

Elan Mortel: Life, Death and Laughter

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Henri Bergson's little book on laughter is an odd anomaly. Among Bergsonians, it is usually regarded as a rather minor work, that seems thin and adventitious compared to the more substantial and systematic works, *Time and Free Will* (1889) and *Matter and Memory* (1896), which preceded it, and *Creative Evolution* (1907) which followed it. As a result, it is not often the subject of sustained philosophical analysis on its own terms, a fact that may reflect the somewhat uncertain place of theories of laughter and the comic within philosophy more generally. On the other hand, non-Bergsonians and non-philosophers are more likely to be more familiar with this work, or at least with its central ideas, than with Bergson's more substantial and representative works. The book has perhaps proved popular among non-specialist readers precisely because it seems to give us Bergson's philosophy in its most intelligible and therefore perhaps distorted form. In *Laughter*, we seem therefore to meet a Bergson who does not quite meet with himself, who is both more than himself and less.

But the anomalous status of *Laughter* as a text is appropriate because Bergson's treatment of laughter is itself anomalous. What is more, it is an anomaly that ripples not just through Bergson's account of life and death, but through the many more recent forms of vitalistic argument that depend, if only tacitly, on Bergson's arguments, among whom Gilles Deleuze must certainly be accounted the most prominent and influential.

I want in the following to win you to four propositions. The first is that the comic provides Bergson with an arena or opportunity for the distinguishing of the living from the dead. The second is that Bergson's argument is nevertheless complicated by the fact that he sees the act of laughing, not as a reprieve from or redemption of deadness, but as a curious bringing of deadness to life. In this Bergson's text seems to anticipate Wyndam Lewis's inversion of his formula: laughter is provoked, not by living things reduced to the condition of the inanimate, but rather by dead things importunately seeming to claim the privileges of life. This leads me to a discussion of the relation and difference between Bergson's and Sartre's ideas of the relations between comedy, seriousness and freedom. The third proposition is that comedy and the *élan vital* have a strong equivalence, The fourth proposition is that comedy is also, and more fundamentally, a suspension or interruption of the unfolding of the *élan vital*, a suspension which both seals the affiliation

of comedy and death and assists the comic impulse in standing out against a life that, on Bergson's account, is a mere, murderous indifferentism.

Relief

We can say that there are, and have only ever been, two viable theories of laughter. The first, usually known as the incongruity theory, suggests that laughter is provoked by absurdity, failure of fit, collapse of logic or, in its temporal form, disappointed expectation. Adherents of the incongruity theory tend to regard laughter as a civilising, adaptive and even morally educative force, often stressing the ways in which it allows for the greater tolerance of irony, complexity and paradox, along with the anxiety they might otherwise cause. The other option, the 'superiority' theory, asserts that we laugh at things or persons in order to demonstrate our superiority over them. As Hobbes famously puts it in his *Essay on Human Nature*, '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' (Hobbes 1839-45, IV.46). Adherents of the superiority theory are less likely to make high moral claims for laughter; indeed, they may regard it, and its practitioners, as morally dubious.

Bergson's is a version of the superiority theory. Laughter results from the spectacle of something living suddenly having the prerogatives of life taken from it. '*We laugh*', declares Bergson, '*every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing*' (Bergson 1911, 58). Bergson gives us many variants on this state of arrested variation, the principle that '[r]igidity is the comic' (Bergson 1911, 21), variants which go to suggest something like a *idée fixe* on Bergson's part. Thus, the body is comic when it no longer expresses the lightness and subtlety of the soul, but is

no more in our eyes than a heavy and cumbersome vesture, a kind of irksome ballast which holds down to earth a soul eager to rise aloft. Then the body will become to the soul what, as we have just seen, the garment was to the body itself – inert matter dumped down upon living energy. (Bergson 1911, 50)

Bergson sees habits – in both senses, as obsessively repeated forms of life, and as cumbersome vestures – as intrinsically comic. They are superficial appearance encrusted upon essence and therefore represent, says Bergson, '*the manner seeking to outdo the matter, the letter aiming at ousting the spirit*' (Bergson 1911, 53). Probably the most eye-popping applications of this principle are provoked by the twin questions: 'What is there comic about a rubicund

nose? And why does one laugh at a negro?'. Acknowledging that the question is 'an embarrassing one', Bergson suggests that

the correct answer was suggested to me one day in the street by an ordinary cabby, who applied the expression "unwashed" to the negro fare he was driving. Unwashed! Does not this mean that a black face, in our imagination, is one daubed over with ink or soot? If so, then a red nose can only be one which has received a coating of vermilion. (Bergson 1911, 40)

If the comic is the making definite of the indefinite, or the infinite, then a definition of comedy must presumably always try to avoid itself succumbing to its own strictures. Accordingly, we find in the opening pages of Bergson's text a conventional apology for venturing upon an analysis of comedy:

we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life. We shall confine ourselves to watching it grow and expand. Passing by imperceptible gradations from one form to another, it will be seen to achieve the strangest metamorphoses. We shall disdain nothing we have seen. Maybe we may gain from this prolonged contact, for the matter of that, something more flexible than an abstract definition – a practical, intimate acquaintance, such as springs from a long companionship. (Bergson 1911, 2)

Everything will turn out to depend on precisely what kind of 'living thing' that comedy will be taken to be.

Passages like this would suggest that Bergson would like to arrive at a theory of comedy that would see it as enlarging, humanising, and vitalising. The principal exponent of the civilising power of comedy is George Meredith, whose 'Essay on Comedy' of 1877 asserted that 'One excellent test of the civilization of a country, as I have said, I take to be the flourishing of the Comic idea and Comedy; and the test of true Comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter'. Meredith goes on to distinguish the broader, cruder forms of satirical comedy from the operations of the 'comic spirit'. Meredith proposes that 'The laughter of satire is a blow in the back or the face. The laughter of Comedy is impersonal and of unrivalled politeness, nearer a smile; often no more than a smile. It laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; and it might be called the humour of the mind.' For Meredith, comedy tends towards universality and peaceful acceptance of eccentricity, but is far from universal in its distribution. 'The German literary laugh', for

example, 'is infrequent, and rather monstrous... It comes of unrefined abstract fancy, grotesque or grim, or gross...Spiritual laughter they have not yet attained to'. Meredith concludes that the 'treble-Dutch lumberousness of the Comic spirit is of itself exclusive of the idea of Comedy'. The feminist Meredith regards the development of the comic spirit as absolutely twinned with the condition of women. So, he says, 'the poor voice allowed to women in German domestic life will account for the absence of comic dialogues reflecting upon life in that land'. Middle Eastern societies come off even worse: 'Where the veil is over women's faces, you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst...There has been fun in Bagdad. But there never will be civilization where Comedy is not possible'. On the other hand, and perhaps predictably enough, Meredith finds the comic spirit alive and well in Greece: 'if the Comic idea prevailed with us, and we had an Aristophanes to barb and wing it, we should be breathing air of Athens'. So we can say that, in the very manner in which Meredith distinguishes the higher forms of Attic and Anglo-Saxon humour as genial tolerance of incongruity from the cruder rough-and-tumble of other races' humour, he is in fact plainly and punitively trumpeting something like Hobbes's '*conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves'.

There is a certain parallel between Meredith's view of the spirit of comedy and Bergson's view that the function of laughter is predominantly social, as expressed in the formula 'rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective' (Bergson 1911, 21). For, rather unexpectedly, Bergson sees the corrective power of laughter not as fixing and diminishing human foibles into codes or patterns of conduct, but rather as coaxing human subjects out of their dehumanising habits and *idées fixes*, since society requires of its members a supple and alert responsiveness to situations and responsibilities.

society ... is not satisfied with simply living, it insists on living well. What it now has to dread is that each one of us, content with paying attention to what affects the essentials of life, will, so far as the rest is concerned, give way to the easy automatism of acquired habits. Another thing it must fear is that the members of whom it is made up, instead of aiming after an increasingly delicate adjustment of wills which will fit more and more perfectly into one another, will confine themselves to respecting simply the fundamental conditions of this adjustment: a cut-and-dried agreement among the persons will not satisfy it, it insists on a constant striving after reciprocal adaptation. Society will therefore be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity

with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity. (Bergson 1911, 19)

And yet, as many contemporary reviewers of Bergson's *Laughter*, especially in Britain, observed, Bergson's account of the comic is actually very far from Meredith's. Where Meredith's comic spirit is tolerant and inclusive of eccentricity, Bergson's is 'suspicious' of it. The socially corrective function of Bergson's comedy is a peculiar kind of oxymoron, in being a kind of disciplining into flexibility – a grafting together, as it were, of Juvenal and Sterne. Where Meredith's comic spirit is said to be both thoughtful and sympathetic, effecting a union of judgement and feeling, Bergson's splits feeling off from judgement: famously, for Bergson, 'the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart' (Bergson 1911, 5).

Risus ex Machina

We might pause here to note that Bergson does not see comedy arising from the impingement or abrasion on life of its simple opposite – of death, or of that which has never been alive, the inanimate. Rather, the principle that betrays and, as it were, comically impugns life, is the mechanical: 'The laughable element ... consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being' (Bergson 1911, 10); '*The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine*' (Bergson 1911, 29). Elsewhere, Bergson calls the comic more crisply '*something mechanical encrusted on the living*' (Bergson 1911, 37) and 'a mechanical tampering with life' (Bergson 1911, 43).

Laughter may be said to have two aspects, depending on whether one concentrates on its stimulus or its effect. Its stimulus is a complication or interference of life and death, a situation in which 'the mechanical and the living [are] dovetailed into each other' (Bergson 1911, 38). It is this that makes it possible to resolve Bergson's superiority theory into an incongruity theory – as indeed it nearly always is possible. Considered as a response to this grotesque collision of the living and the dead, the the act of laughing seems to effect a quarantining of life from death, making of them, not just contrasts, but reciprocally definitional opposites. Laughter is then a way of converting ambivalence back into absolute difference, or rendering difference within as difference between. Laughter may be regarded as a method of purging life of death, a machinery for discharging the threat of the mechanical.

Conceived in this way, the logic of Bergson's argument might seem to be that laughter is a bursting out of life and elasticity in the face of the intolerable stiffening of life into automatic or repeated gestures. In fact, though, the tendency of Bergson's essay is to describe laughter as itself a kind of machinery. At one point, he even borrows a geometrical conception to characterise it: 'I see no objection, at this stage, to defining the process by the curve which ... [Pascal] studied under the name of *roulette* or cycloid – the curve traced by a point in the circumference of a wheel when the carriage is advancing in a straight line: this point turns like the wheel, though it advances like the carriage' (Bergson 1911, 37). Bergson thinks that the spectacle of human beings reduced to the condition of puppets is intrinsically comic, but he often evokes the apparatus of puppetry in describing the comic response. '[S]ince, in the games of the child when working its dolls and puppets, many of the movements are produced by strings' Bergson asks, 'ought we not to find those same strings, somewhat frayed by wear, reappearing as the threads that knot together the situations in a comedy?' (Bergson 1911, 69).

So, in laughing at what is inhumanly inelastic, we actually mirror the condition that is said to be comic. This confusion between stimulus and response, or between the laughable and the laugh, runs through Bergson's account. '[I]nvoluntarily I laugh', he writes (Bergson 1911, 32); and when he asserts that 'it is really a kind of automatism that makes us laugh [une espèce d'automatisme qui nous fait rire]' (Bergson 1911, 16, Bergson 1972, 12), it is not certain whether he means that we laugh at automatism or that we laugh as an instance of it. Like many another commentator on laughter, Bergson seems somewhat disturbed by the physical processes of laughing, which seem to reduce the laugher to the condition of the one from whom he seeks to distinguish himself in laughing and whom his laughter seeks to coax back into alert and elastic pliability. Nowhere does this emerge more clearly than in Bergson's account of why it is that we are all supposed to find hunchbacks so funny. It is, he says, because they look as though they are deliberately holding themselves in a painful and unnatural posture. The posture is not just of the misanthrope, but of Mr Punch, who seems to be the crystallisation of the act of laughing itself:

Is it not, then, the case that the hunchback suggests the appearance of a person who holds himself badly? His back seems to have contracted an ugly stoop. By a kind of physical obstinacy, by rigidity, in a word, it persists in the habit it has contracted. Try to see with your eyes alone. Avoid reflection, and above all, do not reason. Abandon all your prepossessions; seek to recapture a fresh, direct and primitive impression. The vision you will reacquire will be one of this kind. You will have

before you a man bent on cultivating a certain rigid attitude – whose body, if one may use the expression, is one vast grin [un homme...qui a voulu...faire grimacer son corps]. (Bergson 1911, 24; Bergson 1972, 18)

Though Bergson skirts around the physical act of laughing, he seems to come close to the view of Descartes, who described the act in this hilariously solemn fashion in his *Passions of the Soul*:

Laughter results when the blood coming from the right-hand cavity of the heart through the arterial vein causes the lungs to swell up suddenly and repeatedly, forcing the air they contain to rush out through the windpipe, where it forms an inarticulate, explosive sound. As the air is expelled, the lungs are swollen so much that they push against all the muscles of the diaphragm, chest and throat, thus causing movement in the facial muscles with which these organs are connected. And it is just this facial expression, together with the inarticulate and explosive sound, that we call 'laughter'. (Descartes 1985, I.371)

'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness', says Nell in Beckett's *Endgame*; but in fact Descartes's and Bergson's examples often seem to suggest that there is nothing funnier than hilarity.

Being in Earnest

The theme of automatism, a topic energetically-debated among psychologists during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, runs through Bergson's account of the impulses and energies of life. In *Time and Free Will*, automatism is defined as the thick crust of habit through which pure acts of freedom must break. 'It is', writes Bergson, 'the whole soul, in fact, which gives rise to the free decision: and the act will be so much the freer the more the dynamic series with which it is connected tends to be the fundamental self' (Bergson 1971, 167). However, such freedom, in which the whole soul is taken up without residue in its acting, is rare. For, says Bergson

it is by no means the case that all conscious states blend with one another as raindrops with the water of a lake. The self, in so far as it has to do with a homogeneous space, develops on a kind of surface, and on this surface independent growths may form and float. Thus a suggestion received in the hypnotic state is not incorporated in the mass of conscious states, but,

endowed with a life of its own, it will usurp the whole personality when its time comes. (Bergson 1971, 167)

Laughter recalls the metaphor of the dead leaves floating on the surface of the pool, though this time in the context of a discussion of language.

Language only attains laughable results because it is a human product, modelled as exactly as possible on the forms of the human mind. We feel it contains some living element of our own life; and if this life of language were complete and perfect, if there were nothing stereotype in it, if, in short, language were an absolutely unified organism incapable of being split up into independent organisms, it would evade the comic as would a soul whose life was one harmonious whole, unruffled as the calm surface of a peaceful lake. There is no pool, however, which has not some dead leaves floating on its surface, no human soul upon which there do not settle habits that make it rigid against itself by making it rigid against others, no language, in short, so subtle and instinct with life, so fully alert in each of its parts as to eliminate the ready-made and oppose the mechanical operations of inversion, transposition, etc., which one would fain perform upon it as on some lifeless thing. The rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absentmindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity, such are the defects that laughter singles out and would fain correct. (Bergson 1911, 129-30)

This, for Bergson, is why '*instead of concentrating our attention on actions, comedy directs it rather to gestures*' (Bergson 1911, 143). For action, especially tragic action, involves the whole person, leaving nothing unexpressed, while gesture is an inessential accretion on the person: 'Action is intentional or, at any rate, conscious; gesture slips out unawares, it is automatic. In action, the entire person is engaged; in gesture, an isolated part of the person is expressed, unknown to, or at least apart from, the whole of the personality' (Bergson 1911, 143)

Oddly, Jean-Paul Sartre defines freedom in precisely the opposite way, though in terms that shadow the shape of Bergson's argument. For Sartre, it is imagining oneself to be entirely and authentically continuous with oneself that constitutes bad faith, while it is the comic impulse that expresses one's essential freedom, in the apprehension that 'I am the being which *is* in such a way that its being is in question' (Sartre 1984, 556), even though this

means that ‘we should never say of him [Man] that he *is* at all. He is what he is not and he is not what he is’ (Sartre 1984, 575). For both Bergson and Sartre, freedom is inseparable from action, rather than the automatism of habit; but, for Sartre, many forms of apparent freedom are in fact themselves forms of habit, precisely insofar as they ignore the encrustations of the inauthentic self, and the act of self-nihilation involved in refusing them. It is for this reason that Sartre will bring forward, as his essential criticism of Bergson’s notion of duration, or the compounding of the past in the present, the ignoring of the fact that ‘an organization of multiplicity presupposes an organizing act...For if the Past, as he maintains, is inactive, it can only remain behind and will never come to penetrate the present in the form of a memory unless a present being has undertaken to exist as well ekstatically in the Past’ (Sartre 1984, 135). Without action, there is no being, and without being there is no active duration, none of the freedom of the self perfecting itself in its act on which Bergson insists. But where, for Bergson, the self comes into being in its free act, as the expression of a necessity, so that [a]ll that is serious in life comes from our freedom’ (Bergson 1911, 79), Sartre’s freedom is absurd and comical, because equivocal. For Sartre, freedom is bound up with play, whereas seriousness is worldly. This notion underpins the curious paragraph of the last chapter of *Being and Nothingness* in which Sartre describes the seriousness of the revolutionary:

It is not by chance that materialism is serious; it is not by chance that it is found at all times and places as the favorite doctrine of the revolutionary. This is because revolutionaries are serious. They come to know themselves first of all in terms of the world which oppresses them, and they wish to change this world. (Sartre 1984, 580)

So Sartre adopts the Bergsonian metaphors of rigour and inelasticity to characterise, not the comic, but the serious, or what Bergson calls the tragic outlook:

Thus all serious thought is thickened by the world; it coagulates; it is a dismissal of human reality in favor of the world. The serious man is “of the world” and has no resource in himself. He does not even imagine any longer the possibility of *getting out of* the world, for he has given to himself the type of existence of the rock, the consistency, the inertia, the opacity of being-in-the-midst-of-the-world. (Sartre 1984, 580)

Against this, there is what Sartre calls play, which, ‘like Kierkegaard’s irony, releases subjectivity’ (Sartre 1984, 581). Play involves and activates the

awareness of freedom – and Sartre notes that this is ‘a freedom, by the way, which could just as well be his anguish’ (Sartre 1984, 580-1). Seen from the point of view of this play, seriousness is a dreary and indeed laughable thing:

It is obvious that the serious man at bottom is hiding from himself the consciousness of his freedom; he is in *bad faith* and his bad faith aims at presenting himself to his own eyes as a consequence; everything is a consequence for him, and there is never any beginning. That is why he is so concerned with the consequences of his acts. Marx proposed the original dogma of the serious when he asserted the priority of object over subject. (Sartre 1984, 580)

This leads Sartre to a claim that seems almost deliberately, though silently, to recall and invert Bergson’s central proposition in *Laughter*. For Bergson, ‘[a]ll that is serious in life comes from our freedom’ (Bergson 1911, 79), while to be reduced to the condition of an unfree object is to become comic. For Sartre, ‘Man is serious when he takes himself for an object’ (Sartre 1984, 580) – that is, relinquishes, hides from, or hides from himself, his absurd freedom. The project of Sartre’s later work will be to bring together what here are disjoined – the inauthentic seriousness of the revolutionary project, and the playful freedom of subjectivity.

One Vast Grin

It is tempting to identify laughter with the concept of the *élan vital*, or vital impulse, that Bergson developed seven years later in his most influential work, *Creative Evolution*. While it is clear that Bergson is one of the most important modern philosophers of life, it is important to note the terms in which Bergson himself criticises vitalism. To be sure, Bergson rejects mechanistic theories, the essence of which, he says, ‘is to regard the future and the past as calculable functions of the present, and thus to claim that *all is given*. On this hypothesis, past, present and future would be open at a glance to a superhuman intellect capable of making the calculation’ (Bergson 1998, 37). He prefers the principle of ‘an internal push that has carried life, by more and more complex forms, to higher and higher destinies’ (Bergson 1998, 102), unfolding itself continuously and creatively through evolution. However, he is impatient with what he calls the ‘finalism’, or teleology that characterises other contemporary theories of life such as those entertained by Hans Driesch and Johannes Reinke. Finalism, which sees in life either the unfolding of some preexisting principle, or the approach to some preordained end, is, for Bergson, indistinguishable from mechanism,

because it renders time arbitrary and unnecessary, a simple interval of unfolding or delaying device rather than a dynamic constituent of free, which is to say, unpredictable creation. The most radical part of Bergson's vitalism is his reluctance to give a name, form, identity, or direction to life. There can therefore logically be no leading edge, or privileged vehicle of life, not animals, not instincts, not intelligence, not consciousness, man. 'So it is of no use', asserts Bergson, 'to try to restrict finality to the individuality of the living being. If there is finality in the world of life, it includes the whole of life in a single indivisible embrace' (Bergson 1998, 43). One might wonder, under these circumstances, what this 'whole' could possibly consist of, and how it is conceivably to be grasped.

Bergson expresses this idea in another key, when he makes his remarkable claim that life is by no means to be understood as a coalescence, or gathering of force into form. If life has any kind of form then, for Bergson, it is the paradoxical form of an explosion. Rather than progressing in a single course, like a projectile fired from a cannon, life 'proceeds rather like a shell, which suddenly bursts into fragments, which fragments, being themselves shells, burst in their turn into fragments destined to burst again, and so on for a time incommensurably long. We perceive only what is nearest to us, namely, the scattered movements of the pulverized explosions' (Bergson 1998, 98). Bergson stresses that 'life is tendency, and the essence of a tendency is to develop in the form of a sheaf, creating, by its very growth, divergent directions among which its impetus is divided' (Bergson 1998, 99). In absolute contrast to Freud who, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, identifies *eros*, or the life-instincts, with association and combination, while *thanatos*, or the death-drive expresses itself in a tendency to dissolution, Bergson asserts that '*[L]ife does not proceed by the association and addition of elements, but by dissociation and division*' (Bergson 1998, 89). Bergson's *élan vital* is therefore strictly isomorphic with the Freudian death-drive.

Life struggles to make the fixed and the definite ever more indefinite. All animal life consists '(1) in procuring a provision of energy; (2) in expending it, by means of a matter as supple as possible, in directions variable and unforeseen' (Bergson 1998, 253). If this anticipates some of Bataille's argument about the energy of *dépense*, it also seems to anticipate some of his arguments about the necessity for the energy of dissolution to enter into various local compacts or compromises with accumulations or deposits of matter, precisely in order to increase the possibilities of dissolution: 'The resistance of inert matter was the obstacle that had first to be overcome. Life seems to have succeeded in this by dint of humility, by making itself very small and very insinuating, bending to physical and chemical forces, consenting even to go a part of the way with them, like the switch that

adopts for a while the direction of the rail it is endeavouring to leave' (Bergson 1998, 98-9).

Nevertheless, for Bergson, life, after all, does seem to have a plan, if only an emergent one, which is precisely the realisation of freedom or variation. It may be said that 'at the root of life there is an effort to engraft on to the necessity of physical forces the largest possible amount of indetermination' (Bergson 1998, 114), indeed, that 'the role of life is to insert some *indetermination* into matter. Indeterminate, *i.e.* unforeseeable, are the forms it creates in the course of its evolution. More and more indeterminate also, more and more free, is the activity to which these forms serve as the vehicle' (Bergson 1998, 126). And this allows Bergson, audaciously perhaps even a little insanely against the grain of his own argument, to make out privileged repositories or containers of this energy of dissolution: '[I]f, from the very first, in making the explosive, nature had for object the explosion, then it is the evolution of the animal, rather than that of the vegetable, that indicates, on the whole, the fundamental direction of life' (Bergson 1998, 116). And then, within the sphere of animal existence, there is the evolution of the nervous system:

A nervous system, with neurones placed end to end in such wise that, at the extremity of each, manifold ways open in which manifold questions present themselves, is a veritable *reservoir of indetermination*. That the main energy of the vital impulse has been spent in creating apparatus of this kind is, we believe, what a glance over the organized world as a whole easily shows. (Bergson 1998, 126)

On the one hand, Bergson insists that, because '[l]ife...transcends finality...[t]here has not, therefore, properly speaking, been any project or plan' (Bergson 1998, 265). It would thus be wrong, even ridiculous 'to regard humanity, such as we have it before our eyes, as pre-figured in the evolutionary movement' (Bergson 1998, 265-6). On the other hand, it is man who comes closest, so far, to infusing in matter the maximum of indetermination, and Bergson never gets more Nietzschean than in his articulation of this belief:

From our point of view, life appears in its entirety as an immense wave which, starting from a centre, spreads outwards, and which on almost the whole of its circumference is stopped and converted into oscillation: at one single point the obstacle has been forced, the impulsion has passed freely. It is this freedom that the human form registers. Everywhere but in man, consciousness has had to come to a stand; in man alone it

has kept on its way. Man, then, continues the vital movement indefinitely, although he does not draw along with him all that life carries in itself. On other lines of evolution there have travelled other tendencies which life implied, and of which, since everything interpenetrates, man has, doubtless, kept something, but of which he has kept only very little. *It is as if a vague and formless being, whom we may call, as we will, man or superman, had sought to realize himself, and had succeeded only by abandoning a part of himself on the way.* (Bergson 1998, 266)

As far as I know, Bergson never returned to the question of the comic after his *Laughter* essay. He certainly nowhere explicitly associates the miniature and parochial explosiveness that characterises laughter with the more general and generalising big bang of the *élan vital*. But there do seem to be resonances between laughter and the vital impulse. If nothing else, there is the fact that both *élan vital* and *le rire* cohere upon the figure of the human: ‘there is nothing comic apart from man’ (Bergson 1911, 133), presumably because it is only in man that the effects of freedom being arrested are so paradoxical.

Then there is the fact that, like the *élan vital*, the comic impulse is said to be, if not explosive, then certainly expansive:

An inexorable law dooms every living energy, during the brief interval allotted to it in time, to cover the widest possible extent in space. Now, comic fancy is indeed a living energy, a strange plant that has nourished on the stony portions of the social soil, until such time as culture should allow it to vie with the most refined products of art. (Bergson 1911, 65)

We recall that Bergson promised to treat the comic spirit ‘with the respect due to life’, as he watches it ‘grow and expand’ (Bergson 1911, 2). Bergson notes that establishing the laws or logic of comedy is difficult because of the tendency of comedy to diversify its forms through arbitrary, or mechanical associations.

When a comic scene has been reproduced a number of times, it reaches the stage of being a classical type or model. It becomes amusing in itself, quite apart from the causes which render it amusing. Henceforth, new scenes, which are not comic *de jure*, may become amusing *de facto*, on account of their partial resemblance to this model. (Bergson 1911 95)

And yet, as we have seen, the strange, propagating organism that is laughter is a sort of mimic or parasitic life, an epidemic of mechanism that borrows the diffusive energy of life, while everywhere fixing or arresting it into dead or repetitive forms. It is a propagating deadness. But this is another respect in which the comic resembles the operations of the *élan vital*. For life not only needs the inanimate, it is also productive of it:

Our freedom, in the very movements by which it is affirmed, creates the growing habits that will stifle it if it fails to renew itself by a constant effort : it is dogged by automatism. The most living thought becomes frigid in the formula that expresses it. The word turns against the idea. The letter kills the spirit. (Bergson 1998, 127)

Indeed, this might be seen as the necessary outcome of the project of indetermination on which life is bent; life expands so far away from the definite into the virtual, that it assimilates its opposite, so that death is no longer the outside or residue of life, but rather an internal principle of variation within it. The indetermination of death and life in comedy would seem to make it a carrier-wave of this impulse.

Distraction

One of the strangest features of Bergson's account of laughter is the prominence in it of the idea of 'distraction' or, as it is rendered in the Brereton and Rothwell translation, 'absent-mindedness'. Bergson requires life to be characterised by two features which we might ordinarily see as opposites. On the one hand, life is endlessly changeable. On the other hand, it is continuous, without divisions. It is for this reason that life is fundamentally a temporal matter or matter of duration. Duration is to space as intension is to extension and '[e]xtension...appears only as a tension which is interrupted' (Bergson 1998, 245). Bergson articulates this notion of invariant variation, immutable mutability at the opening of *Creative Evolution*: 'The truth is that we change without ceasing, and the state itself is nothing but change' (Bergson 1998, 2).

Comedy comes about, according to Bergson, when this continuity is suspended, when life breaks off from ceaseless change, and hardens into repetitive and reversible forms. Bergson regards this state as a loss of tension, attention, or attentiveness, a kind of distraction:

Actual life is comedy just so far as it produces, in a natural fashion, actions of the same kind – consequently just so far as

it forgets itself, for were it always on the alert, it would be ever-changing continuity, irrevertible progress, undivided unity. And so the ludicrous in events may be defined as absentmindedness in things, just as the ludicrous in an individual character always results from some fundamental absentmindedness in the person. (Bergson 1911, 102)

For Bergson, spatiality is that which allows for such interruptions or discontinuities:

In consciousness we find states which succeed, without being distinguished from one another; and in space simultaneities which, without succeeding, are distinguished from one another, in the sense that one has ceased to exist when the other appears. Outside us, mutual externality without succession; within us, succession without mutual externality. (Bergson 1971, 227)

This suggests that it may not be possible for man ever to get on the side of life, and that there may actually be something comic in his striving to do so. Bergson's account of the difficulty for the intellect of understanding living process suggests that it is comic in its nature:

We see that the intellect, so skilful in dealing with the inert, is awkward the moment it touches the living. Whether it wants to treat the life of the body or the life of the mind, it proceeds with the rigour, the stiffness and the brutality of an instrument not designed for such use... we are amazed at the stupidity and especially at the persistence of errors. We may easily find their origin in the natural obstinacy with which we treat the living like the lifeless and think all reality, however fluid, under the form of the sharply defined solid. We are at ease only in the discontinuous, in the immobile, in the dead. *The intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life.* (Bergson 1998, 165)

Indeed one might almost say that the intellect itself is a kind of absent-mindedness for Bergson. For absent-mindedness means the eddying or abating of the onward duration of life, and this is precisely what the spatialising intellect effects. By contrast, the attentiveness to life, the serious purposiveness that is interrupted or relaxed by comic distraction, would have to be an oddly unconscious, even mindless inundation of attention in action. It is probably for this reason that Bergson will characterise unconscious instinct as closer than conscious intelligence to the continuous

apprehension of being, leading him in *Creative Evolution* to the cryptic formula: ‘*There are things that intelligence alone is able to seek, but which, by itself, it will never find. These things instinct alone could find; but it will never seek them*’ (Bergson 1998, 151).

Instinct...is moulded on the very form of life. While intelligence treats everything mechanically, instinct proceeds, so to speak, organically. If the consciousness that slumbers in it should awake, if it were wound up into knowledge instead of being wound off into action, if we could ask and it could reply, it would give up to us the most intimate secrets of life... The most essential of the primary instincts are really, therefore, vital processes. The potential consciousness that accompanies them is generally actualized only at the outset of the act, and leaves the rest of the process to go on by itself. It would only have to expand more widely, and then dive into its own depth completely, to be one with the generative force of life. (Bergson 1998, 165-6)

Man’s very intellect is in fact a form of comic absent-mindedness – indeed it is a kind of automatism. *Rire* recoils from the break or interruption of continuity that is the ridiculous, since the ridiculous can be associated with interruption itself. As Joseph Jones remarked, in the course of an interesting comparison of Bergson’s and Emerson’s ideas of comedy, ‘whatever is not cosmic is comic’ (Jones 1949, 64).

In an extremely penetrating article on the relations between comedy and morality, published in 1913, at the peak of Bergson’s international celebrity and influence, J.W. Scott points out an odd lapse in Bergson’s account of the way in which the comic effects its interruptions of vital process. If one inspects Bergson’s arguments and examples carefully, writes Scott, it becomes clear that the effect of the comic is not to substitute a dead thing for a living one, but rather ‘*to substitute abrupt transitions for what are supposed to be life’s fine gradations*’ (Scott 1913, 160). The story of a miser who slowly succumbs to an avarice that insinuates itself into every particle of its being is not likely to strike us as comic; but a passion that appears to descend arbitrarily on its victim, or to emerge from him in the form of ‘abrupt explosions’ (Scott 1913, 160) may well strike us as comic in Bergson’s sense. Curiously enough, as Scott himself recognises, Bergson’s account involves the spatialisation of a contrast that should more properly be understood as a matter of rhythm or timing (Scott 1913, 163). It has sometimes been remarked that comedy is nothing else but tragedy speeded up, an implicitly cinematographic metaphor that relates interestingly to Bergson’s extended objections to the cinematographic conception of time in *Creative Evolution*.

Bergson's *élan vital* is characterised by an absolute continuity, a refusal of all such abrupt transitions, such hitches, hiccups or syncopes in the unrolling of time. The form of the *élan vital* is one of slow and steady explosion

succeeding by its sinuosity, worming its way between the obstacles, forever altering its own course, and even shedding part of its own being to reach its ends. The good is simply the keeping alert and responsive, the making life a series of delicate adjustments to varying circumstances. The moral imperative in the end is deprived of its absolute and positive character. It says no longer be 'just,' or 'courageous,' or 'sincere.' It does not even say 'be good.' It only says 'be adaptable.' (Scott 1913, 165)

In contrast to this, Scott makes it clear how much of human life and value actually depends upon the rigidity or abruptness which cuts across these slow insinuations. 'Deprive life of the liberty to impose this "mechanical" form upon its own action, wipe out from life all that contains this awkwardness and abruptness, and you cut away all the morality which is only strong and straight, without being refined and clever' (Scott 1913, 164).

Because man is a concretion of life, he is for that very reason an interruption of the radiating explosion or insinuation of life. We must cleave, half-dead to our enclave, the epoch of suspended space we have opened up partially with, and partially against the current of life, if we are not to be swept away in life's ongoing self-diffusing explosion, an explosion that cannot but appear to creatures like us except as mortal indifference. We cannot, that is, hope to get on the side of life, or get life on to our side. Locked as we are in a life or death struggle with life, the mechanical comedy of deadness is our defining syncopation, a way of standing out against the annihilation of an indetermination that forbids all identification, all survival or living on. If the form of life we know as the human is a sort of precipitate, thrown off by the 'vague and formless...superman' in its project of self-realisation, then comedy both comes to rest and comes to its own sort of life in the figure, not of the superman, but of the rude mechanical, the clown, the schlemiel, the Untermensch.

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