

Humor and Metaphysical Truth

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Abstract: One of the more provocative claims that emerged from German romanticism was that a certain specific form of comedy—a form best exemplified by the novels of Rabelais and Cervantes and by the comedies of Shakespeare—reveals a paradoxical truth about human life that cannot be fully conveyed in any other manner. This essay offers us a brief and highly selective history of this thesis from its emergence in Jean Paul's *Preschool of Aesthetics* (1804) to its re-conceptualization in the aesthetic theories of George Santayana and Mikhail Bakhtin, along with some reflections on what it would mean to defend the view today.

Keywords: Jean Paul Richter, Santayana, Bakhtin, humor, metaphysics.

When considering the comparative merits of tragedy and comedy, it might be thought that any preference for comedy is unlikely to rest on claims about its greater truth, however that slippery word is to be understood. Surely it is more plausible to think that *King Lear*, say, shows us something true about the world we live in than it is to think this of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; for when Lear's daughters betray him, we feel that this is the sort of thing that happens; and when Bottom is turned into an ass by Oberon, doted on by a goddess and attended by retinue of fairies, we feel that this is the sort of thing that doesn't. And even if the truth we are looking for is not mere imitation of life but truth in a deeper, more philosophical sense, tragedy has always attracted more advocates. Sebastian Gardner has helpfully identified two opposing ways of defending tragedy in such terms: the view that tragedy is morally true because it reveals the world as fundamentally just, as a world in which vice or *hamartia* is necessarily punished, and the view that it is metaphysically true because it reveals something close to the opposite of this: a world-characterization in which morality has no place, in which suffering is completely and totally unredeemable.¹ On both fronts, comedy can seem comparatively unserious: it is morally capricious in handing out its ridicule—famously finding “the virtues of Malvolio as absurd as the vices of Angelo”—and it seems escapist—keeping any meditation on the ubiquity of human suffering firmly out of mind.²

But even despite these obstacles, there have been attempts to argue that comedy is a deep source of metaphysical truth about the nature of human life. The first fully articulated defense of comedy in this vein was perhaps provided by the German romantic writer Johann Paul

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1 See Gardner 2003. I am simplifying this a bit: for Gardner the moral view of tragedy need only claim that there is no fundamental incompatibility between morality and tragedy, it need not assert that tragedy has a fundamentally moral function.

2 The quote is from Frye 1957, p. 167.

Friedrich Richter.³ Although Jean Paul (as he is usually referred to) is not especially well-known today, the influence of his aesthetic writings throughout the nineteenth century was both deep and wide; he was recommended for an honorary doctorate by Hegel, beloved by figures as different in temperament as Heine and Kierkegaard, plagiarized by Coleridge and Carlyle, and praised highly by Schopenhauer and Freud.⁴ In his chief work on aesthetics, the *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (1806), Jean Paul argued that that a certain specific genre of comedy—a form best exemplified by the novels of Rabelais and Cervantes and by the comedies of Shakespeare—reveals a paradoxical insight about human life that cannot be conveyed in any other manner. Borrowing the term from English, he called this genre ‘humor’.⁵ The term ‘humor’ has come to stand-in for the whole sphere of what evokes laughter, but Jean Paul’s claims are anchored in a specific literary form, indeed, in a canon of classic works mostly from the renaissance period.⁶

In the following, I will offer a highly selective history of the view that a certain kind of literature—one typified by the comic works of Rabelais, Cervantes, and Shakespeare—is uniquely capable of revealing some metaphysical truth about human life. After describing Jean Paul’s theory of humor, I will turn to two critics of his theory: the turn of the century Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana and the twentieth century Soviet literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. As we will see, Santayana and Bakhtin adopt certain central features of Jean Paul’s account—particularly the claim that humor reveals a paradoxical truth about human life—but they disagree about the nature of the truth comedy reveals. These disagreements do not stem from purely aesthetic considerations, but from fundamentally different metaphysical convictions about the place of the of the human mind in the natural world. I will conclude by considering what resources there might be for a contemporary resuscitation of the view.

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3 Max Eastman credits the modern age with “discovery and celebration of benign humor as a great and significant kind of wisdom, and art and yet also a philosophy of gracious life. This discovery was authenticated and recorded in literature by the German romantics and by Jean Paul Richter and Hegel and his disciples, but it was not made by them nor by any person who can be identified. It was made by the English language” (Eastman 1921, p. 165). On the ‘Englishness’ of humor, also see G. K. Chesterton’s contribution to the 1928 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Humour,” which distinguishes humor from wit, satire, irony, and other forms of comic amusement in much the same way as the figures I will be treating here (Chesterton 1928).

4 For a more complete account of Jean Paul’s influence on subsequent reflection on humor, see the Introduction to Fleming 2006.

5 Jean Paul is not entirely consistent in his terminology: sometimes he treats satire, irony, humor as modes of the comic, sometimes he treats comedy, alongside satire, as one of the modes of ridiculous literature. I am following the former usage, where humor marks a kind of comic literature.

6 See, e.g., Morreall (1987).

I. Jean Paul Richter

To understand what Jean Paul might have meant by speaking of the truth of humor, it is important to first understand how he conceived of truth in the sphere of poetry more generally. In his most famous book, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams characterizes the romantic period as taking place amidst a general shift from the classical conception of poetry as imitating reality (poetry as the ‘mirror’ of nature) to a more modern conception of art as the expression of powerful emotions which light the world up in a certain distinctive way (poetry as ‘lamp’).⁷ The quickest way into Jean Paul’s theory of aesthetic truth is to recognize that it is motivated by a rejection of *both* these metaphors, mirror and lamp, and a search for a third metaphor to help us understand the relation between art and life.

In the *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, Jean Paul criticizes the idea that poetry should mirror reality on the grounds that mirroring reality is a pointless, impossible, and unpoetic task.⁸ It is pointless because if we have nature, we do need a duplication of it; it is impossible because any reproduction is necessarily selective; and it is unpoetic because to repeat nature without transforming it is a mechanical and unspiritual operation. The mimetic or ‘copybook’ theory of art had been under assault for some time when Jean Paul wrote, and he saw quite clearly what was presently rising to replace it. This was idea that the artwork is simply the expression of the free play of the artist’s own sentiments, a lamp-like projection of the artist’s own passions. But Jean Paul is just as opposed to any purely subjectivist conception of the artist task, thinking that this entails a kind of sterile egoism or poetic nihilism, one that substitutes an unpoetic reproduction of nature for a fluttering away into an “impotent and formless void.”⁹

Jean Paul’s ambition is to find a way to accept that the romantic insight that experience of beauty is in some important respects subjective, a matter of the way the individual mind or spirit perceives the world, but without relinquishing the more classical conviction that art must reveal the objective truth of reality. To do this, he must see the poetic transformation the real world into the beautiful world not as an extraneous injection of subjective passions into a reality that could be more accurately described in prose, but as somehow completing the real world, allowing it to come to full fruition.

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7 Abrams 1953.

8 Richter 1990. The first edition was published in 1804 and the second in 1813. All the following references are to the English translation of the second edition: Richter 1973.

9 Hegel would later criticize Jean Paul’s humorous novels on just these grounds, saying they present us with a “disorderly jumbling of topics related only in his own subjective imagination,” but he claims Jean Paul’s model, Laurence Stern, is free of these defects, and is capable of what he calls “true” or “objective” humor (Hegel 1998, pp. 601-2). For an excellent recent treatment Hegel’s theory of humor, see Lydia Moland 2018.

The metaphors that Jean Paul chooses to express this relation are, unsurprisingly given the times, organic ones. He says art is to reality as the bloom is to the flower, or that the second world of poetry stands to the first world of nature in the same relation that an English garden stands to its natural surroundings (25). This suggests that the message or truth that art conveys is not a reproduction of what we know already, what is already available in first nature, but a truth that can only come to us “on poetic wings.” In a vivid expression of this point, Jean Paul characterizes art’s relation to nature as a “copy that contains more than the original” (22, 24). Just as the full potentiality of the flower is only manifest in its blooming, the deepest truths of life are only expressible in poetry.

What, then, is the truth of life such that it might only become completely manifest to us in and through poetry? Jean Paul interprets his own metaphor in the following way: he says what the poet adds to reality when he reproduces it in his poetry is “the infinity of the idea”; this enables poetry to show limited or finite nature disappearing into such infinity “as if on an ascent to heaven.” Max Eastman once said that Jean Paul’s “metaphysical grandiloquizing upon the terms sublime and ridiculous, infinitely little and infinitely great, is fruitless of true meaning, and that I suppose was the essence of its value.”¹⁰ But although there is some obscurity in his terminology, we can take a first step towards understanding what Jean Paul means by this by noting that he is quite explicitly and self-consciously attempting to secularize a traditional Christian view of reality. When St. Paul wrote that the created world reveals or makes visible the otherwise invisible reality of God, he suggested that to see only the created world in the created world would be to subject to a kind of illusion, it would be to fail to see all that the created reveals about its own unseen dependence on God. This is not a failure to see, say, a tree as a tree, but a failure to see a tree as what it truly is ontologically speaking, that is, as *ens creatum*.

Jean Paul’s secularized parallel for this the idea that in ordinary experience, we are able to see, feel, and touch only limited objects; “[t]he understanding and the object-world,” as he puts it, “know only finitude” (88). To think these individual, finite things are all there is, is what he calls, borrowing from this religious view, the atheism of the infinite. But in the experience of the world which is afforded by poetry--particularly, *romantic* poetry--all the finite things in the world, including human actions, are placed in a broader, cosmic context (he calls this context “the infinity of the idea”), a context that is supposed to reveal their true or deepest significance in the something like the sense in which the created world only reveals its deepest meaning when seen as created by God, as ultimately dependent on his will.

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¹⁰ Eastman 1921, p. 169.

Jean Paul claims that serious and comic poetry accomplish this task in different ways. In romantic tragedy, which he only briefly discusses, the actions and suffering of an individual are placed within the “wild gigantic mill of the universe,” and this placement allows the audience with an insight into the total significance of that suffering (67). According to Jean Paul, the insight this affords the audience is strictly unavailable to the actual sufferer because the sufferer himself “deafened by the storm of emotion”—it is *only* available to the person regards this suffering from the aesthetic standpoint, seeing the figure against the background. The audience of *King Lear* is thus in a better position to understand the significance of what Lear has gone through than Lear is himself, and this is so because of something Shakespeare has *added* to the experience of suffering by depicting it; his way of framing the events of Lear’s life transforms them in a way that allows us to view them not as particular finite events but as a hieroglyph of human destiny.

Jean Paul acknowledges that comic poetry, as opposed to the more serious forms like tragedy or epic, might initially seem to be poorly equipped to afford us any deep insight into the place of humanity in the grand scheme of things, and this for the obvious reason that it often deals with seeming trivialities. But the most influential claim in the *Vorschule* is that there is species of comic poetry, termed ‘humor,’ that is fully worthy of comparison with ‘serious’ romantic poetry, but which is distinct from serious poetry because locates infinity not *in the world* but *in us*. He thinks the greatest exemplars of this genre are modern—they are the peerless comedies of Shakespeare, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, and the two famous novels of Rabelais (*Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*)—but he concedes that we can also see flashes of this sort of humor already in Aristophanes.

Jean Paul identifies four components of humor: totality, annihilation of the finite, subjectivity, and sensuousness. For the sake of this discussion, it is the first of these that is most important (though I will allude to the other three). According to Jean Paul, comic poetry expresses totality when it “annihilates not the individual but the finite through its contrast with the idea.” He paraphrases this by saying that humor “recognizes no individual foolishness, no fools, but only folly and a mad world.” This is his way of marking a common distinction between satire and humor proper. The “common satirist” finds some ridiculous thing or person and makes a few jokes at its expense in the name of some standard of common sense or normalcy that the critic accepts. Such a critic is superior to his target. In Jean Paul’s terminology, this is to merely contrast the finite (the target) to the finite (the standard), something does not allow for “infinity” to emerge. But in true humor, the apparent target takes on a more general allegorical significance.

Jean Paul illustrates this distinction by invoking a romantic commonplace about *Don Quixote*, which is that although Cervantes

appears to have set out to write a satire of chivalric romance or peasant, “his genius was too great for a lengthy joke about accidental derangement and a common stupidity”—so he ended up drawing a “humorous parallel between realism and idealism, between body and soul, in the face of the infinite equation; and his twin stars of folly [Don Quixote and Sancho Panza] hover above the entire human race” (89).¹¹ The key thing to notice here is when comic poetry makes the transition from satire to humor, the defects of its target can no longer be viewed as accidental defects, as idiosyncratic follies or vices, instead they stand in for universal and necessary features of human life. From the point of view of infinity, great and small, good and evil, are equally nothing. So understood, the ridicule in question applies to the critic just as surely as his target, and this makes possible a kind of generosity in humor, a willingness in the audience to fully identify with the target of the ridicule rather than pretending to stand above him.

It is just this feature of humor, the thing that distinguishes it from common satire, that gives rise to what, from the point of view of ordinary experience, seems impossible or sheer madness (94). On the one hand, the humorist is fully identified with, or included within the target—this must be so since whatever is being ridiculed in the target is supposedly a *necessary* feature of human nature not an *accidental* vice or stupidity. And yet at the very same time, the action of the comedy allows the humorist to see his own finitude as finite, as ridiculous, and thus to experience a kind of subjective infinity, an ability to outstrip, though comic consciousness, all of the limitations of human life by seeing them as such. The humorist, Jean Paul says, places himself in the breach between these two poles—he is both the fool himself and yet wise enough to see his own folly. By doing so, comedy offers a form of reconciliation with life.

So we are now in a position to see what it might mean to suggest that comedy is capable of expressing a truth that cannot be expressed in ordinary life, or to say that it is a copy that contains more than the original. It is to attribute to humor the capacity of offering us a seemingly impossible or paradoxical form of self-knowledge: one that is simultaneously inside human life, subject to its constitutive folly, and yet outside of human life, capable of seeing such folly as folly. This form of self-knowledge seems impossible for the same reason self-deception has seems impossible. To deceive myself I must both know the truth that I am hiding from myself and yet somehow convince myself, or some part

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11 This characteristically romantic way of reading Quixote as a broad allegory rather than as a satire of chivalry has been searchingly criticized, though on different grounds, in by Anthony Close in Close 1978 who accuses it of being completely anachronistic, and by Vladimir Nabokov in Nabokov 1983 who accuses it of involving genteel evasion of the cruelties and vulgarities that can be found in the actual narrative.

of myself, that it is not true. Similarly, in humor, I must both be subject to a folly qua human being, and yet somehow come to see through it as a god might, seeing it, as Jean Paul puts it, from the perspective of the infinite. In such laughter, the scorn or derision of satire are entirely transmuted; I both fully recognize the intrinsic limitations and finitude of human life and yet by doing so I temporarily adopt an infinite standpoint which has transcended these limitations. Humor thus points to the possible achievement of an absolute standpoint on human life, one that cannot be reached through any other means.

II. George Santayana

Although Jean Paul's reflections on the case of humor were genuinely original and path-breaking, his general attempt to exalt art by showing that it was uniquely capable of revealing a deep metaphysical truth about the world was, of course, characteristic of the romantic period. When Keats famously wrote that "beauty is truth and truth beauty," he was expressing in poetry an idea that had already been batted around in the prose of various literary critics and idealist philosophers for at least fifty years. But by the last third of the nineteenth century, the excesses of the romantic metaphysics needed to justify such claims had provoked various strong reactions from thinkers with more naturalistic metaphysical convictions. An early and quite powerful example of this can be found in Nietzsche's 1878 indictment of the romantic conception of art in the fourth section of *Human, All Too Human*: "From the Souls of Artists and Writers."¹² But the most interesting reaction for the purposes of an inquiry into humor was perhaps the first book by the Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana: *The Sense of Beauty* (1896).¹³

William James famously described Santayana's way of approaching poetry and religion as the "perfection of rottenness."¹⁴ This remark, which was not intended to be as unfriendly as it perhaps sounds, directs us to a striking combination of qualities that is present in Santayana's thought. On the one hand, Santayana has an exquisite sensitivity to the appeal of the ideal, whether poetic or religious, one deeply informed by the romantic metaphysics of the great German period. But he couples this, on the other hand, with an inflexible commitment to a kind of naturalism or materialism according to which all these ideals are just human projections, forms of wish-fulfillment with no real anchor in reality, that is to say, with no independent embodiment or causal efficacy. So although Santayana thought religion was one

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¹² Nietzsche 1989, pp. 103-37.

¹³ Santayana 1955.

¹⁴ James 1920, p. 122.

of the most valuable expressions of human spirit, he also took it to be profoundly and deeply self-deceived about being more than this. His praise of poetry has the same somewhat patronizing quality; he attempts to do justice to the highest experiences poetry affords, like the romantic intuition that it affords us a deep insight into the truth of reality, but on the basis of a naturalistic psychology that shows us exactly how the illusion of such significance is generated.

In *The Sense of Beauty*, Santayana argues that one of the chief confusions of nineteenth century aesthetics was a failure to analytically separate the value of art from the value of the content that great art sometimes express. This confusion gave rise to a belief that beauty itself necessarily held some deep mystical meaning for human life, that it contained a hidden truth that could not be articulated or expressed in any other way than through art. We already have seen one version of this in Jean Paul, but it was ubiquitous in the period, especially in post-Kantian German philosophy.¹⁵ For Santayana this amounted to a mystification of aesthetic experience, a failure to see the need to account for the effects of such literature in terms of what Santayana characterized as “naturalistic psychology”. He described his own work as an attempt to explain the complex and overwhelming experiences of great art that were at the heart of the romantic view, particularly the experience of the tragic sublime, but in terms of principles acknowledged to hold in simpler judgments of beauty outside of the fine arts (v).

It is important to note, though, that Santayana’s criticism of romantic aesthetics does not depend on any crude misunderstanding of what they meant by poetic truth. He recognizes that the romantics clearly distinguish between a more common notion of truth—as correctness of representations—and a deeper notion which is more crucial to poetry but more difficult, if not impossible to define. But he thinks romantic thinkers have only reached for this unspeakable truth because they have paid insufficient attention to the psychological mechanisms by which the effects in poetry that they are so impressed with are actually achieved.

In tragedy, for example, the artist can take a depiction of intense and unmitigated suffering (Santayana’s example is *Othello*) and transform it into an experience of sublime peace, turning it into a spectacle that we can contemplate with ‘sacred joy’ (126). He fully concedes that this is one of the great glories of tragedy and perhaps its most extraordinary aesthetic achievement. The romantic theorist, however, refuses to be content with the psychological experience art affords us, he feels a need to impute a metaphysical truth to tragedy that would justify this feeling of reconciliation with life: for example, a revelation that evils of life are an inseparable component of the

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¹⁵ For a more general account of this tradition, see Gardner 2002.

transcendent glory of the whole or an insight into our ultimate unity with whatever is eternal and divine in us. But for Santayana, the paradox of tragedy is a purely psychological one—how can the artist enable us to simultaneously identify with the protagonist and yet derive a pleasure or even joy from his suffering, a pleasure without which the tragedy itself would be an aesthetic failure—this is a paradox of feeling that the romantic theorist mistakes for a mystical truth of reality that we only get glimpses of through art.

Santayana sees an analogous paradox also arising in the sphere of the comic. Like Jean Paul, he marks a clear distinction between two species of comedy: satire and humor. Satire depends on what Henri Bergson famously described as an ‘anesthesia of the heart,’ for the pleasures of satirical ridicule depend on a lack of sympathy with their target. This suggests that it is a general law of satire that the more sympathy we have with the target, the less a depiction of their folly or error is capable of amusing us; and vice versa. But in the case of humor this general law somehow fails to hold. Humor combines, Santayana says, amicable humanity with amusing weakness; it provides us with cases where the comic aspect of person endears us to the person rather than estranging us from him. This is the paradox of humor, which he thinks of as an important parallel to the paradox of tragedy.

The example that Santayana provides of such humor is an example we have already seen: Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Of Cervantes’ classic, he says:

Don Quixote is mad; he is old, useless, and ridiculous, but he is the soul of honour, and in all his laughable adventures we follow him like the ghost of our better selves. We enjoy his discomfitures too much to wish he had been a perfect Amadis; and we have besides a shrewd suspicion that he is the only kind of Amadis there can ever be in this world (*The Sense of Beauty*, p. 156).

The paradox that Santayana finds here is comprised of a combination of two seeming antithetical reactions—an admiration of Don Quixote based on a deep sympathy for his goodness, nobility, and humanity coupled with a clear perception of the absurdity of his self-conception. If we pay attention to the ridiculous aspect of the hero too much, then we will be prone to read the book as a satire: either a satire of romantic chivalry or of all faith and human idealism. But if we exclusively attend to the admiration and sympathy that he provokes in us, then the humor of the book dissolves into pathos—we are more saddened than amused by his misadventures. For something to work as humor, the tension between these opposing reactions must be fully maintained. For Santayana, Don Quixote’s greatness as a novel is due in no small part to Cervantes’ achievement of this seemingly impossible task.

In a certain sense, Santayana thinks the paradox of humor should be approached in the same way as the paradox of tragedy, not as an inscrutable metaphysical problem but as a tractable psychological one. He says we should resist the temptation to think, as the romantics did, that there is some deep truth or remote significance in Don Quixote.¹⁶ Instead, if we want to understand the effect that the work has on us, we should pay attention to the way Cervantes counterbalances the negative or painful aspects of his story with other aesthetic effects, like the vivacity of spectacle and the luxury of imaginative sympathy. These specifically literary techniques are what enable the complex and unstable balance between sympathy and ridicule to be maintained, not any dark insight into the infinite.

But there is also a sense, clearly detectable in the passage above, in which Santayana retains the claim that humor can reveal a metaphysical truth to us, a truth that enables us to achieve a more just and philosophical attitude towards the ideals of human life. For what does it mean to have a “shrewd suspicion” that Don Quixote represents “the *only kind* of Amadis there can ever be in the world” (my italics)? It means to have suspicion that in every sphere of human interest—from morality, to art, to religion—we are under the perpetual temptation to mistake our moral and spiritual ideals as realities in the world rather than as mere projections of our needs; but it is to feel or know this without any loss of sympathy with those all too human ideals, without relinquishing the claim that it is precisely these ideals are the best things in us, “the ghost of our better selves”. In genuine humor, we are freed from the constitutive illusions generated by human moral and religious ideals but without having to give up those ideals as ideals. Indeed, Santayana characterizes his own philosophic attitude in terms of characters drawn from Cervantes’s novel; he says it is as an attempt to reconcile the gross and earthy realism of Sancho Panza, with the mad idealism of his master: “recognizing facts as facts and ideals as ideals.”¹⁷ Santayana has not really rejected a metaphysical reading of humor in favor of a psychological one; he has just offered an interpretation of humor grounded in a different, more naturalistic metaphysics.

What difference does this make? The issue is complex, but let me offer a quick sketch of where Santayana and Jean Paul overlap and where they diverge. They both see in humor a paradoxical juxtaposition of two perspectives on human life: an inner perspective which allows us to identify with and admire the target, and an external one which decisively contextualizes or undercuts something about the internal perspective. Their metaphysical presuppositions, however, lead them

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¹⁶ For Santayana’s own account of how Don Quixote came to be interpreted in so many ways, see Santayana 1956, pp. 112-9.

¹⁷ Santayana 1969, p. vii.

to characterize the significance of this double-perspective in radically different ways.

For Jean Paul, as we have seen, the great works of comic literature enable us to take a kind of God's eye point of view on human life, the point of view of infinity. They show us how to rise up to an absolute standpoint, a form of subjectivity in which we are able to joyously experience the ridicule and annihilation of all of our finite concerns. What is affirmed in this case, is our capacity to accept the inevitable destruction of all of our finite aims because we identify with the absolute. Santayana is deeply unsympathetic to the sort of romantic idealism central to Jean Paul's view. In an essay on Dickens, who he considered the consummate comedian, Santayana derisively characterizes the romantic viewpoint as one that "swallowed the universe whole, supposing that there was a universal spirit in things identical with the absolute spirit that observed them."¹⁸ For Santayana, the glory of great comic literature was precisely its naturalism, its unflinching acceptance of the human scale, of the finitude and insignificance of human life when viewed from outside itself. Great works of comedy do not exalt us to a higher standpoint on life, they allow us to acknowledge the true relation of spirit to existence which is that, in his words:

[T]his earth has no spirit of its own, but brings forth spirits only at certain points, in the hearts and brains of frail living creatures, who like insects flit through it, buzzing and gathering what sweets they can; and it is the spaces they traverse in this career, charged with their own moral burden, that they can report on or describe, not things rolling on to infinity in their vain tides (*Soliloquies in England*, 64).

For Santayana, comedy offers us not the bliss of joining the infinite, but a peace in acknowledging our sheer finitude, in affirming our human needs and desires and ideals while fully accepting that they have no special significance from the point of view of the universe. Outside the human perspective is not the divine idea, but just "the earth"—nature conceived as entirely indifferent to our projects and ends.

III. Mikhail Bakhtin

The third and final figure I want to bring into this discussion is the great Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. The most important work of his on comedy is *Rabelais and His World*.¹⁹ This book,

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18 Santayana 1922, p. 64. Santayana's specific target in this passage is Walt Whitman.

19 Bakhtin 1965. All subsequent Bakhtin references are to this book.

which was mostly written in the 1930s but only published in the 1960s, takes as its point of departure a seemingly insignificant problem in the reception history of the great comic novels of Francois Rabelais, which is that the capacity to understand and appreciate Rabelaisian humor seemed decrease quite precipitously in the centuries after Rabelais wrote. Bakhtin's thesis is that after the sixteenth century, it became increasingly difficult for readers to fully understand and appreciate Rabelais because his works drew on an understanding of significance or power of laughter that was deeply tied to the popular culture of the medieval period, particularly the folk carnival tradition. In making his case for this, Bakhtin sketches a remarkable history of laughter: one that starts in the middle ages, reaches a kind of summit in the great comic works of the Renaissance (most notably, the novels of Rabelais and Cervantes and the comedies of Shakespeare), and then enters a period of relative decline, as manifest by a correspondingly reduced conception of laughter.

Central to his argument, then, is a contrast between laughter at its apogee—the festive or carnival laughter that achieves its fullest realization in Renaissance literature—and a lesser, degenerate kind of laughter that followed it, and that informed post-Renaissance readings of Renaissance literature. According to the higher, truer conception of laughter:

Laughter has a deep philosophic meaning, it is one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint (*Rabelais and His World*, 66).

It is this conception of laughter as an “essential form of truth,” one that is equal or perhaps even superior other more serious forms like tragedy, that made the great achievements of renaissance comic literature possible. For if there is a comic aspect of the world, an aspect “accessible only to laughter,” then laughter is not only admissible to great literature, it is indispensable to understanding our place in the world. This rather exalted conception of laughter's power is contrasted with a lower form that he calls “reduced laughter,” of which parody, satire, and irony are examples. In these latter forms, laughter's disclosive power is *reduced* because laughter is no longer itself regarded an essential mode or form of truth, it is seen either as a meaningless amusement, or as serving some other more serious end which is not itself subject to ridicule, or as entirely and one-sidedly negative.

Bakhtin's claims writers like Rabelais and Cervantes were able to create great works of comic literature because they were able to draw on a rich and popular conception of laughter, a conception which had

developed throughout the carnival festivities and comic spectacles medieval period. The problem is that when this carnival tradition died out in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so did this conception. Those who continued to read the masterpieces of comic literature during this later period were forced to draw on comparatively impoverished conceptions of laughter in attempting to understand these works, conceptions which were not able to do justice to them. *Gargantua and Pantagruel* began to be read as a mere satire of ecclesial excesses; *Don Quixote* as a mere parody of chivalry; *Midsummer Night's Dream* as a fanciful fairy tale; and so forth. Although the reputations of Cervantes and Shakespeare were able to survive these misreadings better than Rabelais, in all three cases the deeper philosophic significance of these works was largely lost to view.

There was, of course, a revival of interest in all three of these figures in the romantic period—indeed, as we have already seen, Jean Paul's writings give evidence of this.²⁰ But from Bakhtin's point of view, the romantic retrieval of these figures was only a partial success. His criticisms of romantic theories of irony are thus a useful place to get clear on exactly where Bakhtin's own account overlaps with these earlier attempts to vindicate the intellectual and philosophic value of humor, and where he goes beyond them, striking out into new territory.

Bakhtin identifies three primary characteristics of true laughter, laughter in its unreduced form. I am re-arranging the order in which he introduces them to proceed from commitments that he shares with the romantics (like Jean Paul). The first concerns the question of the scope of the laughter—what exactly is being laughed at? Like Jean Paul and Santayana, Bakhtin insists that the target of carnival laughter is never just a particular individual, event, or institution—the target is always also universal or, in his terms, “world-involving.” If the satirist places himself above his target, who has defects or limitations the satirist himself is free of, the genuine humorist includes himself and everything else within the scope of his mockery. It is this feature of laughter that generates philosophic interest, since it means that even something that would appear to be personal invective, historical parody, or political satire, must also be understood as carrying a global or universal significance, as bringing out limitations not just of some particular individual but of the world itself. His provisional characterization of what is conveyed by this dizzying vision is “gay relativity,” a refusal to see anything in the world, including our convictions or beliefs, as absolute, immutable, or beyond laughter.

The second characteristic concerns the nature of the attitude expressed by this laughter. Bakhtin claims “this laughter is ambivalent:

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20 The other Romantic figures Bakhtin mentions in this context are the Schlegels, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Victor Hugo, and Théophile Gautier.

it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, buries and revives” (11-12). Again, this has a clear echo in the two accounts we have already considered. We saw that Jean Paul insists on a kind of *impossibility* involved in being both the target of ridicule and yet aware of it and that Santayana characterizes humor as involving a *paradoxical* double-vision. Bakhtin’s notion of the fundamental *ambivalence* of laughter or folk humor is clearly in the same family of views. Indeed, he himself characterizes such ambivalence as closely akin to logical paradox.

But on closer inspection, some differences also emerge. For Bakhtin, the ambivalence he is concerned with is analyzed in terms the simultaneous presence of negative pole and positive or affirmative pole. His key example of this is the grotesque realism present in Rabelais two novels, the use of exaggerated images of the bodily functions—eating, urinating, defecating, copulating—which simultaneously serve to undercut a sterile spiritual pretense to transcend the body (this is the negative function), but also serve to emphasize our connection to the regenerating power of the earth (the affirmative function). From this point of view, the romantic version of the paradox of humor is excessively one-sided and negative, for it undercuts every finite object or aspiration, but without any sense of the potential for a renewal of the world through this destruction. Bakhtin complains that: “The positive aspect of the grotesque [or laughter]...is conceived by Jean Paul (as it is by Schlegel) as outside the laughter principle, as an escape from all that is finite and destroyed by humor, as a transfer to the spiritual sphere” (42). This is similar in tone, of course, to the complaint that Santayana makes, which is the romantic conception of humor is excessively spiritualistic, insufficiently sensitive to the radical naturalism of great comic literature, its attempt to return us to an affirmation of the earth, the body, the human scale. But he is adding a temporal element, a reference to natural cycles or seasons of death and rebirth.

The third feature of carnival laughter that Bakhtin identifies is perhaps the most important—it is certainly most characteristic of his own thinking, clearly setting his account apart from both that of Jean Paul and Santayana. This concerns the question of *who* is laughing. On this point, Bakhtin emphasizes that we are talking about *festive* laughter, festive in the sense that is not “an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic event’” but a laughter “of all the people” (11). In carnival laughter, it is not only the case that I see myself as included in the scope of laughter (the universal element), I also see myself as alongside others who also see this, who see it together with me (the social element). For Bakhtin, this marks a clear contrast with romantic conceptions of laughter or the grotesque:

“Unlike the medieval or Renaissance grotesque, which was directly

related to the folk culture and thus belonged to all the people, the Romantic genre acquired a private 'chamber' character. It became as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy" (*Rabelais and His World*, 37).

What Bakhtin sees in Jean Paul (whom he sees as characteristic of romanticism) is a privatized version of carnival laughter. For Jean Paul, laughter effects a subjective and individual liberation from finitude, a realization of his own personal destiny in rising to absolute; although this is a transcendence of individuality in a certain sense, of the subject-object divide, it is one we achieve on our own. It is clear that this is also true of Santayana's more naturalistic conception of the comic, which also has a kind of elitist or individual character. Although the individual reader is included in the scope of laughter, the view is for him alone; it is not a shared, communal achievement.

For Bakhtin, the most damaging consequence of this subjectivization of laughter is that it obscures the utopian element of humor. Both the romantic and the renaissance conception of laughter refer us to "the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life" (48). But for the romantics, this different world was one that was only present for "abstract thought and inner experience"; whereas previously it was one that could only be fully realized in and through a transformation of social consciousness (92). The contrast here is between utopia as in individual solitary achievement of unity with the absolute, or the infinite striving for such unity, and utopia as experience of the formation of a new society. Indeed, once one is looking for it, it is easy to see that this emphasis on social reconciliation is a major theme in renaissance comedy itself, as later critics like Northrup Frye have rightly emphasized.

Bakhtin's own "social" conception of the utopian element of humor, however, admits of an important ambiguity. Sometimes, as in the final pages of his work, the utopian element of laughter involves a reference to a distant future, and to the mere possibility of realizing a form of human community that would no longer have the limitations and defects of the existing world, even the defects of the most progressive tendencies of the existing world (see, 453-4). Attention to these passages have led to more Marxist or post-Marxist readings which view carnival laughter as itself a nascent form of political resistance. Reacting to this reading, several authors have criticized Bakhtin for overstating the revolutionary character of carnival laughter: they have pointed out that far from being revolutionary, carnival laughter was often licensed by the existing ecclesiastical and political powers because it functioned in a very conservative way, releasing or blowing-off transgressive energies in

order sustain the dominant system and reinforce dominant values.²¹

But in the introduction and first chapter of the work on Rabelais, which appear to have been written much later than the body, we are given another way to understand the utopian element of humor, one that is not subject to this criticism. In these earlier passages, Bakhtin is emphatic that laughter places the *entirety* of the world into question, including all history, all societies, all ideologies (84). This indicates that there is no conceivable political regime no matter how fully reformed, or how far into the future, that would be free of the defects and limitations laughter brings to light. The utopia that laughter points us to, although it is social, is not a utopia that could be achieved outside of laughter, independently of it—it is not a political condition, but one that we enter into only through the collective experience of laughter. It is not elsewhere, or in the future, but here and now. Indeed, it is only this second conception of utopia—as a non-political ideal community effectuated by shared laughter—that is consistent with Bakhtin’s claims that the truth of laughter is intrinsic to it and cannot be transformed into seriousness without being destroyed (94).

IV. The Paradox of Humor

I have spent some time on the differences between Jean Paul, Santayana, and Bakhtin, differences rooted (or so I tried to show) in their competing metaphysical views, particularly concerning of the place of human values within the world. There is no point, I think, in trying to rebut the accusation that these figures were to some degree or other projecting their ultimate philosophical views onto the object under consideration. That they are able to find so much in humor is at least partly due to the basic metaphysical framework with which they are approaching it. This equips them to see a philosophical potential in humorous literature that might otherwise be overlooked. But it does raise the question of whether something like this view is still available to us today, with our own presumably distinct metaphysical or perhaps even anti-metaphysical presuppositions.

In addressing this topic, it is useful to attempt to restate the fundamental thought that they all share, despite their different

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21 See the discussion of this issue in Stallybrass & White, 1986. What makes this criticism of Bakhtin peculiar is that Bakhtin himself emphasizes that carnival laughter was a “temporary” and “ephemeral” release from official life which was “legalized” by the ecclesiastical and political authorities precisely because the “relaxation” it afforded enabled us to return to our ordinary political and religious obligations with “greater zeal” (see Bakhtin 1965, pp. 75-76, pp. 89-91). Whatever Bakhtin might have meant by the “utopian element” in carnival laughter must be fully consistent with these explicitly non-revolutionary or even conservative features, since they are in no way peripheral to his account. The emphasis on these features of carnival is also present in Jean Paul, who emphasizes that carnival flourished most precisely in “the most devout times,” times when there was no risk that carnival humor would be misunderstood as satire (Richter 1973, 82 fn.).

philosophical starting points. The thought is that human reality is most truly comprehended when it is seen as requiring the simultaneous occupation of two strictly incompatible standpoints. The first may be understood as a more internal standpoint in which we find ourselves ineluctably committed to taking our own religious, moral, and political values as entirely serious, as what is highest and most important to our lives. The second is a more external standpoint according to which there is something essentially parochial or absurd or pretentiously self-deceived about taking these values so seriously (the differences among our protagonists being mostly about the nature of this external standpoint). The central paradox, or so the argument goes, is that while both of these are necessary, they cannot be occupied at the same time or assembled into a single unbroken vision of reality.

Once it is put this way, it is clear that something like thought continues to be alive in contemporary philosophy, though it can take very different forms. In Anglo-American philosophy, the best-known defender a view like this is perhaps Thomas Nagel. For Nagel, the problem that faces every rational being, and that is the source of so much philosophical perplexity, is “how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included.”²² But Nagel thinks these two perspectives are both inescapable yet incompatible. He characterizes the feeling of the absurdity of life as stemming from a recognition that we cannot live human lives without taking some things more seriously than others and yet we always have open to us a point of view outside of what we take serious, and from which “seriousness seems gratuitous.”²³ A structurally similar view, though one that draws on very different philosophical resources, is defended by Slavoj Žižek. For Žižek there is an irreducible gap between the transcendental horizon in which reality appears to us, and reality in the naïve, objective sense (the world as if we were not there).²⁴ Žižek’s notion of the “parallax view” is an attempt to articulate what it would be like to somehow see from both of these standpoints at the same time, and despite their strict incompatibility.²⁵

Why might we think humor is uniquely or especially capable of expressing a paradoxical truth of this form--or at least allowing it to

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22 Nagel 1986, p. 3.

23 Nagel 1971, pp. 716-727.

24 For this formulation of the issue, see Žižek 2021.

25 Like Nagel, Žižek thinks the same problem recurs many forms. In Žižek 2006, he argues that there are three main modes of parallax: philosophical, scientific, and political (p. 10). Žižek adopts the notion of parallax from the work of Kojin Karatani. See Coker 2018 for more on the similarities between Jean Paul, on the one hand, and Žižek and Karatani, on the other.

be glimpsed or briefly inhabited or entertained? The claim is deeply implausible if extended to all comic phenomena and everything we might call humorous literature, but it is less dismissible if we focus on those accepted masterpieces which (arguably) manage to bring us to the point of sensing that even our own highest moral and spiritual aspirations, even the whole human point of view, is strangely insubstantial: gratuitous in Nagel's sense. This is, I think, the benefit of rooting our analysis of humor in the achievements of a specific tradition of literary exemplars—a tradition including Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Sterne—rather than in a more general psychological phenomenon of laughter as such. And we can get a handle on what these works accomplish by contrasting them to other forms of comic literature, forms which collapse into one or other of the two perspectives that humor, rightly conceived, must somehow keep in equipoise. The collapse into the internal view is characteristic of satire. Satire, as we have seen, is characterized by ridicule or humor which is underwritten by ultimate values which are not themselves impugned by the ridicule; when we satirize a hypocritical political or religious leader, for example, we are implicitly endorsing the value of integrity, placing at least that one value beyond the scope of our laughter. And many have claimed that any serious comedy must at the end of the day hold certain things as sacred, lest it devolve into triviality or even nihilism.²⁶ The collapse into the external view shows up in a variety of forms, but perhaps most saliently in works of all-consuming irony or absurdism. In such works, laughter is indiscriminate and relentless; it takes in everything and seems to exist without any firm standing at all. It is a bravura performance of the artist that generates a generalized skepticism about values or even about the very possibility of taking what the author says seriously. From the point of view of an advocate of this kind of comic literature, any attempt to restrict such irony to some particular domain in order to stop or stabilize it, requires drawing arbitrary lines; it is a moralistic refusal to allow laughter to be total.²⁷

It is hard to see any conceptual space between these two possibilities; it would appear we must either regard some values as beyond criticism or regard everything as being open to being undermined in this way, as an inappropriate object of serious attachment. Although her account of this distinction is quite subtle,

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26 James Agee finds even the classic films of Preston Sturges, which are perhaps the finest examples of humor in twentieth century cinema, defective in just this regard. In an otherwise very positive review, he criticizes *Hail the Conquering Hero*, saying it has "enough themes for half a dozen first-rate American satires" but "not one of these themes is honored by more attention than you get from an incontinent barber" (Agee 1958, p. 116); and he characterizes *The Miracle of Morgan Creek* as "one of the most intoxicating bits of nihilism that the screen has known, but always at the expense of a larger excellence" (p. 345).

27 Here I am paraphrasing the criticism of Wayne Booth in de Man 1996, pp. 165-67.

drawing on some Hegelian conceptual machinery I cannot get into here, a similar dichotomy that is present in Alenka Zupančič's recent opposition of conservative to subversive comedy.²⁸ But in the tradition I have attempted to reconstruct here, the promise of humorous literature, the achievement of its greatest exemplars, is bringing the things we take most seriously—our moral convictions, religious intuitions, or political commitments—into within the sphere of laughter but without leading to any diminishment in our commitment to them. This is not because some part of these is held back from criticism—the laughter is “total” or “world-involving”—but because in humor we recognize both the ungroundedness of our own deepest values, not just those of our benighted ideological opponents, and the absurdity of thinking we could somehow transcend this condition, finding some way to live beyond the scope of laughter. It is subversiveness carried to the point of affirmation: “hot ice, and wondrous strange snow.”²⁹

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28 Zupančič 2008), pp. 30-35. Zupančič's distinction is not exactly the same, since she views irony in the above sense, “playful ironic ease,” as just a form of conservative comedy, since it is often functions to support the existing social structure by giving individuals a space for laughter outside the co-ordinates of the official ideology (4). Her vision of subversive comedy involves cases where a given value or universal notion (her example, drawn from *Borat*, is the American “right to bear arms”) shows itself to “short-circuit” by being necessarily to a seemingly heterogenous and negatively valenced notion (in the *Borat* example, this a taste for shooting Jews). Zupančič's claim is that only subversive comedy is true comedy because it is the only form of comedy that is essentially anti-ideological.

29 Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i. I want to thank Alan Rubenstein, Sandy Goldberg, and the audience at Carleton College for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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