

ON LAUGHTER, COMICALITY, HUMOUR

Liberato Santoro-Brienza

As a purely physiological phenomenon, laughter seems to be adequately understood. However the full experience of laughter—in its content, as it were, and its causes—appears to be less simple. In the entry that goes under the title ‘Rire’, the *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* asks the rhetorical question: “quoi de plus complexe que le rire?”² Along with the numerous encyclopaedic companions to the Bible, the aforementioned *Vocabulaire* echoes the comments of the Fathers of the Church, and most explicitly of Saint Basil, who noted “the ambiguity of the word laughter” in the Scriptures.³

Even more ambiguous, polysemic, and complex than laughter are its content and causes: comicality and humour. The wealth of theories and reflections that aim to clarify their nature and structure bears witness to their polysemic complexity. Most of these theories and reflections refer to comicality and humour as if they were interchangeable synonyms. One of the main intentions of this essay is to attempt to differentiate between the two, while cursorily presenting some preferred arguments and ideas about this vast subject.

Let us begin with the story of laughter. One of the earliest documents dealing with the mysterious power of laughter is to be found—so we are told—in a papyrus scroll which relates how:

a Godhead of almost certain Hellenized Egyptian extraction ... laughs aloud seven times ... and thereby sets creation in motion. Out of each laugh wonderfully leaps one of the seven functional gods of the universe. When the Godhead laughs for the first time, light appears, and the god of fire and the cosmos is born. When the Godhead laughs for the second, the waters are so amazed

they separate, and the god of the abyss makes his appearance. Thereafter, as bitterness and sadness have their way with him ... more fateful gods are thrown up. Until at last, with the emotions fairly balanced, he whistles mightily to the earth which labours to bring forth a being of its own, a dragon by the name of Phochophoboch, the shining one, the cause, ultimately, of Phobos—terror. The primal laugh does not make the world an unmitigatedly breezy place. There are tears in laughter.⁴

This Egyptian story, redolent with Hellenic overtones, reminds us that ancient Greek and Roman mythology resounded with the echo of many laughs. We speak, for example, of 'Homeric laughter'. Zeus—like most of the gods—laughed. Joviality derives from the name of Jove. In the Homeric Hymn, baby Hermes "laughed with endless delight" at the sight of the mountain tortoise, foreseeing the sacrificial metamorphosis of the harmless creature into the lyre. And then there is Demeter's laughter, provoked by the iambic comic obscenities of, precisely, lambe.

According to some mythical narratives and traditions, lambe was reputed to be the daughter of Echo and Pan: the child born of repetitive Chattering and Lustfulness. Other traditions simply present her as an old woman from Halimos. In any case, lambe's claim to distinction remains the same: she made the sad Demeter laugh again. One version of the story runs like this:

Demeter, goddess of the sprouting corn, is inconsolable. Hades has carried off her beloved daughter, Persephone. He has entombed her with him in the world below, leaving the earth wintry. Demeter wanders her kingdom, veiled, robed as an old woman, unrecognizable, ungodesslike, searching in vain for her daughter. At length she arrives in Eleusis, where she accepts neither food nor drink. She sinks upon a rock named 'Unsmiling' and mourns ... Until lambe appears in her presence. And pours from her mouth a stream of obscenities. Jest. Ribaldry. Mockeries. Indecencies ... She becomes, in other words, a comedian. And in the face of her comedy, Demeter's despair evaporates. She rises from the rock called 'Unsmiling'. She laughs. She eats. She drinks. She comes alive. The recumbent earth stirs again.⁵

The aforementioned mythical tales suggest, firstly, that laughter is at the same time a liberating and creative life-force, and a destructive

power containing elements of malice, fear and terror; and secondly, that laughter was understood in ancient times as something quite primordial. We could, then, rephrase Goethe's rephrasing of "in the beginning was the word", and agree with our Egyptian ancestors that "in the beginning was laughter". But this would not accord with other mythical narratives. Laughter does not feature conspicuously in the biblical texts, for instance.

In Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, the monk Jorge of Burgos (who has his real twentieth-century counterpart in Anthony M. Ludovici, arguably the most virulent contemporary foe of hilarity⁶), abhorring the idea that an ancient text ascribed to an auctoritas such as Aristotle could deal with laughter, has no qualms about poisoning his community brothers. In his fanaticism, he argues—against textual evidence to the contrary—that there is no mention of laughter in the New Testament. He is, however, correct in repeating that Jesus is never portrayed as laughing. Jorge's primary preoccupation seems to concern the upholding of the Benedictine monastic rules. And, so, he reminds his brothers: "*Verba vana aut risui apta non loqui*".⁷

The already-quoted *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* mentions thirty-two references to laughter in the Bible. Apparently, there are only two cases in the Old Testament that clearly associate laughter with joy. Most of the other instances are expressions of scorn, derision, contempt and mocking. It would appear that the writers of the Bible had a diabolical sense of humour. As a result, a biblical joke is no laughing matter. (That this should actually be the case will become quite obvious when we will discuss the subversive character of humour and comicality). But, then, precisely because the biblical beginning—and in fact the whole text, in its not negligible length—is so serious, Spike Milligan could successfully spice it up in his own modernised version of the story of creation. Here is a short sample.

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
2. And darkness was upon the face of the deep; this was due to a malfunction at Lots Road Power Station.
3. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light, but Eastern Electricity Board said He would have to wait until Thursday to be connected.
4. And God saw the light and it was good; He saw the quarterly bill and that was not good...

10. And God said, Let the seas bring forth that that hath life, flooding the market with fish fingers, fishburgers and grade-three salmon.

11. And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the sea, and let fowl multiply on earth where Prince Charles and Prince Philip would shoot them...

15. And God said, Behold, I have given you the first of free yielding seed, to you this shall be meat, but to the EC it will be a Beef Mountain.⁸

As a neuro-physiological phenomenon, laughter has been explained as consisting in the involuntary contraction of fifteen facial muscles, accompanied by certain irrepressible noises, suspended respiration, sudden convulsive shaking of the shoulders and of the whole body. Thus understood, "laughter is a reflex, but it is unique in that it has no apparent biological purpose. One might call it a luxury reflex. Its only function seems to be to provide relief from tension".⁹ If the neuro-physiology of the bodily act of laughter is clearly understood and defined, its causes seem to resist attempts at definition—if for no other reason than their endless variety—and have been explained in a large number of mostly partial definitions. There are, of course, instances of purely neuro-physiological causes of laughter. I think of hysterical laughter, individual or collective, as a discharge of pent-up tension. Young children are known to break out in laughter at the moment when a state of tense anxiety induced by fear is suddenly removed. Youngsters are seen to come out of school laughing their heads off, without any apparent reason. There is the unstoppable, quite involuntary and embarrassingly contagious laughter that seizes one in the most solemn occasions marked by prolonged tension and restraint. And there is 'spastic laughter', along with other kinds, caused by lesions and other damage to the brain.¹⁰

Perhaps precisely because of the difficulty of the subject, laughter becomes more interesting when we consider it in the light of its causes: as triggered by comicality and humour. Here we encounter that endless variety of explanations and definitions that made some theorists, like Victor Raskin despair of ever unravelling the elusive nature of comicality, and of ever fully grasping the essence of humour. For instance,

Croce (1903, 228) claimed that "humour is undefinable like all psychological states." Bergson (1899, 61) warned: "We shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition" ... "we regard it, above all, a living thing."

One of the implications of this was, of course, that humor will defy any definition and escape from any prison. Bergson, however, was one of those who did not give up hope altogether: "The comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest forms. It has method in its madness" (ibid, 62). "The funniest thing about comedy is that you never know why people laugh," admitted W.C. Fields. "I know what makes them laugh, but trying to get your hands on the why of it is like trying to pick an eel out of a tub of water."¹¹

We might add that it is like looking, face to face, into the eyes of a platypus, and trying to make sense of its baffling morphology. Raskin notes another difficulty to be encountered when dealing with advanced theories on comicality and humour: "Humor has defeated researchers in still another, perhaps more subtle, less conspicuous and ultimately more harmful way. It has generated a great number of loose, incomplete, unrestricted or circular definitions of itself".¹²

Among others—but arguably more cogently than others—Pirandello, in his *Lumorismo*, pointed to the ambiguous, amphibian and paradoxical nature of comicality and humour. Given his anti-rationalistic stance, Pirandello found the problem of *umorismo* particularly fascinating. From his point of view, comicality—and its variation, humour—has the distinctive virtue of having frustrated and embarrassed all the philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, etc. who have tried to define it. This has led some more recent theorists to think of humour and comicality as purely hypothetical universal concepts: *Reflexionsbegriffe*, in the Kantian sense, encompassing a vast and diversified set of phenomena bearing a 'family resemblance', in the Wittgensteinian sense.

Summing up Pirandello's analysis in part, we can make—along with Eco—three initial points:

(i) Humour and comicality, in the widest possible sense of the words, refer to and denote a rather complex, diversified, imprecise experience or phenomenon. For this reason, they also connote a variety of sub-classes: irony, satire, sarcasm, wit, *agudeza*, conceit, laughter, smile—"And we are not sure whether these constitute separate kinds of experience or are rather variations of a unified fundamental experience". Laughter may appear, at first sight, to be the common denominator. However, we soon discover that many comical—and even more humorous—instances are associated with and induce crying: the tear in the smile. Paradoxically, a tragic element seems to lurk behind the scene of comedy and humour.

(2) More than laughter, unease and embarrassment, for instance, may be better candidates for the common denominators of the various forms of humour and comicality.

(3) Finally, the theorists of humour give either a definition that does not account for all the possible manifestations of comicality (Bergson and Freud, in particular, are singled out) or a definition that implies too much, even situations and experiences that go beyond what we generally call comical or humorous.

Pirandello suggests that the comical experience is triggered when we "perceive the contrary" (*avvertimento del contrario*). In this suggestion we find an echo of the main classical theories of comedy. For Aristotle, for instance, the comical effect is produced when, in a sequence of foreseeable events, something happens that alters the habitual and familiar order of things. Kant thought that we laugh when an unexpected and absurd situation frustrates, subverts, and vanquishes our familiar and habitual expectations. Schopenhauer stands between Kant and Pirandello, who was significantly influenced by his thought.

However, in order for us to laugh because of what we perceive to be an error, or mistake, or flaw—according to the order of our familiar construction of the world—it is necessary that we remain at a distance and not be involved in the mistake. The 'mistake', or flaw, belongs to somebody else and we—who are not in error or in a state of imperfection—indulge in the feeling of being superior. Indeed, comicality makes us feel healthy and wholesome, especially if we fear we may be otherwise. Comicality, in other words, protects us against the 'reality principle', as Freud would put it. And the imaginary self-assurance that makes us laugh at the misfortunes of others—inferior to us, of course—is indeed diabolical. So, we are diabolically surprised: we are surreptitiously or symbolically jolted out of our diabolical condition of everydayness and fear of novelty, and we laugh.

Pirandello gives an example which we may elaborate on. Imagine an elderly lady who, out for a walk, dresses like a teenager: with miniskirt, high stiletto boots, a transparent and tight t-shirt, dozens of rings on her ears and nose, heavy facial make-up, dark-coloured short hair. We perceive that the old lady is the opposite of what a respectable and decorous senior citizen should be and look like. This situation confronts us with a breakdown of our familiar expectations. We feel detached in our understanding—however intuitive and pre-reflective—of the lady's mistake, her desire to escape the irreversible cruelty of time, her pathetic narcissistic attempt at feigning an irretrievable condition. And so, we laugh.

According to Pirandello, the distant "perception of incongruity" which produces a comic effect and triggers malicious laughter can turn into a "feeling of incongruity" if we abandon our detached and supercilious stance. We can, in other words, empathise with the old lady. We can identify with her intentions and concerns, her fears and desires. We can introject the foibles and naive machinations of the old comical lady. By doing or experiencing this, we abandon our sense of distance, because we realise that, after all, we might all eventually behave in the same silly manner. We become tolerant. We no longer partake of a comical scenario. We are transported into the land of humour. Our initial laughter is replaced by a compassionate sense of pity and understanding. Laughter is replaced by a smile, not without a little sadness and a tear.

To return to the question of definitions of comicality and humour, it has been noted that the prevailing, if not in fact exclusive, approaches to questions concerning comicality have attempted to define it ontologically: they aim to find a substantialist answer to the ontological question: "what is comicality, in itself?"¹³ This observation would prompt us to suspect that perhaps there is nothing laughable, comical or humorous in itself or, if you prefer, 'in reality'. Only thinking—and hence speaking—makes it so. This suggestion would be supported in particular by those approaches to humour that (respectful of its etymological roots in the Hippocratic 'humours') define it as "a temperament; a state of mind, mood; inclination; facetiousness, comicality; and faculty of perceiving comicality; jocose imagination (less intellectual and more sympathetic than wit)", as indicated in the *Oxford Dictionary*. Or, as Harvey Mindess puts it in other words: "a frame of mind, a manner of perceiving and experiencing life. It [humour] is a kind of outlook, a peculiar point of view, and one which has great therapeutic power".¹⁴ Pirandello's definitions as well—of, on the one hand, comicality as *avvertimento del contrario*: detached, supercilious, objectifying or pro-jective "perception of incongruity"; and, on the other, of humour as *sentimento del contrario*: empathic, sympathetic, introjected "feeling of incongruity" that could affect us—point in the direction of subjective disposition.

It would appear that the objects, the contents or raw material of humour, comicality and laughter are, in themselves, either serious or neutral, natural, banal, everyday occurrences. Generally, it seems that

while humour and comicality bring to light some substantial and serious feature of our human condition, they nonetheless focus on, or take as their material, very accidental human properties, behaviours, and events. And this seems to be particularly the case with comicality, more so than with humour, perhaps.

Furthermore, let us not fail to notice—with Eco—that the majority of writers who have attempted a 'serious' explanation of humour and comicality were not humorous writers, nor comedians. Aristophanes, Molière, Lucianus, Groucho Marx, Rabelais, and Woody Allen, for instance, have not made—to my knowledge—any serious attempt to analytically solve the riddle of humour and comicality. Instead, we have been granted reflections on the subject by Aristotle, a rather earnest thinker, who wrote on comedy as a conclusion to his *Poetics* and as a final explanation of tragedy; by the intellectually ponderous and austere Immanuel Kant (though we have reason to believe, from his biographies, that he was endowed with a very good sense of humour); by the even more earnest Hegel who, it must be said, was quite keen on and readily inclined to irony and sarcasm; by a post-romantic, 'splenetic' (depressive?) poet, such as Baudelaire; by a relatively cheerless, anguished, and existentially over-anxious Kierkegaard; by a totally humourless psychologist such as Theodor Lipps; by Henri Bergson, haunted by metaphysical preoccupations; and finally by Freud, who mirthlessly showed the way to turn our "neurotic misery into everyday unhappiness", and in the end focused his theoretical efforts on the not so cheerful notion of our "death instinct".

To return to our main theme, it would appear that there is no laughable, comical and humorous 'thing', *an sich*. If this is the case, we are obliged to think that the power of humour and comicality—which, as suggested, seems to lie on the side of subjective disposition—rests mainly, if not entirely, on their formal side: their context, structure, and articulation. As far as jokes are concerned, for instance, it is the way you tell them that matters. With this, I am repeating what I suggested earlier. But I am also helping myself to move on and focus—albeit briefly and selectively—on my understanding of humour. The whole story, for one of my purposes, could begin with Sigmund Freud. In his two writings on jokes, wit and witticisms, humour, laughter and comicality, and everyday linguistic parapraxes: *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud considered these phenomena as "symptoms", hence as vehicles of sign-functions. Therefore, he articulated a

semiotic discourse—albeit in *nuce*—that identified the linguistic and psychological mechanisms productive of comic or humorous effects: *displacement and condensation*. Since Freud—and eventually with the development of semiotics—humour and comicality have increasingly been studied as forms of communication, in the light of their formal aspects, as particular kinds of production of peculiar kinds of texts or messages. The list of eloquent exponents of this approach is too long to be mentioned here. Very selectively, we can think of Ernst Kris and E. H. Gombrich who, in particular, applied Freud's findings to the study of comicality in caricatures; Gillo Dorfles, who has deduced semiotic insights from his analyses of cinematic communication; W. Fry, who identifies in humorous or comical messages two distinctive aspects: an explicit communication concerning a paradoxical situation, and a meta-communication that denounces the same humorous discourse as unreal and hence subject to the condition of paradox. Arthur Koestler has suggested that:

It is the sudden clash between two mutually exclusive codes of rules—or associative contexts—that produces the comic effect. It compels the listener to perceive the situation in two self-consistent but incompatible frames of reference at the same time ... While this unusual condition lasts, the event is not only, as is normally the case, associated with a single frame of reference but "dissociated" with two The word dissociation was coined by the present writer to make a distinction between the routines of disciplined thinking within a single universe of discourse—on a single plane, as it were—and the creative types of mental activity that always operate on more than one plane. In humour, both the creation of a subtle joke and the *recreative* act of perceiving the joke involve the delightful mental jolt of a sudden leap from one plane or associative context to another.¹⁵

Among the other authors who have taken and developed the semiotic lead offered by Freud, we must include Victor Raskin, for his systematic work on *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*; Paul Bouissac with his "A Semiotic Approach to Nonsense: Clowns and Limericks"¹⁶; and all the contributors to the November 1976 issue of *Il Verri*, in particular Patrizia Violi's essay "Comico e Ideologia", and Giovanni Manetti's seminal paper "Per una semiotica del comico". Manetti makes the point very clear:

If we shift the axis of our attention from metaphysical concerns to language and to sign-making or semiotic processes in general, comicality and humour will prove to be a particular instance of linguistic-semiotic strategy. They would, then, demand a specific and differentiated elaboration of their own kind of language. A semiotic analysis would consist in justifying or accounting for that specificity and difference.¹⁷

Manetti proceeds with an outline of the basic semiotic strategies deployed in the making of comical or humorous messages. These are said to rest, fundamentally, on the collision and/or overlapping of oppositional registers and codes, which—finally—explain comical language as opposed to everyday or current language.

In his “The Comic and the Rule”, Eco reminds us that, in both tragedy and comedy, we are dealing with the problems of a violation of some rule, code, or convention.¹⁸ With this, Eco reiterates the widely accepted idea according to which the primary mechanism for the production of comical and humorous effects is estrangement and defamiliarisation—hence the strategy of surprise, bordering on the *unheimlich*, in Freud’s sense of the “uncanny”. In light of this we could add that the ‘poetic’ strategies generating comicality and humour can be said to produce—in an implicit and indirect manner—aesthetic effects: they are akin and analogous to creative art.

Questioning the generally adopted assumption whereby tragedies deal with the violation of universal rules (and therefore ought to concern all humans, regardless of culturally and historically different contexts), while in comedies the violated rules are particular, Eco offers an alternative solution to the problem. He suggests that we should focus on another kind of question, namely: “what is our awareness of the rules that are being violated?”, in tragedy and comedy respectively. The answer is that what distinguishes tragedy is that before, during, and after the enacted representation of the violation of the rule, we are compelled to linger at length precisely on the nature of the rule. On the contrary, in the comic act, the violated rule is implicitly presupposed, taken for granted, and never explicitly mentioned. As Eco puts it:

Translated into terms of textual semiotics, the hypothesis could be formulated in this way: there exists a rhetorical device, which concerns the figures of thought, in which, given a social or intertextual “frame” or scenario already known to the audience, you display the variation without, however, making it explicit in discourse.¹⁹

There is, however, another question to be asked. Is there some difference between the kind of rules violated—and reiterated or reaffirmed—in the tragic act, and those violated—without ever being explicitly mentioned, and actually negated or suspended—in the comic act? Eco grants us a hint. He mentions that in tragedy we see the violation of ethical and religious rules, while in comedy—and comic acts—we witness and re-enact the violation of what he calls “common scenarios”:

[T]he pragmatic rules of symbolic interaction that society takes for granted. The pie in the face makes us laugh because we normally assume that, at a party, pies are eaten and not thrown at other people. Because we know that kissing a lady's hand means lightly grazing it with the lips, a comic situation arises when someone seizes the hand and covers it greedily with wet, smacking kisses.²⁰

Eco's reflections on the tragic, the comical, and their relation to the rule prompt a corollary idea. We could say that in a tragic act, the rule—as the voice of the Other, as fate and destiny—duly reiterated and reaffirmed, in the end wins. The violator is violated. In Greek tragedy, where often two sets of rules—both valid and both justifiable—“collide” (to use Hegel's chosen term to define tragic action), the bearer of one of the two codes of moral, or social, or religious action must be vanquished. In fact, in the end, all the protagonists lose. Only the rule, in the guise of fate, wins. And the unchallenged triumph of the rule is another way to define ‘duty’ and ‘seriousness’, especially in their extreme form which is closely related to repression and neurosis. On the contrary, in the comical act—and in humour—the violator wins and the rule is, even if only temporarily, defeated and suspended. I say ‘temporarily’ vanquished, for it is there to be violated—in the beginning—and re-emerges, re-instated, after the comical defiance. In the end, for logical and dialectical reasons, the comical act functions with constant reference to the rule which it presupposes. Eco makes this point very clear. There are insightful comments on the same idea in Bakhtin's study *L'oeuvre de François Rabelais*.²¹ Patrizia Violi suggests that:

Obviously we must not forget that the expressions of this kind of comical-popular culture were always contained within well-defined physical-temporal spaces

such as the carnival, religious festivities, country fairs, etc... Only within the bounds of exceptional times, the freedom of the feast was allowed by the powers to be. And precisely their character of unique/exceptional occurrence confirmed—in the end—the very same order and hierarchy that—in the feast—was laughed at and subverted Even at these conditions and in these terms, one could deploy humour for the purpose of a really subverting and renewing purpose. However, one would still need to acknowledge and adopt the critical awareness of the complexity and contradictions that the use of a language “other” necessarily implies. Its being “other” is such only with reference to the “official language”, therefore it stands as an indirect confirmation of the prevailing language and rule.²²

The all-pervasive presence of the rules, albeit temporarily violated and suspended in comicality, sheds light on the conviction, held since Aristotle, that laughter is the *proprium* of humans. In the first place, humour, comicality, jokes and laughter always deal with the human factor, and if they deal with objects or natural phenomena, they do so in an anthropomorphic fashion and after an implicit anthropomorphic transformation. We are reminded of this by Bergson, when he writes in *Le rire*: “The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human”.²³

At the beginning of *L'umorismo*, Pirandello quotes Rabelais, who rightly claimed that “*le rire est le propre de l'homme*”. Rabelais, as we know, was not coining a brand new idea, but rather repeating an old scholastic topos. In Eco's words: “The ‘proprium’ is that characteristic that one adds to the definition by species and genus, in order to better single out—and in a quite unambiguous fashion—certain members of a species. For instance, man is a vertebrate mammal animal. Among all other such-like animals, he is also rational. Furthermore, he is distinguished by having—as his *proprium*—the trait of being *ridens*. No other animal—even presuming that there may be other rational animals—knows how to laugh”.²⁴

Aristotle's statement was: “Man is the only one among living beings, who laughs”.²⁵ Elsewhere in the same work, he stresses the same point by stating that “none of the animals [except humans] laughs”.²⁶ Aristotle's observation has echoed through Rabelais and many other voices, down to our own times. I have mentioned Bergson. We could now quote William Hazlitt, who starts his

Lectures on the English Comic Writers with this remark: "Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be".²⁷ We are the only animals capable of seeing things otherwise, never fully isolated within solipsistic solitude, never completely bound within the determinations of natural laws. And this is our constant disposition, which expresses itself also in our 'proper' characteristic that occasionally inclines us to laughter. By contrast, it is precisely the deterministic inscription within the laws of nature—a condition never to be altered nor overcome—that makes my little cat unable to laugh, always a little too serious and vulnerable. Slaves to ontologically determined 'codes', animals cannot break them, through a process of endless semiosis and subversion in dialogical communication. By the same token, animals are not endowed with, nor burdened by, a psychic unconscious, and therefore they are spared the laborious task of dealing with either super-ego, or with "symbolic apples". In our case, the negotiated conventionality of our rules allows us to break, change, or suspend them. This is at the very root of our laughter. And in this may be found the full meaning of Hobbes's remark that:

The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour.²⁸

Breaking codes—or even the temporary illusion of breaking them—makes us laugh. Violating rules, no matter how innocently, is immediately 'sinful', as Eco's essay "*Generazione di messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica*" evocatively suggests.²⁹ But it is also unavoidable. Questioning, changing, subverting rules is thus most human, sinful, and therefore also diabolical. In Baudelaire's words, "laughter is diabolical: it is, therefore, profoundly human". He adds that comicality is "one of the clearest diabolical traits of man, and one of the many seeds contained within the symbolic apple".³⁰

The comical act is sinful and diabolical, because it is essentially human. It is human to violate, suspend, break and reformulate rules. It is fun to be suspicious towards, and enjoy a little respite from, all that is super-ego, in whichever shape it may take, and in whichever manner it may bind us to rules. This is what humour and comicality are for. And so, Freud is back on the scene. Laughter and the pleasure

afforded in comical acts, issue from a release of tension from neurotic repression: a temporary 'taking holidays' from rules. And insofar as, to be 'normal', we all need to be a little neurotic and a little psychotic, by the same token—and consequently—we are all in need of laughter, now and again.

Psychotics don't laugh in merriment, only derision. They have no rules to question, suspend, or subvert. Thus they can only vanquish and destroy everything that is 'other', 'object', and that belongs to 'the reality principle'. By contrast, humour (along with comicality and laughter) thrives in 'otherness', and thus it also reminds us of our finitude, while preparing us to meet the great master, the final rule: our death, hopefully accepted, if not laughing, then with serene and smiling disposition.

In Eco's abbey, Jorge of Burgos (forerunner of Anthony M. Ludovici) was, in a cleverly ambiguous way, almost right. For in *The Name of the Rose*, laughter stands for comicality, which remains dependent upon rules, but also for humour, which questions, transforms, and re-invents rules. Ironically, for all his animosity against laughter, Jorge in the end laughs, while chewing the poisoned parchment that was to seal his death. He laughs last. But he laughs badly. For he laughs with destructive derisory mocking. The blind monk is terroristic. He has done away with his unconscious instincts. He acts as a persecutory super-ego, and as if he were God. (At this point it becomes reasonably clear that books such as the Bible do not have much room for laughter and jocularly—though they could have more for merriment—because they are fundamentally conceived for the purpose of teaching and upholding 'the rule').

While the library of *The Name of the Rose* goes up in flames, the model writer and the model reader smile. Humour, rather than comicality, is the game. Humour consists in the conscious and explicit critique of the rules that it presupposes. Humour—*l'umorismo*—"must endlessly contradict and mediate itself".³¹ It thrives and rejoices in ambiguity—and in the endless game of disambiguating, while re-ambiguating. It flourishes on the threshold between rule and violation. It criticises and teases the relative resilience and hardness of codes, while dwelling in the fragility of our language and of our culture:

In this way humour would not be, like the comic, victim of the rule it presupposes, but would represent the criticism of it, conscious and explicit. Humour would

always be metasemiotic and metatextual. The comic of language would belong to the same breed, from Aristotelian witticisms to the puns of Joyce.¹²

We could furthermore suggest that humour also consists in sharing the pleasure and delight of seeing things otherwise: opening up the Pandora box of ambiguity, returning to Babel, re-inhabiting the Tower, starting always all over again from a point of endless interrogation; without malice, without arrogance, without envious and slandering *diabolé*, but with compassion, empathy, generosity of spirit, and goodness of heart.

In the end it seems that humour functions, in some respect, like tragedy, without, however, taking the rule too seriously: as something that must not be questioned, that cannot and must not be revised and reformulated anew, as some deterministically pre-ordained fate never to be challenged and broken. Quite to the contrary, with humour, the very opposite seems to be the case. (Alongside the implicit and ubiquitous dialectical debate concerning tragedy and comedy in Aristotle's writings, *The Name of the Rose* also stands as a sharp and elegant critique of dogmatic intolerance in the name of rules).

There are tears in a smile. And I would like to conclude by mentioning the film *La vita è bella*, as a perfect instance of this absorbing and thought-provoking dialectical co-existence. The protagonist, played by Benigni, humorously debunks and comically denounces the rules tragically imposed in a concentration camp, by humorously re-inventing a new set of playful rules that will keep his little boy alive, engaged, even happy, in an 'other' world. As protagonist and narrator, he invents a magical world of fun and play that rests—again ironically and humorously again—on the same logical order of rules imposed for repression through another game of other rules. Viewing *La vita è bella*, dwelling in its fictional (and not entirely fictional) world, we—at different times—laugh or don't laugh, we smile inside when we often want to weep, and we weep while smiling deep inside.

Notes

- 1 This paper is a re-edited and abridged version of my "Eco ridens", in Franco Musarra et al. (eds), *Eco in Fabula*, (Leuven-Milano: Leuven University Press & Franco Cesati Editore, 2002), pp. 325-37.
- 2 Jean Duplacy et al., *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1962).

- 3 "Let us not be deceived by the ambiguity of the word laughter", *The Ascetic Works of Saint Basil*, trans. W. K. L. Clarke (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1925), p. 180.
- 4 Howard Jacobson, *Seriously Funny* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. 24.
- 5 Jacobson, *Seriously Funny*, p. 38.
- 6 See Anthony M. Ludovici's condemnation of humour and laughter in his *The Secret of Laughter* (London: Constable Press, 1932).
- 7 "Do not utter words either vain or inducing laughter". The Benedictine rule is clearly derived from St. Basil's *Longer Rules*. See *The Ascetic Works of Saint Basil*, pp. 180-1.
- 8 Spike Milligan, *The Bible (The Old Testament) According to Spike Milligan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp. 1-2.
- 9 Arthur Koestler, "Humour and Wit", in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th edition, 1997, Vol. 20), pp. 682-88. See also his *Insight and Outlook* (London: Macmillan, 1949) and *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964).
- 10 At this point we should note that, while we have detailed accounts of the neuro-physiology and psychology of laughter, we seem quite deprived of any scientific investigation on the smile.
- 11 Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 6.
- 12 Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms*, p. 7.
- 13 Giovanni Manetti, "Per una semiotica del comico", *Il Verri* (no. 3, 1976), pp. 130-152.
- 14 Harvey Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1971), p. 21.
- 15 Koestler, "Humour and Wit", p.682.
- 16 In *Sight, Sound, and Sense*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 244-63.
- 17 Manetti, "Per una semiotica del comico", p. 134.
- 18 Umberto Eco, "The Comic and the Rule", in *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1986), pp. 269-78. See also his "Pirandello ridens" and "Ma che cosa è questo Campanile?", in *Sugli specchi e altri saggi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1995), pp. 261-79.
- 19 Eco, "The Comic and the Rule", p. 272.
- 20 Eco, "The Comic and the Rule", p. 273.
- 21 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *L'oeuvre de Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).
- 22 Patrizia Violi, "Comico e Ideologia", *Il Verri*, (no. 3, 1976), pp. 114, 129 (my translation).
- 23 Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (London: Macmillan, 1911). Quoted in Jacobson, *Seriously Funny*.

- 24 Eco, "Pirandello ridens", p. 270. (My translation).
- 25 Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, 673 a 8.
- 26 *De Partibus Animalium*, 673 a 28.
- 27 William Hazlitt, *Letters on the English Comic Writers*, in *Collected Works*, P. P. Howe (ed.), Vol. VIII (London: Dent, 1903).
- 28 Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature* (London: John Bohn, 1840, Vol. IV), p.46.
- 29 Eco, "Generazione di messaggi estetici in una lingua edenica", in *Le forme del contenuto* (Milano: Bompiani, 1971), pp. 129-44.
- 30 Charles Baudelaire, *De l'essence du rire*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 980.
- 31 Violi, "Comico e ideologia", p. 114.
- 32 Eco, "The Comic and the Rule", p. 259.