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J C GREGORY



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LAUGHTER

CHAPTER I

SOME VARIETIES OF LAUGHTER

ANGER, like most human emotions, may result in many and diverse actions. An angry man may send his children to bed, cut off his son with a shilling, change his politics, bring a libel suit, write a satire or, reverting to the original and most instinctive manifestation of anger, black his neighbour's eye. This original of all angry methods of attack is apparent in the single action of the animal when impelled by anger: the result of animal rage is usually an assault upon the offender. It is also written upon every human being at the moment of insult. The body of the angered man may be represented by his clenched fist, which is one characteristic expression of his emotion of anger. The extra supply of sugar with which anger floods his blood is typical—as his clenching fist is typical of the pose of his body—of an inward preparation for struggle. Struggle requires energy, and sugar supplies

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it. The anger diffuses an aggressive poise throughout his whole body, and a preparation for physical attack is evident to the eye in outward manifestation and disclosed to inner physiological exploration. Many other aggressive responses to anger have developed from this original method of physical violence. Anger may be suppressed and it is an important part of moral training to control it, but the single emotion of anger has obviously become connected with many and diverse actions. In anger there is one emotion and many manifestations of it.

On turning from an examination of anger to an inspection of laughter the converse seems to be true. Each member of the row of laughers in Hogarth's picture laughs differently, but every laugh is essentially the same "mechanical motion", as "dog" is always the same word though written in different hand-writings by twenty different people. This one characteristic bodily action of laughing seems to be connected with many and diverse emotions or feelings. "Emotion" or "feeling" may be intelligibly used to denote the conscious accompaniments of laughter without attempting to conform to accurate definitions of these terms.

As Diomedes stooped to strip his fallen foe of his armour Paris pierced his foot with an arrow. Then Paris leaped to his feet and, "sweetly laughing", exulted over his enemy.¹

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“ Sweetly ” seems a strange adjective, for this is the laughter of triumph—laughter in its most crude and brutal form. When Hezekiah desired to unite Israel and Judah in one great passover he made proclamation from Beersheba to Dan. “ So the posts passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh even unto Zebulun : but they laughed them to scorn ”². There is laughter of triumph and laughter of scorn ; there is also laughter of contempt, superiority, and self-congratulation. When lovers laugh as they meet they are not contemptuous, nor are they amused. The pure laughter of play, like the laughter of greeting, is as innocent of amusement as it is of contempt. The ungracious varieties of laughter and the laughter of social delight in greeting and play are often forgotten because human laughter is now so closely associated with amusement. Amused laughter, with its characteristic and indefinable sense of the ludicrous, is a third variety that frequently, in discussions on laughter, draws attention entirely on itself and blinds the mental eye to ungracious forms and laughter of social delight. When the sense of the ludicrous is pure and dispassionately free from either animus or sympathy, amused laughter is purely comic. In humour sympathy blends with the sense of the ludicrous and laughter is transformed from the animosity of triumph or scorn into geniality and friendliness.

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Bergson's contrast of humour as scientific satire with the oratorical satire of irony³ implies another definition for it than a sense of the ludicrous touched with sympathy. But the English tradition favours the distinction between comic laughter whose sympathies are neutral and humorous laughter that is genial and sympathetic. Coleridge distinguished the "pure, unmixed, ludicrous, or laughable" from "the congeniality of humour with pathos"⁴; "the comic", wrote Meredith, differs "from satire in not sharply driving into the quivering sensibilities, and from humour in not comforting them and tucking them up"⁵, and Professor Saintsbury describes humour "as a feeling and presentation of the ludicrous including sympathetic, or at least meditative, transcendence"⁶. Freud seems to admit the separation of humour from the purely comic through its sympathetic content by suggesting economy of thought as the essence of the latter and economy of *feeling* as the essence of the former⁷. There is authority, therefore, as well as justification through private observation, for distinguishing between the sympathetic laughter of humour and the pure amusement of the comic.

The ungracious, delighted, and amused varieties of laughter do not always, or even usually, occur simple and unmixed. Amusement may mingle with scorn, or contempt with amusement, and social delight may be

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tinged with triumph. Some writers say that we are deceived by this mingling of emotions into overestimating the number of the varieties of laughter. When Coleridge wrote "to resolve laughter into an expression of contempt is contrary to fact, and laughable enough"⁸, he hinted that laughter is never anti-sympathetic and contains no ungracious forms. Mr Max Eastman makes this hint explicit. He urges the dismissal at the outset of scorn and its disagreeable children—including sarcasm, commends Voltaire for affirming the incompatibility of laughter with contempt and indignation, and condemns the first analysts who "confused laughter with the act of scoffing". Whenever ungracious or unsympathetic elements appear they are pollutions of laughter, not part of it.⁹ Thus from the three previous classes of laughter he excludes the first, the ungracious or anti-sympathetic class, leaving the second class of social delight, and the third class of amused laughter. His theory of laughter restricts it to the social delight of greeting or play and the sense of the ludicrous. Professor McDougall restricts further by ignoring all non-amusing forms and defining laughter as "an instinct of aberrant type" that is "accompanied by an emotional excitement of *specific quality*, the quality that is best called 'amusement' "¹⁰. This extreme restriction sharply contrasts two possible

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estimates of laughter. Laughter may have one characteristic emotion, the sense of the ludicrous, and its other varieties may be apparent only because other emotions mingle into its proper emotion. Or it may, as a converse of anger with its single emotion and many actions, have one action of body and many, perhaps very many, emotions.

Any advance in knowledge can, from one point of view, be described as a progressive disclosure under scrutiny, as a white patch far distant up the road divides, as it approaches the observer, into a flock of sheep and as each member of the flock, on nearer approach or on closer observation, reveals its value as wool or mutton. There has been much thinking and much writing on laughter, but its progressive disclosure of itself to scrutiny has been, admittedly, very small. This reluctance of laughter to disclose its own nature increases the importance of holding firmly to what can be known. The decision between singleness and multiplicity in laughter which study meets at the outset cannot be dogmatically or assuredly made. But, since it does seem possible to discover some elements in laughter, though they may be few, that favour its multiple nature, it seems to be wise method to assume at the beginning a connection between the act of laughing and a variety of emotions. As the argument proceeds on this preliminary assumption it will

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be found to include still more kinds of laughter than have been already described. These further varieties of laughter seem to be as clearly different species as those included in the three classes so ruthlessly reduced to one single kind by Professor M^cDougall. If there are many ways of laughing these seemingly additional species are of them. If the final decision falls on singleness for laughter they will be condemned as false appearances along with all ungracious laughing and even, if Professor M^cDougall has his way, along with the laughter of greeting or of play. Congruency with the facts of laughter, so far as these can be discovered, must ultimately decide between the rival hypotheses. If the monistic view of laughter, as M^cDougall's theory may be conveniently called, most adequately co-ordinates the facts and estimates of them, it will prevail. If Eastman's concession of one or two extra varieties to laughter co-ordinates most adequately, his modestly pluralistic theory will prevail over M^cDougall's. If the freely pluralistic estimate, as it may be called to contrast it with the monistic, is more adequate than the other two, it will prevail over them both. It will be assumed here that there are many laughters : laughters of triumph, of scorn and contempt, of superiority, of self-congratulation, of play, of greeting, and of amusement, which includes pure comic perception of the ludicrous and

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humour with sympathy. Other varieties will be involved in the connection of these with the fundamental facts of laughter. The following chapters will present laughter in terms of the hypothesis that it has had, and still has, many varieties. No dogmatism is intended, for laughter eludes all dogmatism and laughs at it, but an attempt is simply made to identify some features of human laughter and to connect them consistently.