***Laughter* – Henri Bergson**

Chapter 1 – The Comic in General

Bergson makes three preliminary observations:

1. “[T]he comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN.” (p.4a)
2. The comic is always marked by an absence of feeling. As soon as you find yourself *interested* in the situation – acting with those who act, feeling with those who feel; in other words, sympathising with people – nothing appears funny. Thus, the comic’s “appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.” (p.4b)
3. Things only appear funny when we are within a group. Laughter “must have a SOCIAL signification.” (p.5b) Bergson suggests the example of a group of people next to you on a train sharing funny stories. Although the stories are funny to them, you don’t feel any desire to laugh; moreover, *you would have laughed had you been part of the group*. We can also include here the fact that “comic effects are incapable of translation from one language to another, because they refer to the customs and ideas of a particular social group…” (p.5a)

By way of summary; “The comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and

calling into play nothing but their intelligence.” (p.5b)

Imagine a runner stumbling and falling. What makes this funny? It is the element of involuntary “mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being.” (p.6a) This will serve as the touchstone for everything which follows.

Life is characterised by two forces: *tension* and *elasticity*. Inelasticity of character, mind, or body arouses the suspicion of people “…because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity.” (p.8b) Society, however, cannot respond to this ‘materially’ because it has not been affected in material fashion. Indeed, there is nothing more than a symptom before it, a gesture. That being the case, a gesture must be its reply. This is precisely what laugher is; a *social gesture*. The significance of this is that laughter must not be considered merely aesthetic, but moral; it “…pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement.” (p.9a)

*The comic physiognomy – the comic element in* forms*.*

We see the comic in a person’s body or face anytime we see rigidity, the permanent fixing of a form, which makes the living body “appear immersed and absorbed in the materiality of some mechanical occupation instead of ceaselessly renewing its vitality by keeping in touch with a living ideal.” (p.11b) This is what makes caricature funny. No face is perfectly harmonious. There is always the sign of “some impending bias… some favourite distortion towards which nature seems to be particularly inclined. The art of the caricaturist consists in detecting this, at times, imperceptible tendency, and in rendering it visible to all eyes by magnifying it.” (p.10b)

*Comic gestures and movements*

The exact thing holds for gestures. “THE ATTITUDES, GESTURES AND MOVEMENTS OF

THE HUMAN BODY ARE LAUGHABLE IN EXACT PROPORTION AS THAT BODY REMINDS US OF A MERE

MACHINE.” (p.11b) A public speaker’s speech and movements should be a progression, always moving forwards. The idea developed in the speech “…never halts, never repeats itself. It must be changing every moment, for to cease to change would be to cease to live.” (p.12a) Let a gesture or movement repeat though, like a machine, and we laugh. “Why? Because I now have before me a machine that works automatically.” (p.12b) This is also why imitation is funny, when the original act isn’t at all; that is to say, because “…our gestures can only be imitated in their mechanical uniformity, and therefore exactly in what is alien to our living personality. To imitate any one is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person.” (p.12b)

*The comic in general*

The central idea here is that the comic occurs when we have something mechanical encrusted on the living, and Bergson identifies three main directions this may take:

1. Whenever rigidity is “…applied to the mobility of life, in an awkward attempt to follow its lines and counterfeit its suppleness.” (p.14a) In this way, clothes can easily become comic when used as a disguise. This principle then extends beyond that of the person to nature, and even to society. Whenever the genuine is covered over with a disguise, turning the situation into a masquerade, we have the comic.
2. When an incident “CALLS OUR ATTENTION TO THE PHYSICAL IN A PERSON WHEN IT IS THE MORAL SIDE THAT IS CONCERNED…” (p.18a) or, as Bergson also calls it, “THE BODY TAKING PRECEDENCE OF THE SOUL.” (p.18b) This can be elicited in many ways, but one is where constant attention is given to form and the mechanical application of rules instead of the flexibility and mobility that characterises the living response to a situation.
3. When “A PERSON GIVES US THE IMPRESSION OF BEING A THING.” (p.20a)

Chapter 2 – The Comic Element in Situations and the Comic Element in Words

*The comic in situations*

As we saw in the first chapter, any situation (arrangement of acts and events) which produces the illusion of life and the impression of a mechanical arrangement is funny. Here, however, Bergson adds that we, as adults, find funny the same things that we found funny as children; “…there can be no break in continuity between the child’s delight in games and that of the grown-up person.” (p.23a) This leads Bergson to identify three types of comic situations based on our childhood games:

1. The jack-in-the-box: The essence here is a spring being placed under tension then being released, and the *repetition* of these two. It is the repetition that is particularly important here because this gives us the sense of the mechanical. “IN A COMIC REPETITION OF WORDS WE GENERALLY FIND TWO TERMS: A REPRESSED FEELING WHICH GOES OFF LIKE A SPRING, AND AN IDEA THAT DELIGHTS IN REPRESSING THE FEELING ANEW.” (p.24b)
2. The dancing-jack: The idea here is that, instead of being free, we are actually being controlled by strings jerking us around like a marionette.
3. The snow-ball: Here, Bergson has in mind a rolling snow ball, growing in size as it moves, but this equally applies to a row of toy soldiers collapsing in an irresistible sequence after the first is pushed over.

All of the above suggest the mechanical, but why do we laugh at the funny? Because the mechanical in the living suggests “…a kind of ABSENTMINDEDNESS on the part of life… life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This

corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.” (p.28b)

In order to understand how the mechanical can be a contrast to life, we must obviously first understand the latter. Only then can we identify the opposite features which will characterise the mechanical. This is how Bergson describes this:

Life presents itself to us as evolution in time and complexity in space. Regarded in time, it is the continuous evolution of a being ever growing older; it never goes backwards and never repeats anything. Considered in space, it exhibits certain coexisting elements so closely interdependent, so exclusively made for one another, that not one of them could, at the same time, belong to two different organisms: each living being is a closed system of phenomena, incapable of interfering with other systems. A continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the order of phenomena, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series: such, then, are the outward characteristics--whether real or apparent is of little moment--which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical. Let us take the counterpart of each of these: we shall obtain three processes which might be called REPETITION, INVERSION, and RECIPROCAL INTERFERENCE OF SERIES. Now, it is easy to see that these are also the methods of light comedy, and that no others are possible. (p.29a)

We next take each of these three elements separately:

1. Repetition: Imagine, for example, a series of events in a play which repeat throughout, being enacted by the same characters or different ones.
2. Inversion: One way this is enacted in comedy is by reversing the situation by inverting the roles of the characters.
3. Reciprocal interference of series: This arises whenever a situation “…belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time.” (p.31a) The classic example of this in comedy is utilising misunderstanding between characters.

In general: “Whether we find reciprocal interference of series, inversion, or repetition, we see that the objective is always the same--to obtain what we have called a MECHANISATION of life. You take a set of actions and relations and repeat it as it is, or turn it upside down, or transfer it bodily to another set with which it partially coincides--all these being processes that consist in looking upon life as a repeating mechanism, with reversible action and interchangeable parts.” (p.32b)

*The comic in words*

Language, being the translation of living thought, should reflect the characteristics of its source. Language, in other words, should be just as living as a living thing. “We feel it contains some living element of our own life…” (p.41a) If we depict language as mechanistic, rigid, inanimate, we ought to obtain the comic. The comic in speech, therefore, doesn’t differ from the comic we have just analysed in situations; it is merely “…their projection on to the plane of words.” (p.35b) This means we can simply analyse this with reference to the three general forms we identified above:

1. Inversion: This can be seen when we reverse the subject and the object in a sentence.
2. Reciprocal interference: This occurs when we have two ideas which ‘fit’ in the same sentence; in other words, a play on words. “Here there is really one and the same sentence through which two different sets of ideas are expressed, and we are confronted with only one series of words; but advantage is taken of the different meanings a word may have, especially when used figuratively instead of literally.” (p.38a)
3. Repetition: In language, this takes the form of *transposition*; i.e. where a set of ideas are taken out of their natural environment, “…transferred to fresh surroundings, while maintaining their mutual relations, or, in other words, if you can induce them to express themselves in an altogether different style and to transpose themselves into another key…” (p.38b)

Some examples of this include transposing between the solemn and the familiar, the small and the big (exaggeration), the physical and the moral, or the real and the ideal. Regarding this last, Bergson notes that, “Sometimes we state what ought to be done, and pretend to believe that this is just what is actually being done; then we have IRONY. Sometimes, on the contrary, we describe with scrupulous minuteness what is being done, and pretend to believe that this is just what ought to be done; such is often the method of HUMOUR. Humour, thus denned, is the counterpart of irony.” (p.40a)

Chapter 3 – The Comic in Character

We have already seen that comedy can only occur in an absence of feeling between a group and an individual; when “our neighbour’s personality ceases to affect us.” (p.42a) From this, it follows that an individual “…is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings.” (p.42a) Laughter, then, in a point we will return to later, is the attempt to “…reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream… In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least in his deed.” (pp.42a-b)

The following are the elements that make up the comic character:

1. Unsociability
2. It must not arouse our feelings: This is the main difference between comedy and drama, and in it lies the art of the comedian; i.e. to lull the sensibility to sleep by “…throwing a wet blanket upon sympathy at the very moment it might arise…” (p.43b) Bergson identifies two methods by which this is achieved:
   1. Isolating within the character the feeling attributed to him or her. In this way, we perceive the feeling as a “…certain rigidity which prevents it from establishing a connection with the rest of the soul in which it has taken up its abode.” (p.44a) The result is that we cannot put ourselves in tune with the character because the character is not in tune with him or herself.
   2. Instead of making the mental state of a character culminate in actions, which emphasise and draw us into it, comedy stops at gestures. By this, Bergson means “…the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching… Action is intentional or, at any rate, conscious; gesture slips ouot unawares, it is automatic. In action, the entire person is engaged; in gesture, an isolated part of the person is expressed, unknown to, or at least apart from, the whole of the personality. Lastly--and here is the essential point--action is in exact proportion to the feeling that inspires it: the one gradually passes into the other, so that we may allow our sympathy or our aversion to glide along the line running from feeling to action and become increasingly interested. About gesture, however, there is something explosive, which awakes our sensibility when on the point of being lulled to sleep and, by thus rousing us up, prevents our taking matters seriously.” (pp.44b-45a)
3. Automatism: We have talked a lot about this already, and it manifests in a character whenever the actions of an individual appear involuntary or mechanical.

*Art*

In living our lives, we normally don’t come into contact with things themselves. More often, we “…confine ourselves to reading the labels affixed to them.” (p.47b) This not only applies to external objects, but also to our own mental states. “When we feel love or hatred, when we are gay or sad, is it really the feeling itself that reaches our consciousness with those innumerable fleeting shades of meaning and deep resounding echoes that make it something altogether our own?… Mostly, however, we perceive nothing but the outward display of our mental state. We catch only the impersonal aspect of our feelings, that aspect which speech has set down once for all because it is almost the same, in the same conditions, for all men. Thus, even in our own individual, individuality escapes our ken. We move amidst generalities and symbols…” (p.47b)

The goal of artists, and the purpose of art, then, is to go beyond these generalities; to show us the things themselves; “…by rhythmical arrangement of words, which thus become organised and animated with a life of their own, they tell us--or rather suggest-- things that speech was not calculated to express. Others delve yet deeper still. Beneath these joys and sorrows which can, at a pinch, be translated into language, they grasp something that has nothing in common with language, certain rhythms of life and breath that are closer to man than his inmost feelings…” (pp.48a-b) Painting, sculpture, poetry, music; they all attempt to “brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself.” (p.48a)

Drama also falls into this category. We must live in societies, which means we must agree to abide by certain rules. This requires that we resist the impulse of our natural feelings. The purpose of drama, then, is not to show to us other people; rather, it is to give us a glimpse of ourselves, “…a whole host of ghostly feelings, emotions and events that would fain have come into real existence, but, fortunately for us, did not.” (p.49b)

Art (including drama), then, aims at what is *individual*. “What the artist fixes on his canvas is something he has seen at a certain spot, on a certain day, at a certain hour, with a colouring that will never be seen again. What the poet sings of is a certain mood which was his, and his alone, and which will never return. What the dramatist unfolds before us is the life-history of a soul, a living tissue of feelings and events--something, in short, which has once happened and can never be repeated.” (p.49b)

Interestingly, this means that the artist need not study other people. Indeed, we often find artists living lives of solitude. How is it they are able to depict situations they have never seen then? Because they show us “certain profound moods or inner struggles…” (p.51a), and this subject matter cannot be witnessed from without. Does this mean they have *experienced* all they depict? Looking at the lives of artists, this also seems unlikely. They are able to capture these moods and sensations because they are better able to *imagine* possible paths their lives *could* have taken. “Our character is the result of a choice that is continually being renewed. There are points--at all events there seem to be--all along the way, where we may branch off, and we perceive many possible directions though we are unable to take more than one. To retrace one's steps, and follow to the end the faintly distinguishable directions, appears to be the essential element in poetic imagination.” (pp.51a-b) Bergson is highly opposed to the notion that the artist’s imagination works by piecing together fragments from various situations and people. “Nothing living would result from that. Life cannot be recomposed; it can only be looked at and reproduced. Poetic imagination is but a fuller view of reality. If the characters created by a poet give us the impression of life, it is only because they are the poet himself…” (p.51b)

Comedy, however, is completely different. Here, what is important is the general, not the individual. Indeed, we have seen that it takes the individual and diverts our attention away from it, to the mechanical, to that which could apply to every and any body. This must be so because laughter (the external manifestation of the comic) is a corrective, aiming to ensure conformity to social life. In order to have this focus on the group, the general, it must therefore direct itself to as many people as possible. “By organising laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment, it even obeys an impulse of social life. And in this respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature.” (p.52b)

*Vanity*

In light of our above analysis, Bergson concludes that the quintessential comic character is that which manifests *vanity*; i.e. a sense that one is better than one really is, and, more importantly, better than others in society. Not only is it the case that in the vain character we find the most cause to laugh, but we often actively look for the vain precisely so that we may laugh at it (thereby remedying this problem for society). There are many ways vanity is brought out in comedy, but given that the essential condition is a general category into which many individuals can step, Bergson finds a natural home for it in the ready-made categories established by society itself; namely trades, public services, and professions, where each “…particular profession impresses on its corporate members certain habits of mind and peculiarities of character in which they resemble each other and also distinguish themselves from the rest. Small societies are thus formed within the bosom of Society at large.” (p.54a) We thus find professionals a particularly good target for comedy because they represent a threat to wider society. Bergson calls this type the *professional comic*, and identifies the following two devices:

1. Professional vanity – in which one exalts their own profession above the rest. This leads into solemnity. “Useful professions are clearly meant for the public, but those whose utility is more dubious can only justify their existence by assuming that the public is meant for them: now, this is just the illusion that lies at the root of solemnity.” (p.54b)
2. Professional callousness – in which the “comic character is so tightly jammed into the rigid frame of his functions that he has no room to move or to be moved like other men.” (p.54b) Jargon is of particular use here at making a profession seem ludicrous. “Judge, doctor and soldier are made to apply the language of law, medicine and strategy to the everyday affairs of life, as though they had become incapable of talking like ordinary people.” (p.55a) Another way is through “professional logic” which takes advantage of “…certain ways of reasoning that are customary in certain circles, which are valid for these circles, but untrue for the rest of the public.” (p.55a)

*Absurdity and dreams*

There is one feature of the comic character we have thus far neglected to mention; the strange logic peculiar to them, which is, in fact, quite often absurd. The rigidity of the comic character often appears through a kind of “obstinacy of mind or of disposition… At the root of the comic there is a sort of rigidity which compels its victims to keep strictly to one path, to follow it straight along, to shut their ears and refuse to listen.” (p.56b) This eventually progresses to seeing only what they want to see. “A stubborn spirit ends by adjusting things to its own way of thinking, instead of accommodating its thoughts to the things. So every comic character is on the highroad to the above-mentioned illusion, and Don Quixote furnishes us with the general type of comic absurdity.” (p.56b)

We find this same inversion of common sense in the logic of dreams. “Comic absurdity is of the same nature as that of dreams.” (p.57a) Bergson describes dreams in the following way:

The behaviour of the intellect in a dream is exactly what we have just been describing. The mind, enamoured of itself, now seeks in the outer world nothing more than a pretext for realising its imaginations. A confused murmur of sounds still reaches the ear, colours enter the field of vision, the senses are not completely shut in. But the dreamer, instead of appealing to the whole of his recollections for the interpretation of what his senses perceive, makes use of what he perceives to give substance to the particular recollection he favours… (p.57a)

Bergson identifies four specific similarities between dreams and the comic:

1. A general relaxation of the rules of reasoning. There is still an element of logic in both dreams and comedy, but we readily tolerate quite implausible breaches of this.
2. Comic obsessions bear a resemblance to dream obsessions; i.e. the same image appearing in successive dreams. This is essentially repetition.
3. There is a crescendo in dreams the matches that in the comic. “The first concession extorted from reason introduces a second; and this one, another of a more serious nature; and so on till the crowning absurdity is reached.” (p.58a)
4. The strange sense of a fusion of two persons in dreams, in which one of these is the dreamer him or herself. “He feels he has not ceased to be what he is; yet he has become someone else. He is himself, and not himself. He hears himself speak and sees himself act, but he feels that some other "he" has borrowed his body and stolen his voice. Or perhaps he is conscious of speaking and acting as usual, but he speaks of himself as a stranger with whom he has nothing in common; he has stepped out of his own self.” (p.58b)

*Conclusion*

In the comic, Bergson sees a double movement. First, we sympathise with the comic character. “By this is meant that we put ourselves for a very short time in his place, adopt his gestures, words, arid actions, and, if amused by anything laughable in him, invite him, in imagination, to share his amusement with us; in fact, we treat him first as a playmate.” (p.59b) This, Bergson calls a movement of relaxation. “To remain in touch with things and men, to see nothing but what is existent and think nothing but what is consistent, demands a continuous effort of intellectual tension. This effort is common sense. And to remain sensible is, indeed, to remain at work.” (pp.59b-60a)

But this relaxation lasts only for a moment. Then the second movement, laughter, which we have already identified as a corrective, begins. Bergson speaks of laughter in quite negative, almost sinister, terms here. “Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed.” (p.60a) “Its function is to intimidate by humiliating. Now, it would not succeed in doing this, had not nature implanted for that very purpose, even in the best of men, a spark of spitefulness or, at all events, of mischief.” (pp.60b-61a)

Bergson is clear that this corrective doesn’t proceed from an act of reflection. It is merely “…the result of a mechanism set up in us by nature or, what is almost the same thing, by our long acquaintance with social life. It goes off spontaneously and returns tit for tat.” (p.60b) This means that it is not deliberate, and, precisely because it isn’t reflective, nor can it be considered just. It is simply how we have evolved based on our need for society. And this makes Bergson’s account of laughter, the only *explanation* of the phenomenon I have ever heard.