

laughter of a group. It may, perchance, have happened to you, when seated in a railway carriage or at *table d'hôte*, to hear travellers relating to one another stories which must have been comic to them, for they laughed heartily. Had you been one of their company, you would have laughed like them; but, as you were not, you had no desire whatever to do so. 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!' What that man thought of tears would be still more true of laughter. However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group! It is through not understanding the importance of this double fact that the comic has been looked upon as a mere curiosity in which the mind finds amusement, and laughter itself as a strange, isolated phenomenon, without any bearing on the rest of human activity. Hence those definitions which tend to make the comic into an abstract relation between ideas: 'an intellectual contrast,' 'a palpable absurdity,' etc. – definitions which, even were they really suitable to every form of the comic, would not in the least explain why the comic makes us laugh. How, indeed, should it come about that this particular logical relation, as soon as it is perceived, contracts, expands and shakes our limbs, whilst all other relations leave the body unaffected? It is not from this point of view that we shall approach the problem. To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification. [...]

Henri Bergson, *Le rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris, 1900); trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911); reprinted, ed. Per Bregne and Guy Bennett (Copenhagen/Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1999) 7–13.

Sigmund Freud

Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious//1905

Anyone who has at any time had occasion to enquire from the literature of aesthetics and psychology what light can be thrown on the nature of jokes and on the position they occupy will probably have to admit that jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life. Only a small number of thinkers can be named who have entered at all deeply into the problems of jokes. Among those who have discussed jokes, however, are such famous names as those of the novelist Jean Paul (Richter) and of the philosophers Theodor Vischer, Kuno Fischer and Theodor Lipps. But even with these writers the subject of jokes lies in the background, while the main interest of their inquiry is turned to the more comprehensive and attractive problem of the comic.

The first impression one derives from the literature is that it is quite impracticable to deal with jokes otherwise than in connection with the comic.

According to Lipps (*Komik und Humor*, 1898), a joke is 'something comic which is entirely subjective' – that is, something comic 'which we produce, which is attached to action of ours as such, to which we invariably stand in the relation of subject and never of object, not even of voluntary object' (*ibid.*, 80). This is explained further by a remark to the effect that in general we call a joke 'any conscious and successful evocation of what is comic, whether the comic of observation or of situation' (*ibid.*, 78).

Fischer (*Über den Witz*, 1889) illustrates the relation of jokes to the comic with the help of caricature, which in his account he places between them. The comic is concerned with the ugly in one of its manifestations: 'If it [what is ugly] is concealed, it must be uncovered in the light of the comic way of looking at things; if it is noticed only a little or scarcely at all, it must be brought forward and made obvious, so that it lies clear and open to the light of day ... In this way caricature comes about' (*ibid.*, 45). – 'Our whole spiritual world, the intellectual kingdom of our thoughts and ideas, does not unfold before the gaze of external observation, it cannot be directly imagined pictorially and visibly; and yet it too contains its inhibitions, its weaknesses and its deformities – a wealth of ridiculous and comic contrasts. In order to emphasize these and make them accessible to aesthetic consideration, a force is necessary which is able not merely to imagine objects directly but itself to reflect on these images and to clarify them: a force that can illuminate thoughts. The only such force is *judgement*. A joke is a judgement which produces a comic contrast; it has already

played a silent part in caricature, but only in judgement does it attain its peculiar form and the free sphere of its unfolding' (ibid., 40-50).

It will be seen that the characteristic which distinguishes the joke within the class of the comic is attributed by Lipps to action, to the active behaviour of the subject, but by Fischer to its relation to its *object*, which he considers is the concealed ugliness of the world of thoughts. It is impossible to test the validity of these definitions of the joke – indeed, they are scarcely intelligible – unless they are considered in the context from which they have been torn. It would therefore be necessary to work through these authors' accounts of the comic before anything could be learnt from them about jokes. Other passages, however, show us that these same authors are able to describe essential and generally valid characteristics of the joke without any regard to its connection with the comic.

The characterization of jokes which seems best to satisfy Fischer himself is as follows: 'A joke is a *playful judgement*' (ibid., 51). By way of illustration of this, we are given an analogy: 'just as aesthetic freedom lies in the playful contemplation of things' (ibid., 50). Elsewhere (ibid., 20) the aesthetic attitude towards an object is characterized by the condition that we do not ask anything of the object, especially no satisfaction of our serious needs, but content ourselves with the enjoyment of contemplating it. The aesthetic attitude is *playful* in contrast to work. – 'It might be that from aesthetic freedom there might spring too a sort of judging released from its usual rules and regulations, which, on account of its origin, I will call a "playful judgement", and that in this concept is contained the first determinant, if not the whole formula, that will solve our problem. "Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom", wrote Jean Paul (1804) "Joking is merely playing with ideas"' (ibid., 24).

A favourite definition of joking has long been the ability to find similarity between dissimilar things – that is, hidden similarities. Jean Paul has expressed this thought itself in a joking form: 'Joking is the disguised priest who weds every couple.' Vischer carries this further: 'He likes best to wed couples whose union their relatives frown upon.'² Vischer objects, however, that there are jokes where there is no question of comparing – no question, therefore, of finding a similarity. So he, slightly diverging from Jean Paul, defines joking as the ability to bind into a unity, with surprising rapidity, several ideas which are in fact alien to one another both in their internal content and in the nexus to which they belong. Fischer, again, stresses the fact that in a large number of joking judgements *differences* rather than similarities are found, and Lipps points out that these definitions relate to joking as an ability possessed by the joker and not to the jokes which he makes.

Other more or less interrelated ideas which have been brought up as defining

or describing jokes are: 'a contrast of ideas', 'sense in nonsense', 'bewilderment and illumination'.

Definitions such as that of Kraepelin³ lay stress on contrasting ideas. A joke is 'the arbitrary connecting or linking, usually by means of a verbal association, of two ideas which in some way contrast with each other'. A critic like Lipps had no difficulty in showing the total inadequacy of this formula; but he does not himself exclude the factor of contrast, but merely displaces it elsewhere. 'The contrast remains, but it is not some contrast between the ideas attached to the words, but a contrast or contradiction between the meaning and the meaninglessness of the words' (Lipps, *Komik und Humor*, 87). He gives examples to show how this is to be understood. 'A contrast arises only because ... we grant its words a meaning which, again, we nevertheless cannot grant them' (ibid., 90).

If this last point is developed further, the contrast between 'sense and nonsense' becomes significant. 'What at one moment has seemed to us to have a meaning, we now see is completely meaningless. That is what, in this case, constitutes the comic process ... A remark seems to us to be a joke, if we attribute a significance to it that has psychological necessity and, as soon as we have done so, deny it again. Various things can be understood by this 'significance'. We attach *sense* to a remark and know that logically it cannot have any. We discover *truth* in it, which nevertheless, according to the laws of experience or our general habits of thought, we cannot find in it. We grant it logical or practical consequences in excess of its true content, only to deny these consequences as soon as we have clearly recognized the nature of the remark. In every instance, the psychological process which the joking remark provokes in us, and on which the feeling of the comic rests, consists in the immediate transition, from this attaching of sense, from this discovering of truth, and from this granting of consequences, to the consciousness or impression of relative nothingness' (ibid., 85).

However penetrating this discussion may sound, the question may be raised here whether the contrast between what has meaning and what is meaningless, on which the feeling of the *comic* is said to rest, also contributes to defining the concept of the *joke* in so far as it differs from that of the comic.

The factor of 'bewilderment and illumination', too, leads us deep into the problem of the relation of the joke to the comic. Kant⁴ says of the comic in general that it has the remarkable characteristic of being able to deceive us only for a moment. Heymans (1896)⁵ explains how the effect of a joke comes about through bewilderment being succeeded by illumination. He illustrates his meaning by a brilliant joke of Heine's, who makes one of his characters, Hirsch-Hyacinth, the poor lottery-agent, boast that the great Baron Rothschild had treated him quite as his equal – quite 'famillionairely'. Here the word that is the

vehicle of the joke appears at first simply to be a wrongly constructed word, something unintelligible, incomprehensible, puzzling. It accordingly bewilders. The comic effect is produced by the solution of this bewilderment, by understanding the word. Lipps (*Komik und Humor*, 95) adds to this that this first stage of enlightenment – that the bewildering word means this or that – is followed by a second stage, in which we realize that this meaningless word has bewildered us and has then shown us its true meaning. It is only this second illumination, this discovery that a word which is meaningless by normal linguistic usage has been responsible for the whole thing – this resolution of the problem into nothing – it is only this second illumination that produces the comic effect.

Whether the one or the other of these two views seems to us to throw more light on the question, the discussion of bewilderment and enlightenment brings us closer to a particular discovery. For if the comic effect of Heine's 'famillionairely' depends on the solution of the apparently meaningless word, the 'joke' must no doubt be ascribed to the formation of that word and to the characteristics of the word thus formed.

Another peculiarity of jokes, quite unrelated to what we have just been considering, is recognized by all the authorities as essential to them. 'Brevity is the body and the soul of wit, it is its very self,' says Jean Paul⁶ merely modifying what the old chatterbox Polonius says in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act II. Scene 2):

Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness, the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief.

In this connection the account given by Lipps (*Komik und Humor*, 90) of the brevity of jokes is significant: 'A joke says what it has to say, not always in few words, but in *too* few words – that is, in words that are insufficient by strict logic or by common modes of thought and speech. It may even actually say what it has to say by not saying it.'

We have already learnt from the connection of jokes with caricature that they 'must bring forward something that is concealed or hidden' (Fischer, *Über den Witz*, 51). I lay stress on this determinant once more, because it too has more to do with the nature of jokes than with their being part of the comic.

I am well aware that these scanty extracts from the works of writers upon jokes cannot do them justice. In view of the difficulties standing in the way of my giving an unmistakably correct account of such complicated and subtle trains of thought, I cannot spare curious inquirers the labour of obtaining the information

they desire from the original sources. But I am not sure that they will come back fully satisfied. The criteria and characteristics of jokes brought up by these authors and collected above – activity, relation to the content of our thoughts, the characteristic of playful judgement, the coupling of dissimilar things, contrasting ideas, 'sense in nonsense', the succession of bewilderment and enlightenment, the bringing forward of what is hidden, and the peculiar brevity of wit – all this, it is true, seems to us at first sight so very much to the point and so easily confirmed by instances that we cannot be in any danger of underrating such views. But they are *disjecta membra*, which we should like to see combined into an organic whole. When all is said and done, they contribute to our knowledge of jokes no more than would a series of anecdotes to the description of some personality of whom we have a right to ask for a biography. We are entirely without insight into the connection that presumably exists between the separate determinants – what, for instance, the brevity of a joke can have to do with its characteristic of being a playful judgement. We need to be told, further, whether a joke must satisfy *all* these determinants in order to be a proper joke, or need *only* satisfy *some*, and if so which can be replaced by others and which are indispensable. We should also wish to have a grouping and classification of jokes on the basis of the characteristics considered essential. The classification that we find in the literature rests on the one hand on the technical methods employed in them (e.g. punning or play upon words) and on the other hand on the use made of them in speech (e.g. jokes used for the purposes of caricature or of characterization, or joking snubs).

We should thus find no difficulty in indicating the aims of any new attempt to throw light on jokes. To be able to count on success, we should have either to approach the work from new angles or to endeavour to penetrate further by increased attention and deeper interest. We can resolve that we will at least not fail in this last respect. It is striking with what a small number of instances of jokes recognized as such the authorities are satisfied for the purposes of their enquiries, and how each of them takes the same ones over from his predecessors. We must not shirk the duty of analysing the same instances that have already served the classical authorities on jokes. But it is our intention to turn besides to fresh material so as to obtain a broader foundation for our conclusions. It is natural then that we should choose as the subjects of our investigation examples of jokes by which we ourselves have been most struck in the course of our lives and which have made us laugh the most.

Is the subject of jokes worth so much trouble? There can, I think, be no doubt of it. Leaving on one side the personal motives which make me wish to gain an insight into the problems of jokes and which will come to light in the course of these studies, I can appeal to the fact that there is an intimate connection

between all mental happenings – a fact which guarantees that a psychological discovery even in a remote field will be of an unpredictable value in other fields. We may also bear in mind the peculiar and even fascinating charm exercised by jokes in our society. A new joke acts almost like an event of universal interest; it is passed from one person to another like the news of the latest victory. Even men of eminence who have thought it worthwhile to tell the story of their origins, of the cities and countries they have visited, and of the important people with whom they have associated, are not ashamed in their autobiographies to report their having heard some excellent joke.⁷

- 1 Jean Paul Richter, *Vorschule der Ästhetik* [School for Aesthetics] (1804) part II, paragraph 51.
- 2 [Theodor Vischer, *Ästhetik* (Aesthetics) (1846–57) vol. 1, 422.]
- 3 Emil Kraepelin, 'Zur Psychologie des Komischen' [On the Psychology of the Comic], *Philosophische Studien* (1885) 143.
- 4 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [Critique of Judgement] (1790), part I, section 1, 54.
- 5 G. Heymans, 'Ästhetische Untersuchungen in Anschluss an die Lippsche Theorie des Komischen' [Aesthetic Investigations after the Lippsche Theory of the Comic], *Z. Psychol. Physiol. Sinnesorg* (1896).
- 6 Jean Paul Richter, op. cit., part II, paragraph 42.
- 7 Von Falke's *Memoirs*.

Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious' (1905), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. VIII (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1960); reprinted, *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. 6, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 9–15.

Hugo Ball Dada Fragments//1916–17

12 March 1916

Introduce symmetries and rhythms instead of principles. Contradict the existing world orders ...

What we are celebrating is at once a buffoonery and a requiem mass ...

12 June 1916

What we call Dada is a harlequinade made of nothingness in which all higher questions are involved, a gladiator's gesture, a play with shabby debris, an execution of postured morality and plenitude ...

The Dadaist loves the extraordinary, the absurd, even. He knows that life asserts itself in contradictions, and that his age, more than any preceding it, aims at the destruction of all generous impulses. Every kind of mask is therefore welcome to him, every play at hide and seek in which there is an inherent power of deception. The direct and the primitive appear to him in the midst of this huge anti-nature, as being the supernatural itself ...

The bankruptcy of ideas having destroyed the concept of humanity to its very innermost strata, the instincts and hereditary backgrounds are now emerging pathologically. Since no art, politics or religious faith seems adequate to dam this torrent, there remain only the *blague* and the bleeding pose ...

The Dadaist trusts more in the sincerity of events than in the wit of persons. To him persons may be had cheaply, his own person not excepted. He no longer believes in the comprehension of things from *one* point of departure, but is nevertheless convinced of the union of all things, of totality, to such an extent that he suffers from dissonances to the point of self-dissolution ...

The Dadaist fights against the death-throes and death-drunkenness of his time. Averse to every clever reticence, he cultivates the curiosity of one who experiences delight even in the most questionable forms of insubordination. He knows that this world of systems has gone to pieces, and that the age which demanded cash has organized a bargain sale of godless philosophies. Where bad conscience begins for the market-booth owners, mild laughter and mild kindness begin for the Dadaist ...

13 June 1916

The image differentiates us. Through the image we comprehend. Whatever it may be – it is night – we hold the print of it in our hands ...