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Bergson's theory of laughter analyzed and tested

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Thesis

Bergson's Theory of Laughter Analyzed and Tested

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Survey of Leading Theories

Ever since the dawn of ~~mankind~~ civilization many of the world's greatest thinkers have attempted to set down the meaning of laughter. It is not at all surprising since this is one of the most apparent and universal emotions. No matter what the condition, situation, or character,--man has always laughed. It is an alluring subject. Why do we laugh? What is the comic element? Can it be isolated definitively and conclusively? Although such a revelation would add little to our enjoyment of the comic, it would help us to obtain a broader and more complete picture of the nature of life and mind. At first, however, one would be inclined to feel that since laughter is such a light-hearted affair, it ~~it~~ should be relatively simple to categorize and examine it. But although it is perhaps the balmiest of human possessions it is among the most difficult to capture for examination. No one as yet has succeeded in giving a satisfactory explanation of the comic. One difficulty is that so many things are true of comedy. It is as changeable and multi-formed as life itself.

If the occasions for laughter were identical for all men, it would be easier to determine the basis of the comic. But they are not identical. The British brand of humor is not considered very laughable here in America, although the

British are supposed to be close relatives of ours in relation to cultural and linguistic stocks. Can any single principle explain such varied characters as Falstaff, Tartuffe, and Tony Lumpkin? The joke of one generation is not always laughable in the next. Pepys thought A Midsummer Night's Dream the silliest play he ever saw. Few Frenchmen enjoy the porter scene in Macbeth. Many Elizabethan horror plays, written to purge men's souls by pity and terror, now awaken only their mirth.

Nevertheless, as we have said, attempts have been made from time to time to explain the baffling problem of the comic. Let us look at some of them.

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In the very beginning it was a conversation about pleasures that are mixed with pain that gave rise to the attempt to make a science of comic entertainment.

"You remember," says Plato in the Philebus, "how at the sight of tragedies the spectators smile through their tears?"

"Certainly, I do."

"And are you aware that even at a comedy, the soul experiences a mixed feeling of pain and pleasure?"[1]

Although the science of humor was well-born in this intuition of Plato's, it did not grow very well in his hands, for he quite failed to comprehend the nature of

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[1] Plato, The Philebus, translated by E. Poste, Oxford Univ. Press, 1860, p. 46.

this 'mixture'. He said that the"pleasure" which we experience in laughing at the comic is an enjoyment of other peoples' misfortunes; the "pain", on the other hand, is our envy of those people, which makes that enjoyment possible. Perhaps Plato realized the flaws in his original idea, for he wandered away from it and he seemed content in the end to define comedy as a pleasure, ----the pleasure of seeing other people humiliated, of seeing them appear stupid when they are not powerful or important enough so that their stupidity is a danger to us.

Aristotle's definition can be linked with Plato's in that they both conceived of laughter as a form of expressing superiority.

> "Comedy is an imitation of characters of a lower type---not, however in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain."[2]

Max Eastman calls these "Derision Theories",since they depend upon the principle of laughing-down or making fun, to produce laughter. One is inclined to agree with him. Nevertheless there is no denying that derision is certainly one of the sources of laughter and it probably is a main one. The Greek philosophers were groping toward a

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[2] Aristotle, The Poetic, in Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama,Stewart & Kidd, 1918, p. 5.

real understanding of the complexities of the comic. But they did not labor long enough and it remained for later men to attempt to tie up the loose ends.

Cicero offered something new but was obviously unable to escape the influence of his predecessors. He said that laughter is of two kinds. The first is that in which we laugh at someone. The other is that in which we expect to hear one thing and another is said. He was not content to leave the two ideas unrelated, however. He proposed a plan by which they could be reconciled. We always laugh at someone, he maintained,---even when it is a case of deceived expectation. For in that situation we are simply laughing at our own mistakes.

To the Derision Theory, Cicero added the idea of deceived expectation. Moreover he attempted to offer a more complete explanation. But he, too, did not keep at it long enough, for his notion is greatly inadequate. Aside from this, Cicero added nothing to Aristotle's solution of the problem of the comic, except the valuable opinion that Aristotle did not solve it:

> "What a laugh is, by what means it is raised, wherein it consists, in what manner it bursts out, and is so suddenly discharged, that though we were willing, it is out of our power to stifle it, and in what manner it all at once takes possession of our sides, of our mouth, our

> veins, our look, our eyes, let Democritus explain all these particulars; they are not to my present purpose, and if they were, I would not be ashamed to say that I do not know them, for even they who pretend to account for them know nothing of the matter."3

Thus far there has been a significant absence of one of the most important prerequisites for laughter. Not one of the great thinkers mentioned the feeling that is almost inseparable from the laugh. That is, of course, happiness or gladness. Saint Gregory of Nyssa was the first psychologist to perceive that it does not require humor to make people laugh, but that they are ready to laugh at anything or anybody who comes to them with gladness. He even presented a biological description of the condition of the ducts of the human body before and after laughter. This was as early as the fourth century. After a space of one thousand years in which many similar things may have got lost, the same natural association of laughter with gladness appeared in Castiglione's famous book The Courtier:(1561)

> "To describe a man the most common saying is, He is a living creature that can laugh: because this laughing is perceived only in man, and always is a token of a certain jocundness and merry mood that he feeleth inwardly in his mind, which by nature is drawn to pleasantness, and coveteth quietness and refreshing, for which cause we see men have invented many matters, as sports, games, and pastimes, and as many sundry sorts of open shows."4

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[3] Cicero, De Oratore, trans. Wm. Guthrie, London, 1742, bk. 2, p.54.

[4] Castiglione, The Courtier, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby, London, D. Nutt, 1900, Book 2, p. 336.

We may regard this as the last word spoken on the subject of laughter in freedom from the sovereign authority of Aristotle. Whatever else the critics and commentators of the Renaissance had to say is but an amplification of Aristotle's theory of comedy presented in his *Poetics*. One critic added to it the idea of *surprise and suddenness*. Another added the thought that though the comic object is slightly mean and ugly, the purpose of our laughter at such objects is to supply a mild corrective, and help ourselves and others to avoid ungainliness and the small vices of life.[5]

Thus it was nothing new when Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century revived the Derision Theory of Plato and Aristotle: (1651)

> "Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called Laughter, and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favor, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of Pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able."[6]

It is difficult to imagine how Hobbes could have been more incorrect. He has carried the Derision Theory

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[5] The two critics are Maggi (1508-1554) and Robertelli (1516-1567), mentioned in Eastman's *The Sense of Humor*, New York, Scribner's, 1922, p. 176.

[6] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London, G. Routledge, 1887, Part 1, Chap. 6, p. 51.

to such an extreme that we might well dismiss his writing as a treatise on sneers. The saving word is that "sudden" which intimates that even this bitter taste of joy must come in against our expectations, thus recalling Cicero's contribution. Hobbes identified humorous joy too much with egotism and scorn. Nevertheless we shall see that Bergson and others took up this cry. There is no denying that the laugh of scorn is one of the elements in some laughter, but to say that it is all is far from the truth.

George Meredith can be mentioned here because his theory comes close to Hobbes'. Meredith, too, identified the comic with a kind of lofty, supercilious scorn, so that in one respect his statement amounted to a rare beautification of Hobbes' virulent writing. But Meredith was so concerned to paint a sage and humane understanding into his portrait of the Comic Spirit that he may be quoted in mitigation as well as in support of the theory of Hobbes:

> "If you believe that our civilization is founded in common sense(and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like

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> the longbow, was once a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk----the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit."[7]

Hobbes' theory can be regarded as a focal point of argument, for many writers took up his cry and many more were in open disagreement. Spinoza, as one might expect, was more careful than Hobbes. He was one of the most consecrated reasoners about good and evil that ever lived. His judgment, therefore, that derision is an evil thing, one which hinders the existence of man, but that jests promote the existence of man and are good, is of much greater weight. Spinoza classified derision, in his system, as one of the forms of hate and added:

"I recognize a great difference between derision and laughter or jest. For laughter and jest are a kind of

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[7] Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit, New York, Scribner's, 1911, p. 38.

joy, and so, if they are only not excessive, are good."[8]

Even before Spinoza, however, there was a growing opposition to the idea of Hobbes that scornful pride and mockery are in the heart of all laughter. The other opinion of the ancient philosophers was still living,--that in which we laugh because of deceived expectation. Pascal said:

> "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees."[9]

In more modern philosophy this assumed a position of authority with Kant's statement that

> "Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing."[10]

Other German philosophers, such as Schelling and Schopenhauer, took this view along with Kant, except that they did little but narrow his conception so that it applied only to disappointments of an intellectual kind. Thus there is a whole school that traces the essence of laughter down to the mistake, the deceived expectation.

Along about the eighteenth century the English word "humor" was adopted into every one of the languages of Western civilization, to describe the more genial aspects

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[8] Spinoza, Ethics, trans. W.H. White, London, Trubner's, 1883, part 4, p. 280, ff.

[9] Pascal, quoted by Max Eastman in The Sense of Humor, op. cit. p. 152.

[10] Kant, Critique of Judgment, trans. J.H. Bernard, London, Macmillan's, 1914, p. 223.

of the comic spirit. There is a reason for this. Humor, as a word, had existed before, of course. But because the first men who thought about humor analytically(Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes,etc.) were intellectual in their tastes, and because they confused laughter with scorn and scoffing, the earliest names and definitions of humor described only its more intellectual and bitter **forms.** With the great upsurge of popular and simple life into art and literature the inadequacy of all those definitions and names became evident. The word "humor" has since become associated with the essence of laughter more than such words as "wit" and "satire", which we now consider as subdivisions or offshoots.

There have been many attempts to define the word, and to distinguish it from the hard cold thing that the comic had been conceived to be. In general, most of the critics and philosophers agree that humor is characterized by an absence of scorn, a presence of emotion, and that it is an excellent thing. Carlyle's definition is characteristic:

> "True humor springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love; it issues not in laughter, but in still smiles which lie far deeper. It is a sort of inverse sublimity, exalting, as it were, into our affections what is below us, while sublimity draws down into our affections what is above us."[11]

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[11] Carlyle, Essay on Jean Paul Richter, in Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, Boston, J. Munroe, 1898, volume 1, p. 20.

This has all the flavor of the German Romantic Movement and it is there that a true literary appreciation of humor flourished. Jean Paul Richter (1763-1825) held humor not only as an art, but as a philosophy of life. What we laugh at, he thought, is~~s~~ the petty, the infinitesimal, when it is brought into contrast with our ideal of the infinite, the sublime. And since all mankind, in contrast with that ideal, is petty and infinitesimal, the tendency for laughter is to promote sympathy for humanity and to give greater glory to God. His theorizing is couched in metaphysical and grandiloquent terms and at times is devoid of real meaning. Nevertheless it succeeds in rendering his concept of the overall emotional value of laughter, His statement is reinforced with a good caustic criticism of Hobbes:

> "In the first place , the feeling of pride is very serious, and not at all related to the comic, but related to contempt which is likewise serious. In laughter one feels not so much that he himself is elevated(often perhaps the contrary) as that others are lowered. That tickle of self-comparison would have to enter as comic pleasure into every perception of the errors of others, and be the more laughable the higher one stood, but the contrary is true, one often experiences with pain the subjection of others....Laughers are good-natured and place themselves often in rank and file with those they laugh at; children and women laugh most; the proud self-comparer the least; and the harlequin who holds himself worthless laughs over everything, and the proud Mussulman over nothing. No one is ashamed of having laughed, but we should be ashamed of such a gross elevation of ourselves as Hobbes

> describes. And finally no laughter takes it badly, but right well, if a hundred thousand others laugh with him, and thus a hundred thousand self-elevations surround his, which would be impossible if Hobbes were right."[12]

This genial view of laughter is echoed by many of the great writers. Laurence Sterne had said that if his book "is wrote against anything,---'tis wrote,an' please your worships, against the spleen,"[13] and Byron confessed that

> "If I laugh at any mortal thing
> 'Tis that I may not weep."[14]

Hegel brought the weight of his authority to the opinion that true humor invites us to a sympathetic experience and that the highest form of comedy is that in which the character himself enjoys his superiority to circumstance. Humor, he maintained, is the happy state of mind and the healthy condition of the soul which, being aware of itself, can endure the failure of its aims. Hegel used the comedies of Aristophanes and the character of Sir John Falstaff as examples of this true and highest kind of humor.

With the advent of the so-called "scientific" age of the nineteenth century, it was characteristic of science to drop all these vague emotionalizings and go in for an explanation of laughter based upon the mere ground of mechanics. The supreme expression of this point of view is found in Herbert Spencer's essay on "The Physiology of

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[12] Richter, quoted by Max Eastman in The Sense of Humor, op. cit., p. 186.

[13] Sterne, Tristram Shandy, Odyssey Press, New York,1940,bk. 4, chap. 22,p.244.

[14] Byron,Don Juan,Odyssey Press, New York,1935,canto 4,stanza 4, p. 320.

Laughter*. Spencer undertook to explain comic laughter (he recognized other kinds of laughter) in the same manner that one would explain the operation of a pump. It is simply an overflow of nervous energy from a reservoir that has been stored up too full. It occurs when we have prepared ourselves for something big and momentous and there follows something small and inconsiderable. Thus we see an acrobat run off a springboard and somersault over four horses. A clown follows him at the same gait and gesture, and we gather energy to see it again. But the clown stops short to flick a bit of dust off the flank of the near horse and all our energy floods forth in laughter. Spencer certainly seems to explain the exact way in which laughter takes possession of our bodies. He authenticated, in his explanation, the assertion of Jean Paul Richter that the laughable is an infinitely little thing, as an object. Moreover there is a trace of the much older explanation of the comic as deceived expectation.

No discussion of the important theories of laughter could possibly be considered as complete without mentioning the contribution of Sigmund Freud. His book, Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, is primarily an investigation of intellectual jokes, and he traces these to their

origin in the word-play and thought-play of children. This is an activity which he considers not humorous, but a happy exercise of the mental faculties. It amounts to a direct enjoyment of nonsense. As the child grows up he is compelled by the social standards of rationality and what we call"good sense" to abandon these forms of amusement, but the impulse to indulge them remains alive in his unconscious, and he finds in maturity a devious and clever way of satisfying it. He seeks out forms of speech which are from one point of view sheer nonsense, but which from another point of view mean something. Thus he gratifies his love of nonsense without offending too much his sense of reason and critical judgment. Freud goes on to attribute to nonsense a greater function. It gives release to other and stronger repressed tendencies of our nature than the mere tendency to play----namely, the hostile or aggressive tendency and the sexual tendency. He then makes two divisions, labelling the child-like nonsense humor as "harmless wit" and the release of hostility and repressed sexuality as "tendency wit". It is this latter that he considers most fundamental. We might, for example, find it rather difficult to acknowledge in ourselves an indiscriminate yearning to commit adultery. But if we were earnestly

advising a friend to take a wife, and he should earnestly reply"Whose?", that would give us a pleasure out of all proportion to the value of such a nonsensical question. It would release us temporarily from the restrictions of our social culture and give us at least a moment of barbaric and uproarious liberty. Freud discusses other aspects of humor, such as the peculiar similarity between wit and dreams. The difference between the two is that a dream disguises our forbidden thoughts to keep them out of our consciousness , while a joke disguises them to let them in. The essence of his book as a contribution to something new in the science of humor,however, ~~--~~is its demonstration that witticisms are peculiarly adapted for releasing suppressed motives from the unconscious, and that they are frequently so employed.

Max Eastman repudiates practically all the prededing theories and offers his own:

> "All attempts to explain humor have failed, and they all look pretty foolish to hilarious people, because they take humor seriously. They try to explain it, I mean, and show what its value is, as a part of serious life. Humor is play. Humor is being in fun. It has no general value except the values possessed by play."[15]

He dismisses the old formula of the mixture of pain and pleasure by maintaining that laughter can be a response to any stimulus, pleasant or unpleasant, provided it is one

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[15] Max Eastman, The Enjoyment of Laughter,Simon and Schuster, New York, 1936, p. 15.

that can be taken playfully.

Upon completing this examination of the major theories of laughter and the comic, one emerges with a conglomeration of varied conceptions. Chief among these seem to be the ideas of superiority in laughter; deceived expectation; pure joy and geniality; nonsensical, unfulfilled desire; and finally, child-like play.

Some writers have seen laughter as a very simple manifestation. Others have been unable to define it and have attested to its complexity. It is indeed a baffling problem, but it is equally a fascinating one. We shall see how one man attempted to solve it.

CHAPTER TWO

Analysis of Bergson's Essay

Before examining Bergson's formula for the comic, it would be well to gain a rough acquaintance with his general philosophical outlook. We ~~will~~ shall see that this is not in the nature of a digression, for his Essay On Laughter fits right in with his overall philosophy.

His is usually labelled a philosophy of "vitalism". He came at a time (1870-1890) when the world was still reeling from the impact of Darwinism. Herbert Spencer's system was the culminating expression of this mechanical point of view. It is a remarkable thing that Bergson was in youth a devotee of Spencer. But the more he studied Spencer, the more keenly conscious Bergson became of the unconvincing aspects of the materialist mechanism. He felt that the concept of Life was more fundamental and inclusive than that of mere force. In his masterpiece, Creative Evolution (1907), he saw evolution as something quite different from the blind and dreary mechanism of struggle and destruction which Darwin and Spencer described. He sensed duration in evolution, the accumulation of vital powers, the inventiveness of life and mind, "the continual elaboration of the absolutely new". He presented overwhelming evidence to prove his hypothesis that there is something more in evolution than a helpless mechanism of material parts. Life is more than its machinery; it is a

power that can grow, that can restore itself. Life is that which makes efforts, which pushes upward and outward. It is the opposite of inertia, and the opposite of accident; there is direction to its growth. This mysterious something inLife that gives power and direction to the mind of man is called the "Elan Vital" or Vital Urge. Against it is the undertow of matter, the lag and slack of things towards relaxation and rest and death. This is exemplified in habit, inertia, sameness, immobility. Life and Matter are thus two opposing tendencies. The first drives towards creativity and individuality; the second drags ~~it~~ Life down towards immobility and mechanism.

With this brief background we are prepared to examine Bergson's theory of laughter.

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The Essay is divided into three sections, "The Comic in General", "The Comic in Situations and Words", and "The Comic in Character". Because Bergson takes the same basic element, i.e.laughter, and examines it under various conditions, there is much inevitable and unavoidable overlapping and repetition. However, this really serves in a logical way to substantiate Bergson's main hypothesis, one which is omnipresent throughout his entire

treatment of laughter. It is that the comic is "something mechanical encrusted upon the living." Keeping this phrase in mind we ~~will~~ shall perceive its meaning more fully as we examine the work step by step.

The first section is devoted to a primary consideration of the comic. At the outset, Bergson recognizes the problem that faces him and anticipates part of the possible criticism of his theory:

> "Our excuse for attacking the problem in our turn must lie in the fact that we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing."[1]

Perhaps he meant not to "imprison" it within a definition, but we ~~will~~ shall see that this is precisely what he has done. He means to give the reader merely an"acquaintance" with the subject, such as "springs from a long companionship", but he quickly becomes dogmatic and offers definitions, laws, and rules.

He starts off with three observations on the nature of the comic that he considers fundamental.

In the first place, the comic "does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human." We laugh only at that which possesses the quality of human life. Consequently, Bergson goes on to state, if we laugh at an animal we do

[1] Henri Bergson, Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic New York, Macmillan, 1928, p.2.

so only because its gestures or actions resemble those of a human being. At first glance this might seem to be quite true. One thinks of the comical and lifelike gestures of a monkey imitating a human being, or of a bear or any four-footed animal walking upright on its hind legs. We do laugh at these situations because we detect in them "some human attitude or expression". But there are occasions when we laugh at animals for wholly different reasons. The picture of a dog,avidly chasing his tail,is funny but there is nothing human in his action. Then one must admit that there is something very comical about a dog causing all traffic to halt as he chooses to cross a city street alone, and yet he is not acting as a person would. Perhaps we laugh at him for that very reason,--because he is not behaving as a human being would.

Exception is taken to this point of Bergson's because he has set it down too dogmatically. He has not allowed for laughing at an animal for any other reason than the one he has given. Moreover Bergson mentions laughing at animals(and non-human objects in general) only at the beginning of his essay and then leaves the subject. He dismisses this large field too lightly. It is as though he is blocking himself against too large a problem, one

which would unfold itself into manifold details and complexity if examined more closely.

Nevertheless, Bergson is not all wrong. We do laugh at things sometimes when they possess human characteristics. But they possess these human attributes only as objects of individual interpretation. They are funny to us because we feel like looking at them in a humorous way. Irvin S. Cobb offers a good example of this:

> "There are certain things which both writers and comedians have found by testing to be almost as funny as whiskers.......a cheese is always funny, whether written about, described, or exhibited. Limburger is the funniest brand with Camambert next. Right alongside of cheese, and running it a close race in the popular favor as a human asset I would rate the onion. The lemon, which has attained a sort of transient hold on the public fancy here of late years, can never in my humble opinion, hope to rival the onion as a permanent favorite. It lacks the drawing and holding qualities of the onion. After all, a lemon isn't near as funny, really, as a banana. But the onion is immortal; it is an epic; it is elemental humor...."[2]

As a second observation, Bergson calls attention to the lack of feeling which he claims accompanies all laughter. According to him, we laugh with our minds, not our emotions. The moment our feeling comes into play, the thing is no longer funny. The appeal of laughter is to the mind alone.

Now, since the mind can be measured and compared to

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[2] Irvin S. Cobb, The Trail of the Lonesome Laugh, in Everybody's Magazine, April 1911.

other minds, then one mind can actually be "better" than another. But the emotions cannot be measured, in the sense that one person's emotions are "better" than another's. Consequently, since Bergson holds that laughter has to do only with the mind, he has here introduced the idea of superiority. He goes on to say that the heart has no place in laughter. Carlyle and Richter would not agree with him, for they believed that the essence of the comic lay in its heartfelt appreciation. On the other hand, Bergson would find ready agreement in such writers as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Hobbes,--all of whom believed that in laughter there is always a feeling of superiority towards its object. It is a little surprising to realize that Bergson, who is considered a fairly modern thinker, should overlook the complexities of the human mind, and make the same mistake that the older philosophers made.

Max Eastman approached the late W.C. Fields with this statement of Bergson's which follows from his assertion that laughter only appeals to the intelligence:

> "Depict some fault in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity....the mischief is done, it is impossible for us to laugh."[3]

Fields exclaimed, "Oh no, they laugh often with tears in their eyes!" And he illustrated his point by recalling

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[3] Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

a passage from his own great stage success, Poppy:

> "I had stolen a Horse, and was trying to get it over the border into Canada. I said an affectionate farewell to my daughter and disappeared into the wings, but came back in a few seconds, handcuffed and in the custody of the police. My daughter uttered the single word 'Pop!' She spoke this with heartfelt dismay, and there was not a sound or motion in the audience. They were liking us and caring what happened to us. I said: 'Fortunes of war, my dear! I never did think much of that horse and he dropped dead right in front of the police station!' It was one of the big laughs of the piece, but there was warm feeling in it!"[4]

The third major observation follows from the preceding one. It is that this intelligence which responds to laughter must not exist alone. It must have other intelligences about in order to respond more fully. Laughter is more uncontrolled the more numerous the audience.

Bergson seems to be quite right here for how many of us have had the disappointing experience of not enjoying a play to the utmost because of the disturbing effect of empty seats around us. Laughter, indeed seems "to stand in need of an echo", and is truly a group emotion. When we are alone and experience something comical, how annoyed we are that no one is mear to laugh with us, and how eager we become to relate our experience to someone else so that they will share our laughter. Bergson cites a perfect example of this, which, if applied to laughter, would be

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[4] Quoted by Max Eastman in The Enjoyment Of Laughter, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1936, p. 295-296.

even truer:

> "A man who was once asked why he did not weep at a sermon when everybody else was shedding tears, replied, 'I don't belong to the parish!'"[5]

After these three observations, Bergson pauses to recapitulate. Thus far he has shown to his own satisfaction that the comic can take place whenever a group of persons gather together, directing attention toward one of their number and "imposing silence on their emotions". Now the problem arises as to just what it is that is concentrated upon that produces the laughter.

We have said that the phrase "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" is the leading hypothesis of Bergson's entire theory. We ~~will~~ shall see from here on how he applies it to the many comic instances to prove its validity. To use a single word, we may call this concept "Rigidity".

He takes as succeeding examples then, the hypothetical comic situations of the man who is laughed at because he trips on the street; the simpleton who is hoaxed; the absent-minded person who becomes wildly enthusiastic with his falsely based ideas; and the type of person who is comic because of various distortions of character and will. Now at first glance there seems to be nothing in common among

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[5] Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

these situations other than the fact that they are all capable of being comic. But Bergson calls attention to the concept of rigidity which is present in all four instances. In each of these cases there is involved an automatism or rigidity of attitude. There is "a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence" that causes the man not to see the stumbling-block in his path, and causes the absent-minded person to be blind to the actual facts.

Now, perhaps, one can see some meaning in Bergson's assertion that the comic "is something mechanical encrusted upon the living". Now, too, perhaps it is easier to see a connection between his discussion of laughter and his general philosophy. Bergson, we have seen, regards Life as an everchanging process, full of vitality and movement. It constantly grows and alters its form. Its very nature and essence is elasticity. Consequently, when anything is mechanical and inelastic, it is not possessed of the characteristics of Life. Bergson therefore contends that all forms of the comic are due to the substitution of the rigidity and automatism of a machine for the flexibility and variability of an organism, because we will laugh at the human body in proportion to its reminding us of a machine. Furthermore society will be suspicious of any such in-these situations other than the fact that they are all capable of being comic. But Bergson calls attention to the concept of rigidity which is present in each instance. In each of these cases there is involved automatism or rigidity of attitude. There is "a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence" that causes the man not to see the stumbling-block in his path, and causes the absent-minded person to be blind to the actual facts.

Now, perhaps, one can see more meaning in Bergson's assertion that "the comic is something mechanical encrusted upon the living". [illegible], [illegible], [illegible] in [illegible] of [illegible] [illegible] of [illegible] and his [illegible], [illegible]; we have seen, [illegible] like an ever-changing [illegible], full of vitality and movement. It constantly grows and alters its form. Its very nature makes for elasticity. Consequently, when rigidity is encrusted upon life, it is not in accord with the characteristics of life. Bergson therefore contends that all forms of the comic are due to the substitution of the rigidity and automatism of a machine for the flexibility and versatility of an organism, because we will laugh at the human body in proportion to its reminding us of a machine. Furthermore society will be suspicious of any such inelasticity of character, mind, or body, for society fears that each one of us will not pay attention to the vitality of life, and will thus fall prey to the automatism of acquired habit. Society senses rightly that this rigidity is negating the elastic tendency of life, but society cannot intervene to cry it down with physical repression. Nevertheless, it must show its uneasiness; it must threaten and can do so only by means of a gesture. Laughter, thus, is a "social gesture". It is a corrective, a means by which society would rid itself of inelasticity and get back to the life of ease and fluidity.

At once one is reminded of Meredith's conception of the Comic Spirit hovering overhead and casting "volleys of silvery laughter" down on those members of society who "wax out of proportion,..affected...congregating in absurdities." Bergson would call these social aberrations Rigidities, but he has society laughing in that same role of the comic satyr.

Bergson does not present this concept as a definition of the comic. He states that it is suitable only for cases that are theoretical in which the comic is pure and unadulterated. Bergson prefers to offer the idea of laughter for social correction as

a "leitmotiv" to be realized along with all the explanations that are to follow.

He goes on carrying with him this all-important thought of Rigidity. He applies it to comic forms, such as masks and deformities. There are certain deformed people that unfortunately tend to excite laughter. If we look at them more closely we will perceive that this is because they are deformities that a normal person could imitate successfully. A hunchback suggests the picture of a person who does not hold himself well, who has an ugly stoop to his back. Habit and physical rigidity have caused his back to persist in its position. The same is true of a comic countenance portrayed by means of a mask. Automatism and inelasticity, "habit that has been contracted and maintained", are in the never-changing aspect of the mask. There is a deep-rooted absent-mindedness and unawareness of the change and motion in life that allows the person to be dragged into a mould from which he is unable to escape. So it is rigidity rather than actual ugliness that we laugh at in the comic form.

Bergson passes to the comic ~~form-~~ in gestures and movements, still carrying with him the concept

of automatism in the midst of flux and vitality, which for him so~~r~~lves everything. Once again, he declares that we laugh because of the "artificial mechanization of the human body". Here he brings up a subject which recalls the definition of Aristotle. Aristotle had said that comedy consists in imitating characters of a lower type. Bergson agrees with the idea of imitation, but he offers an explanation of it in terms of his own outlook.

Our mental dondition, maintains Bergson, tends to be in a constant state of changs. If our gestures would only follow our minds they would be fully alive and changeable; consequently they would repel imitation, for imitation depends on a certain repetition. We could not imitate Winston Churchill, for example, unless we knew from repeated instances how he talks or that he usually carries a cigar. Therefore, to im~~m~~itate anyone is to bring out for emphasis the element of mechanization he has allowed to creep into his personality. Small wonder, concludes Bergson, "that imitation gives rise to laughter."

At this point, he launches out into various directions in order to show "the expansive force of the comic." Starting with the simple effect of the comic of automatism in the midst of flux and vitality, which for him covers everything. Once again, he declares that we laugh because of the "artificial mechanization of the human body". Here he brings up a subject which recalls the definition of Aristotle. Aristotle had said that comedy consists in *imitating* characters of a lower type. Bergson agrees with the idea of imitation, but he offers an explanation of it in terms of his own outlook.

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At this point, he launches out into various directions in order to show "the expansive force of the comic." Starting with the simple effect of the comic disguise giving rise to laughter by accentuating the person's absent-mindedness to the present life facts, he applies it to nature and to society. Laughter will arise, then, whenever "a mechanical element" is" introduced into nature and an automatic regulation of society." As an example of this, Bergson cites Sganarelle's answer to Geronte in Moliere's Le Medecin Malgré Lui. The latter had said that the heart was on the left side and the liver on the right. "Yes, it was so formerly," says Sganarelle, "but we have altered all that; now, we practice medicine in quite a new way."

He next brings up the principle of"contrast". This is an old-age concept. Many men have maintained that laughter is produced solely by contrast. Bergson disagrees, of course, but he includes it, as he should, as a part of the total picture. As in the case of imitation, he relates this concept also to his rigidity theory.

We laugh at a speaker who sneezes in the middle of a stirring and dramatic speech. That is because we have had before us the spiritual side of the ~~am~~ man. his soul reaching up to the heights, and suddenly his ponderous, weighty, physical component catches hold of him and drags him down. It is contrast,-the differ-

ence between the spirit and the body, between the physical and the moral. The same thing makes us laugh when we hear of a person that " He was virtuous and plump." From the contemplation of the soul we are suddenly drawn short and faced with the body, the unchanging mechanism of matter.

Third, Bergson directs us toward the concept of the contrast in the body itself between life and matter. He mentions the occasion of Sancho Panza being tossed into the air repeatedly from the blanket. Gradually one loses sight of the fact that the person possesses qualities of life, and he becomes a bundle, an inanimate lifeless mechanism. Consequently, "we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing."

We have now completed a survey of the first part of Bergson's Essay on Laughter. He has introduced his main tenet and has shown partly how it applies to comic instances. In the next division Bergson penetrates even further into the problem of the laughable, still using as his dissecting instrument, "something mechanical encrusted on the living."

> "Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life, and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement."[6]

With the above law, Bergson prepares the way for the discussion of the comic in situations, in action. Here he makes a fascinating analysis and one which shows a clear relationship to his philosophy of "creative evolutionism". We ~~will~~ shall discuss his analysis first, and then attempt to show that relationship.

He classifies the comic situation under three headings. The first is labelled Repetition. It is the idea of the Jack-in-the-Box, the knockdown Punch and Judy show. No matter how many times one pushes them down, they pop right up again, exactly like a repeating mechanism. Then go even deeper, applying the idea to human beings. In *Tartuffe* there is a scene that is a perfect example of this. Dorine, telling Orgon of his wife's sickness, is repeatedly interrupted by the latter, eager to know about his beloved Tartuffe, with the question, "And Tartuffe?" This gives the same illusion as the other two instances,--that of a mechanism pressed down only to pop up again when the pressure is released. As another example, suppose we met a friend at a certain place on the street, by accident, one day. The incident would probably be forgotten. But let it be

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[6] Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

repeated the next day and the next and the next. We will laugh at the "coincidence". On the other hand, picture a reciprocating engine that repeatedly goes through the same motions. We do not laugh at this because it does not give us the "illusion of life" which is necessary.

The second major classification of the comic situation is termed Inversion. It is the idea of the prisoner lecturing the judge, or the child teaching its parents. The word really defines itself. It is the concept of the topsy-turvy world with everything askew and out of its normal order. There are many comedies that set before us the picture of the villain caught in his own trap, or the "robber robbed". These are examples of Inversion. Perhaps, although Bergson does not mention it, this could account for a certain aspect of the exultant laugh of victory, where the underdog comes out on top and laughs to see himself out of his role. But with a knowledge of the psychological implications involved this could well be interpreted otherwise. At any rate, Inversion, like Repetition, accounts for a great many comic situations and does seem to be a root cause of laughter.

The third and last classification is somewhat imposingly labelled Reciprocal Interference of Series. This

occurs when the situation is confused between two or more parties. Bergson offers a good definition of this concept:

"A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time."[7]

One of the simpler forms of this is the "equivocal" situation, where the actors have an erroneous conception as to what is going on, while the audience knows truly what is transpiring and frequently what is in store for them. But there are more complex instances of this "stage-made misunderstanding". It is possible that two or more characters can be talking together, referring to completely different events without being aware of it(once again, absent-mindedness). But at a certain moment the conversation meets under such conditions that the words of one can be applied to the words of the other. There have been many jokes made about two deaf people discussing the weather. This is an excellent example of Reciprocal Interference of Series. One can see that this situation can become highly complex and yet highly effective in the hands of a good playwright.

Bergson offers the foregoing three divisions as very

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[7] Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

definite formulas for detecting laughter in the comic situation.

It is truly fascinating to see how he relates these three to his philosophy and to his phrase "something mechanical encrusted upon the living".

We have seen that he regards Life as a constantly changing and vital process, and that the comic is related to its opposite, the concept of Matter, which is variously referred to by such words as "rigidity","automatism", "mechanical",and "inelasticity".

Now, Life can be regarded from two viewpoints, those of Time and Space. In Time we notice that Life never repeats itself; it constantly grows older. Moreover it never goes backwards, but always pushes forward. In Space, Life contains a series of systems that never disturb one another. They are all separately functioning organisms, although they are also all co-existing. These are the characteristics of Life. We have learned that to look for the comic we must go to Life's opposite,--Matter. There we will find our answer. It lies in the direct antitheses of the three qualities we have just named; that is, since Life never repeats itself, Matter must contain Repetition. If Life never goes backwards, Matter must

invert itself,---Inversion. If Life contains a series of coexisting though separate organisms, Matter must contain its opposite,---Reciprocal Interference of Series.

These three classifications, then, distinguish the living from the mechanical. Consequently they distinguish the non-comic from the comic. Bergson says that "these are the methods of light comedy and no others are possible". Again, he has made an extremely dogmatic statement. It would not be fair to say that he cannot be right because no one is capable of classifying the infinity of comic situations down to three headings. But a fair criticism is to say that Bergson had no right to say as he did at the beginning of his essay that he "will not not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition". As we we pointed out then and as we have shown now, this is precisely what he has done. Perhaps a philosopher, accustomed to pondering the unsolved riddles of existence, cannot ~~help~~ resist offering solutions. But if he does, as in the case at hand, he should say so. He should not say that the problem is so complex that definitions and classifications are impossible, and then ~~go ahead~~ proceed with the greatest of ease and show that it is really very simple if only we look at it from one viewpoint.

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There can be no objection ~~from~~ to approaching it from the Bergsonian point of view; he may be entirely correct. We say this because we do not want to give the impression that we necessarily disagree with Bergson's present exposition, but only his method.

Moreover, there can be no doubt that Bergson has here related his theory of the comic to his "creative evolutionism" in a most ingenious way. He has proceeded on quite logical ground, if one is willing to agree with his major hypothesis,---that the comic is concerned with Matter, the opposite of Life. In fact, he has gone about this classification of the comic situation in such a syllogistic manner that it is difficult to agree with his philosophy and still disagree with his derivation from it, expressed in the preceding formulas. On the other hand, it is quite possible to coincide with his view of the comic without affirming his philosophy. For one can agree to a final result for many different reasons. We can say, as does Bergson, that the comic situation certainly does consist of either Repetition or Inversion or Reciprocal Interference of Series; moreover we can even use the same names. But we can arrive at our conviction by an entirely different reasoning process. Most of us laugh at a given

situation without ever wondering or figuring out why we do so. If we did, the thing would probably be no longer comical, such being the nature of laughter. But if we were to stop and ponder, we might find that we are not laughing because the thing represents something "mechanical encrusted upon the living". We might laugh because in that gesture we gain release for repressed hostility, desire, or sexuality as Freud maintained. Or else we might laugh for some secret reason, hidden from the rest of the world, something peculiar to our own individual experience. But it could still be seen before our eyes as an instance of Repetition, Inversion, or Reciprocal Interference of Series.

The reason that we have not repudiated Bergson's threefold classification is that we believe it to be correct. That is, to the limit of our experience and imagination, there is no comic situation that does not come under one of these three headings. Consequently, Bergson seems to have made an important discovery in this respect.

Next, he passes on to the category of the"comic in words". He first makes the distinction between the"comic expressed and the comic created by language". The first could be transferred into another language and not lose too much of its significance. But the latter is completely dependent upon the structure of the sentence and the words

used. It is not what is meant by the phrase, but the phrase itself that is comical.

The comic applied to language necessitates and ushers in a discussion of wit. Bergson defines his conception of wit in the single phrase, "the comic in words". That is precisely what he believes it to be. Wit is a "dramatic way of thinking". The true wit sees what he is uttering in terms of an entirely visual comic scene.

> "Wit is a gift for dashing off comic scenes in a few strokes---dashing them off, however, so subtly, delicately, and rapidly, that all is over as soon as we begin to notice them."[8]

A witty saying, then, is a comic scene in miniature.

From here the problem becomes greatly simplified. If all wit is but a version of the comic in language form, then it can be analyzed in the exact same fashion, by means of the identical rules already stated. Thus, the law of Rigidity is equally in force here. For example, Bergson had earlier stated that we laugh when our attention is diverted from the moral to the physical in a person, as in the case of the eloquent speaker who sneezed in the middle of his speech. Now Bergson says that "a comic effect is obtained whenever we pretend to take literally an expression which was used figuratively".[9] In reply to the state-

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[8] Bergson, op. cit., p.107.

[9] ibid., p.115.

ment, "He is always running after a joke," a man said, "He won't catch it." There the word "catch" is used in a figurative sense, but if wex take it literally we come out with a humorous scene. The three laws for the comic situation are very much in force in the category of wit. Take one of Mark Twain's statements:

"It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native criminal class except Congress."[10]

If we enlarge this into a scene we might emerge with a picture of a group of portly politicians sitting in a dignified manner behind the jail bars. But that is not even necessary here. Clearly it is a case of Inversion. To have our highest body of lawgivers named as criminals upsets our usual conception of the state of society. Life does not run in such a reversible fashion.

Repetition is likewise employed in wit. Here it often consists in having the same language repeated under different circumstances with comic results, as in the case of servants imitating the speech of their masters, or in mimicking of any kind.

Reciprocal Interference of Series is apparently a vast source from which witty statements are gathered. The most often quoted is that which we call "the play upon words". Two separate series of ideas are expressed by means

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[10] Mark Twain, from Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar

of one series of words, in which advantage is taken of the multiple meanings some words possess. Thus, Mrs. Malaprop's "alligator on the Nile" betrays somehow a certain negligence and absent-mindedness on the part of a language that forgets its true function.

With the mention of Mrs. Malaprop, we are confronted with an opportunity to deal with the final section of Bergson's essay,--namely, the"comic in character". But before that, let us make a few general observations on the preceding section, attempting to relate it with the historical theories of laughter mentioned in the first chapter.

Notably absent from the discussion of wit is any train of ideas remotely resembling Freud's hypothesis of the true function of wit,--i.e. release. That is not at all surprising, for Freud's concepts, just as those of Bergson, are in line with his general thinking, and since the thinking of Freud and Bergson was not truly akin, little could be expected in the way of similarity or agreement.

Kant's theory of deceived expectation comes closer to Bergson's category of Inversion, than to anything else in the essay. Both philosophers include the idea

of "oppositeness". Kant had seen laughter resulting from "the transformation of a strained expectation into *nothing* ", whereas Bergson saw it, in part, as the transformation of one expectation into another which is completely unexpected.

It cannot be denied, however, that Bergson has offered several new ideas to the study of laughter. Moreover, thus far they are better documented and accounted for than any others. This is realized all the more acutely when one recalls the somewhat nondescript and vague emotionalizings of Carlyle and Richter.

Let us turn now to the final section in Bergson's essay, which is, as we have said, a discussion of the "comic in character". We now have behind us all the important points that Bergson offers, so that although the last section is possibly the most important, it contains the least in the way of the introduc~~ings~~tion of new ideas and concepts.

Looking back, we realize that Bergson has performed quite a feat in keeping his comments on this phase of the comic down to a minimum. It is difficult to speak of laughter, a human trait, *without* delving into character.

Bergson commences with the observation that comedy can only begin with "a growing callousness to social life". That is, a person is comic who goes about his business automatically, without stopping to be in contact with the world or his fellow men. As we have learned, it is then the function of laughter to censure his absent-mindedness.

Here is where Bergson sets forth the part of his theory to which later critics have taken great exception. Accusing Bergson of believing(along with Aristotle and Hobbes) that there is superiority and hostility in all laughter, Max Eastman quotes Bergson in the following:

> "In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct....Depict some fault, however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy,fear, or pity; the mischief is done, it is impossible for us to laugh."[11]

In criticism of this, Eastman says:

"Laughter can and does, of course , perform this

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[11] Bergson, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

> function.....But that this is not its primary function, and is not what laughter *is*, would be clear to Bergson if he would spend five minutes in contemplation of a laughing baby..........I suspect him not only of never having seen a baby, but of never having been one."[12]

Eastman seems to be correct, although one or two of his statements are open to question. Bergson is wrong to say that there is hostility in all laughter. Freud, far more of a student of the mind, maintained that there is some repressed hostility, but that there can also be repressed sexuality, and pure child-like nonsense laughter. Bergson completely overlooks the fact that there is such a thing as the laughter of pure joy. Carlyle, Richter, and the other Romantics, with all their airy words, had brought to light an important aspect of laughter.

Bergson continues his analysis of the comic in character by striking a keynote. The essential quality that a comic character must possess is a blind and rigid unawareness of the flexibility of life. Don Quixote unwittingly reveals his "systematic absent-mindedness". Alceste, in *The Misanthrope*, completely overlooks the existence of humor, and is rigidly earnest and serious in his outlook upon life.

A second basic quality is that there must be a

[12] Eastman, *op. cit.*, p.30.

single dominating characteristic, vice or virtue, that isolates itself within the personality of the comic figure and rules his every thought and action. Don Quixote is absent-minded and lives in his own world. Alceste is an avid misanthropist.

Third, the comic character focusses our attention on "gestures" rather than "actions". For the latter is "in exact proportion to the feeling that inspires it." That is, in back of action, we can always sense feeling, and Bergson has said that there is no place for feeling in the laugh. Gesture, on the other hand, is far less significant; we do not take it seriously. Tartuffe would be a monster if we let him reveal himself by his actions;instead we take consideration of his gestures and his monstrosity dwindles.

These then,are the three qualities of the comic character: rigidity,dominance of a single trait, and emphasis upon gestures. It appears that Bergson has put too much emphasis here on what we are accustomed to call "low comedy". The three essentials seem too involved with slapstick,farcical elements. Perhaps, as some say, the farce is at the root of all comedy, and "high comedy" is only more cultivated farce. If

so, Bergson does not explain the cultivating process. If not, then there is a notable omission.

In this discussion he takes up the question of the governing nature of virtues and vices, and the distinction between tragedy and comedy. To answer this question he poses several questions. For example, why could we not title Othello, Jealousy? Why not Revenge instead of Hamlet? And why can we call a person a "Tartuffe" and not a "Phedre"? His answer lies in a basic differentiation between the two kinds of drama.

> "Comedy depicts characters we have come across and shall meet again. Comedy takes note of similarities and types."[13]

But tragedy presents the individual, the unique personality. The tragic hero is motivated by some inner force of his own nature while the comic figure has his characteristics imposed upon him from without. In this sense he is controlled in a puppet-like fashion, which once again suggests the idea of Automatism and Rigidity. Thus "tragedy is concerned with individuals and comedy with classes."

Moreover, a comedy resembles real life far more than does a tragedy. For in a tragedy the author cannot merely go to life and extract the necessary elements;

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[13] Bergson, op. cit., p. 163.

they do not exist in unadulterated form. But, due to the fact that there are many rigidities in real life, comedy is more closely akin to it. Since these rigidities in real life do not stand out glaringly, we may expect to find that the "higher" the comedy(and consequently,the less accentuated the automatism) the more it can be expected to resemble reality*. Bergson feels that this is so true that some scenes in real life could be put right on the stage without altering a single phrase. We shall see later that there is a great deal of truth in this.

At the end of the essay, Bergson reiterates the corrective function of laughter, and once again makes plain that in his opinion there is hostility at the bottom of it all:

> "Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed.....It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness."[14]

Eastman, in his tirade against this view of Bergson's, quotes the French writer De Lamennais only to yield to Bergson the virtue of "a more lenient temper". De Lamennais held that

"Whoever laughs at another believes himself at that

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[14] Bergson, op. cit., p. 197.

* High comedy relies more upon the spoken rather than the visual comic situation. The physical rigidity is often not present at all, as we shall see later.

moment superior to him in the aspect in which he views him, and which excites his laughter, and the laugh is everywhere the expression of the contentment which this real or imaginary superiority inspires."[15]

De Lamennais believes, too, that comedy is concerned with egoism, individuality and love of self.

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Looking back over the Essay, we find it difficult to evaluate on the basis of our own imagination and experience, for ~~it is~~ they are not sufficient. When formulations are made, they must stand as correct until proved otherwise; ~~and~~ whenever such proof was available, we have sought to take exception. On the whole, however, the greater part of the essay, that dealing with the generalization("something mechanical encrusted upon the living") ~~and~~ with its application to various aspects of the comic, thus far stands unqualified. Obviously , such criticism requires broader research and substantiation, which is our present aim.

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[15] Quoted in Eastman's, The Sense of Humor, New York, Scribner's, 1922, p. 148.

CHAPTER THREE

Bergson's Theory Tested in the Field of Drama

It is, as we have said, difficult to attempt an evaluation of such a theory as this. Perhaps the best way to go about it is to proceed on a testing basis. That is, one could think of various comic situations and then try to extract satisfactory explanations in agreement with or against the analysis of Bergson. Then again, this is not a foolproof method, for how can one be sure that he has taken into consideration every one of the infinity of possible comic conditions? Laughter, we have learned, is capable of subtle disguise and great complexity. How can one limited mind hope to embrace all of its many forms?

Ultimately, it must come down to the fact that one can only judge what is valid on the basis of what is true for himself. Very probably there are widespread differences of opinion as to the validity of Bergson's analysis of laughter, for this very reason. One reader will sense the truth of an insight into the subject while another will pass that over and grasp a different one. Laughter is not an external emotion; It is intensely subjective and individual. However, even with all this, we know that there is a certain homogeneity of reaction to the comic that makes criticism of such a theory useful.

In our method of testing, we do not intend to take situations from real life. We ~~will~~ shall use examples of stage comedy because we feel that~~,~~ not only is it more widely known and thus more widely laughed at, but it is *intentionally* comic, and thus more suited to examination. We do not intend to consider all of the works of each writer, for itn is the play we consider,--not the man. Therefore we ~~will~~ shall proceed on a "hit-or-miss" basis, taking a comedy from here and there, and noticing various of its aspects, whether it does or does not coincide with Bergson's view of the comic.

Aristophanes

First let us look at Aristophanic comedy. Almost immediately one can find laughter there that is not accounted for by Bergson. We have mentioned it before; it is the laughter of joy. In the comedies of Aristophanes, it is more revelry and wild festivity than mere joy, but nevertheless it all comes under the same category. At the end of *The Acharnians*, *The Wasps*, *Peace*, *The Birds*, and *Lysistrata*, there are mad wild Bacchanalic dances, full of lusty laughter, and great happy rejoicing.

On the other hand, one does not have to look far to

find agreement with Bergson. In The Acharnians, Dicaeopolis goes to the house of Euripides, the great tragedian, to borrow some clothes so that he will look as pathetic and woebegone as one of the wretched heroes of a Euripidean tragedy. Dicaeopolis succeeds in obtaining rags, a battered hat, a beggar's staff, a basket, a broken cup, and an old pot. "Miserable man!" shouts the exasperated Euripides, "You are stealing a whole tragedy!"

In addition to making good fun of Euripides, Aristophanes has here made use of that law of Bergson's that states that we will laugh whenever our attention is diverted from the moral to the physical in a person, and that an expression becomes laughable when we take literally what is meant figuratively.

Another instance of coincidence with Bergson occurs in The Clouds. Here, we have the Rigidity principle, exemplified in the person of Strepsiades. His consuming desire is to have his worthless son Phidippides educated into the New Learning by Socrates. His plan is accomplished, but then it backfires upon him, and we have an excellent instance of Inversion. Phidippides chases his father out of his house, beating him all the

way. Moreover, the son proves that he is morally quite justified in doing so, according to the teacning of Socrates. Strepsiades is now stirred out of his rigidity and at the end of the play, realizing that it is the insidious science of Socrates that has led to all this, he sets fire to the house in which these studies have been pursued.

Aristophanes apparently recognized the value of comedy as a social corrective, and in this too he follows Bergson's formula. He made fun, thoroughly and repeatedly, of anything; no person, institution, or god, enjoyed the slightest vestige of immunity from his brilliant pen.

Shakespeare-see next page

Shakespeare

~~As proof of this,~~ To see the other side we have but to turn to another master of comedy-William Shakespeare. His best comedies are never the corrective social gestures which bring men into line. There is much laughter but little criticism of contemporary life. A Midsummer Night's Dream is full of a buoyancy and gaiety that invites all to partake in the general fun. For the most part, Shakespeare's comedies are gay, sweet, high-spirited entertainments, with no other purpose of being save their own existence.

One reason for this is that Shakespeare never indulges in the laugh of scorn or in the sneer. Somehow, in a way which defies a Bergsonian explanation, he sees through the faults and rigidities of men, and consequently he seldom presents them as being governed by one single uncontrollable trait. Perhaps it is because he loved men so, that he laughed with them and not at them.

Shakespearean comedy, if it resembles any theory of laughter, approaches most closely to Meredith's conception of the Comic Spirit. For there is an air of understanding and kindness in all of his comic characters. They do occasionally reveal the follies and eccentricities of mankind and they do hold them up for us to shatter

with our "volleys of silvery laughter", but they do not sting us and make such savage fun as do the characters of Ben Jonson, who more closely resembles Bergson's theory in this respect.

Bergson claims that the comic character can be defined and he actually defines it, as we have learned. But Sir John Falstaff simply does not fit. He is not governed by one single trait; he is in no way rigid. He is an intensely living and human figure. He is comic and yet we admire him at times for his clear and piercing understanding, and his awareness of life. He defies Bergson's law that laughter cannot be mixed with emotion. One moment we laugh at him, the next moment we laugh ~~at~~ with him, still another we are perhaps annoyed with him, and finally we are sad and sympathize with him. Throughout his career we are ready to laugh and cry at Sir John Falstaff.

The closest thing in Falstaff's character to Bergson is that of the social corrective, and even that falls short. Falstaff lies, steals, boasts, and takes to his legs in time of peril. He is not a desirable fellow creature from a moral point of view. But he performs with such superb consistency and in such unfailing good spirits that he captivates us by his vitality. For him, we feel, morality does not exist. He is not immoral; he

is unmoral. It would be just as foolish to condemn Bacchus,,the god of wine and revelry. So really, Bergson's idea of social correction does not hold true here.

The same is true of Twelfth Night with such comic characters as Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Malvolio could be viewed from a "Jonsonian" aspect. That is, at times he does represent a type, exaggerated in his characteristics. But, perhaps due to later interpretation of his role, we are prone to look at him with some pity and much understanding. And so it is with the other two comic characters. They would be rigid if we did not behold them in the midst of the gentle and uproarious Shakespearian world. But something happens to them there, and instead of coming out as set types or classes, they emerge as individuals drawn from the dramatist's inconceivably fertile imagination.

Ben Jonson

Bergson maintains that comedy is from first to last an intellectual criticism of life. Perhaps the first author one thinks of in this respect is Ben Jonson. He seemed to have a real sense of the effectiveness of laughter. His plays show that he felt that comedy was an agent of correctiveness. In The Alchemist he attacked the hypocrisy of those villains who allow themselves to be duped through their avarice. In Volpone he satirized the insincerity and lust

of men, greedy for gold. Both of these plays hinge upon the desire of man for Gold, the one through the Philosopher's Stone, and the other through a will.

Jonson also grasped the concept of Rigidity, only he called it Humour. Bergson says that comedy portrays types or classes. Look at the very names of Jonsonian characters and oftentimes their rigidities will be revealed. Volpone is the fox; Voltore, the vulture; Corbaccio, the raven; Corvino, the crow; Subtle, Pertinax Surly, and Sir Epicure Mammon. All of them are governed by a single exaggerated characteristic. This is what Bergson maintains is necessary for the comic character.

Inversion is one of the comic situations often used by Jonson. At the end of *The Alchemist*, Subtle, Face, and Doll Common make their getaway. The criminals are not caught; it is the reverse of what we expect, but this helps Jonson to bring out his point that the trio are not the real villains. It is the duped that are the knaves of the play.

Bartholomew Fair gives the picture of a great, noisy, bustling, topsy-turvy world, in which the supposedly honest are put in the stocks, and the pickpockets walk about

freely. People's identities are mistaken and everything goes counter to real life. The whole play is a gigantic instance of Inversion.

Jonson comes close to Bergson's dictum that "laughter appeals to the intelligence,pure and simple." We do not feel sympathy or pity, for example, for any of his characters. When we laugh, we laugh at their rigidities, and we do so with our minds alone. Apparently, Jonson substantiates Bergson in many respects.

Congreve

When we think of Restoration Comedy, we think more of wit and sparkling dialogue than of the actual comic situation. Congreve's Way of the World relies almost entirely on its brilliancy of expression to secure its comic effect. According to Bergson, wit often consists of fitting an absurdity into a well-established form. Mirabell and Mrs. Millamant seem to recognize this fact in one scene. "Good Mirabell," ahe says, "don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks; butn let us be ~~as strange as if we~~ very strange and well-bred; let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while; and as well-bred as if we were not married at all." In addition to the incongruity of the phrases, the speech

also suggests the notion of an inverted conception of marriage. And so it is throughout the play. The shallow and superficial aspects of this branch of high society are played upon by having all the absurdities of their way of life accepted as entirely reasonable. They are all members of a class; they are all types of the high Restoration court society. We feel no sympathy for them, or any other emotion. Rather they are on display for us and when we laugh we do so with our intelligences, "pure and simple".

Molière

The mention of Restoration Comedy brings to mind the figure of Molière. Not only was he a tremendous influence upon this period of English comedy, but apparently he was a great influence upon Bergson himself. For all throughout the essay, Bergson is constantly referring to Molière and quoting from his plays whenever he seeks to substantiate one of his laws. This is a great help to him for it is not difficult for one to detect the rigidity in Molière's characters. They are always either unable or unwilling to let their intelligences inform them of their real natures. In *Les Precieuses Ridicules*, Madelon and Cathos are steadfast to the

point of ridiculousness in their desire to act like ladies of fashion. In L'Ecole Des Femmes, Arnolphe's undue eagerness to protect himself from a faithless wife governs his entire action, and makes him utterly blind to the consequences of his selfishness. Orgon's foolish and excessive admiration for Tartuffe practically ruins himself and his family. But even a virtue can be made funny, if it can be shown that it lacks that elasticity. Witness the case of Alceste in The Misanthrope. Though an honest man, he is a comic character because he refuses to take the world as he finds it. In L'Avare, Harpagon becomes utterly inconsolable at the loss of his "dear cash-box" which to him had become a habit of security.

Furthermore, Molière's plays are distinguished by their obvious social targets. He attacks the schools of fashion, the church, and the fake doctors. Thus his plays possess the corrective function of laughter, and so fit Bergson's hypothesis quite neatly.

The comic situations in Molière are full of examples of Repetition, Inversion, or Reciprocal Interference of Series.

In The School For Wives there is a good example of

Repetition and Inversion in the same scene. Arnolphe, the master of the house, has returned, and seeks admittance from his two servants within:

Alain-Who knocks?
Arnolphe- Open the door! (Aside) I think they will be very glad to see me after ten days'absence.
Alain-Who is there?
Arnolphe-I.
Alain-Georgette!
Georgette-Well!
Alain-Open the door there!
Georgette-Go, and do it yourself!
Alain- You go and do it!
Georgette-Indeed I shall not go.
Alain- No more shall I.
Arnolphe- Fine compliments while I am left without. Hulloa! Here, please.
Georgette- Who knocks?
Arnolphe- Your master.
Georgette- Alain!
Alain- What!
Georgette- It isn the master. Open the door quickly.
Alain- Open it yourself.
Georgette- I am blowing the fire.
Alain- I am taking care that the sparrow does not go out, for fear of the cat.
Arnolphe- Whoever of you two does not open the door shall have no food for four days!
Georgette- Why do you come when I was running?
Alain-Why should you more than I? A pretty trick indeed!
Georgette- Stand out of the way.
Alain- Stand out of the way yourself.
Georgette- I wish to open the door.
Alain- And so do I.
Georgette- You shall not.
Alain- No more shall you.
Georgette- Nor you.*

Later in the same play~~,~~ there occurs a scene between Arnolphe and the Notary, which demonstrates an instance

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L'Ecole Des Femmes, Act I, Scene II, in Mod. Lib. ed., p. 51.

of Reciprocal Interference of Series. Arnolphe, not seeing the Notary, muses aloud on his problem with Agnes. The Notary, thinking that Arnolphe knows he is there, proceeds to discuss his financial affairs with him. Naturally he receives rather incongruous answers to the questions he puts to Arnolphe, who is still in his own world. The Notary becomes more and more perplexed until Arnolphe finally realizes he is there next to him. But he has no idea that the Notary has been talking to him for quite a while. Both of them part, each convinced that the other ~~perso~~n is completely mad.

Molière's plays are also marked by an absence of feeling, which Bergson claims is essential to laughter. If we let our emotions or our sympathies come into play, we would not laugh at all,probably. Most likely, we would turn away in annoyance, disgusted that Arnolphe, Alceste, or Orgon should be so stupid as not to see the foolishness of their ways. But Moliere succeeded in making great use of the comic situation and comic gesture so that we do not take any of the characters seriously.

It is plain to see that every thing in Bergson's discussion can be checked with the plays of Moliere. But that does not necessarily make his theory universal or valid.

is unmoral. It would be just as foolish to condemn Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry. So really, Bergson's idea of social correction does not hold true here.

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GOLDSMITH

Oliver Goldsmith's She Stoops To Conquer also defies Bergson's theory. Although Goldsmith wrote making fun of sentimentalism, he could not avoid it wholly himself, and in many places his humor is mixed with it. It is not pure intellectual humor. It is, like the comedies of Shakespeare, full of sunshine, merriment, and fun. There is no attempt at social correction in the plight of Marlow and Miss Hardcastle.

The character of Marlow, however, could fit the rigidity principle. With his awkward stuttering and bashfulness before cultivated ladies, he suggests the conception of a trait poured into a mould. But he is

soon roused out of it, and in the end we think of him as a single individual, not necessarily representative of a class or type.

Tony Lumpkin, the most enlivening figure of the play, stands out as a comic creation. And yet what is there about him that relates to Bergson? He is not governed by any single trait, unless it be the love of fun and mischief. Even then he is entirely aware of it, which precludes the possibility of there being any rigidity in his nature. He does not have to do with Matter; he is a creature of Life, full of bounding and energetic vitality.

Sheridan

On the other hand, we find much that is in accord with Bergson's view of the comic in Sheridan's School For Scandal. It is, for one thing, more of an attempt at social correction than any of the comedies of Shakespeare. The play is a caricatured commentary on the contemporary state of affairs in fashions and high society. Moreover, we can see now what Bergson meant when he said that the higher the comedy the more it resembles real life. The characters in this play, albeit exaggerated in their traits, are not far from the ordinary walk of life.

The laughter in The School For Scandal is not at all tainted with sympathy. We laugh with a perfectly clear heart at the cynical wit of the scandalmongers. And although Lord Teazle, Crabtree, Benjamin Backbite, Lady Sneerwell and her crew, are characters closer to life than in previous comedies, it is not difficult to isolate their governing traits, their rigidities.

The two most famous scenes of the play are excellent examples of Reciprocal Interference of Series. Charles does not know that it is his uncle to whom he is auctioning off his pictures. In the other scene, Joseph's struggles entangle him more and more when the screen is thrown down and Lady Teazle is discovered. In both of these scenes there is an overlapping of understanding between the characters on the stage. Moreover, to make the situation more tense and more comic, the spectator knows all and realizes how mixed up are the figures in the two scenes.

French Comedy : **Beaumarchais, Augier& Sandeau, Rostand**

If there is anything to the common phrase "the Gallic Spirit", one might suppose that Bergson may possess it. That is, perhaps he looks at comedy from the viewpoint of a Frenchman, if such a thing is possible. It does

sound strange to say that French laughter is differebt from English laughter, it being so universal an emotion. But,as we indicated before, there is something in the nature of the comic that has to do with a national or sectional understanding and appreciation of it. Else, why is it that Americans love to lampoon what they consider the very unfunny British radio comedians?

Since there is that bias in the comic, perhaps Bergson has been taken in by it. Perhaps he was looking at laughter from the point of view of what a French audience laughs at. We have already shown that most of his citations are from the comedies of Moliere. Maybe it is in French comedy that we ~~will~~ shall find unanimous agreement with Bergson's theory.

Beaumarchais' comedy *The Barber of Seville* reminds one very much of Molière's *L'Ecole Des Femmes.* It is the same general story; the old guardian's beautiful young ward is stolen by the daring and dashing young suitor. The role of Bartholo is a great deal like that of Arnolphe. That being so, one might expect to see rigidity in Bartholo's character. But although Bartholo is intent on keeping Rosine for himself, he is too clever and aware of his own feeling to be classified as a rigid

personality whose intelligence does not inform him of his real nature. He thus falls short of Bergson's formula for the comic character. Figaro is also outside of Bergson's classification. For we laugh at him for his love of fun and mischief and song, just as we did at Tony Lumpkin, whose role of bringing the lovers together is the same played by Figaro here.

There is absolutely no attempt in the play to right social wrongs. The comedy goes along its own way, heedless of any larger issues, entirely confined to the business at hand,--mirthmaking.

However, as in Moliere's play, there are some scenes illustrating Reciprocal Interference of Series. With the plot telling of how Count Almaviva, disguised, gains entry into Bartholo's house through the aid of Figaro, one might expect this type of situation. When the Count seeks admittance under the guise of a soldier seeking a billet for the night, there is a perfect example of this "stage-made misunderstanding".

The Son-in-Law of M. Poirier, by Augier and Sandeau, is reputedly one of the masterpieces of French comedy of the nineteenth century. It is the chief modern exemplar of the high comedy which sprang from Tartuffe and Les Precpersonality whose intelligence does not inform him of his real nature. He thus falls short of Bergson's formula for the comic character. Figaro is also outside of Bergson's classification. For we laugh at him for his love of fun and mischief and song, just as we did at Tony Lumpkin, whose role of bringing the lovers together is the same played by Figaro here.

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ieuses Ridicules. According to Bergson it should resemble reality and so it certainly does. Gaston's attitude toward his father-in-law, the Duke's toward Gaston, the relationship of Antoinette and Gaston, are all far more realistic than in *The School for Scandal*. Apparently, as the development of the drama continues, we are experiencing a definite change in high comedy. We ~~will~~ shall find that more modern plays increase in their resemblance to real life.

It is in the character of M. Poirier that we find the most agreement with Bergson. He is the type of the rigidly ambitious and absent-minded person. He has married his daughter, Antoinette, off to a penniless Marquis, Gaston, in order to gain a title for himself someday. He has been completely unaware of the fact that his son-in-law has been squandering his fortune and gradually taking charge of his household. He is brought to his senses on this last point, but of the first he is never cured. At the end of the play, Verdelet, his close friend, says to him after all the trouble has been cleared up: "You're cured of your ambition aren't you? I think you are." To which Poirier replies: "Yes, yes.", but he adds to himself, "Let me see; this is 1846. I'll be deputy of the arrondissement of Presles in '47 and peer of France in '48." And the play ends.

The very first scene contains an instance of Inversion, and at the same time, Reciprocal Interference of Series. The Duke seeks entrance into the house of M. Poirier (and his friend, Gaston, the Marquis, whom he has come to see). The servant does not know that he is a Duke:

> Servant.- I repeat, Monsieur le Marquis cannot possibly receive. He is not up yet.
> Duke.- At nine o'clock! What time is breakfast served here?
> Servant.- At eleven; but what business is that of yours?
> Duke.- You will lay another place.....Is this today's paper?
> Servant.-Yes: February 15, 1846.
> Duke.- Give it to me.
> Servant.- I haven't read it yet.
> Duke.- You refuse to let me have it? Well, you see, don't you, that I can't wait? Announce me.
> Servant.- Who are you?
> Duke.- The Duke de Montmeyran.
> Servant.- You're joking! *

But while the play fulfills many of Bergson's criteria, it is not in entire agreement. It does not cause laughter of the intelligence alone. Somehow, we feel sorry for Poirier's plight, and we feel sad for the unhappy heroine, when her husband reveals that he does not love her but married her for money. These things help to make it more realistic, as Bergson said high comedy should be; but at the same time they cause our laughter to become adulterated with emotion.

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*The Son-in-Law of M. Poirier, Act I, Scene I, in Chief European Dramatists, ed. Brander Matthews, trans. Barrett Clark, p. 176.

Rostand's *Cyrano De Bergerac* is considered "French of the French", but still it is universal in its appeal. Perhaps it should not be classed as a comedy but as a melodrama, for it portrays the historical poet, dramatist, lover, and fighter of the romantic age. But people have laughed at it,and so it is entitled to come under observation.

When we think of the leading character we think of his nose. That nose is funny in the sense that Bergson states. There it is on the face of Cyrano and he can do nothing about it. Whenever he attempts to be soulful, spiritual, transcendent, the nose drags him down to the plane of Matter. Our attention is riveted on the moral in him; suddenly the nose diverts us to the physical and he becomes laughable.

Now this would be perfectly true if the nose suddenly appeared to us or if our attention were suddenly directed to it. That occurs but once in the play, in the scene where Cyrano tells of his overcoming a hundred men, single-handed. Christian continually interrupts him, calling attention to his nose by playing on the words in Cyrano's narrative. But that is the only time we laugh specifically in accord with Bergson. The rest of the play the hero and his nose appear together constantly

and we do not feel inclined to laugh. Cyrano transcends his nose.

But even when we laugh in the scene mentioned, we do not do so without feeling sorry for Cyrano. He is a prime example of the comic character that negates Bergson. All through the play our laughter is mixed with sorrow and sadness. There is an air of wistful beauty to Cyrano and in the end all laughter ceases as we view his tragic death.

Apparently, then, Bergson does not possess this "Gallic Spirit" for his theory is ~~just as~~ no more valid among French plays ~~as~~ than among others. Let us go further in our testing and try to ascertain to what extent he is correct.

<u>Shaw</u>

George Bernard Shaw has been called the "twentieth century Moliere". His comedies, like those of Moliere, show up the rigid and mechanical aspects of our behavior and thought, particularly the latter in the case of Shaw. We ~~will~~ shall see that he makes use of the comic devices analyzed by Bergson. Much of Shaw's witty dialogue can be isolated and found to possess Bergsonian characteristics, just as Molière's. But Shaw differs from Molière in a large overall sense. The French writer believed at least

that society was founded upon good sense, while Shaw believes that it is not normal and attacks it for that reason. According to Shaw we live in a fettered atmosphere, bound by prejudice, tradition, and convention.

Candida is not a comedy, but the figure of Burgess, father of the heroine, is comic. There is a scene of Repetition when he hears first that Morell is mad, then Marchbanks, and then Candida herself. At each point he reacts like a machine, more explosively surprised every time.

Androcles and the Lion, however, contains the supreme example of agreement with Bergson. Early in his essay he states that we laugh at an animal when it resembles a human being. That situation occurs in this play. Androcles comes upon the Lion, lying in the forest. The Lion roars in pain, and Androcles sees that he has a thorn in his paw. At once, he goes to extract it, talking to him in baby fashion all the while: "Oh, poor old man! Did um get an awful thorn into um's tootsums-wootsums? Has it made um too sick to eat a nice little Christianman for um's breakfast?" After Androcles succeeds in relieving the Lion, the two embrace, the Lion places his tail around him, Androcles takes his paw, stretches out his arm, "and the two waltz rapturously round and round and finally away

through the jungle."

To add to it all, and to make the scene more forcefully an instance of Inversion, his wife, Megaera, who had fainted now calls after him: "Oh you coward, you haven't danced with me for years, and now you go off dancing with a great brute beast that you haven't known for tenn minutes and that wants to eat your own wife. Coward! Coward! Coward!"

Man and Superman is another good example. Here, as in much of Shaw, whatever agreement there is to Bergson is not so much in the comic situation as in the wit. Through the "comic in words" here there are many cases of Inversion. Tanner tells us that in the relations of the two sexes it is the man that is actually pursued, and not the woman. Moreover, he reverses our conception of marriage. It is a complete slavery, a snare. Then, in the dream sequence that takes place in the Sierras, the ordinary idea of Hell is supplanted and it is made to appear like Heaven.

Tanner himself recognizes that he is caught in the clutches of a rigid society. There is no escaping. He is not the creature of habit, the automaton, this time. Now it is society that is the comic figure, and when we laugh, we laugh at it, the entire group.

Thus Shaw took note of the fact that laughter furnishes

a "social corrective". In Caesar and Cleopatra he made good fun of the little island of England and its people. In Androcles and the Lion he showed that all religious persecutions ~~that seem to threat~~ are attempts to suppress propagandas that seem to threaten the established interests. One could go through all of Shaw's writing in this way. As a biographer says: "To Shaw...comedy had no other justification than its classical duty of chastening morals by ridicule."[1] Shaw himself has said that the purpose of comedy is "to stick pins into pigs."[2]

Contemporaries:Behrman,Maugham,Coward,Kaufman & Hart, Lindsay & Crouse,Chaplin

Here we find almost a separate category of comedy. Previously the audiences had laughed through the majority of the plays. But with the coming of our "modern" era, something has happened. Due, no doubt, to the tenor of the times comedy has assumed a dark, sardonic cast. Modern comedy flaunts a flippant irony upon the surface, or causes a light laughter; while behind it and under it is a strong undercurrent of tragedy. Right here there would seem to be a major disagreement with Bergson. For, as we know, he maintains that we cannot laugh and feel at the same time. On the surface one would suppose that this is just what we do in viewing modern comedy. Let us see if

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[1] Henderson, Bernard Shaw, New York, D. Appleton, 1932, p. 340.
[2] Ibid., p. 599.

it is.

S.N. Behrman is known for his high, scintillating, brilliant comedy. His characters have a worldly air; his dialogue is lightly humorous. We might say that there is nothing but pure intellectual laughter in his plays, were it not for the fact that he is interested in serious themes like politics, ethics, and cross-currents of thoughts. End of Summer, for example, investigates the failure of wealth and the rebellion of the younger generation. Underneath our laughter is the realization that a home is breaking up, that the people are selfish, ambitious, tortured by jealous love. Of course we do not laugh at this. And that is why it is possible that Bergson can be correct here. When we laugh we do not feel their misery and unhappiness. We laugh at their witty utterances and lose sight, momentarily, of the deeper significance, ---- the fact that they are not merely conversation figures on a stage, but are real flesh and blood people. Whenever they are witty they cease to be lifelike, for their wit is so unusually clever, so quick and bright, that we feel that we are seeing unreal figures. But when their tragedy unfolds, all wit ceases, and we feel with them without laughing.

The same is true of his Biography. Marion Froude, her maid Minnie, and Feydak, make us laugh. But that is only in their detached conversation. When the picture unfolds of the difficulties and hardships involved in publishing her biography, Marion becomes a somewhat desolate figure, she drops down to reality, and our laughter ends.

We do not mean to say that we laugh at the beginning of the plays and stop toward the end, when the message is brought out. As a matter of fact, all through the comedies, we jump from laughter to sorrow, from thinking to feeling. Bergson, interpreted rightly on this point, is correct.

The same is true of the plays of Somerset Maugham and the heavier comedies of Noel Coward. Maugham's Our Betters flutters back and forth between gay, unfeeling wit, and the harsh realization of the unhappy lot of Pearl, the Duchesse de Surennes, and Tony, with their hopelessly mixed-up lives. The Circle, very much like End of Summer in many ways, alternates the humor of Clive Champion-Cheney and Lady Kitty with the knowledge that they were once married, have left each other and their children, unable to find love and security.*

***The play, taken as a whole, is an example of Repetition. The title itself suggests the idea of unending and repetitive motion. At the close, Elizabeth and Teddy run off together to start the chain anew.**

Their wit is one thing, their lives are quite another.

Noel Coward's The Vortex starts out as pure comedy but ends up on a stark, ugly, tragic note with Nicky confronting his mother Florence with the horrible truth about their lives.

While we have been proving that there is agreement with Bergson on this one point of "unadulterated laughter", we have been indicating another point. This is that idea that comedy should possess social meaning. Most of the modern writers of high comedy have chosen to restrict their sphere. Instead of writing comedies to show up the inadequacies and eccentricities of politics and thought, as Shaw, they have concentrated their attention upon human motivations and relations. Most of this takes place within the family. Limited as this might seem, it nevertheless holds just as much importance as the social attacks of an Ibsen or a Ben Jonson.

High comedy today, moreover, agrees with Bergson's method of reasoning, his Life vs. Matter arrangement. The characters are all caught up in the things that go with Matter,-- wealth, houses, parties; consequently when they do face Life they face it as if it too were Matter. In Our Betters, Pearl asks Tony: "Well, Tony, how is Life?"

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While we have been proving that there is agreement with Bergson on this one point of "unadulterated laughter", we have been indicating another point. This is that idea that comedy should possess social meaning. Most of the modern writers of high comedy have chosen to restrict their sphere. Instead of writing comedies to show up the inadequacies and eccentricities of politics and thought, as Shaw, they have concentrated their attention upon human motivations and relations. Most of this takes place within the family. Limited as this might seem, it nevertheless holds just as much importance as the social attacks of an Ibsen or a Ben Jonson.

High comedy today, moreover, agrees with Bergson's method of reasoning, his Life vs. Matter arrangement. The characters are all caught up in the things that go with Matter, -- wealth, houses, parties; consequently when they do face Life they face it as if it too were Matter. In Our Betters, Pearl asks Tony: "Well, Tony, how is life?"

To which Tony replies, "Rotten. I haven't backed a winner or won a rubberv this week." Their attitude toward Life is mechanical.. Throughout their personalities, one detects a lack of vitality, of motion and excitement. When the lovers, Elizabeth and Teddy, "damn" each other, in The Circle, it is Life entering upon a scene of Matter. Because most of the characters ~~pay so little mind to~~ are so heedless of the change and motion ~~of~~ in Life, because they love Matter so much, their world is dull and unhappy. It is up to the dramatist, by means of comic methods, to make them humorous and inconsequential. The comic method used in modern high comedy is wit.

But all is not in agreement with Bergson. There is no rigidity of character in theplays cited. None of the figures have single uncontrollable traits. True, they all love things, but when tragedy and unhappiness comes they face it with great flexibility.

We have kept using the term "high" comedy because in the modern sphere there is another type. We could almost call it the "modern farce", were it not for the fact that it has not the broad slapstick elements of the older comedy. Such plays as You Can't Take It With You and The Man Who Came To Dinner by Kaufman and Hart, and

Life With Father by Lindsay and Crouse, illustrate this type. There is no tragedy or deep significance in these plays. It is all good fun. In the first mentioned, the title does imply a certain social import, but the comedy itself loses it in laughter and merriment.

All three illustrate Bergsonian Inversion. The first gives us the picture of a completely topsy-turvy home; the people in it are fun-loving, reversing every conception of the normal living habits. The second shows the chaos that ensues when an irascible,great man of letters comes to stay in a peace-loving, ordered household. And the third tells of the explosive home life of a seemingly quiet and respectable family.

In all three the laughter is purely intellectual. We feel sympathy for no character, for there is no character who is unhappy or tragic.

But all modern farce comedy is not this way. There is one notable exception. This is the laughter we experience at the comical figure of Charlie Chaplin. His film role is that of a funny little man with baggy pants, a cane, and a derby hat. We might think that we laugh purely at his slapstick, pantomime antics, but we do not. There is much more to it. The old derby hat, the

oversized shoes, the baggy clothes, all mean to portray the cast-off clothes of others, the "hand-me-downs" of *larger* men. Moreover these clothes, the derby hat (the sign of a banker) and the cane (the sign of fashion) indicate that he is trying to fill the clothes of a larger man of considerable social distinction. There is much in our laughter, as we see. Then too, we laugh while at the same time we feel unutterably sad at the pathetic figure of the little man. There is something universally comic and *at the same time tragic* about him. He sertainly serves as an outstanding exception to Bergson.

With this we have concluded our testing of Bergson's theory of laughter. Once again we have emerged with a varied conglomeration of agreements and exceptions. The problem that remains is to draw a fair conclusion from the mass of evidence.

CONCLUSION

We can certainly say, first of all, that we have found Bergson's theory of laughter to be not entirely correct. If it had been we would not have been able to take a single exception. As it is, we found that in the comedies of every period and age, there was approximately the same ratio of agreement to disagreement. Consequently, we can infer that Bergson is consistently incorrect on various points.

We have noticed that a great preponderance of disagreement occurs on the point of the intellectual function of laughter. It *is* possible to laugh and feel at the same time.

In addition, such dramatists as Shakespeare, Goldsmith, and Kaufman and Hart have shown that a good comedy can lack a social signification.

Again, not every comic character must have rigidity to be laughable, Falstaff and Tony Lumpkin are the exceptions here.

On the other side of the ledger we can safely say that Bergson is sometimes wholly correct. Many comic characters are funny because of their rigidity, as is the case with Ben Jonson.

Moreover, Bergson seems to have classified the comic

situation rightly. All through our survey we have noticed that the plays contained instances of Repetition, Inversion, and Reciprocal Interference of Series.

As a matter of fact, it has been possible to find corroboration of practically all of Bergson's formulas. But at the same time, it has been equally possible to find exceptions to some of these same points.

The conclusion leaves one somewhere in the middle. The one absolutely safe thing to say is that Bergson has accurately analyzed the motives for laughter in the plays of Molière. But he has not done so with other comedies. Since he has set up a formula which attempts to analyze every aspect of laughter, and since we have found that he has failed, it must be concluded once again that his theory is unsubstantial.

ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to set forth and evaluate the leading ideas on laughter expressed by Henri Bergson in his *Essay On the Meaning of The Comic.*

The first chapter seeks to place Bergson in the historical stream of writers on the subject. We have commenced back with the ancient Greek + Roman philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, who first introduced the conception of superiority and scorn in laughter. Later, Thomas Hobbes corroborated their contribution. Other writers, such as Meredith, Carlyle, Richter, Spinoza, Kant, Spencer, Freud, and Eastman, offered their ideas on the nature of the comic. The leading theories through the centuries fall into four rough categories: laughter consists of a superior and critical feeling toward its object; laughter is gentle and kind, not at all corrective; it is a release for repressed and nonsensical yearnings; and laughter is a feeling of child-like playfulness. Bergson constitutes a fifth category.

The second chapter takes up Bergson's theory in particular. The method is analysis, but whenever possible personal criticism is made, together with attempts to relate Bergson's tenets to those of the previously-mentioned writers and thinkers.

His essay id divided into three sections. The first is a general discussion of laughter, wherein Bergson introduces his concept of "Rigidity" which serves as a governing rule for all of his speculation. This idea is one which is present throughout the entire essay. Bergson sums it up in a single phrase: "something mechanical encrusted upon the living." This is what the comic actually represents. For Life is not funny; it is vital and full of wonderful motion and flexibility. But Matter("something mechanical") is the realm of the comic. There human beings are laughable, for there they can take on the attributes of a machine. These attributes are many and varied and, according to Bergson, it is this fact that accounts for the complexity of the comic. But at the root of it all is Rigidity, an unawareness of the elasticity of Life.

The rest of the essay is devoted to an examination of the various manifestations of this idea. For example, the second part is entitled "The Comic in Situations." There Bergson analyzes the actual visual comic action. He relates every conceivable situation to his law of Rigidity, and divides them ~~up~~ into three categories. The first is <u>Repetition</u>, which belongs to Matter, because Life never repeats itself. The laughter produced by a Jack-in-

the-Box is an example. The second is Inversion, which belongs to Matter because Life never goes backwards or turns upon itself. When the child lectures to its parents, it is an instance of Inversion. The third is Reciprocal Interference of Series, which belongs to Matter, because the organisms in Life exist independently of one another, and never get mixed up or overlapped. When two people talk together about two totally different things, each thinking the other understands him, we see this in action.

Bergson continues his analysis by attempting to light on every aspect of the comic and explain it away by means of this Life-vs.-Matter method. The third part takes up "The Comic in Character." There the principle of Rigidity holds complete sway. The comic figure must be dominated by a single uncontrollable trait. Furthermore he must be unaware of it. Don Quixote is unaware of his inability to face reality. Arnolphe is unaware of his selfishness and anxiety in protecting himself from a faithless wife. Moreover these characters must not arouse any emotion in the spectator. The laughter must be of the mind only. Once the heart enters into the picture, laughter dies, Bergson maintains.

This last point is one to which great exception can be taken. In the third chapter we undertake to test this point and others in Bergson's theory by applying them to various examples of stage comedy. Such comic figures as Falstaff, Cyrano, and Charlie Chaplin are mentioned as leading arguments against that idea of laughter appealing to the mind alone. In the comedies of Aristophanes we find the major omission in Bergson's essay----the laughter of joy. In such plays as A Midsummer Night's Dream and She Stoops To Conquer, we note a lack of the "social corrective" that Bergson claims all good comedy must have.

On the other hand we find much corroboration. It is chiefly in the comedies of Molière that unanimous agreement occurs. But such plays as The Alchemist, Volpone, The School For Scandal, The Son-in-Law of M. Poirier, Androcles and The Lion, and Man and Superman, also exhibit certain aspects of coincidence.

But the evidence is not conclusive enough. In the comedies of all ages we have found that Bergson's theory explains and also does not explain the reasons for our laughter. We must therefore conclude that although he has offered a fascinating and sometimes correct evaluation, Bergson's essay cannot be regarded as substantial.

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