustering fire or a raging storm. The Dominican cardinal Cajetan, it is said, refused to continue the dispute at Augsburg because he felt intimidated by the gloomy profundity of Luther's gaze.

But on other occasions, notably during his later years, he emerges as a gay, merry and laughing figure whose physical appearance marks the rejection of medieval asceticism. We are also told that he moved his members vividly while preaching or praying. His devotion was of a merry nature,<sup>139</sup> and he actually coined a special term for it: *Friedigkeit*. As Preuss justly noted, one cannot separate Luther from his sense of humour (1947, pp. 54-55). His merriment was as abundant as his rage. His verbal aggression was as ferocious as it was gay. There is irresistible wit at work in the way he keeps comparing his enemies to hogs, goats, snails, asses, dogs and others farm animals.<sup>140</sup> Luther's language clearly excels in carefree humour – *Isst und trink, auf einem vollen Bauch stehet ein fröhlig Haupt*. He is not gay and merry on occasions, but intrinsically merry, writing in the basic mood of laughter, whereas it is the devil's basic objective to turn us into "melancholiacs".<sup>141</sup>

In the literature, Luther is often presented as an unstable, intermediary figure, a transition between the world of medieval dogma (unable to retain him) and that of modern philosophy (unwilling to admit him), something like an obedient rebel or a brisk neurotic, both restoring and adulterating the Word of God. All biographers, however, unanimously point to his astonishing gift for language and to his vulgar humour, his folksy manners; his excessive reliance on verbal abuse. Erik Erikson (1958/1962) has drawn a very famous psychological portrait of him as a young man. The "folksy" aspects of Luther's personality are explained as remnants of his rather humble descent: his nostalgia for the hard simplicity of peasant life, his vulgarity and blockheadedness, his preoccupation with saws, mud, soil and fertility, his stubbornness and rebelliousness, as well as his "gothic" preoccupation with devils. Erikson's book is primarily on young Luther and he discerns a marked difference between the youngster (a fascinating, highly gifted neurotic) and the older man: a sturdy, voluble table-talker who looked back on his past as a mythological

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<sup>139</sup> Cf. his first spiritual: 'Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein / und laßt uns fröhlig springen'.

<sup>140</sup> A linguistic device employed by the church as well. Cf. the first line of *Exsurge, Domine*, the famous papal bull that condemned him: 'Rise to Your feet, o Lord, for a wild boar intends to damage Your vineyard'.

<sup>141</sup> 'Tristitia instrumentum Sathanae' [3:2840].

auto-hagiography, indulging himself in florid self-revelations with a “histrionic” flair, contributing selected memories to what was about to become his official identity. Erikson expresses his distaste for those histrionic “after-dinner exaggerations”, those “folksy exaggerations of his table-talk vocabulary” (p. 139), considering them “undisciplined”, “irresponsible” and “grotesque” (p. 147) – “although for a few years Luther occupied the stage of history with some of the exhibitionistic grandeur of a Renaissance man, there is no doubt that he concluded his life in obese provinciality” (p. 194).

Young Luther, on the other hand, is considered a gifted but severely disturbed youth whose *cause* became his *cure*. Indeed, Luther’s case history is said to consist of marked periods of manic productivity that alternated with severe depressive breakdowns in which his inclination towards gaiety was eclipsed by his chronic *tentationes tristitiae*, or even by utter despair. Besides psychological ailments, Erikson studied physical problems as well. Luther suffered from lifelong constipation and urine retention,<sup>142</sup> due to chronic melancholia and kidney problems which he, after leaving the monastery, tried to counter by consuming huge amounts of beer and eating ravenously. Erikson suggests, however, that in view of his immobile circumstances, already during his stay at the Wartburg but also later in life, his enjoyment of food and beer greatly aggravated his sadness and his constipation as well as his preoccupation with the lower parts of his body. Erikson tells us: “He would speak of “being on labour” when his kidney stones made him swell up. When they had passed, he announced the elimination of Gargantuan quantities of fluid: eleven buckets at one time” (p. 245).<sup>143</sup> Indeed, he was “bawdy” about his “bulky body”, “obviously enjoyed hearty food and plenty of beer”, as well as “belching and farting”. His grotesque body language and his “bawdy jokes” are explained as expressions of neurotic symptoms, as “regressed, defiant obstinacy”, and his obscenity is said to express the “needs of his manic-depressive nature” while his repudiate and anal witticisms as well as his “many nasty and provocative statements” (with which he set “a lasting bad example to his people”) are considered an indication of regressive,

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<sup>142</sup> Apart from all of this, Luther also suffered from constant buzzing and whizzing in his ears, which Erikson attributes to a chronic middle ear infection. He even suggests that Luther’s spiritual weapon, his ‘inner voice’, might be explained by this fact (p. 244), much like Nietzsche suggested that Socrates’s ‘inner voice’ could be attributed to ear problems – ‘So ist vielleicht auch das Dämonion des Sokrates ein Ohrenleiden, das er sich gemäß seiner herrschenden moralischen Denkungsart nur anders, als es jetzt geschehen würde, ausgelegt’ (Human, All Too Human I, § 126).

<sup>143</sup> Luther was in the habit of keeping his friends informed about his physical condition. ‘The Lord has kicked me in the ass’, he writes in a famous letter to Melanchthon from the Wartburg, ‘and my stool is so hard that it takes a lot of pressure and sweat to get rid of it’ (12 May 1521). Indeed, he begs Melanchthon to pray for a healthy stool. In his letter of 27 February 1537, once again to Melanchthon, he reports that, as he got up one night and tried to piss in vain as usual, God suddenly opened up his ureter and bladder and enabled him to release a huge amount of the kind of liquid which is considered inferior by others but of precious value to Luther himself. Moreover, he reports that this very letter had been written while alternately pissing and writing.



obsessive transference.

Up to a certain point, Erikson claims, Luther's body language could be explained as being in accordance with contemporary aesthetics: "People in those days expressed much more openly [the emotional implications] of the primary bodily functions. We permit ourselves to understand them in a burlesque show, or in circumstances where we can laugh off our discomfort; but we are embarrassed when we are asked to acknowledge them in earnest" (p. 205). In his later years, however, "when Luther's freedom of speech occasionally deteriorated into vulgar license, he went far beyond the customary gay crudity of his early days" (p. 206) – and Erikson cites the following line taken from the Prandial Conversations as an example: "I am like ripe shit, and the world is a gigantic ass-whole".<sup>144</sup> Instead of considering Luther's anal witticisms as symptomatic of a neurotic, obsessive concern with defecation or as evidence of psychic decline, I will rather stress the grotesque speech genre to which they belong, in which excremental images, rather than conveying a negative mood, are associated with reproduction, fertility, and life, with birth, dying and being reborn, with laughter.

Luther's grotesque understanding of the body is displayed throughout his prandial conversations, of which countless examples could be cited. He refers to the nose as the head's latrine, with the implication that God has to accept prayers which are said from underneath a privy,<sup>145</sup> while considering someone's capacity for defecation (which in his case had been greatly affected by monastic life) a sign of good health [3:3006]. Moreover, according to Luther, as the physical desire of eunuchs was said to increase instead of decrease with emasculation, he recommends that one should rather put on a second pair of testicles than to have his natural pair cut off [3:2865]. And during a conversation with Lukas Cranach (referred to as a person of comparable gaiety) which took place in an orchard, Luther pointed out that they in fact fed themselves from a peasant's buttocks whose shit contained the seeds which had produced the trees, etc. [3:3210a].

Even Luther's relationship with the devil displays all the features of grobian laughter such as can be found in the writings of Rabelais and other contemporaries. Via grobian laughter, the terrible gothic creature is transformed into a jovial companion. In his later years, Luther had come to accept the devil's company [3:3154; 3: 3208], although at times they would still quarrel and Luther would be disturbed by his presence. Luther justified the obesity of his later years by saying that he wanted to grow sufficiently fat to choke the devil, if by any chance he were to swallow him, so that he would feel forced to spit him out again. He defines sexuality mainly in terms of the physical necessity to rid oneself of bodily discharge, and discusses it in a down-to-earth folkish manner. It is a cure against melancholia inflicted by a devil. Luther believed in the presence of demons and devils, hiding in

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<sup>144</sup> 'Ich bin der reife Dreck, so ist die Welt das weite Arschloch... Ich danck dir, lieber Gott, das du mich lessest unter deinem geringen Heufflein sein', 5:5537.

<sup>145</sup> 'Nasus enim est latrina capitis, steht einem über dem Maul, immo ipse Deus muss alle Gebet und Gotts dienst unter dem Scheishaus geschehen lassen' [3:2807].

forests, waters, marshes and clouds, producing all kinds of weather effects which, according to Luther, were mistakenly attributed to unknown natural causes by philosophers and physicians [3:2829]. The devil would tempt him to enter into a theological debate, or cause some kind of physical ailment. While residing at the Wartburg, Luther claims to have thrown walnuts and inkpots at him [3:2885].

All this verifies the mood of laughter at work in Luther's mode of speech. Yet, the most prominent of all the Luther lie-gends, one which happens to be true, if only because Luther himself is the source of it, concerns his basic experience of revelation, the very turning point of his spiritual life – a story which continued to embarrass his followers for centuries, while providing his enemies with an easy target for ridicule: the decisive experience which came to be known as the *Turmerlebnis* – or “tower experience”, which will be discussed in the following sections. But first I will explain my Bakhtinian conceptual framework and methodology.

#### 4. Luther as a contemporary of Rabelais

The narrative of Luther's life and performance has triggered considerable attention throughout the ages. Countless biographical studies about him have been published. As a rule, he is presented as a serious, fanatic, depressed, even gloomy figure. In his own self-narrative, however, another, often neglected side of his personality emerges. Notably in his *Tischreden* – Table Talk or Prandial Conversations – Luther stands out as a gay and jolly figure, a contemporary of Rabelais.<sup>146</sup> These conversations, although predominantly devoted to comments on the Scriptures, are crammed with jokes, verbal abuse, parody, franc-parler, colloquialisms, folksy witticisms and laughter. Bakhtin's book on Rabelais (1968) allows to recover this “comical side” of Luther. Moreover, by relying on Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais, we become aware of the crucial and intimate relationship in Luther's writing between truth and laughter. The turning point in his biography, as well as in his reading of the Bible, is the so-called Tower Experience (“*Turm Erlebnis*”): a comical scene, quite in accordance with the genre conventions of late Medieval and Renaissance comical narrative. His extraordinary gift for language and his profound acquaintance with vernacular speech genres (the unofficial and unpublished spheres of language) allowed him to revitalize and familiarize Christianity, to reform its standard chronotopes, and to create the German language.

In my re-reading of Luther, Bakhtin's book on Rabelais will function as my principal guide, although I will rely on other works by Bakhtin as well (notably Bakhtin 1988). Bakhtin's methods and concepts will be “applied” to the case of Luther. That is, I will read Luther in a way that is reminiscent of Bakhtin's reading of

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<sup>146</sup> All references refer to the Weimar Edition of Luther's works, containing the *Tischreden* in six volumes: Dr. Martin *Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar: Böhlau, 1913-1921.

his grotesque French contemporary. Yet, every “application” always entails a reassessment of the “instrument” as well.

Those who regard Luther as an excessively serious figure, an “agelast” (someone who does not laugh) simply have not read him. In his writings – that is: in the original, un-adapted, unexpurgated versions of his writings – laughter, verbal abuse and other elements of grotesque aesthetics are omnipresent.<sup>147</sup> Whoever glances through introductions and editorial comments to the published versions of his works will notice the countless apologies made by editors regarding the crudeness and coarseness of his language – they are hardly ever absent. Time and again we are urged to ignore the grobian aspects of his style and in many editions, considerable effort is made to tone down his notorious earthiness. My rereading is an effort at retrieval and rehabilitation. If Luther’s verbal laughter is silenced and omitted, he is bound to be misunderstood. The established reading strategy which relies on the distinction between serious “content” and grobian “residue” cannot be rejected firmly enough. Those who read Luther with an unprejudiced eye will be struck by the Rabelais-like tone and quality of his style and language (Zwart 1999).

I will first summarize Bakhtin’s book on Rabelais by pointing out a basic set of oppositions on which it rests. Subsequently, I will reread Luther as a contemporary of Rabelais, first of all by drawing attention to a crucial scene in Luther’s life in which the grotesque setting of his work is exemplified in a highly condensed and emblematic form and subsequently by stressing the importance of the “excremental grid” as a basic perspective that allows Luther to come to terms with his ideological environment without disavowing his rustic, down-to-earth origins. Finally, I will briefly present Luther’s biography as a sequence of typical chronotopes, separated by instances of metamorphosis.

## 5. Rabelais and his world

Bakhtin’s famous study of popular genres of literary laughter (1968) is no doubt a rich and complex work. Yet, it relies on a fundamental scheme that consists of a series of basic oppositions, notably: (1) the opposition on the level of discourse between the lofty and serious speech genres of official discourse versus the language of the market square; (2) the opposition on the level of basic moods between the basic mood of late medieval “gothic” terror versus the basic mood of laughter; (3) the opposition on the level of aesthetics between classicist canonization (the aesthetics of the sublime) versus the aesthetics of the grotesque. Let me briefly explain these oppositions that allow me to summarize Bakhtin’s impressive book.

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<sup>147</sup> Many of his writings are written in an offensive tone, built up in the form of abuse of others and expressed in the vocabulary “of coarse and excremental expletives, to which he was particularly addicted” (Todd 1964, p. 6). Luther’s verbal abuse, however, was not a purely negative phenomenon. Being witty and jolly, he “enjoyed an occasional prank” (p. 8).

The serious speech genres of official discourse achieve stabilisation via canonization and the production of an artificially neutralized nomenclature: ideologically reliable words, functioning in a quasi-automatic manner; a basic set of terms, concepts and neologisms, constituting a stable, reliable, predictable circuit. Once one enters this circuit, its inherent logic will prove irresistible. It seems impossible to detach the official words from their established ideological meanings. The production of legitimate speech acts is predetermined by fixed procedures. Those speech acts that fail to meet the established criteria are regarded as illegitimate.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the paradigmatic example of such a system of ideologically reliable elements was the mechanical discourse of scholastic theology: the truth game of the Sorbonnites, relying on a peculiar, technical kind of Latin, containing a large sample of typical neologisms and academic phrases, indicating fixed and unavoidable short-circuits between terms and meanings, fixed procedures for producing legitimate verbal utterances. For those who entered this system, it was impossible to escape from its powerful grid, its firm discursive sway, its truth regime, from the powerful, invisible hand guiding the production of written as well as spoken discourse.

The unstable and ideologically unreliable languages of the market square, however, functioned as a counterpart. In these unpublished spheres of speech the ideological and vulnerable nature of official discourse was suddenly revealed. Serious idioms were ridiculed, degraded and travestied, and found themselves accompanied by their “comic double”. On the market square it was revealed that there are no ideologically reliable genres, no indifferent or neutral words, only artificially neutralized ones. All words belong to particular speech genres, and every genre has a peculiar logic and persuasiveness of its own. The language of the market square constituted an encyclopaedia of genres, idioms, dialects, proverbs, jargons, in short: a living heteroglossia. It constituted a setting in which the questionable nature of an apparently inviolable discourse suddenly found itself exposed to ridicule. On the market square, the mood of seriousness, the sway of terror suddenly gave way to the liberating mood of laughter.

Laughter, as we have seen, is regarded by Bakhtin as an essential form of truth in its own right: “certain aspects of the world are only accessible to laughter” (1968, p. 66). True laughter is a philosophical principle in its own right with a peculiar “logic” of its own that liberates from “the great interior censor: fear” (p. 11, 16, 66, 70). Laughter opens up the deep comical aspect of the world. It allows reality to appear in a carefree manner. What the mood of laughter reveals is that there are no extra-temporal truths. Laughter is the sudden awareness of the lack, the shortcomings and vulnerabilities of established discourse, of the official truth, otherwise held to be immutable and indisputable. Gay and carefree laughter is a positive, affirmative force, an affirmation and rehabilitation of life, notably of its bodily aspects.

Laughter’s peculiar logic relies on a series of basic techniques. One of them is comic reversal or the practice of turning serious connections upside-down. Socrates may stand as an example here: the philosophical jester, the hero of the famous

serio-comical dialogues whose speech acts abound with laughter – although much of it seems lost in the serious (modern) translations of Plato’s work. In the famous farewell scene in *Phaedo*, as we have seen, Socrates mocks and ridicules the tragic view of life, in which life is equated with health, while death is regarded as the ultimate illness. In Socrates’s speech acts, tragic phrases are parodied, put between quotation marks and cited jestingly. The tragic view of life gives way to an atmosphere of gaiety and laughter when Socrates turns the logic of tragedy upside-down by proving that life itself is the disease and death the ultimate remedy. In other words, the short-circuit life=health : death=disease that had functioned as the apparently indisputable grounding of the tragic view, suddenly finds itself abolished and dis-unified, in order to give way to a completely new, unexpected and liberating set of equations: life=illness : death=remedy – equations that were to become quite important during subsequent (Christian) centuries. The basic signifiers of ancient morality were put between quotation marks and, subsequently, their interconnections became radically reversed. Socrates’s version of a “cheerful death” parodied tragic conceptions of life and death and rendered them less self-evident.

A second technique consists in playing with words, notably by omitting or adding a character or two. Bakhtin gives many examples of this. Take for instance the last words uttered by Christ on the cross: *Sitio* (“I am thirsty”) and *consummatum est* (“It is accomplished”). In medieval parodies, the latter phrase was deliberately distorted into *consumatum est* (“It is consumed”), thus charging it with digestive or even sexual connotations. A minor change (the omission of one letter) immediately has a comical effect and transforms a solemn tragedy into a more jovial scene.

This example also involves a third technique: the degradation of the serious and lofty by connecting it with elements of bodily life, preferably the body’s lower stratum. Due to the omission of the letter *m*, the final words of Christ suddenly become associated with eating, drinking and intercourse. This technique is of central importance to the speech genres of the grotesque. Elements functioning on a lofty plane are degraded by associating them with eating, digestion, defecation and other bodily processes. Let this suffice as a summary of Bakhtin’s study. What can be gained by reading Luther from this perspective?

## 6. The tower experience: the issue of locality

The official reading of Luther relies on a basic procedure, a reading strategy, a basic prejudice, as we have seen. From the very outset we (newcomers) are urged to distinguish between the theological content of the work – which is to be preserved and purified – and the vulgar remainder, the grobian elements that are abundantly present in his writings (and even highly characteristic of his style), but must be regarded as

irrelevant or even inconvenient from a theological point of view.<sup>148</sup> The canonization of Luther from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century onwards involved a purification of grobian, pre-modern elements. My rereading of Luther, however, starts from the contention that it is impossible to detach “official” content from the vulgarities and obscenities of his language, simply because there is a fundamental congeniality between both. It was the basic mood of laughter that allowed him to discern a new and liberating truth in a setting that was still dominated by gothic terror.

In Luther’s standard biography two decisive turning-points emerge. The first of them came to be known as the *Stotternheim Erlebnis* – the Stotternheim experience. One day, while still a student and on his way from Eisleben to Erfurt, and approaching the small village of Stotternheim, young man Luther was suddenly caught in a terrible thunderstorm that frightened him to death and terrified him so much that, paralysed by a sudden flash of lightning quite near, he made his famous vow to Saint Anne to become a monk. Besides being terrified by the storm itself, he was struck with fear and despair at the prospect of facing divine judgement. Indeed, he was overwhelmed by all the ghastly terrors of late medieval life. The whole scene is an emblematic picture of late medieval gothic terror, of the gloomy atmosphere in which Luther spent his earlier years. Subsequently, while trying to become a perfect monk, Luther’s sensibility remained thoroughly gothic and melancholic. His basic experiential mood was one of fear and despair rather than laughter. He desperately tried to subdue his sense of guilt by means of a rigid regime of fasting, freezing and isolating himself in his cell – all to no avail.

At a certain point, however, at a time when he was completely absorbed by his reading of the Psalter and the Epistles of Saint Paul (notably the ones addressing the Christians of Galatia and Rome) Luther experienced a spiritual transformation in which the horrible scene, the thunderbolt experience near Stotternheim, found its reversal, its antipode. Indeed, this new experience constituted its comic double. It was another decisive turning-point in his biography, the transition from a gothic, inhibited youth<sup>149</sup> into an astonishingly productive mid-life, known as the *Turm Erlebnis* – the Tower experience – representing a grotesque scene par excellence. It is recounted by Luther himself during one of his *Tischreden* [Prandial Conversations, Table Talks] and recorded by visitors in three versions. Before analysing the narrative as such, however, we must first pay attention to the genre characteristics of the document that contains it.

The *Tischreden* constitute a remarkable part of Luther’s oeuvre. Luther’s ideological heirs tended to regard it as a huge collection of materials from which the theological content had to be carefully isolated at the expense of an enormous residue

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<sup>148</sup> This is the Lutheran version of Voltaire’s image of the *Temple du Goût* [Temple of Taste], referred to by Bakhtin (1968): an intellectualist image of heaven in which all the great works of world literature are thoroughly rewritten and purified by angels.

<sup>149</sup> A youngster “drenched in muteness and invisibility”, in “the mute and invisible spheres of life” (Bakhtin 1988, p. 135).

of grotesque and histrionic waste.<sup>150</sup> From a Bakhtin-like perspective, however, it is a crucial part of Luther's output, for several reasons. To begin with, it is a work that provides considerable support for the picture of Luther as a "popular fool", someone remarkably familiar with the genres of grobian laughter; someone moreover whose reading and writing practice was intimately connected with abundant food intake, with eating and drinking, with laughter. Indeed, the *Tischreden* revitalize the time-old affinity between food, drink and the spoken word. The laughing tone, the carefree vocabulary, the gross exaggerations, the fearless truth and the astonishing, uninhibited scholarship of Luther's *Tischreden* are quite in accordance with the speech genre referred to by Bakhtin as "the Banquet form of speech, liberated from fear and piousness" (1968, p. 297). In his later years, he inhabited with his wife (a former nun) and family the former Black Cloister. Besides his many children, a variable number of poor students lived with him and shared his hospitable table. Over dinner, while eating and drinking heartily, he was in the habit of entering into discussions with them in a rather carefree manner. The bulk of these conversations are devoted to comments on the Scriptures. Until the end of his life, Luther continued his intense reading of the Bible, and the Prandial Conversations basically contain the protocol of this reading practice.<sup>151</sup>

Yet, other genres are present as well. Notably, the Prandial Conversations contain a huge series of comic stories and jokes. To my knowledge, Luther's talents as a comic writer never have received the attention they deserved, but should we collect these jokes and stories from the *Tischreden*, a comic novel could easily be composed out of them. These stories are crammed with jovial indecencies and comic expressions and they often built on jokes.

Take for instance the story about the lazy priest who, instead of saying his obligatory prayers, was in the habit of reciting the alphabet, adding, "Lord, please receive these letters and be so kind as to compose from them the canonical chants Yourself" [2973]. Or the story about the butcher's dog who mistook his master's testicles for the bowels he was cleaning and swallowed them – a story which arose during a discussion over the etymology of the word "monk" which, according to Luther, was derived from an old German name for "castrated horse" [2981]. Or the story about the priest who, as he witnessed a dog urinating in his censer, asked whether the animal had turned Lutheran. Such gay-hearted stories, reminiscent of Boccaccio, Rabelais and others, narrated by Luther over his hospitable table, contributed considerably to the merry atmosphere of his prandial conversations. Indeed, the world seemed full of gaiety, with everyone mocking everyone else, and

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<sup>150</sup> The catholic biographer John Todd also urges us to exercise care in using the Table Talk. "It is quite easy to make a selection from passages ... and produce a lurid picture of a coarse blasphemer" (Todd 1964, p. 8).

<sup>151</sup> Certain connections could be discerned between his daily digestion of the Bible and food intake, a connection that complements the obvious one (made by Luther at several occasions) between writing and defecation.

Luther joining in with Renaissance laughter. These *Tischreden* were recorded by the visiting students mentioned above, who were in the habit of taking notes. They functioned as the “third person” in Luther’s private life, “eavesdropping”, as Bakhtin calls it, on the private, intimate spheres of his speech, making the private public (1988, p. 124). The compilation of these notes eventually resulted in enormous, macaronic heaps of text, scattered over no less than six bulky, carefully annotated volumes, with vernacular, untrimmed German constantly passing over into scholarly Latin and vice versa – offering the modern reader a reading experience beyond comparison.

Now somewhere in these conversations we suddenly find it narrated how young Luther, after having experienced a gloomy and gothic childhood and adolescence, full of hardship, while brooding over a very disturbing passage in the Scriptures, all of a sudden discerns a new and unexpected truth. And Luther quite frankly points out that this happened to him while dwelling inside a monk’s latrine. Let us look into these entries in the *Tischreden* in more detail [3232a-c].

For days and weeks young man Luther, a monk in the monastery of the Black Friars, had been pondering over a well-known phrase taken from the Epistles of Saint Paul, a terrifying phrase that drove him into utter despair: *Iustitia Dei*. Nowadays we may find it difficult to understand why these words meant so much to him, but in Luther’s epoch they constituted the very heart of the omnipresent gothic atmosphere of moral anxiety – as depicted for example in the famous painting *The Last Judgement* by Hieronymus Bosch. In those days, Luther (like many of his contemporaries) was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt, an awareness of his deficient, sinful nature, spotting devils everywhere. In the established circuits of gothic theology, the phrase *Iustitia Dei* had acquired a fixed and indisputable meaning: Divine Justice = Divine Punishment. Justice and punishment functioned as synonyms. And this short-circuit of gothic theology inevitably produced a terrible syllogism, the basic syllogism of the gothic ethic of fear: (1) We are constantly falling short and unable to improve ourselves, (2) We will be judged by God, (3) Ergo, God will punish us. The frightening image of the punishing Deity greatly reinforced Luther’s aptitude for depression and melancholy. There simply was no prospect of escape.

The Renaissance solution – by continuous exercise we are able to re-sculpt ourselves into an elegantly cultivated harmonious body and even to realize the typical grandeur of Renaissance man – was not available to late medieval monasticism.<sup>152</sup> For although monastic ἄσκησις was devoted to self-improvement through physical and spiritual exercise, it was askesis in the sense of abstinence rather than moderation,

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<sup>152</sup> Nietzsche, a great admirer of the Renaissance practice of self-improvement, in the course of which individuals transform their life and body into a work of art, recognized that this effort at glorification – *Verklärung* – of the body eventually met with an insurmountable limit: the *Unterleib* – “Der Unterleib ist der Grund dafür, dass der Mensch sich nicht so leicht für einen Gott hält” (the abdomen is the reason why man does not easily take himself for a god – *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 141; 1966, p. 89.



and Luther had experienced that sexual abstinence increases the bodily drives, rather than subduing them, transforming them into a truly diabolical force. In short, we are unable to improve ourselves and the terrifying prospect of an omnipotent, punishing God was an image omnipresent in gothic art. It was a prospect that greatly reinforced Luther's physical ailing as well. His rural, folkish body never managed to adapt itself to monastic asceticism and he continuously suffered from severe constipation.

Many years later, during one of his Prandial Conversations, an obese and good-hearted Luther told those gathered around his hospitable table the following story. In those days, he told them, the terrible words "just" and "justice" used to strike him like lightning and it terrified him merely to hear them uttered. For in his still gothic mind, justice was inevitably associated with punishment. But one day, while lingering in the tower in which the monk's cloaca was located, reflecting on a most obscure phrase in the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Christians of Rome, where it is suggested that those who are justified through faith shall live (1:17), it suddenly dawned on him that, rather than being punished by God, it is God's justice by which we are justified or rectified and saved from sin. For a modern reader, it may be difficult the grasp immediately the tremendous significance of this new interpretation. Indeed, we tend to fall silent for a while, or feel urged to reread these lines over and over again, without gaining a clear understanding at first. What is Luther pointing at? What has happened?

What we in fact witness here is the basic truth of the spiritual movement that came to be known as the Reformation, formulated for the very first time in an untrimmed, primordial version. The bulk of Luther's theology (a theory about to shake Europe to its very foundations) is contained in these few, remarkably comic lines that rather read like a parody of revelation. In these two words the nucleus of Protestant theology is captured. Indeed, Luther's gigantic corpus of writing is the discursive echo of that tremendous roar of laughter that overtook him *in hac turri, in qua secretus locus erat monachorum*. It was a laugh that subverted not any particular phrase or concept, but a whole epoch, a whole world: laughter with historical generative force, a triumph of life over gloomy seriousness (Bakhtin 1988, p. 194). A new style of reading was bestowed on him in a monk's privy – *Diese Kunst hat mir der Heilige Geist auf dieser cl[oaca] auf dem thorm gegeben*.<sup>153</sup> For Luther we are utterly incapable of improving ourselves by means of works or exercise so that we remain guilty before God, who nevertheless takes pity on us by saving and rectifying us – at least some of us. In short, we are irreparably doomed, nothing can save us: ergo God will save us.

Of course, this revelation, notably the use of the word ergo, has nothing to do with propositional logic; it is a truth of faith, which cannot be recapitulated by reason. And yet, once we allow this revelatory truth (in the sense of ἀλήθεια) to enter our mind and

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<sup>153</sup> This art [of reading] was bestowed unto me by the Holy Spirit in this c[loaca] in the tower [3232b]. He now read the Scriptures, notably this terrifying passage, with a completely transformed eye. Suddenly, he tells us, "the words came up to me on every side jostling one another and smiling in agreement".

open-up our world, once we really open ourselves to it, it becomes irresistible: it is not something which can be denied or rejected. We are overwhelmed, reassured, brightened by it: it makes us laugh, or cry, or defecate, or whatever. It is an experience reminiscent of Nietzsche's definition of "gay science" as the saturnalia of a mind that has patiently resisted a persistent pressure of long standing; a kind of recovery, almost like a state of drunkenness, where many a foolish and unwise thing will emerge, an experience which reveals the basic connection between truth and laughter.

From a rational point of view, such a line of reasoning may seem absurd. Luther's response to the gothic truth (we are doomed, our works fall short in comparison to our sins, we will remain guilty before God, ergo nothing can save us) is the gay and liberating truth that God himself will save us, regardless of our sins. It is a gay rereading. Luther himself refers to the "art of reading" with which he claims to have been equipped by the Holy Spirit while he was busy attending to his daily physical needs. Those very lines which seemed to support the gothic regime of terror, suddenly announced a dawn of day. When we are about to be overwhelmed by utter despair, the liberating truth dawns on us that only God can and therefore will save us: pardon our sins through an act of grace. We are rectified through faith, while "works" and exercise (the hard core of spiritual existence and monastic life during the gothic period) are rendered insignificant. Luther's theology provided a solution to the general experience of fear and bewilderment that dominated the twilight of the Middle Ages by pushing gothic belief to its extreme and then turning it upside-down, relying on parodical devices of exaggeration and reversal.

Luther apparently had a clear, intuitive grasp of what was happening in German regions at that time, because his case, his theology became a kind of collective cure. This explains the astonishing impact of views some of which today may strike us as exaggerated, excessive and pathological. His tower experience transformed him to such an extent that the one-time melancholic suddenly changed into an astonishingly energetic maniac who, apparently undisturbed by physical suffering and by the frightfully complicated political, social, and religious conflicts in which he became involved, produced a gigantic corpus of writing, encompassing, apart from his translations of and glossaries on the Bible, a great number of theological and polemical treatises which decisively influenced Western thought. Although those who claim that Luther retrospectively came to idealize his tower experience by turning what had actually been a gradual process into a sudden, mythological event are probably right, his autobiographic anecdote does point to a significant change in Luther's basic state of mind: the (sudden or gradual) expulsion of terror by laughter.

It was an experience of relief and release. Luther was suddenly able to relief himself from his burden, both mentally and physically. The one-time melancholic suddenly changed into an astonishingly energetic author who was to produce a gargantuan corpus of writing.<sup>154</sup> The Holy Spirit – a name for the astonishing human

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<sup>154</sup> The Tower Experience functions as a 'comic double', not only of Luther's own Stotternheim Experience (a gloomy experience, complemented by a comic one), but also of the

possibility of introducing new and unexpected associations between words and meanings<sup>155</sup> – acted as midwife in giving birth both to Protestant theology and to the German language. In the introduction to the Latin edition of his works, Luther stressed that, due to the Tower Experience, the terrifying words *Justitia Dei* suddenly became his “gate to paradise” – a formula in which the excremental grid is still noticeable.<sup>156</sup> Even more so if we remember that the excrements constituted an item of some importance in the theological images of earth and paradise produced by high scholasticism. Thomas Aquinas, for example, points out that in paradise, original humans did eat and defecate, but their excrements – *faeculentia* – had nothing indecent or embarrassing about them (1922, Prima Pars Q97), whereas in Luther’s experience, the whole world seemed transformed into a huge malodorous latrine.<sup>157</sup>

Luther’s comical retrospect stresses the sudden nature of the transformation. In fact, his autobiographical account concords with what Bakhtin (1988) refers to as the chronotope of metamorphosis. One of the characteristics of metamorphosis-time is that decisive life events are compressed into a single moment of crisis and rebirth, a time of exceptional, unusual events. This we find in Luther. His claim that his rereading, his liberating retranslation of the word *Divine Justice* was completely original and unprecedented: a Dionysian impulse so to speak, ignores the fact that it had already been used by others, with whose work Luther was quite familiar. In his idealizing retrospect, however, a gradual development is condensed and compressed into a single decisive emblematic moment, so that we are faced with a Gestalt-switch – a sudden transformation of a gloomy monk into a jolly protestant, a sudden shift

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famous revelation Saint Augustine experienced when reading and reflecting on that same Epistle of Saint Paul. In contrast to Luther, however, Saint Augustine was dwelling, not on a latrine, but in a beautiful garden and instead of defecating, he wept abundantly (St Augustine, 1912/1950, Book VIII, Ch. 12). We must not forget that young man Luther was an Augustine monk. His experience was a kind of comic follow-up as compared to the paradigmatic experience reported by the highly-esteemed founder of the monastic order to which he belonged. In his commentary on the Psalms, on which he was working at that time, Luther returns several times to Augustine’s Confessions Book 8, a passage that obviously had a deep effect on him. Another important support was the work of Tauler in which Luther underlined sections on distress and birth.

<sup>155</sup> Lacan (1994), *Le signifiant et le Saint-Esprit* (pp. 41-58).

<sup>156</sup> Even this *Introduction* betrays Luther’s congeniality with the aesthetics of the grotesque. After having apologized for the rough and chaotic state of most of his writing, a series of biographical scenes is presented in short-hand, speaking of being dead drunk with Papal doctrines, of the market square noises produced by brawlers selling indulgences, of the contemptuous “Italian gesture” made by someone from Cardinal Cajetan’s train, of the women in an inn who, asked for their opinion regarding the Holy See, wanted to know whether it was made from stone or wood, and, finally, of his own “rebirth”, the crucial experience that had opened the gate for him and allowed the terrible signifier *Justitia Dei* to take on quite a different countenance [WA 54; 179-187].

<sup>157</sup> As the reigning ideology refused to make sense out of it, the life of the body could only be crude, dirty, self-destructive. Between the word and the body there was an immeasurable abyss. In short, there was, according to Bakhtin, a close connection between medieval ascetic ideology and the coarseness of medieval bodily practices (1988, p. 171).

from gothic horror into Renaissance gaiety – due to the decisive experience of laughter. Two basic and relatively stable images of one and the same individual are separated from one another by a sudden metamorphosis. Young Luther, who desperately devoted himself to asceticism, had been suffering from melancholy and constipation. In his autobiographical account, the *Turm Erlebnis* is the turning point between the gloomy, inhibited monk he used to be and the jolly, highly productive ringleader of Protestantism he came to be. A long-term effort of intense reading and reflection is compressed retrospectively into a sudden inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

But the metamorphosis scene as such also constitutes a typical, emblematic Gestalt in its own right, at least from the point of view of the aesthetics of narrative laughter. The “context of discovery” of the very nucleus of Protestant theology was a monastery’s latrine. The Holy Spirit revealed the truth to Luther when he was dwelling in a medieval cloaca. It pleased God to bestow His precious gift on him while emptying his buttocks. In such a grobian locale, the terrible short-circuit of scholastic theology was suddenly turned upside-down. From that time onwards, Luther became a literary giant who produced an enormous bulk of writing in which excremental and scatological metaphors, images, abuses and expressions are omnipresent.<sup>158</sup> The excremental environment in which the truth was conceived remains noticeable throughout his writings.

But all this is not quite as astonishing as it might seem to a modern reader. In fact, the *Turm Erlebnis* is a grotesque scene par excellence, quite in accordance with the style conventions of the grobian, popular aesthetics of late medieval farces and fabliaux. It simply is a genre image, a formulaic scene that can be encountered throughout the genres of laughter that flourished “on the market square”. We find this reflected in Rabelais where, quite in accordance with the logic of popular laughter, monastic life is systematically brought in connection with defecation, vomiting and pissing.<sup>159</sup> In fact, the congeniality between Luther and Rabelais has been noticed by

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<sup>158</sup> In terms of publication, Luther’s “literary spate” set off in 1518, when his “reforming and scriptural impulse was running at high speed through the narrowest funnel in a pure Lutheran jet. From Martin’s room began in 1518 to shoot the spate of writings which never dried up” (Todd 1964, p. 141).

<sup>159</sup> In *Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel* Bakhtin (1988) gives the following explanation for the stereotypic link between monastic life and crudity in popular laughter, already pointed at above. Due to the oppressive influence of catholic *askesis*, Bakhtin tells us, the natural functions of the human body were denied “ideological directives”. As a consequence, they became crude and bestial. Since the reigning ideology refused to make sense out of the life of the body, it could only be licentious, crude and dirty. Monastic ascetic ideology on the one hand and the coarseness and licentiousness of medieval bodily practices – the coarse, hawking, farthing, yawning, spitting, hiccupping, noisily nose-blowing, endlessly chewing and drinking medieval body – paralleled one another. “The coarse debauchery of medieval man was but the reverse side of the ascetic ideal” (p. 192). Therefore, from the point of views of popular laughter, monastic asceticism was intrinsically connected with vulgarities. Indeed, as a consequence of the “falseness inherent in the ascetic world view, gluttony and drunkenness flourished precisely in the monasteries. A monk in Rabelais is first and foremost a glutton and a drunkard” (p. 185).

Erikson (1958/1962, p. 145) who, speaking about Luther's preoccupation with the lower parts of his body, paraphrases a letter (already cited above) in which he, after having suffered from severe kidney problems for some time, triumphantly reports the release of "Gargantuan quantities" of urine, eleven buckets at one time!<sup>160</sup>

Yet, it goes without saying that Luther's frank and carefree account of the birth of Protestantism became a source of embarrassment to his pious, serious, even hagiographic readership. By that time, the aesthetics of the grotesque had already been dethroned by Protestant and neo-classicist aesthetics, and laughter had been dispelled from theological discourse. Some of Luther's heirs tried to conceal the true circumstances of their master's conversion by relying on a symbolical re-interpretation of the story. It was claimed, for example, that the cloaca or secret, heated room in the tower was a metaphor that indicated the spiritual prison in which Luther spent his monastic years.<sup>161</sup> Meanwhile, biographers belonging to the catholic party were severely criticized for taking advantage of Luther's lack of prudishness by over-emphasizing the supposedly negligible details of his decisive experience.<sup>162</sup>

One of these Catholic authors was Hartmann Grisar, the Jesuit writer of an impressive, three-volume standard biography (1911/1912). When in the first Volume Grisar cautiously pointed out that the tower experience actually took place in a monk's cloaca, located in a tower that was apparently part of the adjacent city-wall,<sup>163</sup> this raised a storm of indignation among Protestant reviewers. Grisar was severely criticized for taking Luther's comic reminiscence literally. They even claimed that Grisar's objective was to make strategic use of the locality of Luther's revelation, similar to the way in which the Catholic Church in its struggle against Arianism had

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<sup>160</sup>The bulk of his writings likewise attained gargantuan dimensions. From 1518 onwards, he achieved an enormous literary output. There is so much of his writing material, Todd tells us, that the mere task of setting out a precise chronological list of all the publications is something belonging to specialists (1964, p. 171). Indeed, the flow of his printed word became ceaseless.

<sup>161</sup> I find it rather ironical that for Luther himself, the Tower Experience was the very thing that freed him from this time-old practice of allegorical re-interpretation. When I was still a monk, he tells us in one of his *Tischreden*, I applied this interpretative strategy to everything. Even a cloaca was interpreted in an allegorical manner – Antea allegorisabam etiam cloacam et omnia... Zuvor allegorisirte ich, und deutete geistlich, auch die Cloaca, und nur alles... [335]. On the other hand, the symbolic reading of the Tower Experience is not completely incorrect. It constitutes an emblematic scene. In Luther's experience, the world at large had acquired on the depressing aspect of an enormous diabolical latrine. Due to his decisive experience of laughter, however, the conditions of spiritual and physical life were suddenly cleaned-up in a Herculean manner – and Hercules' heroic reposition of a river might be compared to Luther's heroic reposition of the great stream of words known as the Bible.

<sup>162</sup> But we find even catholic readers embarrassed by the locality in which the discovery (often alluded to as 'tower theology') came to him. A whole myth had grown up around the phrase 'tower-theology', Todd tells us, and the precise room to which Luther was referring "has been identified with a lavatory in that part of the building, to the delight of some and the dismay of others" (1964, p. 79).

<sup>163</sup> The sewage having egress outside the town boundaries, an arrangement quite customary at that time (Grisar 1911/1912, p. 323)

successfully exploited the fact that Arius had happened to die in a latrine.<sup>164</sup> In view of this criticism, Grisar added a substantial supplement (Vol. 3, pp. 978 ff.) in which the “issue of locality” – *die Lokalfrage* – was given due attention. As a result, the fact that Luther was telling a real-life story in a frank and straightforward manner is now considered beyond doubt. It could not have been his monastic cell (which was not heated), nor was he granted another private cell somewhere in a tower in order for him to quietly pursue his reading, as had been suggested, nor is it likely for these words to have been added by impious rogues in later versions of the manuscript.

## 7. The excremental grid

In the case of Luther, similar to Rabelais, the “Sorbonnites” or “agelasts” functioned as a community of scholars who devoted themselves to establishing fixed connections between terms and meanings (between signifier and signified), relying on apparently indisputable a priori parameters of their speech genre.<sup>165</sup> On the market square, however, such artificial conditions for the production of scientific discourse were suddenly destabilised and the contestable nature of serious discourse became apparent. The exposing bluntness of the fool’s language is closely linked with the chronotope of the public square. Extra-temporal truths were exposed to ridicule, due to the techniques of laughter. As was explained above, one such technique consisted in degrading lofty discourse by reconnecting it with corporeal life, notably the body’s lower stratum. In Luther’s work, this technique is very important. It is quite prominent in his *Prandial Conversations*, but present in other, more “official” works as well. Verbal abuse, relying on degradation, is a characteristic ingredient of his style. The persistent reference to bodily life is inherent to his carefree vocabulary, allowing him to articulate his fearless truth.<sup>166</sup> In the *Prandial Conversations*, many entries read like scenes borrowed from popular farces rather than theological arguments. The grotesque humour of the market square is noticeable throughout his work.

The importance of excremental metaphors in Luther’s corpus was stressed by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1986) who indicates that the Prandial

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<sup>164</sup> A few days before his death, Luther informed his wife that he himself almost died in a latrine, due to a huge stone in the ceiling that happened to come off (Letter to his wife, 10 February 1546). The comic technique of degrading someone by having him die in a latrine was a stock element in the serio-comic genres of ancient literature, cf. for example Seneca’s *Ludus morte Claudii* where the emperor dies at the moment of defecation (Bakhtin 1968, p. 150) – another example of the remarkable vitality and persistence of ‘genre memory’.

<sup>165</sup> According to Luther, the intellectual methodology which commonly passed as theology was in effect little more than a crossword puzzle, an intellectual game played with counters devised by philosophers (Todd 1964, p. 155).

<sup>166</sup> According to Todd (1964) Luther’s “addiction to excremental and coarse words” was an attempt “to bring before his opponents the brute facts as an ordinary man would express them; it was all part of the departure from the scholastic abstractions back to a vocabulary for the Gospel in which the nouns, verbs and adjectives were those in everyday use” (p. 240).

Conversations (Propos du Table) and other writings basically rely on an excremental scheme. In Luther's perception, the world is a heap of shit. We ourselves are the excrements that fall from the devil's aperture and the words of opponents are time and again referred to as shit produced by the Devil's behind.<sup>167</sup> Throughout his writings, Luther relies on an anal or excremental grid that allows the world to appear in a comical manner. The terrifying image or prospect is ridiculed, familiarized by it.

Notably, there is in Luther a close link between words and shit. Writing and defecation are associated on countless occasions.<sup>168</sup> In Luther's libel *Against Harry Sausage – Wider Hans Wurst* – for example, the act of writing a book is compared to letting go a fart. In the *Tischreden* we often find it recorded that, whenever Luther gets himself in a difficult position while disputing with the devil, he simply tells him to kiss his ass.<sup>169</sup> The predominance of the excremental scheme or grid is indeed quite astonishing. At times, it even allows him to solve some tedious theological issue or other in a grotesque manner. We already discussed the way he responds to a question concerning God's responsibility for the existence of evil in the world. If someone is about to shit somewhere, God may, instead of preventing it, induce him to retreat into some corner or other, rather than emptying his bottom on the table. The comical effect is intensified by Luther's tone of voice, his mastery of the grotesque mode of speech, which remains unsurpassed, provided his language is judged according to the standards of the genre.

Another basic feature of parodical discourse, omnipresent in the *Tischreden*, is the macaronic mixture of languages, fragments in Greek or Latin floating over into phrases in the German vernacular (cf. Bakhtin 1968, p. 150). Luther boldly tells us that he wants to empty his buttocks on the papal crown [218], while on the other hand he confesses that, had he been present at some of the heroic events recorded in the Bible, he would most certainly have wetted his pants [335]. The transformation of the terrifying and bewildering thought of God as the omnipotent origin of evil into something rather comical is Luther's access to moral truth. It is part of what Bakhtin refers to as the "specific truth of table talk" (1968, p. 117).

Luther's remarkable reliance on excremental jokes, metaphors and abuses is part of his epoch-making effort at "vulgarizing" the Scriptures. Centuries of scholastic

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<sup>167</sup> I already cited the following entry: "Ich bin der reiffe dreck, so ist die Welt das weite arschloch... Ich danke dir, lieber Gott, das du mich lessest unter deinem geringen heufflein sein" - I am ripe shit, and so the world is the great ass-hole... I thank Thee, dear Lord, for allowing me to be among your petty little heaps [5537].

<sup>168</sup> For example, when Luther refers to the nose as our facial latrine - *latrina capitis* - he does so in order to point out that all our prayers are produced from under a latrine - *unter dem Scheishaus* [2807]. And so forth, and so forth.

<sup>169</sup> *Lecke mich im a.* [83]; The devil will dispute with me until I tell him to kiss my ass – *Der teuffel disputirt mit mir, so lange bis ich sage: Leck mich in gem A.* [141]; *Der teuffel disputiret heindt mit mir et accusabat me ... sed ego nolebam ei respondere et dicebam: Lecke du mich im a.* [248]; etc.; I often chase the devil away by letting go a fart, saying: Devil, yesterday I likewise produced a fart, did you make note of it in your record? – *Jag ihn offt mit eim furz hinweg... dico, Teuffel, gester thett ich auch ein furz; hast du ihn auch angeschriben in den register?* [122]; etc.

theology had turned the language of the Bible, even the New Testament, into something quite inflexible and serious. Fixed and lofty meanings had been attached to words and scenes that were originally located in everyday settings. We must not forget that the medieval Bible itself was called *Vulgata*, i.e. the vulgarized version of the official Greek and Hebrew original. Its language, however, had become canonized once again and therefore, a subsequent effort at vulgarization was called for – and this was Luther’s great achievement. He did not translate the Bible into a language already available. Rather, by translating and commenting on the Bible, he baptized the German vernacular and created the German language (much like Hieronymus had created Medieval Latin). It was a language event – a *Sprachereignis* – that allowed the German language to become responsive to the language of the Other, not by merely repeating it, but by revitalizing it.

Let me give a telling example of Luther’s technique. In *On Councils and Churches* (1539) Luther explains the original and proper meaning of the word *ecclesia*. According to Luther, ἐκκλησία simply means a bunch of people, a crowd gathered on the market square. For this is how the word is used in *The Acts*.<sup>170</sup> In Acts 19, Paul’s announcement that the Greek deities were nothing but idols and human artefacts produced commotion among the silver smiths of Ephesus. Not only was their craft in danger, but they also feared that the temple of the great goddess Diana would be despised. So one day they marched towards the theatre, shouting “Great is Diana of the Ephesians”. When the town clerk finally managed to appease the general confusion, the crowd there gathered was referred to as *ecclesia*. Thus, although Luther’s translation of *ecclesia* as “a bunch of people” at first may seem grobian, his basic objective is to recover its true and proper sense, which for Luther has nothing to do with an official, momentous, hierarchical institute. It is a horizontal, rather than a vertical phenomenon. As a translator, he objected to assuming that *ecclesia* referred not to just any gathering of Christians but exclusively to “one particular squad of fools”.

In fact, Luther justified his technique quite eloquently in *Vom Dolmetschen* (On Translating, 1530). He had been severely criticized for having translated *arbitramur hominem justificari ex fide absque operibus* (Romans 3:28) with *Wir halten, daß der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, allein durch den Glauben*.<sup>171</sup> The German translation, which contains the word *allein* (“only”) suggests that the original contains the word *sola*, which is actually absent and the literal translation would read *through faith* instead of *only through faith*. Apparently Luther added it, so that the original would support his theological views, an instance of data massage as it were. In his defence, however, Luther denies papal asses (*Papstesel*) the right to judge his translations, for it is a profession in which he happens to excel.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore,

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170 ‘Die Kirche, das ist ein Haufen Leute’.

171 ‘We take it that man is justified regardless of his works of Law, but only through faith’.

172 And he cites the Roman satirist Juvenal to support his view.



many translations into German which may seem accurate, very often prove not to be German at all, but a ridiculous kind of quasi-German, bound to be misunderstood. Luther simply wanted to write proper German, and to do so he had to be sensitive to the verbal peculiarities of the word *allein*. For instance, when we say *Der Bauer bringt allein Korn und kein Geld* (“The farmer brings only corn and no money”) *allein* (“only”) is added to *kein* (“no”). In this respect, German differs from Latin or Greek, and the translator should not consult the Latin or Greek original as to how German should be spoken or written. Thus, in order to become a translator, one has to acquire a profound familiarity with the vernacular tongue, and this is what Luther had trained himself to do, quite unlike his papal contemporaries who, he argued, simply repeated (that is, obscured) rather than retrieved the Word of God. He felt compelled to write the way he did by the German language itself, and maintained that it was not his translation that offended, but the Word of God itself, which was brought to light again at last. His sole objective simply was to allow the Word of God to enter the German language – and to transform the German language into a living written language. Luther’s marvellous technique allowed the language and idiom of the market square to appear in print, to enter published discourse.<sup>173</sup> In Luther’s writings, the vulgar, the down-to-earth and the sublime seem to coexist. As in the case of Rabelais, many words borrowed from popular discourse were used in a written form for the first time by Luther. He succeeded in familiarizing the Bible, much like the French translation of the Bible, done by Olivétan, reflects the influence of Rabelais’s language and style (Bakhtin 1968, p. 100). It is, as Bakhtin phrases it, nearer in style to Rabelais, to Calvin in thought.

This revitalization of the language of the Bible by transposing it into vernacular German inevitably produced a comical, parodical effect. According to Bergson (1940/1969) the transposition of a certain idea or phrase into a different tone of voice is always comical and this notably applies to the transposition of solemn ideas into the colloquial language of contemporary life. Bakhtin claims that the language of French literary prose was created by Calvin and Rabelais, where Calvin’s language already was “an intentional and conscious lowering of, almost a travesty on, the sacred language of the Bible” (1968, p. 71). As for the German language one could say that Luther represents both Calvin and Rabelais, fused into one heroic person.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Janssen writes: “Er schöpfte aus den reichen Quellen der Volkstümlichen Redeweise; in volkstümlicher Beredsamkeit kamen ihm wenige gleich” (1915, p. 252). Thus, Janssen emphasizes that, as a writer, Luther borrowed from the rich resources of popular speech. And yet at the same time the concise, cheerful statements in which he articulates the profundity of his faith are sublime.

<sup>174</sup> Whereas Calvin, the ‘agelast’ of radical Protestantism, rebuked Rabelais in a rather stern manner, Luther regarded gaiety as an appropriate Christian mood. Unlike Luther, Calvin was already part of what Toulmin (1990) referred to as Counter-Renaissance. He represented the dawn of a new seriousness. When troubled by heavy thoughts, Luther tells his visitors in some of his earliest Prandial Conversations, he usually has recourse to sturdy drinking – einen starken trunck birs [17] – or a good joke – so mus ich ein hohen starken bossen reissen [19].

Although his translation contains elements of degradation, this is necessary in order to familiarize and revitalize the Bible and to evade a mechanical and insensitive translation. To the official practice of distancing the word (along the vertical axis) by means of canonization is thus opposed the horizontalising practice of familiarizing the word through vulgarization. The vertical distance between the exalted lofty atmosphere of official discourse and the carefree atmosphere of the unpublished spheres of speech is reduced. In the case of Rabelais, Bakhtin stresses the enormous importance of extra-literary sources, but his argument is fully applicable to Luther as well.<sup>175</sup> Like Rabelais, Luther incorporated into his writings the crude frankness, jokes, short stories, proverbs, puns, catchwords and sayings of popular culture. Whenever he refers to the Pope, for example, he cannot resist from comparing him to an ass, a pig or any other degrading object. What Bakhtin says with regard to Rabelais applies to Luther as well: representatives of the old clerical world: monks, religious fanatics, priests, even the Pope himself – are constantly treated as absurd (1988, p. 240).

In the introduction to his famous essay *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation: on how to improve the Christian Ranks* Luther refers to himself as the “court’s jester” (1520; WA 6; 404-469). Due to his caps and bells, he has the right to frank and unrestricted speech. Indeed, he appeals to the court jester’s privilege of unrestricted speech – *Ich sage aus meinem Hofrecht frei heraus* – when he tells us, for example, that it is as idiotic to ban sexual intercourse from life as it would be to pronounce a ban on eating, drinking or defecation. In *On Marital Life* it is likewise claimed that sexual intercourse is as natural and unavoidable as eating, drinking and defecation (1522; WA 10; 2; 275-304). The vow of chastity is as ridiculous as the pledge to bite off one’s own nose. Tetzl, the unfortunate Dominican who happened to be selling indulgences in Wittenberg on behalf of Saint Peter’s Dome when all of a sudden Luther took the floor, was one of those shouting voices – a *grosser Clamant* – on the market square of late medieval gothic life, relying on circus, theatre and bombast to convey the message. He and other enemies were overloaded by Luther with verbal abuses, often of an excremental nature. As Bakhtin points out, the phrase “verbal mudslinging” still builds on the ancient gesture of besmirching, not with mud, but with excrement.

But Luther’s abuse is not merely a negative phenomenon. By verbal degradation, the terrible powers of the church became humanized, the intimidating vertical distance of the Word suddenly became reduced. Excremental abuses indicated that all human beings, whether Pope or peasant, are basically equal because the daily life of our bodies (notably the lower half) is basically equal. And this has a crucial *topological* effect. Due to carefree abuse, the frightening silhouettes of Pope,

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<sup>175</sup> “Rabelais’s first and foremost source was the unofficial side of speech, with its rich stores of curses... with its various indecencies... To this very day, the unofficial side of speech reflects a Rabelaisian degree of indecency in it, of words concerning drunkenness and defecation and so forth...” (1988, p. 238).

Cardinals and all the other once dreaded spokesmen of verticalised official truth are familiarized into human beings quite like us. The jolly abuse of the fearless and impious excremental grid allows the world to appear in an everyday and horizontal manner. The papal blackguards have been mocking us German simpletons and drunkards long enough, Luther tells us, and he subsequently compares the Pope as the head of the church to the painted heads that are carried around during Carnival processions on Shrove Tuesday. Verbal abuse adheres to the destruction-by-parody of the lofty spheres of medieval ideology (Bakhtin 1988, p. 221).

Like in the case of Rabelais, Luther's language and laughter destroy the "false idealization" of the established speech genres and render them implausible, in order for new forms of communication to become possible. The essence of his method consists in the destruction of habitual matrices – such as the identification of ecclesia with the Church of Rome, or the identification of Divine Justice with Divine Punishment – and the subsequent creation of unexpected associative matrices, including the most surprising logical links and linguistic connections – a freeing of consciousness that had become imprisoned within a tyrannical discourse (Bakhtin 1988 p. 60-61, p. 169). False connections, false associations, established and reinforced by tradition and sanctioned by official ideology, are dis-unified in order to rebuild in a creative manner the entire picture of the world. Like in the case of Rabelais, the "defecation series", as Bakhtin calls it, is of crucial importance in this process. The defecation series "creates the most unexpected matrices of objects, phenomena and ideas, which are destructive of hierarchy and materialise the picture of the world and of life" (1988, p. 187).

In Luther we find a joke in which papal Decretals are brought into connection with excrements by referring to them as *Drecketalen* instead of *Deckretalen*,<sup>176</sup> suggesting that there is something rectal about them. They are pieces of shit that are swallowed by the people in order to become shit again, subsequent to being digested (provided one has a strong enough stomach). Likewise, in Rabelais we find a section entitled *In Praise of Decretals* where papal decrees also enter the defecation series. Friar John used them for an arse-whipping while Panurge suffered a severe case of constipation after reading one of them. What is ridiculed in, for example, late medieval scholasticism by Luther, Rabelais and others is the mechanical, machine-like manner in which the established matrices are applied in such documents.

As Bergson (1940/1969) pointed out, the mechanical is comical. We laugh whenever something gives the impression of functioning automatically and in a machine-like manner, like a puppet. We laugh when someone's movements or speech acts become mechanical and resemble the dull, obstinate patterns of machines (1940/1969, pp. 38 ff.). We laugh whenever a human being seems to be transformed into an automaton, someone who has lost all responsiveness and flexibility. Laughter corrects mechanical forms of discourse. In this respect, Bergson's analysis of laughter

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<sup>176</sup> Book 4, Ch. 52; mentioned in Bakhtin 1988, p. 188.

is in accordance with Bakhtin's. What is corrected by Rabelais is the mechanical functioning of the speech genre of the Sorbonnites. A basic set of terms and items, once installed, has the tendency of functioning automatically. Due to the grotesque and scatological strategies of Luther and Rabelais, the hierarchical arrangements of concepts and words collapse, the established matrices find themselves de-automised. Notably, the enormous vertical distance between learned and obscene language disappears. And this makes it possible for academic discourse to stretch-out, to become more horizontal as it were. Terrifying images had situated themselves along the vertical axis, thus reinforcing an unfortunate misunderstanding, even of the most liberating words of the Other, such a *Justitia Dei*. Luther allowed the practice of reading the Bible to become dialogical once again. The abyss between the Word and the body was mitigated. The fixed links between words and ideas that had organized monastic life for centuries, and had been reinforced by scholasticism, suddenly became contestable. Monastic-scholastic life became drenched in a Gargantuan burst of laughter – until a series of counter-initiatives (the founding of the Jesuit Order for instance) aimed to reverticalise the world again.

By way of justification for his considerable reliance on laughter, Luther at times refers to Christ, and this is another issue worthy of our attention. For it is a well-established prejudice among theologians that Christ never laughed (Morreall 1983). Luther, however, held the opposite position. As an unsurpassed and gifted reader of the Bible, the mockery by Christ Himself did not escape him. In the *Tischreden* he points to several instances of mockery and ridicule in the Gospels where Christ utters Himself jestingly – *hat spottisch geredet*.<sup>177</sup> In fact, he regarded his own prandial conversations, his discourse *über Tische*, his *colloquii convivali* in which he emerges as such an amiable fellow, as similar to the ones conducted by Christ and his disciples, described by Luther as most jolly and intimate [3268]. Indeed, everything we believe in, Luther tells us, is ridiculous from the point of view of reason. And yet we cannot resist Christianity's gay truth.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Likewise, Jacques Lacan points out that whenever the Pharisees (the precursors of the Sorbonnites so to speak) try to trap Jesus by asking questions that apparently are impossible to answer without offending either the worldly or the spiritual authorities (for example whether a Jew is obliged to pay taxes), he escapes via a formidable joke – Show me the coin... (as if he had never seen one before; Lacan 1986, VII 3). The dilemma at hand is simply eliminated as Jesus manages to reveal the ridiculous nature of the established truth game as such – and the audience must have laughed, since at that time, His innovative, light-hearted words were not yet charged with their present theological gravity.

<sup>178</sup> Even the connection between excrement and words is present in the Gospels. When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees why his disciples break the canon by not washing their hands before eating, He replies by saying: “No one is defiled by what goes into his mouth; only by what comes out of it” (Mt 15:11) and He adds that whatever goes in by the mouth passes into the stomach and is discharged at a certain place without really defiling us, but what comes out of the mouth (wicked thoughts, fornication, etc.) defiles us (Mt 15: 17).

## 8. Luther's biography as a sequence of chronotopes

Bakhtin defines a chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” and as “temporal and spatial indicators [that are] fused into one ... concrete whole” (1988, p. 84.). It is the “typological stability” of chronotopes that allows us to identify genres or generic types. Examples of chronotopes are: the chronotope of the road, the provincial town, the castle (notably in the Gothic novel), the parlours or salons of bourgeois life, and so forth. A chronotope allows time to become visible and concrete, to take on flesh. It is the basic structure out of which the narrative scenes of the novel unfold. I already referred to the chronotope of metamorphosis: two or more basic images of one and the same individual are separated from one another by an exceptional event, a cross-road or turning-point, whereby real biographical time is compressed and condensed into one single decisive moment. The whole world is experienced in terms of crisis and rebirth, as the sinner (for example) is suddenly transformed into a saint. It involves an experience of purification, a leap-like event leaving a deep, ineradicable mark on the individual's entire life (p. 116). What was drenched in muteness and invisibility suddenly enters the public sphere.

Luther's biography entails a sequence of important chronotopes discussed by Bakhtin, namely: (1) the chronotope of the medieval monastery, (2) the chronotope of the expanded world of the Rabelaisian great man, and (3) the chronotope the protestant family home. Each of these basic chronotopes is preceded by crucial, metamorphosis-like turning-points: The Stotternheim Experience, The Tower Experience and, finally, the former monk's marriage to a former nun (an emblematic, comical, farcical scene in its own right).

The chronotope of the medieval monastery is of considerable importance in the history of the novel.<sup>179</sup> The architectonics of a monastery is the materialisation of what Bakhtin refers to as a completely verticalised and hierarchicalised world (p. 156 ff.). The monastery is, so to speak, an inhabited clockwork whose architectonics mirrors the supra-temporal structure of the macro-world, the synchronicity of everything. Time is deprived of its directedness towards the future and reduced to a circular, spherical movement, oriented upwards, copying the eternal movements of the heavenly bodies. At the same time, the monastery is shot through with horizontalising elements of popular laughter. In the genres of the grotesque, monastic life is time and again brought into connection with the physical processes of the body's lower stratum. The comic stories projected onto monastic life de-verticalise the monastery, flatten it as it were, while the monastery itself desperately tries to

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<sup>179</sup> Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* can be regarded as the rehabilitation and glorification of this historical chronotope, an artistic effort to reveal and revive its astonishing narrative possibilities. In Eco's novel, the desperate and grim campaign of medieval asceticism against laughter is part of the monastery's continuous war against its grobian, horizontalising environment

secure and maintain its vertical orientation, its disregard of horizontal time – the time of the cheerful and popular novellas. The chronotope of the monastery provides the setting for a considerable part of Luther’s (auto-)biography, as well as for the supreme narrative plot of his youth: the Tower Experience.

Subsequently, another chronotope is called in to organise and assimilate the astonishingly complex plethora of events of Luther’s life into a coherent, narrative whole, namely the chronotope of what Bakhtin refers to as the expanded world (the macrocosm) of the Rabelaisian great man whose actions affect enormous, extraordinary spatial and temporal expanses (p. 167); a man, as Bakhtin tells us, who eats, drinks, defecates, passes winds, etc., but on a grand scale (p. 241). Indeed, in those days, a burp (or fart) produced in Wittenberg was audible in Rome, as Luther in one of his famous sayings rightly claimed. Everything is as big, as wide and as horizontal as possible, much in contrast to the vertical orientation of monastic life, centred around a tiny, secluded monastic cell. In the Rabelais novels, even the monastery – the abbey of Thélème – is inconceivably large. The time made visible in this expanded world is a time of epoch-making events, of military campaigns and high politics on a grand scale, of ideological and political struggles with emperors and Popes, of debates and warfare of unprecedented intensity. Luther exemplifies, in his own peculiar way, the Rabelaisian great man in this expanded world by producing an enormous amount of printed matter in a limited period of time and by exerting an astonishing influence on the decades and centuries to come. His life during this period was completely exteriorized – he was a public figure. Everything he said was said in public, his thoughts and convictions were immediately published, immediately assimilated into the new emerging realm of published speech. At the same time, he remained a clownish figure, and the bluntness of his language was still linked with the older chronotope of the public square.<sup>180</sup>

Finally, the great man finds a comfortable retreat in his version of the Protestant family idyll, the Protestant, petty bourgeois “home”.<sup>181</sup> Luther’s marriage to

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<sup>180</sup> Although Bakhtin does not refer to Luther in this respect, he does mention Thomas Murner (p. 163), the catholic German satirist whose masterpiece – *Von dem grossen Lutherischen Narren* (1533) – depicts Luther as an obese, clownish, ridiculous, medieval figure, with the objective of containing his performance within the spatially restricted laughter of the medieval market square – unsuccessfully of course. A similar effort was made by the Dutch catholic poet Anna Bijns, who especially focussed on the fact of Luther marrying a former nun. Their laughter is much more negative than the one expressed by their grotesque target – Luther.

<sup>181</sup> According to Weber, the Lutheran ‘home’ differs from the puritan or Calvinist home in that the vitality and frankness of life remained intact. From the outset, the emphasis was on piety and disposition, rather than on regulation and control. This, Weber tells us, was also the reason why the coarse drunkenness of Lutheran courts contrasted so strongly with the ethical norms of other protestant courts (Weber 1965/1991, p. 97). Indeed, Luther’s own household is depicted as rather chaotic and disorderly by his biographers while in his later years Luther’s appreciation of a sturdy drink was notorious. Cf. the description of Luther’s home by Delumeau (1965/1991): “Towards the end of his life he grew fat, developed a drinking habit, and found pleasure in shocking his visitors with obscene witticisms”.

Catherine, a former nun, marked another metamorphosis that made the advent of this third chronotope possible. The demonic rebel turned into a *pater familias*. Withdrawn from the noisy, public sphere, he established a new and intimate integrity in his now limited spatial world (p. 224 ff.). His body changed and grew into the obese figure with whom he is now usually identified. The energetic man of great deeds suddenly found ample opportunity to relax. As Bakhtin points out, this chronotope – with husband, wife, children and intimates gathered around the family table reading the Bible – is to become of tremendous importance in the history of the Protestant novel. A new form of communication is made possible by it. One of the many remarkable facts in Luther's biography is that the final chronotope is located in the very same monastery in which he had spent part of his monastic life. After the Black Cloister came to be deserted by its original inhabitants (the Augustine monks), Luther once again inhabited the place, but this time as head of a family. That is, the locality remained the same, but the chronotope changed completely. The one time monastery now functioned as an accommodation for a new type of space where idyllic family life flourished. The transformed locale from now on displayed a private, cosy, chaotic-but-charming atmosphere, far removed from the grand political world outside (Bakhtin 1988, p. 227, 232.), with which Luther had lost contact. The emphasis is now on the domestic, private, everyday details of life: eating, drinking, friendly discussion, joint reading. The one time giant withdrew into his little corner of the world, a spatially limited, familiar world of his own, with his children and students gathered around the table enjoying their collective family meal. Still a man-of-the-people, notorious for his earthiness, Luther has now become the hero of a different kind of novel, the family idyll. The wandering, inconspicuous monk, who travelled to Rome on foot, encountered all sorts of people and suddenly became a man of the world, finally retreated into a delimited locale where, during shared meals around the family table, he displays the deep humanity characteristic of idyllic man, ignoring the great but abstract world outside. Life has finally become familiarized and humanized. Seen from a grand perspective, the new heroism of the idyllic man is petty and ridiculous no doubt, especially in comparison with his one-time greatness and world-historical significance, but the jovial atmosphere of his Table Talk is authentic and irresistible. The idyllic image of Protestant family life, centring around the joint reading of the Scriptures and the daily family meal, is the new matrix of "objects, phenomena, ideas and words" (Bakhtin 1988, p. 187, 205) that Luther put together after having destroyed the old medieval matrix, centred around the monastic ascetic cell. Yet, this idyll was made possible by the extraordinary, gigantic force of Luther's world-embracing laughter that destroyed the ideological apparatus that had managed to verticalise the world for centuries.

The three chronotopes also become manifest in Luther's physical appearance, as well as in his writing practice. At the time of the monastery chronotope, those who met him were struck by his ascetic looks and his demonic glance. For years, his writing practice was restricted to marginal notes and glosses. Shortly before 1518,

however, he suddenly began to look fatter and more healthy – *habitiore et corpulentiore*. From now on “he begins slowly to put on weight... A physical and psychological climacteric seems to occur at this crisis time in Luther’s life” (Todd 1964, p. 136). And from 1518 onwards, public events on an expanded scale provide the challenge for an intense activity: “For the next twenty years Luther was averaging something like one writing a fortnight. The sheer energy is astonishing. He must surely have had to eat more... It is sometimes said that with a growth in his public importance a man may experience a physical enlargement – he grew in bulk... Fatter he became” (Todd 1964, p. 136). All these publications, written in great haste, had an immediate, astonishing, world-wide impact.

After his marriage, however, nothing outstanding happened in his personal life. His world became a microcosm. Surrounded by his growing family, in a large and open house, students in and out all the time, copying down his every word, the fabulous Table Talks emerged. He became relaxed and jolly, and his verbal abuse became even less restrained than before. “He grew fatter, until he was very large; he drank much and boasted of it” (Todd 1964, p. 220).<sup>182</sup> Notwithstanding the disturbance, the noise, the heaps of papers and books, Todd tells us, the picture of something like a lively idyll does not seem to be very far from the truth. Luther, becoming more and more jolly, obstinate, deep-drinking, expounding and contradicting, “setting an example ... of something like the new kind of Christian household” (p. 242).

## 9. Ambivalence

Throughout the centuries, Luther’s voluminous writings met with a mixed response, triggering enthusiasm and euphoria, but also uneasiness, resentment and outrage. Even those who take a sympathizing stance towards his output are likely to have their experiences of reservation and ambivalence. I emphasised the extent to which Luther’s work suffers from any effort to transform him into a “pure” (serious) theologian, expurgated of his notorious earthiness, along the lines of a Lutheranism-without-Luther. Indeed, Luther is one of those authors who remain physically present in his work. Bakhtin offers a reading strategy that allows us to perceive and appreciate the significance of the physical and comical aspects of his writings and sayings that are too often disregarded. Notably, it recalls attention to the bulky Table Talks, where laughter and corporeal existence are often called in to assist his understanding of the Word as well as of the world.

This does not mean that ambivalence is thereby silenced altogether. Although it was my objective to provide something of a restorative by stressing the gay and

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<sup>182</sup> Luther recommends a stout drink as the perfect remedy against temptations and depression: *ego bibo einen starken trunck birs, quando habeo graves cogitationes* [17]. Similar remarks can be found throughout the Table Talk.



carefree aspect of Luther's words and gestures, it must be kept in mind that, besides being one of the heroes of grotesque laughter, there always remains this other, gloomy, demonic side to Luther. In terms of the three chronotopes distinguished above, it appeared in the demonic, obsessive glance of Luther-the-monk. But it most notably appeared in the disastrous role of Luther-as-Politician during the 1525 peasants' revolt (*Deutscher Bauernkrieg*), one of Europe's largest and most widespread popular uprisings, partly inspired by Luther's own revolt, which ended in massacres. Luther rejected the impertinency of the revolt. His article *Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants* appeared in May 1525 just as the rebels were being defeated on the fields of battle. Finally, much attention is given nowadays to how the Protestant idyll of his later years was disturbed by outbursts of anti-Semitism, which is all the more astonishing in view of the sincerity with which he, as a translator, tried to recover what he regarded as the unsurpassed grandeur of the original Hebrew language. It all adds to Luther's "complexity", no doubt. In judging Luther, there always remains some troublesome element or other to check too much enthusiasm.

## 10. Luther's body of writing

In his account of the tower experience, Luther is simply being frank about the fact that he experienced his decisive moment of revelation in a lavatory. During a retrospective discussion of the events which caused the spiritual upheaval in Germany now known as the Reformation, he shared a simple, comical story with those who happened to share his table, reflecting his merry temper. A famous scene from the history of philosophy may further our understanding of Luther's grotesque autobiographical note, namely the one concerning the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, recorded by Aristotle and commented on by Heidegger (1967, p. 185-186). Heraclitus was discovered by visitors sitting near a backing oven to keep himself warm. He invited them in and, noting their embarrassment, encouraged them to proceed by adding: "Here too the gods do dwell". According to Heidegger, common opinion expects to find famous philosophers in a more suitable position, absorbed in their thoughts. They want to meet thinkers. Instead, these visitors are confronted with an inconspicuous, commonplace scene: someone warming himself near a backing oven, taking care of everyday, down-to-earth, physical needs. Lutherans no doubt would have preferred the revelation to happen in a more proper location, while reading the Bible for instance, contemplating, absorbed in thoughts. But Luther laughs at them, adding, "Here too, in this cloaca, the Holy Spirit dwells" – a scene emphasizing the proximity of the commonplace and the sublime, a truly genealogical scene, revealing the comic, trivial, down-to-earth origin of moral and noetic truths, comparable to Archimedes in his bath tub. The body is not an obstacle to think, although this is how Nietzsche experienced his ailing body, tormenting him with headaches. Rather, Heraclitus,

Archimedes and Luther think in a bodily way.

Luther's comic, auto-biographical connection of revelation with defecation relied on the fact that in both cases it had been a difficult delivery. According to Bakhtin', also Socrates' self-characterization as a "midwife" is a case of carnivalesque debasement, transforming the spiritual experience of enlightenment into a physical achievement of the body, notably the body's lower half, and defecation and delivery are the two principal events in the life of the grotesque body (1968, p. 319). Bergson (1940/1969) likewise points out that, as soon as the body is allowed to interfere, an infiltration of the comical is to be dreaded, and this is why in serious genres (like tragedy for example) the hero's physical needs are hardly ever mentioned. He neither eats, nor drinks, nor warms himself in public. Even to sit down and have a rest is hazardous for tragic heroes.

Young Luther had begun to hate his severe and punishing God and to develop a grudge against Him, even up to hoping that there was no God at all. What he discovered was that terms like "guilt" or "justice" should not be taken as suggesting some kind of economic relationship with God, implying that one's account will be settled and one's sins will be balanced against one's works. Rather, we are "rectified" by God through faith – an explanation which is supported by the etymology of the German word for justice: *Gerechtigkeit* – we are not judged, but rectified, made straight, erected, resurrected, as an act of grace. We cannot "earn" our deliverance, nor can we demand to be delivered in view of our achievements, because God does not keep accounts. The very lines that had been blocking his understanding of the Scriptures became subverted and he felt as if re-born.

Now it has been argued, as was already pointed out, that such a reading of the word "justice" was not at all original or unprecedented.<sup>183</sup> In fact, he himself had been using this interpretation himself before he really, *physically* grasped its true significance. The experience entails a basic change of mood, and what is born is not a particular interpretation, but a new form of subjectivity, of being-in-the-world. Both Grisar and his Lutheran critics miss this point when they finally agree that, notwithstanding the amount of ink spent on it, the issue of locality is trivial compared to the content, which they see as that what really matters. But from the point of view of laughter the content (the correct interpretation of *iustitia Dei*) is in itself a purely scholarly dispute. What is important is that in Luther's case a shift on the level of the signifier had a bodily, somatic and physiological effect. A new truth emerged in this vehement interaction between body and signifier (Zwart 1998). From the point of view of laughter, Luther remained loyal to his truth event, instead of giving in to the compartmentalization between the serious and the residual. Luther's rereading of the troublesome phrase was an experience of deliverance, of both spiritual and physical

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<sup>183</sup> Luther refers to it as the 'passive' reading of justice, as opposed to the 'active' reading which implies that salvation has to be earned by us.

relief.<sup>184</sup> The cloaca scene is a perfect Rabelais-like rendering of this decisive event. Rather than separating content from context (or body from text), we ought to stress their basic connection. Luther's experience of revelation concurs with genealogy as a philosophical method, most notably the claim that the historical beginning of a serious discourse (such as Protestant theology) is human, all too human, perhaps even ridiculous; it is something which has to do with nutrition, digestion and defecation, with food, drink and bodily existence. Truth is something which reverberates in an embodied manner (either paralysing us or releasing us) rather than descending from heaven as pure text.<sup>185</sup>

The image of a monk pondering the Scriptures while dwelling in a latrine reads like a scene borrowed from the popular genres of laughter. The terrible is overcome by connecting it to the body's material lower half. Fear and obstipation are finally overcome by a roar of laughter, making life possible again, and allowing Luther's vitality to produce an enormous bulk of writing.<sup>186</sup> Luther finds himself delivered from his spiritual burden which had caused him to deteriorate physically as well.<sup>187</sup> The reaction of his body confirmed the theological value of his new truth and he must have heralded the physical reaction much like shamans will welcome the rain they finally manage to produce. Never again is he to renounce his laughter, his merry truth. The ghastly obscurity of the gothic night finally gives way to daybreak, and his basic laughter will prevent his mind from ever being drawn into the realm of fear again. It is a scene of laughter that represents a complete transfiguration of spiritual. As a youth, Luther was "dead drunk" with papal teachings and almost drowned by them. His desperate, persistent struggle to understand the very phrases that terrified him so much finally enabled him to understand that, rather than damned we are straightened. From now on, the Scriptures convey a gay promise, and Luther's new way of reading the Bible makes life possible again. It was his second birth, staged in accordance with

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184 'A revelation, that is, a sudden inner flooding with light, is always associated with a repudiation, a cleansing, a kicking away; and it would be entirely in accord with Luther's great freedom in such matters if he were to experience and to report this repudiation in frankly physical terms... Scholars would prefer to have it happen as they achieve their own reflected revelation - sitting at a desk. Luther's statement that he was, in fact, sitting somewhere else, implies that in his creative moment the tension of nights and days of meditation found release throughout his being - and nobody who has read Luther's private remarks can doubt that his total being always included his bowels' (Erikson, 1958/1962, p. 205).

185 Nietzsche, Freud and others emphasised the 'human, all too human', down-to-earth origins of lofty and serious convictions.

186 Erikson points out that, after the tower experience, Luther changed from a highly restrained and retentive individual into an 'explosive' person. Moreover, Luther refers to himself as incontinent, unable to keep it up any longer, etc. when it comes to writing. Cf. 'Will er aber nicht aufhören, so las er mich mit seinen buchlein, die der Teufel aus im speiet und scheisset' [5: 5659].

187 As Nietzsche puts it, the soul needs a cloaca too to rid herself of her burdens and her waste – such as the idea of God, but fails to add: replacing the old god with a new one (*Human, All Too Human II*, The Wanderer and his Shadow, § 46).

the genre conventions of popular laughter.

Someone who deplores the persistent effort of Luther's later readers to disavow the grotesque aspects of his achievement is Lacan (1986, 7:2) as we have seen, who stresses that Luther's digestive and excremental imagery voiced the sense of exile and forlornness experienced by Luther and his contemporaries at the close of the gothic epoch. The gothic solution of exercise and work seemed untenable and Luther's excremental imagery pushes this despair to its extreme, although it is still audible in contemporary forms of uneasiness and discontent, because it is the very experience to which modern culture tried to provide an answer. Yet, apart from giving voice to an experience of despair by depicting the human world as the devil's privy, Luther's digestive and excremental images provided a therapy, a way out, a moral solution transforming gothic despair into a grotesque kind of yeah-saying (*Bejahung*). While transforming the very part of his body that had worked as a barrier into a locus of jouissance and relief, he turned himself into a prolific writer, opening up a writing career as a practice of the self.

The monk's privy is indeed a symbol, a condensation of gothic life and Luther's experience allowed the world to emerge in a different light, producing the kind of moral subjectivity presupposed by Luther's theological doctrine. But although he subsequently elaborated his insight in a propositional manner, the truth which he experienced as such was a revelatory event (*αλήθεια*). And Luther's story exemplifies the inherent connection between a revelatory truth (which may physically shake or stupefy or paralyse or nauseate us) and bodily experience.

## 11. Whether for the sake of their conscience or for the sake of their paunches

Notwithstanding the aura of rupture and revolution which surrounded him, Luther was the kind of author who heavily relied on and remained fundamentally responsive to the "word of the other". He was not at all an egocentric author bent on originality, on creating something *ex nihilo*. Luther responded, and his writing was closely connected with his reading. Every year, we are told, he would read the complete Bible twice, while keeping a watchful eye on the theological writings of his contemporaries. We cannot understand Luther's work without a persistent awareness of this dimension of responsiveness.<sup>188</sup> Luther allowed himself to be addressed by a text that was

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<sup>188</sup> Luther's way of reading was active and dialogical, in accordance with Bakhtin's idea of the 'responsible act'. The word longs to be understood and is desperately in need of a responsive, responsible, righteous reader, anticipated by the word from the very beginning, although he may not belong to the readership initially addressed by it. It is the task of the reader to become the one who will rescue and preserve the desperate word, so that the dreadful apprehension of remaining forever misunderstood will give way to the genre-producing joy of recognition, bound to produce an opening to the future (Simons 1990). In the case of Luther, the very word 'righteousness' (*iustitia*) called for a righteous reading and provided this aperture to

already there. He responded to the word of the Other as a recipient, a discursive steward or custodian, saving the text from misunderstandings. In an at times polemical, at times jocular vein he enters into discussions with others, in order to retrieve and restore the word of the Other. His translation of the Scriptures into the German vernacular remains his most outstanding achievement – a *Sprachereignis* (Ebeling 1964), a discursive event of epoch-making significance. In his effort to respond to the language of the Bible, to *go back to the Bible*, he creates the German language. The bulk of his writing basically consisted of comments on the Scriptures. His proper genre was parody, provided the word is not used in a modern sense (referring to a particular comical genre), but taken literally (*παρά-ᾠδή* or *παρωδία*): as an accompanying chant, an effort to respond to, to retrieve or revive an already existing, but apparently obscured word. The libretto of Bach's (Lutheran) *Matthäus Passion* is a parody. Luther's word was basically responsive, but being responsive is not the same as being repetitious. Parody means responding in such a way that something is recovered, that something of significance is created in its own right, but standing on the shoulders of the primordial version. Luther's basic objective as a translator was not to provide his readership with a literal and accurate rendering but to restore the original to life again, to recover and contribute in its vitality, to retrieve the directness and liveliness of a text (the gay news of the gospel) which had become far too official and momentous. The proximity to everyday life and practical examples provide the comical effect. Yet in Luther's translations of the Bible, the bold, comical and responsive aspects of parody are decidedly present.<sup>189</sup> Luther succeeded in familiarising the Bible, literally.

Luther's technique allowed the language and idiom of the market-square to appear in print and enter published discourse.<sup>190</sup> Many words borrowed from popular discourse were used in a written form for the first time by Luther. And, as Bakhtin observed in his book on Rabelais, it is a language whose grotesque inner logic relies very much on references to the body. This, rather than an idiosyncratic anal "pathology" (Brown 1957/1970), explains why Luther writes the way he does. Luther's laughter is a collective and historical, rather than a purely individual phenomenon, and it is pathological not in the pejorative or clinical sense, but in the sense of not being devoid of pathos. For example, while discussing the decline of monastic life, he takes the position that, should some of the monks prefer to remain in the monastery, "whether for the sake of their paunches or for the sake of their

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the future!

<sup>189</sup> According to Bakhtin (1988) the same goes for Calvin's use of the French language: "The language of French literary prose was created by Calvin and Rabelais - but Calvin's language ... was an intentional and conscious lowering of, almost a travesty on, the sacred language of the Bible" (p. 71). The middle strata of the national languages, represented by Calvin and others, were perceived as a denigrating travesty of higher spheres. The language of Calvin (and, one might add, of Luther) were "to a significant extent born out of parody" (p. 71).

<sup>190</sup> Cf. Janssen (1915): "Er schöpfte aus den reichen Quellen der Volkstümlichen Redeweise; in volkstümlicher Beredsamkeit kamen ihm wenige gleich" (p. 252).

conscience”, they should not be driven out by force. Such images express a way of being-in-the-world, of coming to terms with the actual situation.

As indicated, Bakhtin stresses the enormous importance of extra-literary sources in Rabelais and the same applies to Luther: “Rabelais’ first and foremost source was the unofficial side of speech, with its rich store of curses ... with its various indecencies, the enormous weight carried by words and expressions connected with hard drinking. To this very day, the unofficial side of speech reflects a Rabelaisian degree of indecency in it, of words concerning drunkenness and defecation and so forth, but all this is by now clichéd and no longer creative” (1988, p. 238). Like Rabelais, Luther incorporated into his writings the “crude frankness of folk passions”, the jokes, short stories, proverbs, puns, catchwords and sayings of popular culture. At that time, the basic truth revealed by Luther could only be accessed by laughter. Where Ebeling (1964) talks about *Luthervergessenheit*, it is the grobian and grotesque aspect of his achievement that fell into oblivion. The official picture of Luther became one-sided. As Ebeling himself points out, although Luther’s work is often considered the dawn of the modern age, his proximity to medieval life should not be neglected, nor should the fact that in some important respects he even severely retarded and impeded the development of modern, civic society. All efforts to distinguish between modern content and medieval residue obscure the fact that, from his spiritual transformation called the tower experience onwards, Luther belonged neither to the Middle Ages, nor to the modern age, but to the sixteenth century, an epoch in its own right, under the sway of laughter. According to Ebeling, the tendency to conceal certain embarrassing aspects of Luther’s achievement must no doubt be attributed to something “uncanny” in his work, of which modern readers would rather not be reminded, but this does not allow us to neutralize this “something” by considering it as merely residual. Rather, Luther’s grotesque laughter was a product of his rupture with gothic life. The tower experience, Luther’s tremendous, Herculean roar of laughter, was an experience which allowed an unprecedented but responsive form of moral subjectivity to constitute itself. This and not the “theological content” of the experience explains the astonishing impact on German spiritual and political life. It was an experience quite at odds with, yet ultimately absorbed by forms of etatism and top-down centralism which were developing at that time. It was an experience that derived its convincing energy and vitality from popular laughter.<sup>191</sup>

Indeed, virtually every introduction to Luther’s work contains cautionary notes

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<sup>191</sup> Brown (1959/1968) takes a Freudian stance and pays much attention to the tower experience and other ‘anal’ features of Luther’s writing: ‘Luther with his freedom from hypocrisy, his all-embracing vitality [...] records the scene of his crucial religious experience with untroubled candor’ (p. 182). In Luther’s work, Brown claims, the devil emerges as an ‘anal’ character, continuously throwing shit on everyone, showing his posterior and spreading horrible smells, while Luther himself also relied on anal devices (even producing farts) in order to defend himself. But all these images and gestures were quite at home in the popular comical literature, the time-old ‘wisdom of folly’ (p. 202) which Luther (much like his contemporary Rabelais) exemplified.

urging us not to pay too much attention to his “grobian” laughter, even though it is Luther’s most important literary technique, quite at home in the sixteenth century<sup>192</sup> which Luther happened to master dexterously. Those who feel embarrassed by it are reminded by editors and curators of “mitigating” circumstances, such as the fact that Luther’s adversaries relied on jeering as well. But the internal explanation is more convincing: grobianism came easily to him. Ebeling joins the choir by claiming that Luther’s uncanny gift for polemical discourse exceeds all proper limits and often becomes unbearable, but he attributes it to the spirit of the age, while the true impetus behind his work allegedly must be located elsewhere (“daß ganz anderswo als in solchen extreme Symptomen das eigentliche Movens zu suchen ist, was ihm zu schreiben treibt” (1964, p. 51).

This strategy concurs with the method of compartmentalization, which I consider absolutely fatal when it comes to understanding the discursive phenomenon named Luther. His grobianism reflects a basic truth only accessible to laughter – and laughter is indispensable for recognizing it. For Luther it was quite pointless to argue with one’s opponents as long as their basic mode of thinking and reading remained incompatible with the one fleshed out by Luther himself. Grobianism is not an ornament that the modern reader no longer appreciates. Luther sincerely felt he could not but consider the spokesmen of the official, established truth a bunch of fools. His grobianism is the expression of a fundamental difference that cannot be solved by argument. Laughter is a basic mood or mode of thought which allowed him to raise his voice. It is a way of being-in-the-world, a rupture with the mood of fear and melancholy that had condemned him to silence. Luther was reformed, transfigured by laughter. While his enemies relied on the kind of jeer that did not really laugh, Luther’s laughter was truly gay. He practiced a different genre of laughter that allowed the Word to re-emerge and ensured that, while he was “drinking beer in Wittenberg” (a famous centre of beer brewing at the time, which was its main industry) the Word was doing its work all by itself. What was unprecedented was not his “grobian” laughter as such (Luther borrowed it from the carnivalesque genres of popular culture) but the fact that the very strongholds of medieval seriousness, the serious genres of theological discourse, were suddenly pervaded and overwhelmed by it without being able to offer sufficient resistance. The compartmentalisation of life into a comic and a serious realm – expelling laughter to popular and rural quarters and genres – collapsed as also the serious realms of society were suddenly drowned in a gargantuan burst of laughter.

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<sup>192</sup> Saint Grobianus was mentioned in 1494 by Sebastian Brant in his *Narrenschiff* (“Ship of fools”), who called him a ‘coarse fool’. In 1549 Friedrich Dedekind, student at Wittenberg, produced a poem in Latin entitled *Grobianus*, which before long was translated into German by Kaspar Scheidt, father-in-law of Johann Fischart, who was to produce a versification of the *Eulenspiegel* novel – a literary work that, according to Bakhtin (1968) and others, represented the genre in optima forma.

## 12. The court jester's privilege

In his introduction to the first volume of his collected writings in German,<sup>193</sup> Luther emphasizes, referring to Saint Paul, that the Gospels turn all other books into utter buffoonery. The more one becomes acquainted with the Bible, the more one is likely to dislike even one's own writings and discard them as mere knavery. Those who do take pride in what they have written are asses.

In the year 1520 Luther published several of his most important writings, such as *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation: On How to Improve the Christian Ranks* (“An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation: Von des christlichen Standes Besserung”) in which the “three walls” of the papal stronghold are pulled down and the Pope's authority (when it comes to interpreting the Scriptures) is questioned. This treatise is preceded by some introductory remarks in which Luther refers to himself as a fool or court jester who owes the world an act of foolishness – in accordance with the popular saying that, whatever the world should undertake to do, a monk ought to be present, even if it had to be a painted one. Luther points out that, more than once, a fool has uttered wise thoughts, and quotes Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God (1 Corinthians 3:18). As indicated earlier: because of his caps and bells he claims a right to frank or unrestricted speech.<sup>194</sup> Rome is compared to the Antwerp Fair, while Luther explains how the papal regime itself parodies certain devices that once were of serious origin. Indeed, Luther appeals to the court jester's privilege of unrestricted speech (*Ich sage nach meinem Hofrecht frei heraus*) when he incites all monks, nuns and priests to violate their vows of chastity – for (speaking on behalf of the body) it is as idiotic to ban sexual intercourse as it would be to ban eating, drinking or defecation (as already cited).

Yes, subsequently, Luther uses the language of laughter to unleash a counter-attack on the culture of laughter. All annual fairs and feasts are to be abolished since they only encourage alcohol abuse and idleness, and are to be made working days. The “joke” here is that, although Luther no longer relied on “works”, he was very much in favour of *work*.<sup>195</sup> It is about time the Germans stop roaming about like wandering scholars or mendicant monks. They should forget about their

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<sup>193</sup> Werke, 50, pp. 657-661.

<sup>194</sup> On Luther's comparison of himself to a court jester see for example his letter to Elector Frederick the Wise from the Wartburg (24 February 1522) as well as the remark during one of his prandial conversations cited in chapter two: “Wir haben einen frommen keiser... Er ist stille und frum. Ich halte, er redet in einem jar nicht so viel als ich in einem tage” [3:3245].

<sup>195</sup> Although Protestantism initially succeeded because it promised the same reward using less effort (only faith, no ‘works’), when Protestantism managed to seize the northern parts of Europe, less ‘works’ soon proved to imply more ‘work’ (Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human II*, Mixed Opinions and Aphorisms, § 97).



foolish monastic vows and start earning a decent living. Mendicant orders and peregrine guilds are to be dismantled: they serve as a cover for tramps who want to continue their roaming nomadic existence. Universities are to be reformed, and Aristotle is to be expelled. Luther announces that, notwithstanding the many efforts to make him shut up, the fool will continue to shout his truth. In short, this treatise is an unstable mixture of laughter and discipline, or counter-laughter. The ambivalent language nonetheless relies on time-old, comic and popular devices of unmasking (seeing in phenomena like pilgrimage nothing but a pretext for idleness and alcohol abuse, serving bodily rather than spiritual needs – a popular wisdom of long standing).

Even the more “serious” parts of his writing are never devoid of gaiety, foolishness, and laughter. On the other hand, there is one particular text that seems quite devoid of serious content while abounding in grobianism to such an extent that the very fact that Luther ever came to write it tends to be sincerely deplored by experts: his disagreeable libel against Heinrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, known as *Wider Hans Worst* (Against Harry Sausage). Luther’s libel *Wider Hans Worst* (1541) is generally considered the cusp of his grobianism. In fact, Luther joined a defamatory polemic that had been going on for a while between Friedrich von Sachsen and Heinrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. Luther took the floor because Heinrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel had accused him of calling Friedrich von Sachsen “Hans Worst” – “Harry Sausage”, a buffoon-like figure belonging to popular grobian literature, and included in the cast of Brandt’s *Narrenschiff*. To start with, Luther claims to enjoy being abused, for it makes him feel gay which is the perfect mood for writing (“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you; rejoice and be exceedingly glad, Matthew 5:11). Furthermore, he admits that he often refers to the fat, coarse and clumsy oaf “Hans Worst”, particularly while preaching, but maintains he never used this name with regard to Friedrich von Sachsen.<sup>196</sup> Heinrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel himself must be considered the perfect “Hans Worst”, however. After this introduction, Luther persistently refers to Heinrich as Harry Sausage, and this is one of the basic techniques of the grobian genre, of which Luther displays his mastery in a remarkably carefree way.

Now experts tend to agree that this deplorable libel, in which Luther clearly violates all limits of decency, should not be considered as reflecting Luther’s “content”. In my view, however, this is unfortunate, for in addition to the fact that it informs us of the manner in which theological “content” and grobian “rhetoric” are intrinsically connected, it is also a remarkable treatise with regard to content as such. Luther himself never deplored the fact that he wrote it.

In fact, grobianism seems necessary for invoking a certain mood which allows for

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<sup>196</sup> Hans Worst or Wurst is one of those ‘national clownish characters’ of popular culture that are ‘called by the names of national dishes’ (Bakhtin 1968, p. 298).

Luther's basic insight to be appreciated. In *Wider Hans Worst*, Luther distinguishes between two worlds. The one is the dark, gothic world of terror, alcohol abuse and foolishness, a world surging between abyss-like nothingness and boundless jest. The other is the world of a gay and Christian truth. And gay laughter is the indispensable hinge that allows us to leave the one and enter the other. By mocking terror, truth becomes possible. Grobian laughter means expanding one aspect of the gothic world (the fool's laughter) to such an extent that its sombre and fearful aspect, the ghastly abyss of divine punishment, is bound to collapse. If gothic seriousness can be compared to the still of night, grobianism is the break of day. All this is hinted at in Luther's infamous libel. Luther himself refers to grobianism as "speaking plain German", to make things quite clear and prevent misunderstandings. Furthermore, he refers to the Bible, some parts of which (*Ezekiel 23* for instance) surpass even Luther's libel in coarseness.

According to Luther, the Word of Christ seems to have vanished from the earth without a trace, for human beings are once again wallowing in the mire like hogs. This is not a metaphor or figure of speech because for Luther, deprived of the Word of God, humans really are bound to become like hogs wallowing in the mire.<sup>197</sup> This is what he himself had been doing, Luther emphasises, when suddenly he found himself rectified by the Word of God. This Word is not something to negotiate about. For those who have been transformed are rectified. Instead of erring, their path is secured by the simple phrase *Haec dixit Dominus*. Luther simply has to shout and abuse in order to shout down the terrible noise produced by sophists and epicureans, eclipsing the quiet voice of truth. To be able to read the Bible is an act of grace. We have to become a certain kind of person, rectified rather than terrified by it. For Luther, Tetzl was one of those shouting voices: a grosser Clamant on the market-square of gothic life, not someone to negotiate with, but someone to abuse, for in Luther's perception this was the only language he understood.<sup>198</sup> Luther's aim was to expose a certain world, a certain basic mood (the late medieval gothic mood of terror) by exaggerating its laughter at the expense of its terror. Luther's violent roar of laughter made a new sensibility possible. Bakhtin's view on the carnivalesque laughter helps us to assess Luther's grobianism. Carnavalesque abuse, Bakhtin assures us, does not merely degrade its target, for it familiarises first of all. The terrifying powers of church and state are humanized as the intimidating distance between power and subject is reduced. Terms of abuse convey the basic insight that humans are all basically equal

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<sup>197</sup> Erikson (1958/1962) refers to such images as 'porcography' (p. 197).

<sup>198</sup> Experts inform us that Tetzl, really a dedicated intellectual, was badly mistreated by Luther. Many of the burlesque scenes attributed to him by the Protestant tradition were in fact borrowed from late medieval popular literature such as *Pfaffe Amis* and *Fahrende Schuler*. Well known examples are the story that Tetzl once used his rhetorical talents to present the Roman satirist Juvenal as a Saint, or the story, mentioned by Luther in *Wider Hans Worst*, that he only just managed to escape from being drowned in the Inn as a punishment for his sexual licentiousness.

because of the daily life of their bodies, regardless of official (artificial) separations of class, profession and political influence. Reality is familiarized and the object is brought up close. Laughter is directed at those who are unable to recognize the comic nature of all pretensions to eternity and immutability (Bakhtin 1968, p. 212/213). Due to jolly abuse, the frightening silhouettes of the representatives of eternal truth turn out to be human beings just like us. Jolly abuse implies perceiving the world fearlessly and impiously. Laughter reconciles through the physical proximity that is suggested by grotesque, degrading images and Luther's jolly abuse echoes the experience of the collapse of gothic intimidation.

Still, this type of jolly abuse seems at odds with the hostile negativity which at times resurges in Luther's treatment of opponents, especially in the case of the revolting peasants. In such cases, his rhetoric seems merely abusive and intimidating. His language becomes violent and grim. Rather than transforming the terrifying into the familiar, the familiar (peasants) is now transformed into the terrifying, as peasants are depicted as hordes of gothic devils, to be exterminated without consideration or delay – in short, Luther's speech at times reflects a sudden and disastrous generic shift.

Another specimen of the parodical or grobian genre is Luther's treatise *On the Papacy at Rome, Against the Celebrated Romanist at Leipzig* – a title which is ironical since the Romanist at Leipzig who had attacked him was not that famous.<sup>199</sup> Luther claims that, although he had already suffered quite a bit of slander, now suddenly a gigantic and well-equipped figure has entered the ring. Fortunately, on closer inspection, he proves an idiot on stilts. Luther justifies his recourse to jest by indicating that his adversaries had been treating the Scriptures disrespectfully, as if they contained mere fairy tales produced by a professional jester on Shrove Tuesday. Since the Word of God evokes no more respect than a fool's prandial speech, Luther feels compelled to suspend seriousness and resort to jest: gross fools have to be addressed in a gross manner. Blackguards had been mocking pious German simpletons long enough, pulling their legs for quite some time, convinced that they could get away with it, but now former German drunkards had finally come to recognize that they had let themselves be taken in too many times.

Luther's argument focusses on his adversary's claim that, just as a body cannot do without a corporeal head, neither can the church. According to Luther, this is Shrove Tuesday dialectics. Since the church is a spiritual community, it is in need of a spiritual head (i.e. Christ) but can perfectly do without a corporeal one. In fact, a corporeal head would fit a spiritual body like a painted Shrove Tuesday mask would fit a corporeal one. Only a Shrove Tuesday fool sees the Pope as a head. Luther no longer allows his legs to be pulled by such sophisms now that God endowed him with a gay and fearless mind. Several elements of the popular culture of laughter are

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199 'Von dem Papsttum zu Rom, wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig'. Werke 6, pp. 285-324.

present in this treatise. The giant on stilts represents the grotesque strategy of transforming the terrible into the ridiculous – a strategy employed by Luther by continuously mocking the once dreaded spokesmen of official truth. Furthermore, he jocularly refers to several instances of comic prandial discourse, such as the fool’s speech on Shrove Tuesday, as well as to student drinking habits and mock debates. His final jest entails showing that this spokesman of official truth is himself mocking the Pope by comparing him to a head – again an image borrowed from grotesque popular culture. Yet, again, while using the principle of laughter, Luther at the same time distances himself from it, announcing the instalment of new forms of official speech about to replace outdated forms of power which have been sufficiently ridiculed and now seem about to collapse.

### 13. Interminable analysis or final judgement?

In the early sixteenth century, laughter had become indispensable to bring about the collapse of gothic seriousness and the emergence of unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity that transgressed the late-medieval compartmentalization of moral life into the serious and the grotesque. But even if one agrees that laughter as such could play that role, the excessive coarseness and crudity of Luther’s laughter has been considered deplorable. The laughter of Erasmus for instance, while displaying a fair amount of gaiety, laughed in a more humane and civilized manner. Is it still possible to side with Luther, or rather: was his laughter really gay? To address this question, I will briefly point out the difference between Luther’s and Erasmus’ laughter, and subsequently consider the seemingly pathological features of Luther’s laughter as analysed by Erikson, before turning to the question what form of moral subjectivity was supported by it.

When comparing Luther with Erasmus, we must be aware of the fact that both antagonists already made this comparison themselves: Erasmus reproached Luther for being excessively violent and crude, and Luther reproached Erasmus for being too ambivalent. According to Luther, Erasmus laughed at everything and everyone, persisting in his ambivalence even in the face of Christ. Let us have a closer look.

It was pointed out that Luther’s works, notably his *Tischreden*, contain many comic scenes recognisable from popular comic genres of the sixteenth Century. Even the scholarly world seemed full of gaiety for him, with one exception: God Himself was not to be trifled with.<sup>200</sup> Whenever that happened, Luther’s laughter immediately gave way to furious rage. And here Luther distinguished himself from Erasmus, whom he reproached for laughing at everything and everyone, including (the Word of) God, whereas he himself, although given to gross mockery when

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<sup>200</sup> Diabolus ridet omnes, sed eo excepto, de quo Paulus dicit: Non irridetur, 3: 2993; cf. 3327: ‘Ich kann auch scherzen, trinken, lachen, fröhlich sein, possen reißen etc, sed quidquid de verbo tractatur aut tractandum est, da verzir mich keiner und lasse viel lachen’.

dealing with his fellow human beings, remained pious to God. Erasmus stopped at nothing and finally seemed to include even Christ in his ridicule, or at least in his ambivalences, but Luther maintained that one can laugh at everything except for the Scriptures [3: 2834, 2866, 3010]. In short, Luther reproached Erasmus for not endorsing this one basic constraint (the finitude of the otherwise immense set of laughable things). But he also reproaches Erasmus' laughter for being too restricted. Although at first sight Erasmus' relentless laughter seems consistent, he still leaves something (or rather, someone) out, namely himself. While exposing everyone and everything to ridicule, he himself claims to be wise. According to Luther, this is a basic flaw, for whoever wishes to remain faithful to God must become a fool in the eyes of the world, which is what Erasmus refuses to do.<sup>201</sup> By means of his ambiguous, "amphibolic" language [3: 3010, 3284, 3302], which threatens to ridicule even Christ, he is protecting himself. Although on the surface it seems as though he will not stop at anything, eventually he is unable to laugh at himself. In the case of Luther's laughter, however, his own Self is decidedly included. By making a fool of himself, proclaiming himself a buffoon and a simpleton, he is showing his regard for Christ.<sup>202</sup> Ultimately, it is Luther who stops at nothing – albeit nothing in this world. While Erasmus' laughter comes to a halt before his own genius, Luther includes himself in his universal derision. He laughs at lazy priests, at unfortunate butchers, but also at himself. He stops at no-thing, but stop before God. Idols can be ridiculed, God cannot; we can and should laugh about ourselves, but not about God. The *stultitia mundi* does include us, but not Him. Erasmus's laughter is an experience of self-assertion, for the laughing self remains unchallenged. According to Luther, however, the only person who should be excluded from ridicule was Christ.<sup>203</sup>

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201 I focus on Luther's judgement of Erasmus without passing a judgement on the latter myself and without verifying whether his laughter is really ironical and self-assertive, for such an endeavour would be beyond the scope of this chapter. I will not conceal, however, that my personal judgement is much more sympathetic than Luther's and that I consider Erasmus' laughter less restricted and, above all, less 'ironical' than is suggested here. Huizinga (1950a, 1950b) stresses his wittiness and jest. Praise of Folly is considered the paragon of Renaissance laughter. Even the Scriptures become the target of his playful wit. According to Huizinga, modern man is unable to appreciate Erasmus' gaiety and jest because Luther's earnestness and resoluteness has alienated us from it. Due to Luther, Huizinga argues, we tend to consider his devotion superficial or even deficient.

202 In his prandial conversations he often refers to himself as a fool, and prays that God may act as guardian of simpletons like himself – *unser Herrgott muß der narren furmundt sein* (3: 2835), cf. *Wir sint hanswurst* (3: 2849).

203 This appraisal of Erasmus is supported by Kierkegaard. He considers Erasmus an outstanding example of irony (1989, p. 261) but stresses the extent to which Erasmus' laughter differs from what he refers to as the 'devout mind': '[Much like the ironic subject] the devout mind [or pious mentality] also declares that all is vanity but ... it makes no exception of its own person ... on the contrary, it also must be set aside. In irony, however, since everything is shown to be vanity, the subject becomes free. The more vain everything becomes, all the lighter, emptier, and volatilized the subject becomes. And while everything is in the process of becoming vanity, the ironic subject does not become vain in his own eyes but rescues his own

As an unsurpassed and gifted reader of the Bible, however, Luther clearly recognized the ambivalence of many of its phrases, its vulnerable spots, susceptible to a parodical or even grotesque reading. At times he considered this the work of the devil, whom he referred to as a rogue who, finding himself unable to challenge the Word of God directly, ridiculed it from within by coining phrases which allow or even suggest grotesque associations with bodily functions, thus contributing significantly to the merriment of idle readers. Luther mentions as an example a line taken from the Psalter – *Flabit spiritus, et fluent aquae* – which could be interpreted as suggesting that God produced a fart so that the waters would be stirred. Indeed, Luther adds, many a good line was sullied in this way. But as indicated earlier, it did not escape Luther that Christ himself had recourse to mockery, regarding his own prandial colloquia as similar to the discussions over dinner of Christ and his disciples, referred to by Luther as *iundissima et familiarissima* [3: 3286]. What is revealed by the Scriptures is idiotic from the point of view of reason and experience.<sup>204</sup> And yet we cannot resist this truth, however ridiculous it may seem. Erasmus, however, refuses to become a fool and simpleton, that is, a true Christian.

Now provided we grant this, that Erasmus' laughter – unlike truly "Christian" laughter – suffered from this basic flaw, then what about the next charge, concerning the excessive coarseness of Luther's laughter? Why did he find it necessary to call the Pope an ass and a devil?<sup>205</sup> As was mentioned in a previous section, Erikson develops a psychoanalytical perspective on the problem of Luther's grobian excess. What does it amount to?

Erikson announces that he will "interpret in psychological terms whatever phenomena clinical experience and psychoanalytic thought have made [him] recognize are dependent on man's demonstrable psychic structure" (p. 21), implying that both Luther's achievements and his ailing and idiosyncrasies are to be explained in terms of his neurotic or manic-depressive state of mind and as expressions of his "partially unsuccessful solution of the identity crisis of youth" (p. 242). Such an approach exemplifies Bakhtin's observation that in the modern picture "sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the private and psychological level" (1968, p. 321). Kierkegaard already referred to Luther as a "patient" – not in the clinical sense though, but as someone with a passion for expressing and describing his physical and spiritual suffering. Moreover, Kierkegaard unequivocally supports the view that, in his later years, Luther's personality and achievements suffer a remarkable decline. He complains about the mediocrity and staleness of his table-talks as well as his folksy

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vanity" (p. 258).

<sup>204</sup> 3: 2843, 3022b, etc.; but notably 3:2970b where, after citing a line pronounced by Christ Himself, he laughs and claims that, from the point of view of reason, it is a gross lie: 'Deinde ridens dixit: Ratio dicit: Das ist ein grosse lügen'.

<sup>205</sup> 'Aut asinus fuit papa aut diabolus; asinus quod stupidissimus suos errores non intelligit, Diabolus, quod eos fovit et confirmavit" (3: 3027).

witticisms (such as the claim that a fart produced in Wittenberg is audible in Rome). Erikson basically subscribes to this view. Whereas young Luther's cause became his cure, in Luther's later years his rage as well as his laughter turned histrionic and grotesque.

Contrary to Erikson's position, however, I contend that laughter was the thing that cured him and that the laughter of his later years was still predominantly gay and quite in tune with the roar of laughter known as the tower experience. The grotesque story about the monk who experienced a sudden revelation while taking care of his bodily needs, as told by Luther in his later years, should not be separated from the spiritual transformation that actually took place during Luther's youth. Both episodes (the tower and the table) represent (albeit in their own way) the principle of laughter as it resounded during the early sixteenth Century. Whereas in the case of the tower experience Luther's laughter was still rather isolated (the experience of laughter as explored by Bataille), the convivial laughter of his later years was perhaps even more gay in the Bakhtinian sense of being carefree, comical and hospitable.

In modern retrospectives, much emphasis is laid on one particular aspect of the gothic frame of mind which, in the nineteenth century, came to be identified with the gothic per se: the aspect of gloomy terror. In reality, the gothic world had two aspects. Besides terror, reinforced by the sombre chorus of the mendicant orders, there was the popular cult of carnival, of license and leisure, of relief and release. An element of light-hearted silliness is clearly noticeable in the works and acts of Saint Francis, for instance, not only because of his predilection for preaching to birds, but also because, when God appealed to him to repair His house, he took this literally and immediately took it upon himself to restore the ruined chapel in which he was praying. Both aspects (humour and terror) existed side-by-side, and the early sixteenth century did not witness the resurgence of extinguished laughter so much as the sudden expansion of one aspect of gothic life (the laughing aspect) at the expense of its counter-aspect (the sombre backdrop of terror). Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* portrays besides terror and decline also gay poetry and popular farce, companies of fools and bursts of laughter, jolly festivals and comic processions. Therefore, instead of emphasizing a basic rupture between the gloomy, terrible Middle Ages on the one hand and the gay and merry Renaissance on the other, I would rather stress the basic continuity, i.e. Luther's indebtedness to medieval Catholic popular culture: the grotesque, pre-modern, pre-Protestant, "Catholic" nature of his laughter. Young "gothic" Luther had been a gloomy and depressed, but also gay fellow (*ein guter Geselle*) blessed with a musical gift, a remarkable fondness for lute-playing and singing, someone who appreciated the parodical, comical features of traditional student rituals. Many years later, while addressing a crowd of students, he urged them never to "piss in public" [Tischreden 4:5024].

The monastery constituted an environment which, due to its rigid regime of fasting, silence, isolation and deprivation, was designed to condition sobriety and to abolish laughter. But, as Erikson noted, Luther developed his own, folkish way of

resistance: a highly ambivalent over-obedience, an effort to make monkhood absurd from the very start and from within, by obeying its rules somewhat too scrupulously – a parodical strategy of ridicule via exaggerated obedience. Although initially one might consider excessive fasting as an expression of the total dominance of monastic power over the vital body, on further reflection it might turn out to be a phenomenon of resistance. After having confessed for hours, Luther would ask for special additional appointments in order to correct previous statements or add fresh exaggerations concerning his “sins”, thereby upsetting monastic efficiency. Those “sins” consisted, apart from spontaneous ejaculations, mainly of a chronic inclination towards mockery, profanation and blasphemous abuse while celebrating Mass.<sup>206</sup>

Luther’s final outburst in the tower was an irresistible roar that would turn into a collective experience, the impact of which was simply astonishing. Its outcome was one of renewal and liberation rather than destruction. And it was, of course, grotesque: closely connected with the body, with bodily resistance. What began as an experience of release, associated with defecation, before long became associated with abundant digestion: Luther’s comic reversal of medieval asceticism, his body growing voracious and grandiose, consuming and discharging gigantic portions, while his conversation abounded in references to the body’s lower half, to eating, drinking and sweating. Asceticism, as it was introduced by early Christianity, gave way to the recurrence of grotesque laughter, a change that was also reflected by Luther’s gargantuan production of published speech. This was his primal achievement and act of renewal: the transposition of the gay, unpublished spheres of speech into printed discourse, which resulted in official discourse being suddenly overwhelmed by the vernacular and the colloquial. Three former monks (Rabelais, Erasmus and Luther) were true contemporaries indeed.

Medieval theology had been marked by a tension between two views on laughter, the Aristotelian and the ascetic one (Posthumus Meyjes 1992). The Aristotelian view aimed at a middle ground between boorishness (absence of humour) and buffoonery (excess). According to Clemens of Alexandria, for example, human nature must not be smothered and repressed but managed and organized according to ethical standards. Likewise, laughter must be employed in a balanced and appropriate manner – an ideal often referred to as “urbanity” (as opposed to primitive provincial village laughter).<sup>207</sup> In the ascetic view, however, laughter was no longer tolerated but denied all civil rights. Unlike pagan deities, the Jewish-Christian God allegedly did not laugh.<sup>208</sup> Christian devotion was considered to be incompatible with laughter

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<sup>206</sup> Perhaps this inclination to abuse was a remainder of the ancient pagan habit of mocking and insulting the deity by means of comic pledges and oaths (already referred to above) as ancient cultic forms of derision.

<sup>207</sup> In his *Poetics* Aristotle (1960) tells us that, according to some, comedy was derived from komai, a Dorian dialect noun referring to ‘outlying villages’. The comic poets used to wander from village to village, being excluded contemptuously from the city.

<sup>208</sup> With some exceptions, for example Psalm 2:4.



and John Chrysostom declared that jest and laughter are not from God but from the devil (Bakhtin 1968, p. 73). Yet the idea of *urbanitas* as well as the idea of the opportune, appropriate joke was never abolished altogether. The Aristotelian view was rehabilitated by Thomas Aquinas: laughter is natural and admissible provided it is civilized rather than excessive. Protestantism was usually opposed to laughter and countless Protestant moralists explicitly rejected popular carnivalesque cheerfulness, while Calvin himself rebuked Rabelais in a rather stern manner (1984, pp. 138-140).<sup>209</sup> Yet according to Luther, gaiety (even if it turns excessive at times) should count as an appropriate Christian mood, while a bold prank might count as an argument. In short, rather than endorsing either the Aristotelian or the ascetic view, he sided with unrestricted laughter.

Lutheran orthodoxy, however, made every effort to turn theology into a serious genre once again. The distinction between nucleus and residue, or the tendency of producing allegorical interpretations of straightforward and candid jest, were basic devices of what Toulmin referred to as the Counter-Renaissance, granting only a thoroughly revised Luther access to the *Temple du Goût* of modern discourse, even if it meant stripping him of something basic, presenting him as someone who merely prepared the way for a new seriousness, a herald of the Counter-Renaissance, of a new, etatistic alliance between church and state.

Although this interpretation goes against the grain of his basic mode of writing, some aspects of Luther's performance might nonetheless seem to support such a reading. Indeed, Luther's oeuvre constitutes a strategic power field in its own right, in which several discursive forces compete with one another. One of them is Counter-Renaissance etatism, which announces itself at times (for instance in his plea to decimate the revolting peasants), but without being able to silence laughter altogether, while even the elderly Luther had his share of laughter.

## 14. Elimination or resurgence: towards a gelastic philosophy of laughter?

What lessons have we learned in terms of laughter as a gelastic principle that might be relevant even for today? Does the history of progress reflect a gradual eradication of true laughter, or is laughter still alive somewhere? What building blocks for a viable philosophy of laughter, a truly *gelastic* philosophy have we identified so far?

Overall, history seems to reflect a progressive forgetfulness of laughter. In *Human, All Too Human II*, for instance, Nietzsche explains what he considers to be a pagan ethos as opposed a Christian one ('Mixed Opinions and Aphorisms', § 220). It is a tolerance for the comic, the vulgar and the excessive, for the "other" side of

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<sup>209</sup> As to Calvin – 'the agelast Calvin' (Bakhtin 1968, p. 350) – his view on laughter differs considerably from Luther's. A detailed comparison is far beyond the scope of this book.

human life. In ancient Greece, all natural inclinations were granted certain festivities or appointed days during which it was allowed to exhibit and satisfy them, or even to grant them full rein (the principle of Carnival). Instead of being jeered at, those inclinations were tolerated and acknowledged; albeit within certain temporal boundaries. Every natural force was considered divine. All natural inclinations were included in public life, instead of being rejected or eradicated. There were certain occasions on which they could be exhibited and discharged. This arrangement was a precaution against the risk of being suddenly overwhelmed by the fury of the elements, an intrusion one would no longer be able contain. Morality was attuned to human existence as a whole, in contrast with the restricted, ascetic regimen of a sacerdotal caste. Paganism displayed a sense of realism, moderating the passions instead of trying to abolish them. This no doubt explained the pagan sense of connectedness of the comical (or even the obscene) with the religious, of the burlesque and the ridiculous with the sublime, displayed for instance during the festivities of Dionysus and Demeter (§ 112).

Christianity, on the other hand, distanced itself from ancient paganism by displaying a tendency towards excessive asceticism. While abolishing, repressing, or gradually extinguishing various comic or carnal aspects of human life, other (serious or spiritual) aspects were reinforced or even pushed to their extreme (§ 114). In fact, Nietzsche discerns a historical trend in the direction of a progressive repression of laughter. As culture became more civilized, he claims, more and more realms of human existence were cleansed of mockery and jest. In the sixteenth century, things like marriage, celibacy and gothic theology were almost laughed into oblivion, but this was a temporary intermezzo, for before long a new epoch of seriousness would dawn on Europe (§ 240).

In such a story-line, Luther represents a turning-point, or even a relapse. It becomes increasingly clear that the somatic details of the tower experience are far from residual. First of all, they indicate that, after a long period of asceticism, the “other”, comic, carnal side of human existence finally reasserted itself. Furthermore, the details of this breakthrough emphasized a deeply felt connectedness of the comical and the obscene on the one hand with the religious and the sublime on the other, as experienced by Luther. The violent recurrence of the repressed culminated in an irresistible experience of laughter. Yet there is another side to laughter, recognized by Nietzsche, Bataille and Foucault, which must be included in our account: its connection with fear.

*Human, All Too Human I* contains a remarkable section on the origin (*Herkunft*) of the comical (§ 169), reaching far beyond ancient history and the birth of Christianity and leading us into the very twilight of prehistory. For hundreds of thousands of years, Nietzsche claims, humankind had been a frightened animal, living in a permanent state of anxiety. Anything sudden or unexpected posed an immediate threat to survival. In view of this, it is not astonishing that a sudden or unexpected event, although frightening at first, give rise to laughter as soon as it proves harmless.

According to Nietzsche, this sudden transition from fear to recklessness (conditioned long ago but still discernible in humans) is the essence of the comical. Thus, there are two sides to laughter. Laughter is first of all the sudden manifestation of a vital force, bound to assert itself in a violent manner should its psychic civil rights be disavowed. As such, it is an experience of release, and the individual is overwhelmed by laughter. But for Nietzsche this is a secondary response, triggered and preceded by the sudden collapse of fear, by the sudden awareness that the apparently fearful is in fact quite harmless. Laughter is a triumphant experience of recklessness, connected with a sudden awareness or insight: a gay truth which is suddenly revealed. Indeed, the tower experience provides us with a perfect example of laughter in which both aspects can be discerned. Retention gives way to release and fear gives way to recklessness. The terrifying object (“God”) turns out to be well-disposed, the obstacle is actually a gate. Luther’s experience of laughter is jubilant and truly gay. Both Pope and Emperor are taken aback by the reckless laughter of a vulgar monk. From now on the “other” side of human life becomes more and more recognized. And in the aftermath of this event, celibacy is challenged by the bourgeois marriage, Latin by the national languages, and the official ecclesiastical idiom by new speech genres.

It is interesting to note some similarities between the Etna experience recorded by Bataille and the tower experience narrated by Luther. Note, for instance, that young Bataille left his shelter “in order to satisfy a certain physical need”. Perhaps the volcano itself symbolizes something like a gigantic earthly latrine, producing nothing but heat, dung and farts. Exposed to this horrible sight, he suddenly laughs, an experience of revelation and jubilation.

Apart from being an experience, laughter is also a practice, however, an aspect also emphasized by Bakhtin. The comic festivities of Dionysus and Demeter were efforts to “dramatize” or act-out laughter, turning it into a practice: a comic cult with its peculiar chants and modes of speech. In the case of Luther, several practices of laughter can be distinguished. As a youth, he developed his parodical game of concealed mockery, his parodical practice of over-obedience, his foolish, rebellious parody of asceticism. Subsequently, the tower-experience unleashed a more direct, more manifest form of laughter. Finally, the one-time gloomy, silent monk of the Erfurt monastery was irreversibly transformed into the jovial chatterer of the table-talks, who initiated a merry genre, the dramatization of hospitable merriment.

The tower experience marked the conclusion of Luther’s ascetic phase, a life of isolation and deprivation. Its details show how a comic, foolish, impossible monk became the herald of a new gay truth. It is in the discourse of fools (Cynics, early Christians, Franciscans, etc.) that new truths first make their appearance. Fools are granted the privilege of articulating them for the first time. After his experience, Luther enters the market-square and runs into Tetzl, an advertising voice selling ecclesiastical merchandise, who finds himself exposed and ridiculed by Luther’s relentless laughter, which before long will bring about the collapse of the gothic demarcation of the serious and the popular, the ascetic and the grotesque.

In *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche not only relates the origin of laughter as a primordial psychic ingredient of human existence, but also of freethinking (evolving much later in the course of history). It begins, Nietzsche tells us, with the experience of suddenly breaking free from one's former ties, from some dark corner (Luther's monastic cell), from fear and reverence. It is a sudden, startling experience of awakening, of being torn away from one's "home", an experience of freedom, evoking a frank and carefree mood. From now on, a state of excessive health becomes one's goal. Life had become a problem, but now it is made possible again. Before living life to the full, however, the free-thinker will cast a final glance on his former life, gratefully enjoying his "panoramic, bird's-eye view" – Luther's Wartburg so to speak.<sup>210</sup> The world he left behind has completely lost its significance to him. Finally, the history of free-thinking implies the discovery of *one basic task*, one "inner tyrant" (*Human, All Too Human II*, § 4); Luther's vocation as a translator of a gargantuan body of text known as the Bible. And Luther succeeded where Zarathustra failed. His outstanding achievement, after descending from his dwelling in the "realm of the birds", was to allow the popular, comic and burlesque genres to enter published speech, to admit popular diction and dialects into a discourse which until then had exclusively been devoted to formalistic issues, and to make use of a great number of the free-floating popular speech genres (all those forms of franc-parler that are present in his work). In doing so he created the German language. In his later years he became the founding father of Christian gaiety, professing to be able to write only when in a merry mood. Reading and writing, eating and drinking became intimately associated with each other. He became one of those remarkable authors who applied comical devices to spiritual issues. His unprecedented practice of writing became his "remedy", his way of regaining his health, which had been corrupted by medieval asceticism. As Nietzsche pointed out (*Human, All Too Human I*, Introduction, §1), writing can become a cure, a way to organize free-floating energy suddenly set loose.

In the early sixteenth century, due to the decline of late medieval moral paradigms, human subjectivity was in danger of being overwhelmed by the tyranny of unorganized energies, desires and forces that could no longer be contained by means of the moral and political devices which had been developed to that end. They had been applied successfully for quite some time, thereby securing a moral regime of long standing. Suddenly, however, this regime was on the verge of collapse. There were basically two possible remedies. One was etatism: containment by expanding state and/or ecclesiastical power, allowing it to penetrate human life to an unprecedented extent – the etatistic, top-down option that was used, for instance, during the violent repression of the peasants' revolt. It was this same remedy that inspired the Counter-Reformation, a tremendous effort to centralize, codify and

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<sup>210</sup> As Nietzsche talks about 'Vogel-Freiheit', 'Vogel-Umblicke', 'Fernblicken und Vogelflügen in kalte Höhen' it is interesting to note that in his letters Luther uses similar expressions to refer to his stay at the Wartburg as well as at the fortress at Coburg: 'Im Reich der Vögel', 'Aus dem Reich der Vögel', etc.

reorient spiritual life on an unprecedented scale.

The other remedy hailed the breakdown of established morality, for it would allow unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity to become established. This was Luther's initial, bottom-up solution to a problem he himself experienced so vehemently – the sudden awareness of the insignificance of the terrifying, but also the experience of being overwhelmed by certain aspects of spiritual and bodily existence which had been neglected by the established regime and which, due to the collapse of gothic seriousness, were suddenly released. This experience of collapse, breakthrough and laughter initiated a writing practice which allowed the serious and the comic to become reconnected – and in the course of this writing practice a new form of moral subjectivity, quite in tune with the Renaissance state of mind, became established. In short, Luther allowed himself and others to become a different kind of person.

The collective instead of merely individual, the “moral” instead of merely “psychological” nature of this transition underlines the deficiency of a purely psychopathological understanding, of which Erikson provides us with an outstanding example. “Humour”, Erikson claims, “marks the moment when our ego regains territory from oppressive conscience” (p. 169), but this assessment relies on what he refers to as “man's demonstrable psychic structure” (p. 21) of Ego, Id and Super-ego, set out by Freud. Authors like Nietzsche and Foucault, however, but also the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1954-1955/1978) have pointed out (Zwart 1997) that the Ego as presented by Freud is a “recent invention” of modern (“Cartesian”) origin – an outcome of what Toulmin refers to as the Counter-Renaissance. By taking a decidedly modern (Cartesian, or even Victorian) form of moral subjectivity for granted, and by transposing it to experiences such as the one recorded by Luther, we are likely to produce a distorted picture of the form of moral subjectivity that was allowed to emerge during the early sixteenth Century. From a truly psychoanalytic perspective (which works genealogically and “bottom-up”, rather than in a supra-temporal fashion) we must recognise the significance of the transformation of moral experience that occurred during that epoch and affected the very structures of subjectivity. The moral subject is the outcome of a history: it is a historical variable rather than a constant. Luther's laughter indicated the collapse of a particular historical type of “ego-formation”, some aspects of which were laughed into oblivion. Although it initiated a profound reorganization of vital forces, its outcome (personified by Luther) was not yet a modern (Cartesian) subject. The tower experience was a positive, affirmative experience in its own right and the form of moral subjectivity it produced reflected the Renaissance state of mind. It did not merely tear down some obsolete forms of seriousness (so that new forms of Protestant and Enlightened seriousness could take their place), but represented a unique and novel form of subjectivity *sui generis*, unleashing new practices of the self, including authorship.

But what about Luther's subsequent etatistic turn? Did he not side with etatism

against the peasants and did not become more and more infected by it as he grew older, transforming gay, revived Christianity into a state-church, whose basic maxim was captured in the famous line *Cuius regio, eius religio*? Should Luther not be considered one of those “political maniacs” who, as Nietzsche phrases it, headed for revolt but proved unable to establish something new (*Human, All Too Human I*, §463); the kind of judgement which Luther himself applied to the rebellious peasants. For Nietzsche, Luther still represented a “medieval”, peasant and backward state of mind (*Human, All Too Human I*, §26, §237), a pre-Cartesian and pre-Kantian ethos, impeding sound enquiry and science (*Human, All Too Human II*, “Mixed Opinions and Aphorisms”, §631, §632, §633). My own assessment, however, rather aligns with my judgement of Socrates developed in the previous chapter. Like Socrates in the earlier dialogues, Luther represents the regenerative power and joyful tone of gay laughter. In early modern Europe, like in ancient Greece, established morality and established modes of exercising power were waning. Human subjectivity was in danger of being overwhelmed by the tyranny of unorganized energy that apparently could no longer be contained (neither morally nor politically). Laughter confirmed the breakdown of established seriousness and gave voice to this free-floating energy, but it also allowed unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity to become established: the bottom-up remedy. Luther’s performance can be judged in much the same vein. His remarkable writing practice constituted a practice of the self, a temporary effort to allow the free-floating energies to become organized in a non-etatistic manner, before being absorbed and mobilised by a new set of moral, religious and political arrangements, referred to by Toulmin as the Counter-Renaissance. As Foucault indicated, there was something unstable and unsustainable in Renaissance laughter, which hinted at its collapse from the very start. But this does not allow us to regard it merely as a transitional phenomenon. Rather, it constituted a particular state of mind. Spinoza’s rejection of Renaissance laughter conveyed the awareness that consciousness had to be reformed and that the modern state (of mind) entailed a rupture with the gay science of the Renaissance and its basic mood of laughter.

Could real laughter resurge today? It is not my contention of course that it should be modelled on or even completely mimic Luther’s laugh. The conditions of the moral world have significantly changed since then. We will have to develop our own responsive laugh. Public discourse is no longer dominated by the theological and ideological constraints of the late medieval ambience. Although our language has allegedly become remarkably democratic and free (Bakhtin 1988, p. 71), a new set of official speech genres have been established, known as the social and human sciences, in combination with political and moral liberalism: an astonishingly pervasive regime which dwarfs even late medieval theology’s ability to penetrate and dominate public and private discourse, thereby contributing significantly to the establishment of dominant forms of moral subjectivity, while disqualifying alternatives, thereby fostering contemporary etatism. As indicated in the *Introduction*, technocracy and liberalism are definitely part of this new scheme.

Yet, in certain respects our situation still seems comparable to Luther's. Both epochs seem to mirror one another. The sixteenth century witnessed the rise of the nation-state on the political level, of national languages on the cultural level and of Reformation and Counter-Reformation on the ideological level. At present, however, we witness the sudden but apparently irreversible decline of these now challenged and staggering forms of national, linguistic and ideological stability. No doubt this will allow for unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity to emerge. Whereas in the sixteenth century imperial efforts to bring about the political unity of Europe were thwarted by the rise of nation states, we now witness nation states rapidly losing their political significance and being incorporated into broader networks. Whereas in the sixteenth century the dominance of Latin as a scholarly lingua franca was thwarted by the formation of national languages (notably via the translation of Greek and Latin into the vernacular, a development to which Rabelais and Luther contributed significantly), we now witness the rise of a new lingua franca of science (a standardised version of the English language, comparable perhaps to scholarly Latin during the scholastic period) at the expense of national languages. And whereas national politicians are ridiculed, are becoming increasingly laughable, recent Popes (John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis) emerge as powerful global voices, challenging liberalism and its economic, ecological and cultural impacts.

What we experience seems to mirror the reversal or moral transformation that took place in the early sixteenth century. Therefore, a philosophical reconsideration of Luther's basic experiences and principles gains significance. Once again, laughter may serve as an epistemological prerequisite for exposing the limitations, delusions and complacency of official genres that mistakenly consider their basic insights to be indisputable. The frank and gay vocabulary of parody may again serve to challenge the stabilizing tendencies of the artificially neutralized and generalized nomenclature of liberalism and the social or human sciences. If seeming neutral is just another word for being dominant, we are left with no alternative. Gay laughter does not call for political revolt and its objectives are not of a political nature in the top-down sense of the term, but rather for the a bottom-up solution, the genesis of new forms of moral subjectivity, new forms of Christianity even, cleansed by laughter, such as advocated by the triumvirate of Popes mentioned above.<sup>211</sup> Whether laughter may once again provide a remedy is the subject of the final chapter.

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<sup>211</sup> 'Ich will from Leute haben, nicht eine neue politiam anfangen – Christum nullam relationem habet ad politiam' [Tischreden 3:3126].

## Chapter 5: The Transfiguration of the Moral Subject: a Rereading of *When We Dead Awaken*

### 1. Did Ibsen laugh?

In chapter two several philosophers of laughter were introduced, and in chapters three and four, two heroes of laughter made their appearance, an ancient and an early modern one. And now I am expected to come up with a third, a modern “hero of laughter”, someone who may make our laughter possible and whose laughter would render the strategies of avoidance and compartmentalization described in chapter one untenable.

I suspect that it will come as a surprise that Ibsen is supposed to meet this description and that he of all people is regarded as a gelastic author, as someone who makes us laugh. From pictures and portraits of him, one gets the impression that the silent, tight-lipped poet hardly ever smiled, and when the writer Jonas Lie tells about convivial evenings with Ibsen – “The more his good humour grew, the more he beamed and laughed and shone” until at last he became good, kind, and talkative (Beyer 1978, p. 168) – these remarks are interesting precisely because they are so much at odds with the observations of most of those who met him, usually bearing witness to his gloomy character and cheerless, even cynical mood. The great majority of his plays are not generally considered comical, as they rather seem to convey a gloomy, sinister and tragic view of life. Furthermore, apart from the fact that Ibsen does not seem to excel in comic genres, he is neither generally considered a staunch critic of a progressive, liberal ethic. On the contrary, he is often considered an advocate of liberalism and someone who allegedly was in support of a liberal approach to issues like suicide, euthanasia and emancipation.

But even in the case of Socrates and Luther, the basic mood of laughter had to be recovered at the expense of a well-established, serious misreading of long standing. True laughter, instead of being self-evident, seems to escape us at first. Therefore it is not inconceivable that a similar result could come out of this effort to reread Ibsen – implying that the Norwegian playwright meets the aesthetic demand formulated by Socrates in *Symposium*, namely that a writer of tragedy ought to excel in comedy as well.<sup>212</sup> Perhaps there is more comedy and satyr-play in his dramas than is often suggested. Thus the question is whether Ibsen was indeed an “agelast” (something which seems to be generally agreed upon), or rather a gelastic playwright who *did*

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<sup>212</sup> Although all of his plays constitute a mixture of comic and tragic elements, his ‘epilogue’ could perhaps be considered his ‘satyr-play’, comical above average and added to the somewhat more tragic series of plays preceding it.



laugh. And if he laughed (and I will contend that he did), what was the nature of his laughter? Finally, the implications of his laughter with regard to the liberal strategies of compartmentalization (as described in chapter one) will be taken into consideration. The claim that he supported a liberal outlook will be challenged.

In the case of Socrates and Luther, Nietzsche's judgement (or rather: judgements) served as a starting-point for developing a gelastic evaluation of my own, but in the case of Ibsen such a procedure seems out of the question since Nietzsche hardly knew the work of his contemporary. The only Ibsen play he appears to have read or seen was *Pillars of Society*, a transitional work and not one of Ibsen's major achievements as a creative writer. Moreover, although he does incidentally refer to him, he seems to focus on Ibsen's political "convictions", his progressive "causes", rather than on his creative work. In *Ecce homo*, Nietzsche calls him a "typical old spinster" and "accuses" him of supporting the emancipation of women.<sup>213</sup> According to Nietzsche, the strive for emancipation is a symptom of resentment, of being unable to "procreate", and the only way to "cure" a woman is to make her pregnant – in short, he accuses Ibsen of not endorsing the "negative-ascetic" view on women propagated by Nietzsche himself in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and in many of his aphorisms. In the *Nachlass*, Ibsen is mentioned as someone who represents moral liberalism, and as someone who, notwithstanding his robust will to truth, did not succeed in freeing himself from the illusions of morality, someone who is unable to grasp the fact that "freedom" is merely another manifestation of the will to power and that those who demand "freedom" and "justice" are the weak and powerless.

These incidental remarks, some of which will be considered more carefully at a later point, seem rather disappointing at first. To begin with, no mention is made of the fact that Ibsen provided the modern theatre with what could be considered a solution to what Nietzsche himself saw as "the problem Wagner". For although Ibsen started his career as a playwright of historical pieces (such as *The Vikings at Helgoland*), similar to Wagner's historical artworks in many respects, he dropped the romantic-historical genre, preferring modern life as a dramatic setting, although he never neglected the profoundly historical, even genealogical origins of modern life's plots and problems, much like modern tensions inevitably shimmer through in Wagner's archaeological exploits into lost acoustic worlds or soundscapes.

Furthermore, it has been stressed by many that some of Ibsen's dramatic heroes (Brand, Solness, Borkman) could be regarded as attempts to enact a Nietzschean ideal, transcending the moral boundaries of duty, guilt, and other aspects of what Nietzsche derogatorily referred to as slave morality.<sup>214</sup> But Nietzsche does not even hint at this. Still, I will argue that Nietzsche's judgement, although disappointing, may further our understanding of Ibsen – albeit in a negative manner.

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<sup>213</sup> 'Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe', § 6.

<sup>214</sup> 'He [Solness] could also be, as has been suggested, a Nietzschean superman, but one tragically undone by the fascinating young woman he could not keep in her (according to Nietzsche) properly servile place' (Chamberlain 1982, p. 201)

In my reading of Ibsen I will focus my attention on just one play. My preference for *When we Dead Awaken* is perhaps arbitrary to some extent, and some of his other masterpieces might have served just as well. Yet, there is something final about this play, which is Ibsen's final work, presented as an "epilogue". Moreover, I consider it one of Ibsen's greatest achievements. Ibsen is generally considered the founding father of modern theatre, and in his mature plays he discarded the aesthetics of Romanticism. They are prose plays dealing with modern individuals. Instead of focusing on the lofty, the exceptional and the heroic, these plays deal with less exalted human experiences and moods, such as uneasiness or discontent, nausea, disappointment and boredom. Where does laughter come in? I will claim that Ibsen continuously mocks his characters, and that they mutually mock each other, revealing each other's true objectives by mocking the feigned, "official" ones. A basic mood of laughter pervades his creative work, although this may easily pass unnoticed.

But first I will summarize the play (1964/1982). The setting is a mountain area and the main characters are professor Arnold Rubek, a sculptor, Maja, his wife, and Irene, a mental patient who, several years ago, acted as model for his masterpiece, the statue that made him famous, entitled "Resurrection Day", featuring a young woman awakening from the sleep of death, "filled with a sacred joy in discovering herself unchanged". After spending many years abroad, Rubek and Maja have returned to Norway. They are bound for a journey to the Arctic by steamer. In the first act, outside a hotel at a spa, they are having breakfast with champagne. The professor is described as a distinguished-looking elderly man and Maja as being quite young, with gay, mocking and teasing eyes. They experience the uncomfortable, overpowering quietness of their native country. Ever since he finished his great masterpiece, Rubek seems to have lost all pleasure in his work. His artistic vocation now seems empty and meaningless to him and life bores him. At first, "Resurrection Day" really was a masterpiece, but later adaptations transformed it into a composition (including many figures, including the craving artist himself), which affected its sublimity. Yet it brought him fame and lucrative commissions for portrait busts, so that he could afford a villa on Lake Taunitz (probably: Starnberger See) and a "palatial" town house. Whereas clients usually are flattered by the "striking likeness" of his busts to the human original, they fail to notice the mocking grin beneath. They fail to understand that Rubek has in fact been mocking them: amusing himself by modelling their busts after the head of a horse, a mule, a dog, a hog, or some other farm animal.

Rubek and Maja are provided with all the luxuries required to feel comfortable, but Rubek suffers from discontent. Moreover, he noticed something strange and disquieting: a mysterious white lady who walks about the ground at night, accompanied by a dark figure. The hotel manager informs him that it must have been one of the guests, a certain Madame de Satow, a psychiatric patient who visits the spa in the company of a Nun, who nurses her and watches over her, equipped with a straightjacket should this be necessary. And when Rubek subsequently meets her, he recognizes her: it is his former model Irene. In the course of their conversation it

becomes clear that, after their separation, Irene began to reproach him for having used her as his model, consuming her living body to produce a work of art, persuading her to obliterate herself and to dedicate four years of her life to their joint effort – their “child” as Irene calls it – the statue. She gave up her human vocation (to get married, to have children, etc.) in order to become his “servant”. And when Rubek finally finished his masterpiece, he thanked her for what he referred to as an “episode” – a phrase immediately grasped by Irene as an allusion that he no longer needed her. After that word, this fatal signifier, she left him. What infuriated her was that, during their collaboration, he remained a self-collected artist, approaching and perceiving her as a model, and never as a person, never even touching her. He transfigured a living body into a marble statue that was eventually stowed away in what Irene refers to as a sepulchre: a museum. Instead of loving her as a woman, he used her for his work. After their separation, she worked in cabarets, stand on revolving platforms exposed to the gaze of male clients, and later she married wealthy husbands, whom she despised and one of whom she stabbed to death, so that she disappeared behind bars for years.

Rubek confesses having a troubled conscience with regard to their “episode”, but explains that he needed to maintain his distance to be creative as an artist. Furthermore, he indicates that, later on, he made some alterations and adaptations that pleased his audiences, but affected the statue’s sublime beauty. He allowed reality to intrude upon artistic purity by broadening the pedestal, moving the central figure into the background a little, so that she became a subordinate figure in a group, in accordance with his change in outlook, adding a host of human figures with hidden animal faces. And his new conception demanded also that her face, which was at first transfigured with joy at seeing the light, was subdued a little, expressing life as Rubek now had come to see it. From the day of his model’s departure, Rubek’s creativity began to falter, but he hopes that, somehow, as an artist, he will be restored to life.

According to Irene, Rubek “killed” her by transforming her into a statue – and from the day of her departure onwards she considered herself dead. Now that she has risen from her grave (released from forced psychiatric confinement) and meeting Rubek once again, she awaits her second and final transfiguration, her “resurrection”. She seems to have awoken from a deep, deathlike slumber and now that she has finally returned “to her lord and master” she counts on being brought back to life again. Sitting beside a mountain stream, they resume the game they had played over and over again while working on the statue in a peasant cottage at Lake Taunitz (which Rubek later demolished to build his villa there), namely: constructing a Lohengrin boat with a swan drawing it (the swan representing Irene), watching it swirling and floating down the stream. When Rubek confesses how he wasted their “child” (adapting it to the taste of his clients), she draws a knife but hesitates to kill him. Rubek professes his sense of remorse after a wasted life. Never in all eternity will he be free to live the “resurrected life”. Irene indicates, however, that mere feelings of guilt and remorse will not settle the account. She reminds him of a sunrise

they once witnessed when Rubek had enticed her to climb a mountain with him, promising her she would see “all the glory of the world” (one of Rubek’s lofty figures of speech) if she followed him to the heights, adding however that there is no resurrection for a partnership such as theirs. All that is left for them to do is to continue playing.

Rubek and Irene, the “tragic” couple, are accompanied by a comic double: Maja and Ulfheim, the latter a professed bear-hunter whom she meets at the spa and who seduces her to join him on a bear-hunt in the mountains (although his plot obviously is to turn her into his prey instead of into a huntress). Ulfheim represents the intrusion of laughable, folksy and burlesque reality, someone with unkempt hair and beard and a loud voice who speaks a sturdy hunter’s dialect, continuously making up wonderful stories. Although he does in fact know his way about the mountains, he is a rather clownish figure and Maja refers to him as the living image of a satyr. Maja is eager to join him because she notices that Rubek is bored by her presence and longs to experience the overwhelming beauty of the dangerous mountain landscape. Maja is prepared to leave Rubek, should this be his wish, but he seems to prefer a *ménage à trois*. Apparently he still considers her presence useful. Seeing Irene stalking along “like a marble statue”, Maja takes her leave, granting Rubek and Irene a chance to reconsider their “episode”. Maja feels like she is awakening and that she is finally going to live, singing “I am free!” in a loud voice. Irene and Rubek promise each other to meet again that very night on the mountainside.

In the third and last act, we encounter Maja and Ulfheim on a wild mountainside surrounded by precipices. Rubek and Irene appear as well, having managed to climb the precipitous track. Ulfheim draws attention to the storm that is approaching, but Rubek observes that the gusts of wind sound “like the prelude to Resurrection Day”. Ulfheim urges him and Irene to take shelter in a mountain hut, promising to send a party of men to rescue them, while he starts to rush down the track with Maja. Rubek and Irene, however, fearlessly face the demonic upheaval of real nature, continuing their ascent in solemn anticipation of their marriage feast. Irene follows him “as if transfigured”. They desire to pass through the mist to reach the topmost peak gleaming in the sunrise, but are buried under an avalanche sliding down at a terrific pace. The nun, Irene’s gloomy companion, arrives on the scene just in time to witness their destruction and utter a *pax vobiscum*.

## 2. Artistic calling

In the first act, Rubek and Maja are engaged in a debate on whether they consider themselves happy. Rubek hesitates: “No... to tell you the truth, I don’t think I am – not entirely happy” (p. 224). Notwithstanding their luxurious and liberal life-style, their apparent freedom and happiness is subdued by a chronic sense of discomfort and boredom. Rubek, once a zealous artist, has lost his lust for work. It has become a daily

routine. Although technically speaking he is still considered a master in his art, he feels sickened by it. Instead of creating real art, he has settled for producing commissioned portrait busts. Yet he distances himself from this routine – in a parodical manner. He does not simply produce portrait busts, but busts that seem to parody the conventions of the genre, and although his clients do not seem to notice it, the artist takes considerable delight in it. Something is staring at them, mocking them, from beneath the surface of those busts:

RUBEK: Only I can see it – and how it makes me laugh! On the surface, there's the "striking likeness", as they call it, that they all stand and gape with wonder at. But deep down underneath, there's the pompous self-righteous face of a horse, the obstinate muzzle of a mule, the lop-eared shallow-pated head of a dog, a greasy hog's snout... and sometimes the gross, brutal mask of a bull! (p. 229)

It goes without saying that portrait busts represent a serious, official genre, portraying acknowledged representatives of official life rather than selecting its models or subjects for aesthetic reasons. Yet, those who commission a portrait bust become vulnerable from the point of view of artistic laughter. The parody involved is not merely comical. The animal figures that support the human surface seem to reveal what these individuals really look like, what these human beings truly and basically are. At the hands of Rubek, the portrait bust as a genre becomes the very reverse of those ancient, grotesque little statues, the Sileni mentioned in Plato's *Symposium*. For now, that which seems serious on the outside is actually hiding something ridiculous: a grotesque grin. The serious exterior is mocked and ridiculed by that which is buried inside. Basically, what is conveyed by this parody is that the official human world is really a comedy. Its true aspect is temporarily concealed but by no means silenced by the official, boring countenance of earnestness.

But there is more to this. The commissioned busts reflect the compartmentalising view on art, framing art as something private, something to be stowed away in private quarters or museums. Rubek's aimed to demolish the compartmentalisation of art by creating a great work, not meant to be stashed away in museums, but representing transfiguration as a supra-individual experience, a modern myth or moral truth, a work of art opening up a collective plateau, a moral transformation. But his resignation is symptomatic for the fact that he gave up his ambition and adapted himself to compartmentalisation, enjoying the wealth that comes with it.

Rubek's parodical and degrading device is a subdued version of Luther's more impudent and straightforward ("grobian") comparison of high church officials to mules, hogs and other farm animals. In fact, Bakhtin also refers to "the grotesque character of the transformation of the human element into an animal one" and adds: "the combination of human and animal traits is, as we know, one of the most ancient grotesque forms" (1968, p. 316). Unwittingly perhaps, Rubek is carrying on a comic tradition of long standing.

At the same time, however, Rubek himself is mercilessly exposed as a rather

comical figure by Maja. He certainly appears to be a rather serious or even tragic character at first. But once we notice how she continually (and rather successfully) mocks him, the comic aspect cannot escape us anymore. Ibsen's play suddenly reads like a comedy rather than a tragedy, which is how it is usually interpreted. Rubek's pretence to seriousness, to the lofty and the sublime, his rhetoric of the artist's vocation, is exposed time and again by Maja's revealing mockery (bluntly removing the lofty, artistic mask). For example, she has the habit of mockingly quoting Rubek's quasi-exalted figures of speech. She ruthlessly exposes Rubek's inflated rhetoric about the artist's vocation, which conceals his calculating, utilitarian way of using people, reducing them to servitude, relying on their availability, but ridding himself of them when they are no longer needed. Although his collaborators allegedly consent to their contractual relationship, Rubek raises expectations he is unable and unwilling to fulfil.

Maja's mockery of Rubek's inflated empty rhetoric is exemplified by the following passage:

PROFESSOR RUBEK [tapping himself on the chest]: Inside here, you see, I have a little casket with a secret lock, and in that casket lies all my vision as an artist, but when she [Irene] disappeared without a trace, the lock snapped shut. She had the key, and she took that with her. You, my dear Maja, had no key... and so all that is in the casket is lost to me. And time is passing – And there's no way for me to reach the treasure.

MAJA [struggling with a subtle smile]: Then get her to unlock it for you again ... After all, she's here... Is it really worth making all this fuss and commotion over such a simple thing? ... Just attach yourself to whomever you need most (p. 261/262).

Rubek's liberal view on relationships actually serves as a cover for his instrumentalism, his strategy of exploitation. And when subsequently Irene arrives on the scene, Maja addresses her in the following jocular vein:

MAJA: Professor Rubek is up there waiting for you, madam.

IRENE: What does he want?

MAJA: He wants you to help him open up a casket that has snapped shut (p. 263).

Or consider the following quotation, taken from the second act, in which Rubek confesses that he has come to experience his relationship with Maja as a hindrance to his creative aspirations, his creative revival:

PROFESSOR RUBEK: [...] Do you know what's the most appalling thing of all? Can you guess?

MAJA [quietly defying him]: Yes, it must be that you have got yourself tied to me – for life!

PROFESSOR RUBEK: I shouldn't have put it quite as heartlessly.

MAJA: That wouldn't make your meaning any less heartless.

PROFESSOR RUBEK: You haven't the least idea how an artist's mind works.  
MAJA: Good heavens, I haven't any idea how my own mind works.  
PROFESSOR RUBEK [continuing imperturbably]: I live at such a pace Maja, we artists do [...] I've come to realize that it isn't in me to find happiness in idle pleasure. Life doesn't go like that for me and my kind. I must keep on working – creating work after work – till the day I die. [Managing to say it] That is why I can't go on with you any longer, Maja; not with just you.  
MAJA [calmly]: Does that mean, in plain words, that you've got tired of me?  
PROFESSOR RUBEK [violently]: Yes, that's what it means. I've grown tired of this life with you – unbearably tired and slack and irritable. Now you know (p. 260/261).

Notwithstanding the rhetoric of artistic calling, Rubek's objectives are rather obvious. He has been using Maja, and now he has grown tired of her companionship. She is unable to solve his artistic crisis or impotence. Perhaps he is expecting to be on the verge of a new artistic upheaval, to which she seems unable to contribute. Indeed, Rubek's official artistic countenance, his "portrait bust" so to speak, finds itself mocked and challenged by Maia's degrading, down-to-earth dissection of his real motives. A hidden, calculating grin is thereby exposed. An exalted genre (the lofty pretence to an artistic calling) is reduced to something mean, trivial and commonplace – the common tendency to exploit one another as soon as the opportunity to do so presents itself.

Irene was Rubek's original victim. He demanded her subservience for four years, without paying her any money of course, and without eventually settling the account the way she seems to have been expecting – by marrying and her and becoming a father to her children. She had wanted to serve him "in all things" (p. 245), but he simply wanted her to serve him as a model for his work during a compartmentalised episode. She happened to be exactly what he needed and willingly consented to serve him, although they had different expectations with regard to their bargain from the outset. She generously gave him four years of her youth – "What a spendthrift I was in those days!" (p. 249) – but he simply expresses his gratitude for their "episode", so that she left him, thereby impairing his creativity however (emasculating him as an artist as it were).

Once again the rhetoric of artistic calling proves to be merely a veil that conceals baser objectives: a will to power as Nietzsche and Adler phrased it, continuous egocentric efforts to exploit one another. Rubek managed to subdue and master her, much as he succeeded in mastering the material he worked with, while remaining a self-possessed and independent artist, successfully refraining from exposing his human vulnerability, most notably his sexual desire. Ulfheim explains somewhere that a block of marble has something to fight for too, and will resist the artist rather than letting itself be hammered into a particular form – a fate which mirrors the one that befell Irene: a living, warm-blooded human being that was hammered into stone. When she found herself defeated, she really wanted to become a marble statue, she refused to continue to live. Her performance in cabarets (as a living statue) was a

parody of high-brow art, eventually ending up destroying husbands and aborting pregnancies. Yet she gained a victory as well, for after her disappearance, Rubek's disavowed dependence became manifest. His work stranded. She was to remain his only true model and the statue that resulted as a joint effort remained his only masterpiece. After that, he was forced to settle for trivial and routine commissions.

In short, Nietzsche's judgement of Ibsen seems to suggest the very reversal of what his plays are really like. As pointed out above, he blamed Ibsen for his apparent failure to grasp the fact that moral ideals like "freedom" and "justice" are nothing but instruments in the general struggle for power. They are tactical devices used by the powerless and the weak to defend themselves against an excessive display of power by the strong. But now we recognize that Nietzsche's judgement (based on hearsay) was clearly mistaken, for the hollowness of lofty ideals, employed to cover up the omnipresent strive for power that determines human relationships, is the very truth Ibsen discerned, more lucidly even, I would argue, than Nietzsche himself managed to do. Or, to put it differently, Nietzsche's judgement furthers our understanding of Ibsen in a "negative" manner. By pointing out what is allegedly missing, he helps us to recognize this key dimension. We find a male artist and his female model engaged in a struggle for power. And now, having tasted defeat and finding herself exploited without sufficient reimbursement, the former model demands "justice",<sup>215</sup> a fair settlement: he is to restore her to life again, "to bring the pulsing blood of her youth back to life again", or else she is determined to take his. Her motives are resentment and revenge, but in a manifest and straightforward manner: the psychiatric criminal as an atavistic revenant from a mythological past: a fin-de-siècle version of Brunhilde the Valkyrie, who is awakened from a deep sleep and now wants to take her revenge on the hero who once awoke her but subsequently deserted her. As indicated above, in Ibsen's decidedly modern play, the distant past is always shimmering through.

Although Nietzsche failed to recognise this (so that he cannot be our guide in the case of Ibsen), characters like Irene pursue a "Nietzschean" plot as it were, for her basic objective was to subdue her male opponent by getting pregnant and giving birth to a child. But Rubek was (intuitively) aware of the trap and able to keep his distance, although her intoxicating beauty drove him out of his sense at times. And after having used her body merely as an instrument to produce a "child", i.e. a work of art, resulting from their speechless artistic dialogue, he rejected her "justified" claims with regard to a partnership for life, so that now she has returned to take revenge. Getting pregnant was her primary desire, and her willingness to support Rubek in creating his work was part of the violated agreement. He drained the life out of her living, warm-blooded body, transforming it into a piece of marble. She subsequently refused to continue to live, taking revenge on substitutes – two unhappy husbands (at least) whom she either killed or drove into despair.

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<sup>215</sup> Although Irene's predominant tone of voice is one of accusation, there is a share of mockery in it as well, cf. 'At the same time she accuses him and mocks him' (Beyer 1978, p. 188).



Rubek's victory proves to be illusory, for Irene apparently intoxicated him and deprived him of his creative powers. His artistic manipulations did not produce the happiness he expected. In the struggle for power, all victories are partial, transient and accompanied by significant drawbacks. The game they play (the Lohengrin-boat of petals) mirrors and enacts their dialectical tension. She is the swan that carries him, and like Lohengrin he experiences haptophobia (a fear of proximity, of being touched): on the manifest level because he fears that touching her may compromise her purity as a paradigm of beauty, but on the latent level because he realises that by touching her, his own integrity will be endangered so that he will fall victim to addictive desire. Via their game, their ritual, they try to come to terms with this impossible situation. It is a humorous, luscious, childish parody of the medieval Lohengrin-motive, but it nonetheless mirrors their dramatic impasse, their existential deadlock in a very condensed way.

Rubek, posing as an artist, actually makes his moves in a calculating manner. He seems ready to terminate another "episode", for he once again needs someone "truly near to him", willing and able to be one with him in all his aspirations. His attachment to others is instrumental, strategic and transient, rather than "*sittlich*" and he manages to forget very easily (p. 255). This calculating attitude is mirrored by Ulfheim's comic version, whose bear-hunting exercises are designed for the sole purpose of trapping naïve, affluent, urban women. All manifest goals and objectives of individuals conceal a more basic impetus at work: the will to power. And rather than being "a typical old spinster", as Nietzsche phrases it, Ibsen the playwright succeeds in bringing to the fore the very aspects of human existence which Nietzsche was groping with in a philosophical manner.<sup>216</sup>

We may doubt, however, whether the will to power does indeed constitute the final truth of Ibsen's play. Although Rubek's way with others is clearly manipulative, the will to power as such cannot in itself be considered a convincing ultimate motive. A more basic attachment seems to incite him to manipulate, a basic readiness to respond, a basic sense of vocation, and (later in life) a sense of failure – which seems to amount to something more than mere rhetoric. His power game is not an end in itself, but fuelled by despair, a sense of failure to live up to his vocation. Rubek's ability to remain self-possessed in the presence of Irene's fascinating aura was not merely a decisive masterstroke in their mutual combat. Seeing renouncement as a basic condition for artistic creativity reverberates with an understanding of human desire of long standing, going back to Plato's *Symposium*. Let us listen to him more carefully:

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<sup>216</sup> When Irene leaves him, Rubek not only loses a model, but the very thing a true artist needs most, someone who offers resistance. In order to be creative, Nietzsche claims in *Twilight of the Idols*, one needs enemies rather than friends, and preferably strong enemies, for serious opposition allows one to excel. According to Desirée Verweij (1993, p. 139), this notably applies to Nietzsche's views on the 'eternal struggle' between the sexes.

I was an artist first and foremost. And I was sick with longing to create the great work of my life... You were so exactly what I needed... I could use you – you and no one else. To me, you became something holy – not to be touched except in reverent thought... I was filled with the conviction that if I touched you, or desired you sensually, my vision would be so desecrated that I would never be able to achieve what I was striving after. And I still think there was some truth in that... Condemn me if you like, but in those days my great task dominated me completely – filled me with exultant joy (p. 246).

Bored by Maja's "incessant companionship" and their shallow life together, he needs someone who can reach his innermost self, complete him; be one with him. After the separation from Irene, he could not create anything again in the genuine sense of the term, as atonement for the fact that he once slit the soul out of Irene's warm-blooded body. In short: laughter reveals that, beneath the moral *Gerede* of liberalism (informed consent, etc.) there is a power game unfolding, but at the reverse side of this power game, we notice something even more basic, namely desire and despair.

These articulations reverberate with the classical (albeit farcical) description of the genesis of human desire as conveyed by Aristophanes' parable, recorded in Plato's *Symposium* (Plato 1996), about hominid beings who (at the start of the humanisation process) were cleft in two, invoking in them a desperate yearning for the lost complement. Rubek's strive for power is fuelled by desire. Irene was his only model, the allusive other he needed to be creative, elevating her and sublimating her into something sacred and divine. But at the same time Ibsen is a modern Aristophanes who exposes and mocks this type of lofty and tragic desire (which transfigures Irene into something superhuman, exceptional and irreplaceable) through laughter. Ibsen's play is deadly serious, but at the same time pervaded with mockery, exposing the frantic and tragic pursuits of its key protagonists as laughable.

In *Poetics* Aristotle points out that comedy represents men as worse than they are whilst tragedy represents them as better than they are (II, 4). Notably parody is mentioned by him as a genre which represents men as worse than they really are. In Ibsen's play, Rubek aims at representing himself as a tragic figure, compelled by a lofty sense of duty, a design successfully countered by both Maja and Irene, who mockingly reveal that his basic motives are rather earthly and mundane, or even comical. Whereas Rubek tries to exalt himself, Maja aims at translating his words into ordinary motifs. But this mockery also seems somewhat one-sided compared to the complicated person Rubek really is. For although successful in dominating and manipulating others, he himself still feels dominated in a very fundamental way – not by some human individual or other, but by his calling, his artistic sense of duty, his demon. His readiness to manipulate is fuelled by a basic, toxic drive beyond his control, forcing itself upon him. And now that he failed to realise his vocation, he finds himself overcome by a basic sense of failure. Time is running out for him, and he seems unable to settle the account. Indeed, he has been an over-generous "spendthrift" himself, wasting his talents on portrait busts that do not put in much

weight, since they do not count as truly artistic. His relationship with Irene had been a violent struggle, rather than a partnership, a violent encounter, a struggle for power, the outcome of which proved to be rather ambiguous. She took revenge by leaving him, thereby depriving him of his creativity, killing him or paralyzing (emasculating) him as an artist. They both died and both now long for Resurrection Day, so that they both may be transfigured. This is represented by the basic symbol<sup>217</sup> of the play, the statue of a woman of sublime beauty, filled with a holy joy at finding herself unchanged at Resurrection Day, finding herself transfigured into a warm-blooded, living being once more.

### 3. Transfiguration

Now the play enters its critical phase. Rubek and Maja separate and are replaced by a tragic couple (Rubek and Irene) and a comic double (Maja and Ulfheim). Each couple is heading for its own plot – Rubek and Irene ascending to alluring heights, Maja and Ulfheim descending into the comical and the absurd – and yet they cross each other's track.<sup>218</sup> It has been questioned whether Rubek's and Irene's self-destruction is truly tragic in the sense of inevitable. The sudden ending borders on the absurd and seems a parody on tragedy.<sup>219</sup> And the sudden appearance of the Nun, who is granted the final word (not coincidentally in Latin) echoes parody as well. The whole scene seems a parodical reversal of Resurrection Day. Freezing to death, Rubek and Irene become like marble. They are destroyed rather than revived. Meanwhile, Maja's ridiculous song is heard in the distance, floating up from further down the mountain ("I am free!").

The ending symbolizes the collapse of what Strawson (as a spokesperson of liberalism) refers to as the demarcation between the sphere of morality and the region of the ethical, as well as of Rorty's separation of the private realm of irony and the public realm of solidarity. All individuals, Strawson claims, are fascinated by some personal ideal, seizing them, holding them captive; being true in a very fundamental way. A perfect example of such an ideal would be Rubek's idea of living a truly artistic life – the very thing he failed to achieve because it was so intimately entangled with the ideals and desires of others. As a purely personal ethical pursuit, it becomes

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<sup>217</sup> The statue is a symbol in the sense of being a condensation of the basic desire at work (Freud 1900/1942), the perfect symbol of Rubek's and Irene's artistic episode in much the same way as the Erfurt cloaca was a symbol of Luther's monastic episode.

<sup>218</sup> 'Maia and Ulfheim return to what they think is life but what Rubek and Irene regard as death, while Rubek and Irene climb upwards to what the others regard as death but they regard as life' (Meyer 1967/1985, p. 826).

<sup>219</sup> 'The shortness of the last act is a mystery; not merely its shortness but its (to my mind) inadequacy... It is an unfinished, imperfect fragment' (Meyer 1967/1985, p. 826). Inadequate from the point of view of tragedy, it is at the same time parody, and adequate as such.

laughable. In the so-called sphere of morality, Strawson contends, we are supposedly constrained by certain non-controversial rules and principles that regulate social discourse (for instance, do not harm others). The moral experience articulated by Ibsen is one of contestation rather than consolidation of these basic platitudes of liberalism. The statue is a work of art which refuses to be rendered harmless by transferring it to a private, compartmentalised realm (which would come down to burying it in a sepulchre). Rather, it reveals the intimate way in which the “ethical” and the “moral” remain connected. In order to live up to his ideal, Rubek evidently needs the support and the resistance of others. In Ibsen’s work, human individuals constantly support, harm and combat one another. The work of art is a trans-personal affair. Rubek both instrumentalises and sublimates his “other”. The portrait busts may initially seem to fit in with the moral logic of liberalism, but even here, laughter is an experience of intrusion, causing the demarcation between the private and the public to collapse. As an artist, Rubek invokes the intrusion of laughter into the serious private genre of the portrait bust. By abusing others, he manages to maintain his integrity. By harming his clients, he partially or temporarily manages to live up to his basic, trans-individual sense of obligation, or to subdue his sense of failure.

But there is an intrusion of laughter in the final scene as well, which makes it artistically adequate, reflecting how a basic mood of laughter is conveyed by the play as such. Irene initially seems overwhelmed and paralysed by fear. She speaks “in terror”, “in mounting horror”, and so on, fearing the Nun for instance, who represents the regime of the asylum, and who accompanies her as a patient: keeping her under constant surveillance and carrying a straightjacket with her. But as Rubek and Irene are about to ascend the mountain, they boldly raise their voices, for now they intend to live life to the full – and call it a “feast”. Fear, compartmentalisation and avoidance are finally overcome by a burst of laughter. They have been harming each other ruthlessly, and now the account is about to be settled. Their laughter, Ibsen’s laughter, is not, of course, of an ironical, harmless kind. Rather, it is a burst of gay laughter, making life possible “to the full”, even risking Dionysian self-destruction. Moreover, it is a grotesque, parodical laughter, exaggerating tragic conventions, a dramatic explosion.

It is an experience of laughter that resembles the one described by Bataille when, on the slope of the volcano, he was faced with the violent, non-human aspect of nature. The physical exhaustion, the experience of suddenly perceiving reality in a revelatory light, resulted in anxiety suddenly being overcome by a burst of laughter: all these ingredients are present here as well.

Ibsen’s laughter urges a redescription of the basic features of moral life. In the liberal view, the public and the private realm, as well as public and private morality, are to remain separated. Liberal laughter does not really laugh; it is of a harmless, ironical kind, a laughter that meets liberalism’s basic demand: strengthening the strategy of compartmentalisation. In Ibsen’s view, however, both realms remain intrinsically connected, and they continuously intrude upon each other. The intrusion

of laughter is an experience of transgression. The “non-controversial” demands of the public sphere are rendered superficial by a compelling (rather than “private”) sense of duty. Rubek’s sense of guilt, for example, although it at first may seem to pertain to the harm he has inflicted upon Irene, eventually proves to be identical to his artistic sense of failure, invoking a higher sense of obligation. What is contested by Ibsen’s play is not the awareness as such that moral life is enacted on different levels or in different realms, but rather the way this basic experience is interpreted by liberalism. What is rejected is the claim that these basic levels or realms or aspects of moral life can be compartmentalized and separated from each other. Rather, the very tension between these basic aspects of moral life is the principal issue of ethics as such. This tension, this interrelatedness, this collision, namely between the *human law* of interpersonal relationships, partnerships, etc. and the *divine law* of basic aspirations such as artistic callings etc., is our basic moral “problem”, although under different historical circumstances and conditions, different solutions will be fleshed out; but the platitudes of liberalism disavow rather than address this issue.

By “solution” I mean the way moral subjectivity is allowed to establish itself in response to this basic tension. In Ibsen’s later plays, a certain form of moral subjectivity appears for the first time, a form which, notwithstanding liberalism’s continuous effort to abolish it, continues to affirm itself – a form of subjectivity which continues to resist compartmentalization into a personal and an institutional Self. It was articulated by psychologists and philosophers like Freud (“discontent”), Heidegger (“inauthenticity”), Sartre (“bad faith”) and others. In all these efforts, although often quite different terminologies were used, compartmentalization as a form of moral subjectivity is presented as something inadequate, something which must be subverted. Although apparently it is a comfortable position, it nevertheless conceals rather than articulates the basic tension of contemporary life and therefore is bound to produce a chronic sense of uneasiness, inauthenticity or bad faith. Yet, at the same time an adequate solution seems to be denied to us. Most notably, a “political”, “etatistic”, “top-down” solution seems out of the question, and those political movements which present themselves as providing a way out are destined to fail. Rather, bottom-up strategies must be employed, strategies which enable modern individuals to renounce their desire for “solutions”, but without urging them to resignation, that is, to settle for what seems to be our inevitable present condition: the prospect of compartmentalization. This is opened-up by a form of laughter that laughs at everything “inevitable” or “final” and allows a rival understanding of moral subjectivity to become viable, one that remains incompatible with the liberal understanding of moral life, mistakenly considering itself the inevitable “solution” to the basic tension of moral existence.

One example of an author who fleshed out a rival understanding, offering obstinate resistance to the platitudes of liberalism, is Jacques Lacan (1986), notably in his account of tragedy. He claims that the impossible object of desire – exemplified by Rubek’s artistic vocation, obstinately focussed on his “thing”, his model – works from

a distance. Initially the experience of obligation, duty and failure seems to comply with the strategy of compartmentalisation, enforcing itself upon us in the allegedly private realm of the ethical (namely as an experience of a hyper-personal, egocentric calling or vocation, rather than in the sphere of morality: the world of contractual relationships and the “platitudes” of contemporary utilitarianism, as Lacan phrases it (p. 21). Ethics is intimately connected with desire. The improvised studio in the lake-side cottage was not only the place where Rubek and Irene produced their artwork (via their intense artistic dialogues and dialectical games), but also constituted themselves as moral subjects. Rubek hoped that, by creating an artwork, he would free himself from his toxic artistic desire, his sense of deficiency and guilt. The question was not how to achieve happiness, but rather: how to subdue the pervading sense of discontent and failure. But to achieve this “private” goal, he realised his fundamental dependency on the other (and this is where, as the advocates of liberalism phrase it, “morality” comes in). Their relationship was, however, a dialectical rather than a contractual one. Eventually, the focus of Ibsen’s drama shifts from the mid-life-crisis of the affluent and apparently “liberal” artist to the enigma of Irene’s desire, exemplifying feminine desire as such: a question which, as Lacan phrases it, emerges precisely in “le contexte ibsénien de la fin du XIXe siècle” (1986, p. 18). In other words, the focus shifts from how Rubek had used or misused her to what she really wanted from him (the child-motif in Ibsen’s drama). Precisely *because* she was the object of his desire, Rubek needed to maintain his distance to his model. In order to be able to reproduce and sublimate her body into a work of art, he strictly observed the haptophobic maxim *noli me tangere* (“do not touch me”). For Rubek, Irene represents what Lacan refers to as “the thing”, the primordial other, the ultimate object of desire, the lost object which can only be retrieved or resurrected when all conditions will be fulfilled, “au bout du compte” (p. 65). But in reality, this will never come about, other than as a phantasm, in a hallucinatory manner, as indicated by the work of art (the product of sublimation). Rubek feared the overdose of captivating pleasure involved in direct tactual exposure, while Irene persistently confronts him with his unwillingness to provide the missing part that would have allowed her to fill the existential gap. For Rubek the artwork was a line of defence: something which keeps the separation intact and yet is completely under the sway of and oriented towards the thing. Rubek fears Irene (his artistic “dame”) because of the connection of “dame” with *dominare*, and precisely because of this haptophobic fear, Irene accuses him of being a “poet” (in the Provençale or courtly love sense of the term). When Rubek confesses that he even added a replica of himself to the artwork-turned-composition, namely as someone who embodies remorse of a misguided life and will never be free to experience resurrection, Irene retorts:

IRENE: Poet! ... You think that settles the score. You’re a poet. There is something extenuating in that word... but *I* was a human being – once. *I* had a human destiny to fulfil ... but gave it all up to make myself your instrument – Oh. That was suicide. I should have brought children into this world, real ones, not the

kind buried away in mausoleums. That should have been my vocation. That, rather than serving you – poet (p. 1074)

The Provençale Dame or Thing takes the floor as a living subject with a desire of her own. The statuesque model comes to life and addresses him. Rubek suffers from the voice of conscience, not *because* but rather *notwithstanding* the fact that he plays tricks on his affluent customers, for although he seems highly successful in life he fails to meet a more basic obligation, invoking her furious rage and hate. He claimed that he acted out of servitude, in service of her sacred beauty, but now he finds the empty space left by the artwork suddenly occupied by a living subject. Her desire escalated into pathology, so that husbands became the victims (as substitutes) of a *crime passionnel* which was actually directed at Rubek, and the avalanche experience symbolises the moment of catharsis: their “second death” as it were (Lacan 1986, p. 331). And the question of the Last Judgement, posed on Resurrection Day is: have you acted in accordance with your desire (Lacan 1986, p. 362)? And at this point, the tragic and the comical converge. Ibsen’s play stages a profound and agonistic ethical debate, a moment of ἀλήθεια, compared to which the “adequate” moral platitudes of liberalism become something utterly laughable.

Thus, Lacan’s insights allow us to clarify the final enigmatic scene of Ibsen’s play. As Van Haute (1996) in his review of Lacan’s seminar summarises it, the beautiful (the work of art) is not something (some “thing”) within our reach, but an echo from outside, a point of transition, a last defence, where human existence becomes frightfully vulnerable. Van Haute refers to a violent illumination, a glow of beauty, which coincides with the moment of transgression when beauty lights up and desire becomes manifest – phrases which indeed seem to reverberate Ibsen’s dramatic plot. The desire for the perfect (for example, the perfect work of art, or the phantasm of resurrection) entails a risk of destruction. According to Lacan (1986), as we have seen, ethics it is neither about human happiness or well-being nor about avoiding harm and suffering. Rather, it is about finding a possible way of relating to the ultimate object of desire without being overwhelmed by it. This is the basic insight conveyed by *When We Dead Awaken*, a truth which completely subverts the compartmentalisation of liberalism.

But Ibsen’s play also reveals the extent to which the comical and the tragic remain intimately connected. The tragic view of life is counteracted and subverted by ridicule. In the intrusion of laughter, a basic truth of human existence is revealed and confirmed. The basic truth of tragedy (i.e. the recognition that the ultimate object of our desire remains beyond our grasp and that excessive desire for a final solution paves the way to self-destruction) is the truth of comedy as well, revealed for instance by Aristophanes in *Symposium*, when he tells the comic story about biped human beings, forever separated from their counterpart, deprived of the prospect of resurrection, while Zeus even threatens to bisect them once again and to impair them even more, should they refuse to settle for their present condition. Or, as Bataille phrased it, laughter is a non-tragic way of discerning the fearful truth of tragedy.

Laughter reveals the distance to the ultimate object of desire, allowing a viable form of moral subjectivity to become established. Ibsen's play reveals the intimate connectedness of the truth of tragedy and the truth of laughter, staging modern individuals who, in their efforts to find a way out of an "impossible" situation, rely on strategies of laughter.

#### 4. Beyond cynicism

If moral subjectivity ultimately relies on a comical view of life, what form of laughter should we focus on today? We rejected irony ("reduced" laughter) in favour of parody ("true" laughter). There are some reasons however, for considering Ibsen's play as cynical. Apart from the fact that Ibsen himself was often described as cynical, some obvious ingredients of cynicism can be found in *When We Dead Awaken* as well. The mocking grin, for instance, which Rubek secretly smuggles into his portrait busts (as a form of moral criticism) seems full of scorn and contempt and therefore should perhaps be regarded as cynical rather than parodical, for cynic laughter seems contemptuous rather than gay. Diogenes Laertius (1925/1979) narrates a famous anecdote about how he Diogenes the Cynic once lit a lamp in broad daylight saying, as he went about, "I am looking for human beings" (6:41), apparently implying that he considered actual human beings to be far below his moral standard. This seems to be the Magritte-like message that is conveyed by Rubek's grin as well: this is *not* the portrait of a human being.

Perhaps the best way to tackle this lingering confusion between cynicism and parody is to address it in a genealogical manner. Both Foucault and Sloterdijk point to the significance of cynicism, but emphasise that genuine cynicism is quite unlike how we understand a cynical attitude today. Therefore, we must dig deeper into the relationship of parody to cynicism. Allow me to summarise the basic features of cynicism as a form of laughter in its own right.

In the "standard account" of the history of serious philosophy, Socrates is represented as founding father of academic dialectics, but he also inaugurated a philosophical tradition that constituted its "comic double", namely cynicism. Cynics like Antisthenes and Diogenes are presented by Diogenes Laertius as Plato's mocking contemporaries – his "bad conscience" so to speak, for they reminded him in an obtrusive and pushy manner of those aspects of his highly esteemed teacher which he increasingly tried to obscure in his own dialogues: Socrates as the comic, plebeian, scandalous, mocking satyr. Compared to aristocrats like Plato, many cynics were of humble or even questionable descent. Their philosophy constituted a way of life rather than a doctrine – one of poverty, abstinence, hardship and jest. To the cynics, philosophy primarily meant physical and mental exercise, and they excelled in adapting themselves to all possible circumstances. Instead of arguing with Platonic or Academic philosophy, or other branches of scholarly discourse, they aimed at refuting



their opponents by means of practical jokes and “dramatized” ridicule, using food, body parts and bodily fluids as visual aids. For example, since Plato had defined man as a biped and featherless animal, Diogenes plucked a fowl one day and brought him into the lecture room with the words, “Here is Plato’s man”. As a result of this, “having broad nails” was added to the definition (Diogenes Laertius 1925/1979, 6:40).

Not only Platonic philosophy, public life as such was also ridiculed by the cynics and in much the same manner. We are informed, for example, that Diogenes was in the habit of behaving indecently in public places, doing “everything in public, the works of Demeter and of Aphrodite alike”<sup>220</sup> and using any place for any purpose (6:69). At a feast, certain people kept throwing bones to him as they would have done to a dog (the word “cynic” was derived from *κυνικός* meaning doglike) whereupon he played a dog’s trick and drenched them in urine (6:46). The stereotypical cynic was a solitary, eccentric, unsociable chap (generally of plebeian descent) who challenged established morality in a bold and provocative manner. His basic objective was to expose the platitudes of established culture by means of wit rather than argument. Instead of preaching moral criticism, the cynics embodied and enacted it in gestures, albeit in a provocative, exaggerated, even grotesque manner.

One remarkable feature of the cynic mode of speech is the extent to which content remains dependent on context. Their speech acts are performative rather than argumentative, and always refer to (and comment on) specific situations. In order to grasp the meaning of a particular line or phrase, the situation must be taken into account. It is a performative and dramatic mode of reasoning.

Cynicism created its own genre: the satirical dialogue. Duddly (1937) claims that in the writings of Menippus the Cynic (unfortunately no longer existent) the spirit of mockery was all-pervading (p. 70). No serious treatises were produced by him, Diogenes Laertius claims, and his books overflow with ridicule.<sup>221</sup> Duddley considers the use of the philosophical dialogue for comic and satirical purposes to have been Menippus’ chief contribution to literature, although some of Plato’s dialogues (the “Socratic” ones) already abounded in comic wit as we have seen.

Another reason for being interested in Cynicism is the influence it had on early Christianity. The cynics preached a simple and righteous life, free from all possessions, while criticising the rich, and the wandering mendicant monks of early and medieval Christianity differed little in rhetorical style and outward appearance from the cynics of ancient times (Dudley 1937). The city of **Gadara on the southern shore of Lake Galilee** was a notably Centre of Cynical philosophy and Menippus of Gadara, the famous satirist, was born there. Indeed, Jesus himself has been described as a cynical figure, in the original sense of the term (Crossan 1991).

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<sup>220</sup> A phrase indicating that he used to eat and masturbate in public.

<sup>221</sup> “There is no seriousness in him; but his books overflow with laughter, much the same as those of his contemporary Meleager” (Diogenes Laertius, 6:99). To Diogenes himself was attributed a profound contempt for literature as such.

Notwithstanding the abundance of comic wit, however, cynic laughter seems scornful rather than gay and conveyed an attitude of chronic contempt – “He [Diogenes] was great at pouring scorn on his contemporaries” (Diogenes Laertius, 6:24). Why is it that authors like Sloterdijk and Foucault encourage a cynic revival? Let us take a closer look.

In his *Critique of Cynical Reason* Sloterdijk (1983) aims at rehabilitating cynicism proper as a tradition of comic and popular resistance of long standing by referring to it as “kynicism”, distinguishing it from cynicism in the usual, pejorative sense. According to Sloterdijk, kynicism was Nietzsche’s basic form of laughter. Kynicism had flourished during the Hellenistic period (first three centuries A.D.) as well as during the Renaissance. Its basic feature was the rejection of elite intellectual culture (παιδεία) by endorsing *Frechheit* (i.e. impudence or insolence: ἀναίδεια). Its style of argumentation was coarse, vulgar and “grotesque” (p. 204). Diogenes was the founding-father of grobian, satirical resistance, of kynicism as a plebeian bottom-up philosophy, a “street philosophy”, dwelling in public spaces, boldly and impudently challenging established morality in a comic manner and with irresistible energy, using crude, grotesque and impudent modes of argumentation (p. 203). During the Middle Ages, kynicism manifested itself in the carnivalesque, the frivolous and the obscene, most notably in Germany (Harlequin, Hans Wurst, etc.).<sup>222</sup> Notably Tijl Eulenspiegel (“the fool who went into the offensive”) and Luther<sup>223</sup> are mentioned as paragons of impudence or *Frechheit* (p. 231). Moreover, cynical wit aimed at rehabilitating bodily life and bodily functions (notably its lower parts) and “argued” by means of crude gestures and indecent behaviour.

Yet true kynicism suffered a dramatic decline and today the bold, impudent rogue has become marginalised. Already during the Protestant era laughter was transformed into mere satire, and although its critical aspect has survived, modern criticism has become a serious matter and distanced itself from the traditions of laughter to which it historically belonged. Thus, although modern criticism is of comic descent, and critical philosophy is heir to a popular tradition of comic resistance, we hardly seem to be aware of the fact that since time immemorial moral criticism was connected with laughter.

According to Sloterdijk, the laughter of Diogenes was uninhibited, unembarrassed and unrestrained, relying on quick-wittedness and presence of mind (p. 275). Yet at the same time Sloterdijk points to kynicism’s basic ambivalence. Diogenes was obviously a misanthrope and Sloterdijk agrees that his laughter conveyed an embarrassing amount of bitterness, resentment, discontent, scorn and contempt (p. 308-309, p. 314).<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Sloterdijk refers to Bakhtin and Rabelais (p. 232).

<sup>223</sup> One of his lines is cited: ‘Ein zaghafter Arsch lässt selten einen fröhlicher Furz’ (‘A timid behind seldom produces a cheerful fart’, p. 203).

<sup>224</sup> Sloterdijk refers to his laughter as ‘unfröhliches Gelächter’ (p. 329).

Sloterdijk's effort to rehabilitate kynicism (or cynicism proper) coincided with a similar effort by Michel Foucault. In the fall of 1983, he presented a lecture at Berkeley on *παρρησία* – frank or unrestricted speech. The Greek noun means *franc-parler* and can be found, for example, in the writings of Lucian. The literal meaning of *παρρησία* is to say everything without recourse to any rhetorical forms of indirect speech and without any restrictions of prudence or politeness, implying that it entails an element of impudence and risk. In the writings of Plato as well as those of the church fathers, it has a pejorative connotation for it refers to vulgar public discourse and collides with the virtue of knowing when to remain silent.

In ancient Greece, Foucault claims, truth is not constituted by decisive revelatory experiences but by *παρρησία* as a verbal practice. It is straightforward and sincere, as well as dangerous. It rejects and criticizes those forms of speech which protect us from an inconvenient or even dangerous truth. It is a form of speech that is devoid of rhetorical devices, or, as Foucault phrases it, it is the zero degree of rhetoric. The most prominent frank-speaker of all was, of course, Socrates. His performance conveyed the freedom and frankness of market-square speech.

But speech forms are bound to become more restricted and rhetorical when they enter a power relationship, for instance between a king and one of his subjects. In that case *παρρησία* may become part of a contract. The king orders his subject, for example a messenger, to speak the truth on the condition that the usual restrictions and inhibitions are suspended. The term *παρρησία* emerges in the plays of Euripides, who was a contemporary of Socrates and, like the latter, committed to criticism and truth. Foucault emphasizes three forms of *παρρησία*: *παρρησία* between friends, *παρρησία* in the context of spiritual exercises, and *παρρησία* as criticism.

As to the critical function, special attention is paid to the role of *παρρησία* in public discourse in democratic Athens. *Franc-parler* is intrinsically linked with budding democratic institutions, since they tend to remove traditional restrictions on public speech and grant all citizens equal rights with respect to participation in public discourse. And this is where laughter comes in, but its connection with frankness is rather ambivalent. In fact, Foucault argues that *παρρησία* somehow became divided in itself. In this respect he refers to an anti-democratic pamphlet, dating from the end of the fifth century B.C. and written in the form of a parodical (Foucault uses the word “paradoxical”, p. 36) eulogy on democracy. Foucault emphasizes, however, that the piece is devoid of literary value because it is aggressive rather than witty. It cannot be regarded as representative of the “zero degree of rhetoric” because it is an indirect form of speech, instrumentalising current literary genres such as parody and irony. Its “irony” (p. 37) is in opposition with *παρρησία*, as laughter seems to take sides with conservatism. Its basic contention, however, is that democracy does not foster true *παρρησία*, but encourages flattery, a concealing mode of speech.

A similar line of argument occurs in a more moderate and serious treatise by Isocrates. Democracy pretends to foster *παρρησία*, but is basically at odds with it. And the only remaining true frank-speakers can be found in the theatre among the

comedians! Instead of encouraging frankness, democracy rather impedes it in the longer run, relying on indirect genres of laughter, while “true” frankness joins forces again with popular laughter.

In connection with the decline of the Greek city state and of Athenian democratic institutions, public life and discourse became transformed – a transformation which entailed considerable changes regarding the roles and forms of *παρρησία*. And it is here that Foucault focuses attention on certain unrestricted forms of life and speech, in particular the movement which came to be known as cynicism. Foucault emphasizes that cynicism was a way of life rather than a philosophical doctrine.<sup>225</sup> Again, the relationship between cynic *παρρησία* and the genres of laughter is highly ambivalent. Laughter laughs at cynicism (cf. Lucian), but cynicism is also a form of laughter in its own right. At first glance cynicism appears to be a form of seriousness, of criticism and preaching, mocked by poets like Lucian. The public performance of cynics, however, was remarkably provocative and outrageous, purposely violating public and civil conventions. The lives of the leading cynics entail a series of remarkable anecdotes and scandals which address and appeal to the masses rather than the elite. These public, outrageous performances were often connected with bodily functions, such as eating, sleeping and masturbating in public. It is clear that their vileness and impudence (*αναίδεια*), besides contesting established customs and moral ideals, produced a comical effect as well. They criticized moral platitudes through a bottom-up approach. Like Plato, the Cynics considered Socrates as the founder of their school, the pioneer of their outrageous, provocative and irritating, but decidedly comical genre. Laughter was dramatized by them, and cynicism was primarily a practice, a way of life. Cynic offensiveness had a serious and a gay aspect, while its laughter was lumpish and unrefined. But as a form of laughter, it was often scornful rather than gay.

According to Foucault, cynicism constitutes a remarkable stage in a development in which criticism was gradually bereft of its gay, hilarious aspects and reduced to rational criticism as such. Rather than being a linear development, there were several eruptions of gay laughter, such as during the sixteenth century. According to Foucault, *παρρησία* is part of a genealogy: it is the commencement of the critical occidental tradition. The transformation of *παρρησία* into modern criticism implied the separation or compartmentalisation of criticism and laughter, so that rational criticism has now forgotten its comic origins. The fact that moral criticism evolved out of local, peculiar, non-philosophical forms of speech became obscured. This is not the end of the story, however, and the separation of truth and laughter is far from self-evident or incontestable. It is a temporary outcome and the basic affinity between truth and laughter might be rediscovered someday.

Following the accounts of Sloterdijk and Foucault, some basic features of laughter

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<sup>225</sup> Cf. Diogenes Laertius: ‘If we decide that Cynicism is really a philosophy, and not, as some maintain, just a way of life’ (6:103).

in general and cynicism (or kynicism) in particular can now be emphasized. To begin with, it is important to note that the basic gelastic claim that there is moral truth in laughter actually builds on a gigantic history. For many centuries, moral criticism and laughter were indeed intimately connected – they were natural allies, so to speak. Moral philosophy started as a comical genre. Gradually, the critical aspect came to be regarded as “content”, and the comical aspect as superficial “residue”, a mere rhetorical vehicle. Their original connectedness became obscured by a series of efforts to turn moral philosophy into a serious genre, and yet the natural alliance between moral criticism and laughter tends to re-emerge in times of moral transition, such as in the first half of the sixteenth Century and the end of the nineteenth Century.

Furthermore, since time immemorial the strategies of laughter are intimately connected with popular resistance. As Sloterdijk points out, “silent majorities” have always been laughing majorities, defying official views and policies by mocking them. The experience of laughter indicates that the vital forces of the human body, exploited by the established regime, cannot be completely contained and may suddenly be set free by laughter. It is the expression of free-floating energy, which is to be organized again (in order to avoid pointless excess and self-destruction), but laughter facilitates breaking away from those forms of life that are acknowledged and encouraged by top-down policies and strategies of the established regime. Liberalism is a regime which grants “freedom to the individual”, but in combination with total mobilisation of the global workforce and ecological destruction on an unprecedented scale. Laughter facilitates lucidity (*ἀτυφία*), and we are bound to laugh when we discern how this power regime, labelling itself as “liberalism”, actually develops an unprecedented power over contemporary existence, forcing individuals worldwide to adopt a particular (consumerist, utilitarian and workaholic) view of life. History informs us, however, that forms of moral subjectivity established by laughter may be short-lived. They are unstable and may be appropriated and instrumentalised, exploited and transformed by statism before long.

Moreover, like other forms of laughter, cynicism is responsive rather than constructive. Its basic strategy consists of mocking established theories, exposing their questionable aspects to ridicule. Nietzsche’s dialogue between the wanderer and his shadow is a dialogue between a philosopher and his jester,<sup>226</sup> and what the philosopher learns from his jester is to appreciate the significance of common things, of “things nearby”, such as food, the body, etc. – *Naturalia non sunt turpia* was one of Diogenes’ famous sayings. Moreover, there is an experimental side to gelastic thinking, a strong focus on experimentation even, relentlessly putting established convictions to the test in the “crucible of laughter”, as Bakhtin phrases it: *Gaya scienza*. There is a decidedly positive aspect to this as well: exploring allegedly incompatible scenarios of existence (practices of the Self), which are discarded as

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226 ‘Sei ernsthaft, lieber Narr!’; Human, All Too Human II, The Wanderer and his Shadow, Introduction.

untenable, outdated, primitive, folkish, incorrect, etc. by liberalism.

What cynicism shares with parodical forms of laughter is disrespect for compartmentalisation. Diogenes' impudence consisted, among other things, of doing everything everywhere. A basic ingredient of the parodical experience of laughter is the experience of intrusion. Moreover, it relies on exaggeration as well as on the well-known comic device of taking things quite literally (cf. the anecdote about the biped fowl) – a strategy Diogenes shared with medieval comic heroes like Tjil Uilenspiegel, and one of the reasons why laughter is often lost in translation.

As both Sloterdijk and Foucault point out, rather than supporting laughter tout court, cynicism is basically ambivalent. Yes, it is impudent and comical, but on the other hand it is never really gay. There is always an element of scorn and contempt involved, so that it easily becomes a negative form of laughter, perhaps even sarcastic. Even Mephistopheles, in Sloterdijk's eyes the summit of cynical laughter, displays a negative attitude toward life, seeing life as corrupting and self-destructive. Cynicism excels in depicting human beings as worse than they really are. Sloterdijk tries to subdue this nasty, unappealing aspect by distinguishing true cynicism (kynicism) from "degenerated" varieties, but cynicism's chronic contempt seems present already in its "pure", original form. Quite unlike Socrates' laughter, that of Diogenes was already considerably scornful and jeering. Like Sloterdijk one may appreciate the impudent, popular and comical aspects of laughter, but precisely this is parody, representing gelastic affirmation rather than contempt.

Socrates, Luther, Ibsen and others exemplify the extent to which moral criticism is basically and originally a comical genre. In the case of Socrates, the comic popular tradition was still very much alive, but even Luther and Ibsen somehow seem to be in touch with this, although moral discourse as such had already adopted a serious tone. They intuitively grasped and put to use some of the forgotten possibilities of their genre. Perhaps the concept "genre memory" (coined by Bakhtin) may allow us to elucidate this phenomenon. Laughter speaks. Genres, Bakhtin tells us, constitute fundamental ways to visualize and conceptualize the world. Notwithstanding the diversity of comical forms, "one logic pervades all these elements" (1968, p. 61). He even goes so far as to invest genres with a life and memory of their own. A genre lives in the present, but always remembers its past, its beginning. While discussing the prehistory of the Dostoevsky novel, Bakhtin claims that it was not the author's "subjective memory", but the "objective memory" of the genre which preserved the characteristics of ancient literary forms (1973, p. 100). Likewise, all elements of comedy retain "a certain memory of that mighty whole to which they belonged in the distant past" (Bakhtin 1968, p. 47). As to modern forms of abuse, for instance, a vague memory of past carnival liberties and carnival truths still seems to slumber in them, like a collective unconscious, although the problem of their irrepressible linguistic vitality has not yet been seriously posed (1986, p. 28). Notwithstanding the many adaptations to refined sensibilities and the proprieties of aesthetic decorum, notwithstanding the countless efforts to erase the inappropriate and to eliminate the

vulgar, a certain awareness of the basic features of the generic tradition somehow maintains itself and forces itself upon those who practice it (cf. Le Blanc 1995). Like any other genre, moral criticism remembers its past. It has a “genre memory”, an intuitive grasp of its indestructible, noumenal comic potential, sensed by gifted practitioners. They still intuitively grasp some of moral criticism’s obfuscated possibilities, they have a lucid awareness of what is absent, lobotomized, adapted in serious ethical discourse. They somehow discern the possibilities suggested by the genre itself, ignoring or seeing-through enforced constraints. The modern effort to transform moral criticism into a serious genre and to erase all traces of its comic past is bound to fail. From the point of view of the history of laughter, modern time is but “a tiny island... it has only existed for the last four hundred years” (Bakhtin 1968, p. 319). Our forgetfulness of laughter is an instance of myopia.

## 5. Laughter as remedy

Ethics was originally a comic genre, gradually transformed into a serious one. The question now is: can certain forms of laughter be considered admissible or should laughter be abolished from ethics altogether? In contemporary liberal ethics, this question is dealt with by stating that laughter is considered permissible as long as it remains ironic or privatised. No responsible ethics or politics can be extracted out of laughter. Protagonists of liberalism argue that unreduced laughter not only ridicules, but also phlebotomises social criticism.

How, then, can laughter constitute a remedy? Bakhtin’s work primarily contains a history of laughter, he nowhere systematically explains how laughter could function in the world of today. At times he seems to suggest that laughter could still be of some significance, but in *The Dialogic Imagination* he explicitly points out that in modern times the function of parody has become narrow and unproductive (1988, p. 71). Parody has become sickly, he claims, and its place in modern literature is marginal. Moreover, he adds that we “live, write and speak today in a world of free and democratized language; the complex and multi-levelled hierarchy of discourses, forms, images, styles that used to permeate the entire system of official language and linguistic consciousness was swept away by the linguistic revolutions of the Renaissance”. The national languages that were successfully transformed into the official ones provide only modest space for travesty. In short, when it comes to the actual ideological equilibrium, laughter is either seen as insignificant or as downright subversive and dangerous. A liberal democracy does not seem to be the kind of society where public laughter still applies.

The problems of Bakhtin’s view on laughter in the context of contemporary society have been addressed by Hirschkop (1986, 1989). Are Bakhtin’s views firmly democratic or rather populist? Are they in favour of, or basically at odds with a modern, rational worldview? Such questions are difficult to answer since indicative

clues in Bakhtin's own work seem rather inconsistent or at least fragmentary. He is consistent, however, in viewing language as the podium for competing socio-ideological forces. The basic instrument of political domination by the official stratum (a "unified" language, unfairly generalizing the experiences of a limited section of the population, extrapolating them to other sectors) is mocked and contested by a popular-subversive tradition of farce and plebeian laughter. According to Hirschkop tries to argue, however, that Bakhtin's views on the popular strata of society are "far removed from reactionary images of a pious and backward 'folk'" (1986, p. 93). In other words, Hirschkop tries to introduce a distinction between an educated and "democratic" δῆμος on the one hand and a folkish, conservative and "populistic" *populus* on the other. As far as the basic opposition between higher and lower social strata is concerned, Bakhtin unambiguously sides with the latter. To a neo-Marxist like Hirschkop, however, this does not automatically imply that Bakhtin must be considered as "democratic" in the sense of "progressive". What is missing in Bakhtin's account, Hirschkop claims, is "the socializing function of the official stratum ... the institutional forms within which socialization must take place" (p. 101). In other words, now that left-wing ideas have entered governance, Bakhtin's evocation of the language of the people raises some suspicion. Notably, as Hirschkop phrases it, his political critique is "unable to distinguish between the repressive and socializing functions of class rule". What is neglected is "the process of socialization" as well as the fact that a particular language dominates by becoming the language of crucial political and cultural institutions: "Because he [Bakhtin] does not theorize the fact that the ideological dominance is secured by institutions like schools and dictionaries, he assumes that a spontaneously produced popular discourse will subvert it" (p. 111). In terms of political denomination, Bakhtin seems at best an anarchist and Hirschkop's criticism of Bakhtin's populism mimics Marx's criticism of grobianism, discussed in chapter two. Bakhtin is criticized for being politically unreliable and ambivalent, for advocating anarchism and populism instead of an organized and etatistic leftist view on social change. For Hirschkop, in order to further human well-being we need a state, a social-scientific understanding of reality as well as a democratic, i.e. unified language.

Hirschkop's point of departure is Bakhtin's statement just cited: "We live, write and speak today in a world of free and democratized language" (1988, p. 71). Bakhtin described how differences in form, genre and style within a shared national language can either enforce or challenge political domination and how supposedly unified modern languages must be rethought as political battlefields. According to Hirschkop (1989), Bakhtin's basic objective apparently was to provide the tools for transforming a *popular* language into a *democratic* one. Still, there are some inconsistencies and ambiguities that must be dealt with. In what way will Bakhtin's concepts really further the objective of establishing a coherent democratic language and culture in modern societies? Hirschkop emphasizes that many of Bakhtin's concepts are basically normative. Centripetal tendencies are both analysed and criticized as



repressing a language's "natural" tendency towards differentiation (p. 5). Bakhtin's description of culture seems to be motivated by certain political and normative objectives, but what are they? According to Hirschkop there is a strong populist inclination at work in Bakhtin's writings. The plebeian masses are endowed with spontaneous scepticism, they never fully share the ruling truth, never take completely serious the slogans of (either socialist or liberal) etatism. Linguistic conflicts reflect the everlasting socio-ideological struggles of society.

At first glance, Hirschkop claims, this might seem "more or less the vision of society on offer from liberalism" (p. 20), in the sense that differences in language reflect differences in interest, which must be balanced, accommodated, tolerated, etc. – and "through this line of argument Bakhtin becomes liberalism's, or, if you prefer, liberal pluralism's, best friend" (p. 20). Yet on further consideration, Hirschkop confesses, certain aspects of Bakhtin's writings persistently remain at odds, both with a liberal and with a socialist view on democracy and social change. Bakhtin and social-liberal democracy may even be seen as incompatible. What is missing, Hirschkop argues, is any effort to connect the local, semi-public languages of the market-square to "the larger structures of society and history", to connect "the texture of every-day life" to "the scientific aspirations of social theory". In Bakhtin's work, he claims, there is a dangerous temptation to reject such scientific aspirations altogether in favour of an unqualified celebration of everyday life and heteroglossia. Such celebrations, Hirschkop argues, "have only a tangential relation to Bakhtin's theory of the novel and arguably none at all to democracy" (p. 30). Hirschkop feels that, by renouncing the social and human sciences altogether, democracy would become "disconnected" from the need for accurate knowledge of social forms (p. 31). In opposition to such a view, Hirschkop advocates "a conception of democracy as a collective learning process". If the social analysis necessary to that process appears in the guise of an authoritative language, this is actually a political problem, not an excuse for dismissing social analysis as such. Rather it would entail "the creation of new political institutions, programs for popular education, democratic forms of mass media, and so on". According to Hirschkop, the comprehension of complex modern societies requires knowledge of a sophisticated, social-scientific kind rather than a (gelastic) celebration of everyday life.

In short, certain inconvenient aspects of Bakhtin's work, notably his "anarchist" and "populist" inclinations, are discarded because they "disregard the need for the stability and security which many think is part of the good and desirable life" (p. 32). Instead of trying to change the world in a democratic, organized and scientific way, Bakhtin's conception of a people repressed by official institutions "leaves us with an unending struggle between a "serious" ruling stratum and an ever "sceptical" populace" (p. 33). After citing a statement by Hungarian Marxist György Lukács, implying that irony is "the emblem of the frustration of human impulses in a world which is alien to them", Hirschkop finally concludes that Bakhtin's vision has little in common with the formal democracy on offer from the liberal state while the

“democracy of carnival” is a vision which “draws a remarkable contrast with the public life we have come to accept as norm” (p. 35).

Hirschkop’s analysis is typical for academics (notably from the U.K. and the U.S.) who are initially drawn to Bakhtin’s thought-provoking views, but become increasingly uncomfortably when they begin to realise that these views are difficult to align with the dominant liberal and leftist ideologies of today. Indeed, if we follow Hirschkop’s procedures, Bakhtin’s oeuvre would have to be systematically revised and stripped of its core message. Yes, laughter contests economic or political theories which present themselves as “scientific” and “incontestable”. From the point of view of laughter, such proposals are profoundly laughable, because it strips authors like Hirschkop of their masks, exposing them as etatistic thinkers endorsing and propagating views that are politically correct and zeitgemäß, but astonishingly hypocritical. Yes, in enlightened, liberal and democratic societies, laughter is bound to become a problem. But to understand *why* this is the case, some of the basic conceptual tools elaborated by Bakhtin’, such as his agonal view on the relationship between official (centripetal) and popular (centrifugal) forces, as well as his view that political struggle is first and foremost a *language struggle*, are highly relevant, not in the least because of the extent to which the languages of social research and social criticism have penetrated societal discourse, notably its upper, etatistic layers. It has become the aspiration of moral and social criticism to transform itself into technocratic expertise, a form of upward discursive mobility as it were, so that social criticism now sides with the elite. Laughter has preserved its ability to expose the oppressive restrictions and delusions conveyed by such speech genres. Laughter does not call for anarchy or violence, but it does recognize the extent to which political domination is a phenomenon of language as well as the extent to which the world is transformed through language. Laughter allows us to discern how moral subjectivity (our being-in-the-world) becomes drastically transformed as every-day life is increasingly explained in social-scientific terms. Parody remains “corrective” laughter. Its normative ideal is neither the conservative phantasy of a folk language that managed to preserve its age-old integrity, nor the progressive utopia of an ideal communication devoid of power and domination, for such desires are “corrected” rather than supported by laughter. Basically, laughter entails an awareness of the linguistic struggles of past and present. It is a way of remaining responsive and alert, an effort to recognize and expose those forms of moral violence and moral domination that try to become ideologically immunized by presenting themselves as inevitable and social-science-based. Laughter does not aim for the abolishment of constitutional democracy, but the fact that liberal democracy has become our political horizon does not imply that we should allow ourselves to ignore the moral violence that is implied in the fact that certain forms of moral subjectivity are enhanced by liberalism at the expense of others (for liberalism is never “neutral”), thereby invoking forms of resistance which will become articulated via laughter. Laughter continues to offer resistance to the basic inclination of all official ideologies to compartmentalise certain

social genres from “the fundamental realities of life” (Bakhtin 1988, p. 237).

It is important to emphasize, moreover, that, in the case of Hirschkop and others, “free and fearless investigation” as well as the “experimental attitude made possible by laughter” cannot be identified with the “human sciences”, with academic “social science”, which basically comes down to: rationalising and justifying certain forms of human resource management. In the socio-cultural arena, there are other forms of truth than those of evidence-based human resource management and behavioural economics. The free and fearless forms of investigation and experimentation, made possible by laughter, differ from behaviourism or Taylorism. Rather, they are what Foucault refers to as practices of the self. Ultimately, both Bakhtin and Foucault side with “gay” rather than with “social” science, with gelastic experiences emerging in the folds and margins of the established style of thinking rather than with the human resource management expert; and with the Renaissance state of mind rather than with those forms of discourse that represent the current version of the Counter-Renaissance, playing a role similar to the role of egocentric Protestantism in early modernity. “Free and fearless” investigation should not be identified with human resource management, but with *Gaya scienza*: its bold, comic, unofficial and ineradicable antagonist.

The truth of laughter intrudes into scientific discourse. After desperately trying to come up with a scientific account of sexual desire, Freud suddenly turns to a different source: the story which Plato put in the mouth of Aristophanes in *Symposium* (1959/1967, p. 100), about Zeus slicing humans in two, like eggs that are divided into two parts using a hair: an every-day culinary practice. Freud’s own discourse is abruptly sliced in two as well, and he acknowledges that “the moment has come for breaking off” (p. 102), so as to be able to explain why we (the descendants of these primordial humans) are frantically searching for the lost “other half” of what we once were (Plato 1925/1996, 189E-191C). Freud feels forced to admit the truth of laughter into a discourse that desperately tried to present itself as scientific, acknowledging that the truth of laughter eventually surpasses the truth of science.<sup>227</sup>

In chapter one, we saw how politics is defined as the art of government, the art of exercising power over individuals. I argued, however, that such a definition entails a restricted, top-down understanding of politics, one which tends to obscure the bottom-up aspects of political life. What is neglected in a top-down perspective is the question what kind of moral subjectivity, what form of moral life is constituted, fostered and established by a particular moral regime.

Liberalism is both a political and a moral phenomenon. Its moral aspect is the compartmentalization of moral life into a public and a private realm. Moreover, in a

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<sup>227</sup> In his book on jokes, Freud (1905/1973) circumvents laughter, approaching it only with considerable reluctance (‘An das Problem des Komischen selbst wagen wir uns nur mit Bangen heran’, p. 207). He points out that parody aims at depriving the highly placed of their dignity and sovereignty by overemphasizing certain bodily features or by stressing that they are troubled by the same bodily (notably excremental) needs as everybody else.

liberal perspective the public realm is identified with top-down politics (with procedures, fairness, rights, etc.) whereas moral subjectivity is considered the outcome of private, individual choices. This implies that on the theoretical level, liberalism obscures how (in order for policies of containment to be accepted) certain forms of moral subjectivity are encouraged while others are discarded as questionable or objectionable. Liberalism pretends to be neutral, but in politics impartiality is just another word for being the dominant view. Liberalism tends to neglect and obscure a vital part of the public, political realm, a dimension that cannot be identified with politics in the “strict” sense of top-down government, namely the agonistic realm: the public *ἀγών* or *Αγορά* where incompatible interpretations of the present moral condition mockingly confront each other in an interminable competitive struggle.

Such an understanding of the public realm was already endorsed by Nietzsche and other admirers of ancient and Hellenistic Greece, enticed by the Greek proclivity for verbal competition, so that Greek public existence was marked by an atmosphere of gay verbal competition, where human drives could express themselves even if they were considered as endangering the political establishment.<sup>228</sup>

This vital but neglected part of public existence is the working area of laughter. Although true laughter is the very opposite of governance, it certainly is public, and even political – but in a bottom-up sense. True laughter, Bakhtin claims, concerns the entire order of life, including the prevailing truth (1968, p. 307). True laughter is a moral experience of intrusion which challenges strategies of compartmentalization, preferably to the point of collapse. Socrates, for instance, was not a politician. He did not argue for political change in the top-down sense of the term. He was a midwife, someone who, in defiance of the lifestyles acknowledged and fostered by the state, allowed unprecedented forms of moral subjectivity to establish themselves; notably lifestyles which enacted a critical philosophical practice, including cynicism. In the case of Socrates, philosophical discourse represented an intrusion of popular laughter into the public realm. Philosophical critique was reconnected with age-old popular genres of laughter. In the eyes of the “real” Socrates, philosophy was hilarity and fun. Rather than challenging certain political arrangements, his laughter initiated a certain form of moral subjectivity. Although not “political” in a restricted, top-down sense, his comic performance greatly affected public and political life. It did not merely reject but also affirm. Indeed, the forms of life initiated by Socratic laughter were to gain political significance in the years and centuries to come. Thus, his performance turned out to be “world-historically justified”, as Hegel phrased it. It was a remarkable achievement. For centuries, moral criticism (by Cynics, early Christians, mendicant orders, etc.) remained intimately connected with laughter. Laughter allows us to

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<sup>228</sup> Human, *All Too Human II*, “The Wanderer and his Shadow”, § 167, § 226. Huizinga (1938) in his study on the playful or lusory points out that, whereas in the ancient Greek experience the competitive aspect had been emphasized, a shift towards the comical occurred during the Roman period, while during the Middle Ages as well as during the Renaissance the playful and the foolish remained intimately connected.

perceive the present in a different light and to free ourselves from established forms of moral subjectivity that we come to experience as restricting and misguided.

If different *forms* of laughter can be distinguished, what kind of laughter would allow us to challenge the basic platitudes of liberalism, to expose the moral restrictions of the present? What kind of laughter would provide a timely “remedy”? In the previous chapters and sections, we have already dismissed irony and the same goes for the more rancorous branches of cynicism as well. Whereas irony is basically a defensive mode, cynicism will often express contempt. A much more viable form of laughter has been advocated in this study, one that encroaches upon official genres whenever, due to certain historical conditions, the morally correct types of discourse are experienced as suffocating and misleading. Notably, it takes the floor when representatives of the lower strata, the plebeian sections of society (such as Socrates and Luther) are suddenly granted access to written discourse; a form of laughter which affirms rather than rejects, and which is full of life rather than defensive. Although parody may be considered as excessive and exaggerated at times, it works like a magnifying glass, revealing the dynamics of power on the microscopic, discursive level, on the level of grammar and phrases. We should not aim at a revival of the laughter of Socrates or Luther as such, however, for by literally laughing like them, laughter would become a costume or a mask, and we would be mere impersonators. Certain basic features of their laughter, however, may become the object of an exercise in retrieval, enabling and encouraging us to develop our own genuine style of laughter – a laugh that laughs at a moral regime that questions the admissibility of laughter; a laughter that laughs at liberalism as a position which perceives itself as inevitable, tolerant and lasting.

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