

The Art of Laughter

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For
Sheldon Bach

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Introduction

THE TASK I have set for myself is to develop a general theory that accounts for laughter and for the less vocal pleasures that are associated with laughter. The field for this kind of pleasure is quite wide, including such specialized genres as the comic novel and dramatic comedy, as well as verbal and practical jokes, and the kind of adventitious or natural events which cause laughter seemingly without human intervention or design.

My aim will be to discover the definitive factors which are common to all of these related literary and natural events, and also to define the psychical mechanisms which permit these events to have their well-known effects, laughter or the pleasure associated with laughter. It will be seen that the defining feature both of the external stimulus and of the mental process that yields these pleasures is the force of context. What I come to term the "ludicrous context" is an aspect neither of the content nor of any particular style of an event that occasions laughter. Rather, it is a set of cues or instructions embedded in or imposed upon a particular event, whether literary or natural, that stimulates a parallel mental state of ludicrousness in the observer.

It will be seen that one of my presumptions in this kind of analysis is that any given event is subject to an infinite range of interpretation depending entirely upon the instructions presumed to be contained in or imposed upon that event. Such a range may be generated in each case by slightly changing or differently stressing the factors in the set of instructions, that is, by minutely changing the context in which the event is to be reinterpreted. While it may be reasonable to reject most of the meanings so generated as injudicious, implausible, anachronistic, irrational, etc., and indeed, such judgments usually deserve our concern, it is important that in doing so we are

consciously aware that we are making biased decisions in rejecting most and approving only some of the infinite sets of possible reading instructions. For our particular interest in comedy, it pays to understand what minimal and definitive set of instructions must be present in an event or imposed upon it from the outside in order that we may respond to it with laughter or with the pleasure associated with laughter. It is from this perspective that I offer to define what invokes laughter and to examine individual works of comedy.

A particular value of the idea of context is that it refers not only to the set of instructions associated with the event, but also to the parallel mind-set or state of mind capable of carrying out those instructions and responding to that event. In presenting context as the definitive feature of laughter, I offer a bridge between the psychological and the rhetorical approach to the problem, and I also avoid the difficulties and illogicalities of the traditional rhetorical approach, which has unsuccessfully attempted to define comedic events in terms of a special ludicrous content or a special ludicrous style, or a combination of both. If I am successful in adducing to the idea of the ludicrous context only those few defining features which together account for laughter, then I will have created a theoretical method for unifying the genres and events which produce laughter and the pleasures associated with laughter. In addition to developing a field theory of laughter, I will also offer in the defining features of the ludicrous context a means of analyzing the nature of a particular ludicrous context, that is, the particular set of instructions with which individual works of the comic spirit achieve their own special quality of laughter. My aim, then, is two-fold: to establish the idea of the ludicrous context, and to show how that context is elaborated and itself becomes a fruitful subject for analysis in individual works of the comic spirit.

CHAPTER ONE

Matter and Manner: Theories of Laughter

LAUGHTER IS, of all the expressions of mind and heart, the most enigmatic. It poses a special problem for the critic of literature: if it is not clear why or at what people laugh in nature, it is equally unclear how or why certain artful productions effect the same response. The subject remains obscure, but not for want of clarifiers.

The theories of laughter fall into two mutually exclusive interpretations. According to one, there is in human nature an active capacity for creating humor upon the world around it. In such a view, the artist actively distorts reality in such a way as to evoke laughter. This is the interpretation of all those who discover a dangerous or potentially dangerous tendency in the art of laughter.¹ Humor, in this view, is a capacity that ought to be limited, just as the devoted are commanded against uttering the Lord's name in vain. The temptation to play with names is real enough, as any child, whose main business is to learn the names of things, knows. Is there any real significance in the fact that in English God spelled backwards is dog? Or is there any real meaning in the fact that the name of a child's enemy can be changed by the transposition of a letter or two into the word for some ignominious quality ("Stewart/stupid")? The comparisons so generated are utterly invidious. Yet they please; they can make us laugh with pleasure. The apparent danger is that while the meaning is spurious, it can survive, as in nicknames, with a tenacity stronger than truth. So a suspicion arises against those who make reality laughable by the effort of their imaginations. Critics unsympathetic to laughter tend to view the act of making something laughable as an imposition of a ludicrous style upon the serious content of reality and

as an incitement to the potentially antisocial or even sinful emotions of pride, scorn, and anger.

On the other side, the defenders of laughter tend to rely upon the theory that sees laughter as an appropriate human response to whatever is inherently laughable in reality. In this view, the imagination is fairly passive, merely responding to events. Whenever the laughable presents itself in nature, a person *must* laugh, willy-nilly. Aristotle, for example, felt that we must laugh when we see painless deformity.² The point is that this theory of the laughable removes in large part the responsibility from the laugher and places it upon the laughable object itself. This would be a pretty good defense against the critics of laughter were it possible reliably to identify the laughable in nature with enough exclusivity to separate it from the serious in nature. But this defense fails if it turns out that laughter is a function of style rather than of a ludicrous content in nature.

If laughter is, in fact, a matter of style, anything could be made laughable. Indeed, what could a resolute jester *not* laugh at? As one critic put it, "A horse-laugh set up by a circle of fox-hunters, would overpower the best poet or philosopher whom the world ever admired."³ If anything can be made laughable, then ludicrousness would appear to be rather a style than a thing, an application that can be imposed indiscriminately on any aspect of reality rather than something inherent in only certain parts of it. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn records a particularly perverse example of paranoia over the secret meaning of laughter and its power to subvert truth. He tells about the imprisonment of a Russian citizen who, while reading *Pravda*, smiled:

He had been imprisoned for a *facial crime* (really out of Orwell)—for a *smile*! He had been an instructor in a field engineers' school. While showing another teacher in the classroom something in *Pravda*, he had smiled! The other teacher was killed soon after, so no one ever found out *what* Orachevsky had been smiling at. But the smile *had been observed*, and the fact of smiling at the central organ of the Party was in itself sacrilege!⁴

To repeat, critics of laughter tend to think of laughter as the effect of a ludicrous style which is capable of corroding even the most pure, true, and sacred object with derisive jesting; its defenders, on the other hand, portray laughter as a thoroughly appropriate reaction to

ludicrous objects. Eighteenth-century English apologists of laughter, for example, liked to slightly misinterpret Lord Shaftesbury and claim that laughter was a test of truth: if you can laugh at something, then it was not quite pure in the first place.⁵

The question remains: is ludicrousness in nature or in the eye of the laugher? When critics and philosophers speak of the ludicrous in nature or reality, what we understand them to mean is that there is in reality some thing, or some relationship of things which makes people laugh (admitting that a particular individual may not laugh because he never laughs, or because, although he laughs at other things, he never does at that particular thing, or because, although he generally laughs at that thing, he just does not feel like laughing at it, or perhaps at anything, at that particular moment). We are talking then, about a ludicrous thing, or some relationship of ludicrous things in reality, and the capacity of human nature to respond to it with laughter. There can be nothing in nature that can be termed purely ludicrous without reference to the human nature that so perceives and laughs at it—any more than there can be beauty or ugliness, order or chaos, without the same reference. For those are terms and ideas that reflect the human interest and perspective in reality, not the interest of reality itself. We are too self-possessed ever to be able to know what interest reality has in itself. We can not even agree on a universal view of our own interest. What is beautiful to the landscape painter may not be to the farmer. As attractive and as logical an alternative as it might seem for critics to conclude that there must be an object in nature termed the ludicrous, there remains the difficulty of reaching a definition that can successfully ignore human nature and that includes all objects in nature that can cause laughter and excludes all those that do not.

The debate may begin to be resolved by first agreeing that a single object in nature cannot be the sole cause of laughter. If it were true, comedians would not pay for jokes; they would merely provide themselves with a platypus, or whatever object proved ludicrous, and silently display it before audiences for laughs. It would seem then that while no single object is laughable in itself, it may be made so by the manner in which it is presented to us. Once we admit the modification of a ludicrous manner, we are no longer speaking about a single ludicrous object in nature. It is in this somewhat more com-

plicated light that Aristotle viewed the ludicrous as a "species of ugliness; it is a sort of flaw and ugliness which is not painful or injurious."⁶ For Aristotle, the ludicrous object is clearly not a single object, but rather a kind of ugliness qualified by its characteristic effect—laughter rather than the expected pain. In looking for the source of ludicrousness in nature, Aristotle still had to fall back for the crucial element in his definition upon human nature and the definitive laughing response. While he did supply the interesting concept of ugliness, he still resorted to the circularity so common to thinking on this subject: the laughable is that which makes us laugh. And we are no wiser than before. Exact definition in this matter inevitably turns away from general nature to human nature, and critics who employ the term, "the ludicrous," really comment on the latter rather than the former.

Yet there are obviously ludicrous events that occur in the natural world—occur, that is, without human intervention. The term natural humor I apply to such events, objects, and contexts in the natural world that inspire us to laughter. They are in contrast to artful humor, all those events, objects, and contexts which we actively employ to cause laughter. One might have to wait a long time for this pleasure were he dependent solely upon the natural variety. After all, how many times each day do the materials of reality naturally arrange themselves in just the exact juxtaposition and with just the right timing or manner necessary to stimulate laughter? How often does a pail full of water perch, without human intervention, atop a door? We would be a pretty humorless tribe were we limited only to this adventitious or natural laughter. Artful humor is an imitation of and an improvement upon natural laughter, sophisticating and complicating the natural variety with all the skill of art and at the same time rendering it convenient and replicable.

Whether the laughter is raised naturally or artfully, the fact remains that there is in nature no single object that is of and by itself ludicrous. Virtually every definition of the ludicrous depends upon the concept of incongruity and juxtaposition. But nature consists of an infinitude of juxtapositions. Near the tree is a flower. Around the flower grass grows. We perceive these relationships as normal. If, for a moment, we were to consider nature as the author of all the things and their relationships in reality, how would we characterize her work? Let us