

The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith

For the name of these gods there is both a serious and a humorous explanation. The serious explanation is not to be had from me, but there is no hindrance to my offering the humorous one, for the gods too are fond of a joke.

—Socrates in Cratylus

The Comic Vision and the Christian Faith

A Celebration of Life and Laughter

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Contents

Acknowledgments	7
Prologue: The Gift of Laughter	9
1. A Voice Laughing in the Wilderness—The Humorist	22
2. Jester to the Kingdoms of Earth—The Fool	40
3. Putting Humpty-Dumpty Together Again—The Clown	56
4. A Fool's Liturgy—The Child	73
5. Will the Real Adam and Eve Please Stand Up? ² —The Comedian	88
6. Between Dreams and Dust—The Simpleton	103
7. Tragic Castles and Comic Cottages—The Comic Hero	120
8. A Divine Comedy—The Divine Hero	138
9. A Happy Ending of Sorts—The Underdog	154
10. The Game and the Adventure—The Trickster	169
Notes	183
Suggested Reading	192

In appreciation for
the inspired folly of three friends:

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Royal Lichtenstein Quarter-Ring Sidewalk Circus

Father John Naus, S.J.,
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I must also acknowledge a special indebtedness to the artistry of Charles Chaplin, whose films I had not seen until a few years ago but from whom I have learned more than from any other source. For

several decades Charlie was one of the most widely known and beloved figures in the world, not only because he was a master clown communicating through the universal language of pantomime, but also because he grappled comically with universal human problems. With soulful eyes in a pallid face, his shabby but once elegant clothes, his jaunty penguin gait, his dusty dignity, Charlie touched the heart of the human condition in a way that was as profoundly religious as it was profoundly humorous. Though he denied having much knowledge of religious doctrines and affairs—beyond the stories and impressions he picked up in early youth at religious meetings in the slums of London—he nevertheless displayed a deeply human sensitivity that offered much more than a slapstick performance and a laughter of the moment.

At the end of his last “silent” film, *The Great Dictator* (1940), Chaplin broke the silence he had maintained for twenty-five years—and well into the era of the “talkies”—as if compelled to deliver the message of his clowning in unmistakable terms. As a refugee Jewish barber fleeing toward the Austrian border, Charlie has been mistaken for the German dictator and is chauffeured to a waiting crowd at a nearby Nazi rally. Hesitantly and haltingly he begins:

I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be an emperor. That’s not my business. I don’t want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone—if possible—Jew, Gentile; black men, white.

We all want to help one another. Human beings are like that. We want to live by each other’s happiness—not by each other’s misery. We don’t want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone. And the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone.¹

That, essentially, is the clown’s credo. It is a faith and a confession that is at the heart of both the comic vision and the Christian faith. And we are indebted to a great comic artist for putting it so simply and succinctly, as in his pantomime he put it so unforgettably.

Prologue

The Gift of Laughter

A posthumously published letter to W.C. Fields from a niece in Ireland informed him in 1940:

Your cousin Hughie Dougherty was hung in Londonderry last Friday for killing a policeman. May God rest his soul and may God's curse be on Jimmy Rodger, the informer. May his soul burn in hell. God forgive me. . . .

Times are not as bad as they might be. The herring is back . . . and the price of fish is good, thanks be to God. The Black and Tans are terrible. They go through the country in their lorries and shoot the poor people down in the fields where they are working. God's curse on them.

Your Uncle Danny took a shot at one of them yesterday from the hedge, but he had too much to drink and missed them. God's curse on drink. . . .

P.S. Things might be worse than they are. Every police barrack and every Protestant church in the country has been burned down. Thanks be to God.¹

The letter was not intended to be humorous, and the religious conflicts to which it refers are certainly tragic. But the inconsistencies displayed are nevertheless humorous, especially because the writer is so oblivious to them. A previous letter had ended even more incongruously: "Your Aunt Maggie from Ireland, who has informed me

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that more Protestant churches have been burned to the ground, sends her love.”

The comic tradition deals, among other things, with such incongruities, exposing them, softening them, and hopefully in some measure preventing them. Like anything else of value, however, the comic spirit and perspective must be cultivated. Laughter and humor may be natural to the species, but they do not automatically reach full flower, or grace the whole of life. In some contexts they may even be shunned or suppressed as inappropriate, and left quite undeveloped.

Nearly seventy years ago William Austin Smith made bold to suggest:

Every Divinity School might well have in its senior year, along with courses in systematic divinity and homiletics, a course in the great masters of comedy; and, to arouse our sluggish wits and keep us on our guard, it might not be amiss to carve upon our pulpits, side by side with the lean Gothic saints, the figure of Aristophanes or Molière with warning finger.²

The suggestion has not been diligently pursued in our seminaries or other institutions of higher learning. The prevailing attitude, if anything, has inclined in the opposite direction. And the calumny and vehemence that often characterize religious conflicts are continuing testimony to the failure to understand the *religious* importance—indeed, necessity—of the comic vision.

More revealing of traditional religious understandings is the eighteenth-century treatise by Richard Blackmore ironically titled *Satyr Against Wit*. Sir Richard saw unbridled wit and humor as the enemy of true religion, stalwart virtue, and right reason—a form of insanity and a seducer of young people. Later in the preface to his *Creation* he saw a definite link between witticism and atheism. And extending his argument further in a subsequent essay, he concluded that wit

has no place in history, philology, philosophy, or in the greater lyric or epic poems. . . . Lofty and illustrious subjects, such as the foundation, rise and revolution of kingdoms, commotions of state, battles, triumphs, solemn embassies, and various other important actions of princes and heroes, are exalted above the sphere of wit and humor.

It is an ancient and venerable viewpoint with respect to the more serious subjects that affect and concern us deeply. The similar warning of the German philosopher George Friedrich Meier is representative of the misgivings of more than German philosophers:

We are never to jest on or with things which, on account of their importance or weight, claim our utmost seriousness. There are things . . . so great and important in themselves, as never to be thought of and mentioned but with much sedateness and solemnity. Laughter on such occasions is criminal and indecent. . . . For instance, all jests on religion, philosophy, and the like important subjects.³

Yet our failure to entertain the jester “on such occasions” may be one of the primary sources of the “criminal and indecent” behavior that our “utmost seriousness” so often produces.

When Marcel Marceau divides his pantomime performances into a serious, dramatic program followed by a lighthearted comic one, we are moved in the right direction. The comic side of human nature and perception is given expression and celebration. Yet the relationship between the dramatic Marceau and the comic Marceau remains as unclear on stage as it is in human life generally. What does the latter have to say to or do with the former? What is added to the dramatic Marceau by the comic Marceau? Or are we simply to be left in this schizoid condition?

The situation is hardly improved by the fact that, though our educational systems sponsor innumerable courses in the appreciation of art, music, and literature, as well as gardening, cooking, and tennis, little is offered in the way of *comic* appreciation. This remarkable side of our existence as human beings, which actually tempers and qualifies everything else, is left adrift as a light distraction from more important concerns, a playful interlude whose justification is that it may help us let off a little steam now and then or provide a cheap vacation of the mind from which we will return to work more industriously and fight unquestioningly. To the most sober-minded, humor may even be seen as—in Chad Walsh’s phrase—a kind of “wart on the human soul.” Yet the ability to see the humor in things, or to create comic tales and rituals, is among the most profound and imaginative of human achievements. The comic sense is an important part of what it means to be human and humane. Without it we return to brutishness, and the Philistines are upon us.

There are, of course, those ultraserious types who claim not to be opposed to laughter as such but to consider it largely inappropriate—considering, that is, the current state of the union and the universe: This is not the time and place for laughter, only for diligence and vigilance. Playfulness of spirit is a frivolous and irresponsible luxury. There are letters to be written to congressional representatives, picket signs to be carried, committees to be organized, politicians to be badgered, votes to be garnered, opponents to be debated, corporations and administrations to be hounded, enemies to be defeated. There is little room for parades and balloons and anecdotes and idle chatter. With steeled jaw and knitted brow, looking neither to the right nor to the left, such humorless crusaders are unwilling and perhaps no longer able to laugh, as long as “the cause” has not been victorious, injustice prevails, poverty and pollution persist, warfare continues, textbooks are inaccurate, magazines are sexist—in short, as long as there is evil and suffering in the world—which is to say that they are not likely to be free to laugh in the near future.

To all such one must say: Blessed are they that can laugh outside the gates of Paradise and the New Jerusalem, and who there can give and receive the gift of laughter. Blessed are they who are not determined to wait until lions lie down with lambs, and who can pray, “O God, though I do not live in the Garden of Eden I am nevertheless still glad to be here.”

The Breath of Life and Laughter

One of the reasons for a low view of the comic among us is that the Western tradition has no clear religious basis for laughter and humor. Neither of the biblical creation accounts, so influential in shaping Western culture, specifically mentions the creation of laughter and a sense of humor or indicates their place and function in human life. The Yahwist account of Genesis 2 does contain the potential for a comic understanding in the imagery of being created out of the dust of the earth, and of a divine potter making a clay figurine into which is breathed the breath of life, but it remains undeveloped.

In the mythologies of the world, human beings are created out of quite an array of things, for example, clots of blood, pieces of skin, minerals, eggs, stones. The biblical picture represents one of the more

humble types, though perhaps not quite so humble as a myth from the aborigines of South Australia in which humans were created from excrement. The excrement was then molded into human form and tickled, thus causing the image to laugh and come alive.⁴ Still, Adam, taken from the ground (*adamah*), is an earthy fellow; and Eve, taken from his side, has an equally unpretentious origin.

In the Yahwist narrative, Adam comes closest to a manifestation of laughter in his awakening to discover Eve at his side with a surprised delight in the creation of a companion. The logic of the story, in fact, suggests a kind of creation comedy, if one were otherwise disposed to view it in that light. Though Adam was placed in a garden paradise, with all his needs provided, the implication is that it was not a paradise for him because he was lonely. So, as if a divine experiment were set in motion to resolve the difficulty, God created animals. But despite all the jokes from sheep-herding societies to our own about people preferring faithful dogs to nagging spouses, Adam was still lonely. So God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep, and when Adam woke up he found a woman at his side, taken from his rib. Adam rejoiced, "At last, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," or, as *The Living Bible* translates the enthusiasm, Adam on seeing Eve exclaimed, "This is it!" Male and female (*ish* and *ishshah*): the original unity and the original incongruity, and in both respects among the original sources of laughter.

While there is here no specific reference to laughter, it might be imagined as present in several forms, given the circumstances: the laughter of pleasant surprise; the laughter of joy and delight; the laughter of discovery and recognition; the laughter over a tension released and a problem resolved; the laughter of incongruity in Adam's suddenly seeing a reflection of himself in feminine form; the laughter of incredulity; the laughter of amazement and wonder; perhaps a laughter over the happy absurdity of sexual differentiation and sexual identity; and thus a laughter in the context of a newfound tension-in-unity, the relationship of male and female, which has certainly spawned its share of jokes and rib-tickling laughter ever since.

All this is conceivable. Mark Twain, in fact, made a convincing little comedy out of it, *Eve's Diary*. Still, none of these nuances is directly mentioned as such. And when subsequently read and interpreted by a sober piety, and mixed in with great haste for getting on to the subject

of sin and guilt, any potential movement in this direction is lost from the beginning. We are left with not even a preliminary smile.

There is a myth, however, closely paralleling the biblical account, in which laughter is singled out as belonging to the culmination of human creation. Although unrelated, it provides clues as to how the biblical text might be imaginatively reconstructed. This, in summary form, is the myth as told among the Jicarilla Apache:

When Hactcin had created all the animals he stood back and looked at them. And he began to laugh at the sight of so many different kinds of creatures, with their different appearances and habits—which is why, it is said, people today laugh at the behavior of animals.

After the animals had been assigned their places and instructed in their ways, they held a council, and came to Hactcin and said, “We need a companion. You are not going to be with us all the time. We need someone like you to stay with us.” So the animals gathered an assortment of objects and set them before Hactcin: pollen, iron ore, algae, red ochre, white clay, and various gems. Hactcin took the pollen and traced an outline of a figure on the ground, like himself. And inside the outline he placed the various objects, which became bones and flesh, skin, hair, and eyes.

Then the figure came to life. It was a man, lying face downward. The man began to move, and Hactcin told him to sit up. Then he picked the man upright and said to him four times, “Speak.” And the man began to speak. Then he said to him, “Shout.” And the man gave a big yell. Then Hactcin thought a while and said, “Laugh.” And the man laughed. The dog was glad when he saw the man laugh. He jumped up on him, wagging his tail, and ran back and forth happily. Then Hactcin taught the man to walk and run. And when the birds saw what Hactcin had made, they sang and chirped as though it were early morning.

But the animals thought it was not good that man should be by himself. So they went to Hactcin and told him that the man too should have a companion. Hactcin agreed, and asked them to bring him some lice. He took the lice and put them on the man’s head, causing him to itch and scratch. The scratching made him sleepy. And when he fell asleep, he dreamed that a creature like, yet unlike, him was sitting at his side. When he awoke the dream had come true. A young woman was sitting there. The man spoke to her, and to his astonishment she

answered him. Then he began to laugh, and the woman laughed too. Together they laughed and laughed.⁵

It is unfortunate that neither of the creation stories in the Western biblical tradition gives such a fundamental and prominent place to the creation of laughter and a sense of humor. This not only leaves the matter of their function and importance in some doubt, it also opens the way for the suggestion that laughter and humor are of little critical significance or that they are not of the "order of creation." And if they are not of the order of creation, they are certainly not of the "order of redemption," and therefore are the creation of an evil spirit, or the consequence of human sin.

Though these are arguments from silence, they nevertheless represent some of the lines along which laughter and humor have been understood. The theme of divine laughter, which in the Apache myth is an enjoyment of the comical diversity of animal types, has easily been reduced to a taunting of the enemies of God (and Israel), as in Psalm 2: "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord has them in derision." And human laughter, which in the Apache myth becomes one of the highest and most distinctive human characteristics, has easily been dismissed as detrimental to a holy seriousness, as in Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1676): "It is not lawful to use games, sports, plays, nor among other things comedies among Christians, under the notion of recreations, since they do not agree with Christian silence, gravity and sobriety; for laughing, sporting, gaming, mocking, jesting, vain talking, etc., is not Christian liberty, nor harmless mirth."⁶ Much earlier (A.D. 390), Chrysostom had preached the same: "This world is not a theatre, in which we can laugh; and we are not assembled together in order to burst into peals of laughter, but to weep for our sins. . . . It is not God who gives us the chance to play, but the devil."⁷

It is no surprise to find that theologians and moralists, who have had much to say about seriousness and sobriety, have had little good to say about nonsense and laughter; there are many fine words about the responsibility to work, few about the "responsibility" to play. Still it is really as much in play as in work, in laughter as well as seriousness, and especially in the playfulness of humor, that humanity is differentiated from the rest of the animal kingdom. Christian theologians have expended copious efforts on the subject of the "image of God" in

humanity. Yet for all these laborious and occasionally acrimonious deliberations, precious little has been said about laughter and humor as aspects of the *imago dei*, let alone as a dimension of the religious situation before the divine. The impression is given that laughter is the creation of the devil or a fumbling demiurge, or that it is a pale substitute left to Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the more holy joys of paradise. The ancient Greek peripatetics were closer to the true state of affairs when they characterized human beings as the “laughing animals” (*zoion gelastikon*) and saw in the comic sense one of the distinctive badges of humanity (*homo risens*).

Perhaps a part of the historical inclination of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (sharing as they do in the same creation mythology) toward dogmatism, intolerance, and even “holy war” has something to do with the lack of a specific grounding of laughter and humor in the divine nature, human nature, and human relationships. At the least, what is not stressed is not likely to be encouraged or cultivated. And it may expressly be *discouraged*.

Certainly the ultraserious image of Jesus which has prevailed through much of the history of the church would not so easily have suggested or perpetuated itself if laughter and humor had more obvious biblical footing. The image is hardly correct, as Elton Trueblood’s *The Humor of Christ* demonstrates.⁸ It was actually John the Baptist who was the “straight man” in the Gospels, coming “neither eating nor drinking” and “crying in the wilderness.” Jesus, by contrast, began his ministry by turning water into wine at the marriage festivities in Cana and was accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard” and associating with “publicans and sinners.” Though this image is no more correct than the superserious image, it reveals a side of Jesus which the pious imagination has tended to ignore or deny. The absence of any parenthetical notations in the Gospel records as to when Jesus may have smiled or laughed, and in what contexts, has always left the issue open for a one-sided interpretation to fill in the blank. Thus the medieval *Cursor Mundi* concludes: “That thrice he wept we find enough, but never where he laughed.” Yet what does the full humanity of Jesus mean if it does not include the freedom of laughter and humor?

The problem is not unique to Christianity. Buddhist scholastics—not unlike Christian scholastics—had heated debates on the question whether the Buddha ever laughed, for laughter seemed inconsistent with the inner harmony and serenity that the Buddha was believed to

have achieved, or the resolute discipline necessary to achieve it. Certain passages of scripture, however, seemed clearly to indicate that on such and such an occasion the Buddha *had* laughed. A solution to the apparent dilemma was found in a theatrical manual of the fourth century A.D.—even though Buddhist monks were not permitted to attend theatrical performances. The Indian dramatist Bharata had conveniently distinguished between six classes of laughter, as these were to be displayed on the stage, depending upon the caste and type of individual being portrayed. The most refined individuals were to be represented in the most restrained manner: *sita*, a faint smile, or *hasita*, a smile that barely revealed the tips of the teeth. The more average, or middle-caste, person was to be represented by moderate expression: *vihasita*, a broad smile accompanied by a modicum of laughter, and *upahasita*, a broader smile with louder laughter. It was only in representing the uncouth individual and the lowest caste that the actor was to engage in unrestrained laughter: *apahasita*, a laughter that brings tears, and *atihāsita*, a backslapping doubling over in raucous guffawing.⁹

Given this dramatic classification, the religious interpretation easily followed suit. The first two forms of “laughter” approach the spiritual and the sublime. The last two descend into the crassness and vulgarity of the sensual, lowering and degrading the spirit. And, as might be expected, the Buddha was supposed to have indulged only in *sita*, the most subtle and serene form of laughter. It is almost as if to say that the Buddha was only “guilty” of the most minimal and barely perceptible smile.

The Buddhist restrictions on laughter are reminiscent of reports made by certain anthropologists of missionary successes along these lines in Africa. Before the missionaries came the natives were noted for their hearty, full-bodied laughter. But unrestrained laughter seemed “pagan” to the missionaries. After their reeducation in Christian ways, the natives developed a nervous, suppressed, embarrassed laughter known as the “mission giggle.”

Yet if one reinverts scholastic schemas, the unrestrained laughter of the whole person becomes the *highest* level of laughter and expresses the fullest measure of human freedom. The belly laugh is not the dark descent of spirit into flesh, or of sacred into profane, but the free and unitary expression of one’s total being. The repression of laughter, and of the comic spirit, is not salvation but bondage. And its historical consequences are not liberation but inquisition and oppression.

The Priesthood of Comedy

Medieval physiology determined that the seat of laughter was the spleen.¹⁰ This not very intellectually or spiritually promising location may have derived from the abdominal associations of laughter, which seemed to well up and explode in the larynx from some dark, abysmal region. Laughter belonged to the lower levels of our beings, in association with the stomach, intestines, sex organs, and bladder. By identifying laughter with the spleen rather than the brain or heart, let alone spirit, the rational and religious values of a comic sensitivity were easily dismissed.

One of the striking features of the comic tradition, however, is that nothing stands entirely outside its purview. It is not merely tangential to life, or something from the cellar of life, but all-encompassing. No circumstance is so lowly or inconsequential that comedy will not grant it an audience. Nor is any authority so high, or any subject so dear, that comedy has failed to approach it in more than fear and trembling.

So inclusive is the comic vision that one may see in it a kind of mythology, with a symbol system of its own, which it brings to all aspects of our lives, including those persons and things of utmost importance. The great array of comic figures—tricksters, clowns, fools, jesters, humorists, comedians, and the like—are the officiants of this tradition: its heroes and sages, its “prophets, priests, and kings.” They are the caretakers of its myths and symbols, exemplars of its vision, defenders of its faith, and celebrants of its rituals.

Comic performances are often credited with dealing essentially in trifles and irrelevancies. Close examination, however, shows that this is far from the case. And even when it is the case, “trifling irrelevancy” is not the whole point. Nearly all, if not all, the major issues with which human beings have concerned themselves are dealt with in some manner in the comic tradition. All the central religious categories, for example, are there: creation, celebration, mystery, wonder, finitude, pride, humility, justice, iconoclasm, salvation, hope, eschatology, and so on. The “heroes” and “high priests” of comedy also function in ways that are analogous to their dramatic and religious counterparts, and stand in special relationship to them.

True, we do not customarily associate comic figures with religious ones. And comic figures seem more adept at profaning holy things than supporting them. Yet their odd antics and odd words and odd attire

carry a profound symbolism, with a consistent mythic structure and ritual movement. So much is this the case that one may speak not only of the comedy of religion but also of the religion of comedy.

The essays here presented are aimed at a comic appreciation of these comic figures and their meaning, that is, at the enrichment of life through the art of comedy. The goal is not purely an academic one. And the text has not been compacted—in the words of the subtitle to William Derham’s seventeenth-century treatise on *Physico-Theology*—“with large notes and many curious observations.” To offer an extended scholarly disquisition on the comic would be to pile incongruity upon incongruity and run the risk of choking the comic spirit rather than promoting it. There is an inherent falsification of the subject matter in any attempt to write completely without humor about human beings and their concerns—above all when the subject matter is the comic itself. The style, accordingly, is more poetic than didactic, and the tone seeks to preserve some of the lightheartedness that is the object of inquiry.

“Meditations” would perhaps be an accurate description of the essays, if that term may be taken in the philosophical rather than devotional or sermonic sense. A meditation is a form of intellectual and emotional savoring that enables one to both enjoy and digest the meal, not just analyze the recipe ad nauseum. The book, however, is not as such a comic production, any more than a treatise on cooking is necessarily a culinary delight.

Books have been written on one or another aspect of the comic tradition from a variety of perspectives: literature, drama, sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, classics, theology, and even biology. The following essays take a fresh look from the standpoint of comparative mythology and the history of religions. While drawing upon other fields and studies, the orientation is that of the interpretation of myth, ritual, and symbol. And the focus is on the *religious significance* of the various comic forms.

Questions of the *function* of the comic—psychological, sociological, political, biological—will be touched upon, as well as questions of comic structure. But the larger questions have to do with the *meaning* of this side of existence. What are the implications of the comic perspective for those peculiarly human issues of sacred and profane, “truth, beauty, and goodness,” “nature, man, and God”? What does this angle of vision reveal about human existence, or existence as such?

Functionalism and structuralism are not enough. And restricting the discussion to these levels, however sympathetic the treatment, would be reminiscent of that encomium of laughter given by the nineteenth-century Prussian professor Gottlieb Hufeland:

Laughter is one of the most important helps to digestion with which we are acquainted; and the custom in vogue among our ancestors, of exciting it by jesters and buffoons, was founded on true medical principles. Cheerful and joyous companions are invaluable at meals. Obtain such, if possible, for the nourishment received amid mirth and jollity is productive of light and healthy blood.

A glut of comic fare is certainly available for the production of light and healthy blood in contemporary television and radio programming, cinema, theater, magazines, advertisements, commercials, and books of cartoons and jokes. Yet without a profound understanding of this side of our existence and its potential implications, we may not be carried very far by a mass production of comic forms. Getting the point of a joke is not the same as getting the point of joking.

What is needed, furthermore, is not a running commentary on certain popular samples of the day, but a much broader context that will enable us to see better who and where we are. The examples used in the following essays, therefore, cover the whole span of the comic tradition and its principal types, from tribal ritual to circus clowning, from Greek comedy to modern cinema, from the ancient trickster to the animated cartoon. The result is not an extended footnote to some fashion of the decade, but a celebration of a spirit and perspective that belong to the archetypal “eternity” of the race and that need to be rehearsed now and then lest we, as Søren Kierkegaard put it, “succeed in making an advance upon Socrates, without first having understood what Socrates himself understood.”

Among the Kurnai of Australia is a myth in which the waters of the earth had been swallowed by a great frog named Dak. The thirsty animals tried to get Dak to cough up the waters, but their efforts were in vain. Dak greedily remained stubborn and adamant. Finally the snake began twisting and rolling about in a most comical fashion. Dak tried to maintain a straight face with resolute determination, but could not—whereupon Dak burst out laughing, and the waters streamed forth to soak the parched earth.¹¹ The Kurnai myth-makers were