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Wit and Politics: An Essay on Laughter and Power¹

Hans Speier

Translated and edited by Robert Jackall, Williams College

Originally published in German in 1975, this reflective essay draws on material from a wide range of epochs and societies to analyze the uses, intricacies, and paradoxes of wit in political relationships great and small. Topics include wit as a weapon, the crucial element of surprise, the uses of nonsense, the laughter of both the mighty and the weak, whispered jokes in totalitarian regimes, and wit and death. The essay returns repeatedly to the paradox of timelessness, that is, the recurrence of similar forms of political humor, indeed identical jokes, in different centuries and among different peoples.

PROVINCE OF POLITICAL WIT

Political and Nonpolitical Jokes

Philogelos, the ancient Greek collection of jokes by Hierocles and Philagrius, contains the story of the dull-witted man who hears that ravens live more than 200 years. He decides to keep a raven in a cage to find out if he has been told the truth.² The story also occurs in a 17th-century Japa-

¹ *Trans. note:* Hans Speier originally published this essay in book form in 1975 as *Witz und Politik: Essay über die Macht und das Lachen* (Zürich: Edition Interfrom AG, Texte/Thesen 58, Verlag A. Fromm, Onasbrück). After its German publication, Speier translated part of the essay into English, providing additional examples to amplify analytical points made in his original text. But he abandoned the translation with only fragments completed. In preparing this translation, I consulted Speier's partial translation and integrated into this text some of his supplemental examples. I am grateful to Annette Harms-Hunold of Verlag A. Fromm, Margit Speier (Speier's widow), and Sybil Barten (Speier's daughter and executor of his estate) for permission to republish Speier's work in this form. I also wish to thank Margit Speier, G. L. Ulmen, Thomas Kohut, and Gary Ford for important suggestions on the translation and Arthur J. Vidich for a close reading of the completed manuscript. Joan L. Walling and Peter Giordano provided helpful bibliographical assistance. Direct correspondence to Robert Jackall, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267.

² *Trans. note:* See Thierfelder's (1968, p. 125) edition, which contains 265 jokes from the several ancient manuscripts that were cobbled together at various points to make up the *Philogelos*. This edition also contains a nearly complete listing of all extant editions and translations of the compilation. The most comprehensive edition before Thierfelder was Eberhard (1869), which contains 264 jokes.

nese version and in a modern German form. The Japanese story is somewhat inferior because of its explicitness.

It is said that a tortoise lives for 10,000 years. A thoughtful man caught a baby tortoise and said: "I'll keep this and see if that is true." His friend laughed and said, "Our life is like the dew on the flower on the Rose of Sharon. However long we live, it's not more than a hundred years. How then can anyone see if a tortoise lives for 10,000 years?" The man replied: "That's a pity." (Blyth 1959, p. 485)

Toward the end of Konrad Adenauer's chancellorship of the German Federal Republic, it appeared to many Germans that the old man was determined to remain in office forever. As rumor has it, the federal chancellor was breeding giant turtles in order to verify that they really reach the age of 300 years (Thierfelder 1968). These different versions of the same joke, separated by more than a thousand years and by cultural distances no less formidable, raise two fundamental questions. Within the realm of wit in general, what is the province of political wit? And how does one account for people of completely different cultures and epochs, as is often the case, laughing about very similar jokes?

A nonpolitical joke, such as the Greek or Japanese versions just cited, can suddenly become political, as in the German case, when a publicly prominent person becomes the butt of the jest. But political wit does not consist solely of the ridicule of the high and mighty. Jokes can victimize not only prominent wielders of power or those who abuse that power; they often make the weak and unknown into laughingstocks. Indeed, jests "from above," from those of higher status, rather than those "from below," that is, jokes born of triumph instead of resistance, may be the prototypical political jokes.

Moreover, the targets of political wit from below are not necessarily individual prominent persons. Political wit can be directed against social groups, circles, or strata whose social position is contested: the nobility, the nouveau riche, conquerors, border garrisons, the police, judges, and so on. And, of course, many cultures have jokes about peoples who are different in some way, such as ethnic, political, social, or religious minorities, whose social subordination or foreignness make them objects of ridicule. These include jokes about the Irish, blacks, Catholics, Jews, Sicilians, the East Germans, and neighboring peoples. There are also as many jokes about conquerors as about subject peoples.

Finally, political jokes may be directed against established institutions, policies, or publicly recognized values.³ For example, in the fall of 1974

³ Some editors of collections of political jokes distinguish between personal and non-personal jokes. See, e.g., K. Hirsche (1964, pp. 33ff).

in the United States, one often heard many jokes about the raging inflation of the period, which the government seemed to ignore completely. Some jokes talked about the currency revaluation with a kind of gallows humor, as a misfortune or in a mocking or self-mocking way that one associates especially with medical jokes: "The operation was successful, but the patient died." In gallows humor, misfortune assumes a kind of inevitability about which one can do nothing, like the weather or death. In the following American joke, one that also has an earlier German version, the government gets off entirely scot-free: "The government wants us to tighten our belts; unfortunately, we've already eaten our belts." Such a remark is not really leveled against particular persons, but instead against insufficiently precautionary economic policies. Similarly, the following joke assaults the policies and propaganda of government rather than individual government officials.

Ivan, who as a tank soldier took part in the occupation of Czechoslovakia returned after three months to his Russian garrison town. In the canteen, he was besieged with questions: "How was it? Did you see counterrevolutionaries in Prague?" He responded: "Counterrevolutionaries everywhere; nothing but counterrevolutionaries!" After a while, someone asked: "And what about Yevgeny; when is he coming back?" Comrade Ivan answered somewhat hesitantly: "He'll be late coming back, in fact, very late. He didn't see any counterrevolutionaries." (Swoboda 1969, pp. 46-47)

Finally, an old nonpolitical anecdote or bon mot may suddenly become political even without mention of a name, if the listeners detect a political allusion. When the military is known to be corrupt, as is currently [1975] the case in Peru, the following definition becomes a political barb aimed at the government: "What is an oligarch? A man who lives like a general, but not with his own money."⁴

Wit as a Weapon

One's understanding of political jokes obviously depends on one's understanding of politics. At one level, politics is always a struggle for power. Along with persuasion and lies, advice and flattery, tokens of esteem and bribery, banishment and violence, obedience and treachery, the joke belongs to the rich treasury of the instruments of politics. We often hear that the political joke is an offensive weapon with which an aggressive, politically engaged person makes the arrangements or precautions of an opponent seem ridiculous. But even when political jokes serve defensive purposes, they are nonetheless weapons. Toward the end of October 1972,

⁴ From J. Novitski in the *New York Times*, May 3, 1972.

during a visit of the president of the German Federal Republic to London, a journalist embarrassed Gustav Heinemann in the presence of the British secretary for foreign affairs. Heinemann had made public the establishment of a German-British institute for the study of industrial society. The journalist asked him what the German trade unionists could learn in England. Heinemann seemed somewhat disconcerted. But then he took his cigar out of his mouth and said: "English" (Henkels 1974, p. 42).

The defensive function of the political joke seems particularly clear in quick-witted answers to aggressive remarks. Parliamentary debates provide many examples, especially in England, where witty repartee raises the reputation of a parliament member among his colleagues. In the United States, parliamentary debates are on the whole less witty than in England. As Clement Attlee suggested, a great deal of what is said in the U.S. Congress is said for entry into the *Congressional Record* in order to impress voters in one's home state. Because there is no premium on quick-wittedness, debates suffer a loss of liveliness.

There are, of course, both aggressive and defensive jokes that are non-political. A joke made at the expense of a guest at a social gathering can, to be sure, make the victim an "enemy" of the joker and can lead to the victim's construction of a "coalition" between the joker and his laughing audience. But, at the same time, it can produce an intimate relationship between the victim and those members of the audience who do not join in the laughter. In this case, one can speak of political roles and relationships only in the broadest sense of the word since a private social gathering is not an explicitly political institution. The same is true for a nonpolitical joke with a defensive purpose. A nonpolitical defensive joke that is similar to the Japanese story about the tortoise is the anecdote about a servant of Caligostro, the famous swindler and alchemist. Caligostro claimed to be more than 1,000 years old and to have spoken with Pontius Pilate.

One day a skeptical nobleman wanted to find out whether this was true and he asked Caligostro's lackey: "Is it true that your master is as old as he claims to be?" The servant responded: "I don't know. I've only been in his service for 400 years."⁵

Diversionsary and Soothing Jokes

The allusion to the aggressive and defensive functions of jokes in political struggles does not entirely do justice to political humor. Even Cicero noted that humor softens both pomp and severity and that the skillful orator, by means of a joke, is able to make aggressive remarks that are not easily refuted by arguments.

⁵ From the first-rate collection *Humor seit Homer* (1964, p. 119).

One finds something similar in Quintilian, who begins his treatment about how humor can serve an orator with the observation that, with a joke, the orator can refreshen and revivify the attentiveness of a judge if the latter is drifting off. On the other hand, among the rich collection of jokes in the second book of Castiglione's *Cortegiano*, one finds the following anecdote.

It was reported to the bishop of Padua that a priest had impregnated five nuns. A certain Marcantonio of Torre asked the bishop not to punish the priest. The bishop responded that there was nothing else he could do. Citing Luke's Gospel (16:2), he inquired what he would say to the Lord on Judgment Day if he were ordered: "Render an account of your household." The quick-witted Marcantonio thereupon cited Matthew's Gospel (25:20): "Lord, you have given me five talents; look, with these, I have won another five talents."

The bishop could not refrain from laughing and he lessened both his own irritation and the punishment he had intended for the sinner.⁶

In a similar vein, although somewhat more pointedly, did Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the author of *School for Scandal* and other comedies, express himself. Sheridan, an opponent of William Pitt, was one of the wittiest politicians in the history of England. In his view, four-fifths of the English parliament consisted of landowners and other fools. He used laughter in any way that he could to obliterate the memory of whatever opposed his opinions. "Then," he said, "I set an argument quickly before them and nothing more stands in my way" (quoted in Harris 1966, p. 25). Humor weakens an audience's defenses and makes it more amenable to persuasion.

We should also note a special form of American political humor that helps divert conflict, namely the jesting parable. It comes from the South and has long been used by Southern politicians with great success. For example, it served those politicians well in justifying their position on civil rights, a stance that was not popular with politicians from other parts of the country. As one observer pointed out, such stories aim at "the tension in Congress and its committees to diminish debate and to put off voting" (Harris 1966, p. 225). So the famous Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina expressed himself during the civil rights debate in 1959 as follows:

The Attorney General has a criminal definition that he can use. He has a civil definition that he can use. But he turns to Congress to seek for himself yet a third definition. The Attorney General reminds me of a young fellow who found himself footloose and fancy-free. John courted Mary and John

⁶ Cited in the 1561 English translation of Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, by Sir Thomas Hoby (London: D. Nutt, 1900, p. 151).

said to Mary: "Mary, if you were not what you are, what would you want to be?" And Mary said: "I would like to become a beautiful American rose." And then she asked John: "John, if you were not what you are, what would you want to be?" And John said: "Mary, if I were not what I am, I would want to be a cuttlefish." Mary said: "John, what is a cuttlefish?" John said: "A cuttlefish is a fish that has a thousand arms." Mary said to John: "Well, that's good John. If you were a cuttlefish, what would you do with your thousand arms?" And John said to Mary: "Mary, I would take you in all of my arms." And Mary said to John: "Get out of here, John. You haven't once used the two arms that you have." [laughter] The Attorney General of the United States already has two arms. I assure my fellow Senators that one arm is quite sufficient in the South to stop anybody who intentionally restrains someone, whatever their color or race, from registering to vote or actually voting, or who impedes a vote being counted the way it is cast. (Harris 1966, p. 225)

The story of John and Mary is in itself, of course, not political. But its harmless comedy becomes political because the storyteller points out the relationship to immediately felt political circumstances. The storyteller thus appears in two different roles. As the person who recounts the story, he is a humorous observer without an axe to grind, someone simply engaged in life. But, at the same time, he tells the story as a parable, which is its practical meaning, and after his opponents are disarmed by laughter, he plays again the role of a politician and makes his point. The joke serves as a ruse, though a ruse without falsehood.

One can treat all of these examples in two ways. The opponent is diverted from the dispute, and the dispute itself is smoothed over in a conciliatory fashion. Of course, the narrator may induce his opponent to laugh instead of continuing the dispute and to escape without detriment, while as much as possible working to bring about a victory for his own position. At the same time, he also renews the battle in a different light. He reminds the opponent, as it were, that politics not only consists of conflict, but also assumes some kind of mutual understanding. Political life consists not just in the struggle for power; it also embraces principles of order and commonality. Laughter forges ties between people, binding those who laugh together to one another. With regard to Senator Ervin's story, the listeners believe they are laughing chiefly only about John and Mary and not at the expense of the attorney general. And so the diverting political joke not only influences the course of dispute, but also the desire for conflict among the participants. The joke changes them, so to speak, as it deemphasizes the conflict. In England, Churchill was a special master in the art of reducing the high tensions of conflict in the House of Commons with a joke. Franklin D. Roosevelt also knew very well how to lessen controversies within his cabinet with jokes.

Certain political jokes also reconcile antagonists with each other. Politics not only revolves around the battle for power; it also serves the public

spirit, the social order, the sense of legitimacy in a society, harmony, and indeed peace. Another example. The diplomatic relations between the German Republic and Israel were forged in the first 20 years after the end of World War II under President Erhard of the West German Republic. Many Israelis opposed the presence of a German ambassador in Israel; there were even demonstrations against the German ambassador Rolf Pauls. Fourteen days after his arrival in Tel Aviv, Pauls was invited to a private dinner for the first time. A young Israeli industrialist regaled the guests with Jewish jokes. Pauls wanted to join in the laughter, but he kept his distance either out of tact or embarrassment. He recounted later that the ice was broken when the charming storyteller turned to him and said: "Laugh, Mr. Ambassador. Give us pleasure and laugh" (Pauls 1972, p. 9).

The Healing Joke

Diverting and soothing jokes lie on the border of political humor. Senator Ervin's story about John and Mary seemed to lack practical political application and was a harmless pleasantry without partisan intention, until the senator made his point. Nonpartisan jokes presuppose an observer who is capable of distance from life and its trials. The humor of such an observer is a kind of tonic, one that has nothing to do with tricks and maneuvering in the political arena. The political joke as a weapon is pragmatic: it inflicts wounds. The purely reflective joke stands above the fray; it heals. Diverting and soothing jokes lie between the entirely pragmatic and contemplation. When used as a ruse in a political debate or for the purpose of working out an amicable arrangement, they are pragmatic, but when they are used as humor they are contemplative and healing.

If, in the course of a study of the political use of jokes, one's attention is addressed to the pragmatic function, one may assume that the critic is interested in changing the world instead of accepting it as it is—a fundamental postulate of modern science and of the world to which science belongs. The revolutionary and the scientist are humorless. Science does not brook much genuine humor. Humor accepts both nature and the world of affairs. Humor does not change the circumstances that it illuminates, although it is able to lessen the discontent and even the despair that these circumstances produce. It does not alter the life meanings of people or the forces that control them. It helps one only to bear somewhat better the unalterable; sometimes it reminds both the mighty and the weak that they are not to be taken seriously.

On December 13, 1862, during the American Civil War, the battle of Fredricksburg took place, in which the Union army suffered high casualties, double those of Confederacy troops. A deep depression settled over

the North. On the day after the battle, the congressman Isaac N. Arnold sought out President Lincoln. He found Lincoln reading a book by a contemporary humorist. Arnold did not conceal that Lincoln's lighthearted mood shocked him. Later he recounted that Lincoln, seeing his distress, threw the book aside and with tears on his face and with his entire body shaking said: "Mr. Arnold, if I don't find some passing relief from the crushing burdens that I must carry, then my heart would break" (Harris 1966, p. 100).

Even in the form of gallows humor, jokes can work as soothing and liberating devices. There are many jokes of this kind in many languages. There is, for example, the story of the man from Cologne, who after a bombing raid pulled his unharmed neighbor out of his completely burned house. He turned quietly to his neighbor and said: "You are certainly one poor fellow." The neighbor asked in an astonished voice: "And just how is that? I have it behind me, but you have yet to face it!"⁷

The Cynical Political Joke

There is another form of political joke that falls under neither of the previously mentioned categories. It is neither aggressive/defensive nor diversionary nor soothing; ultimately, it lacks even the liberating consolation of distancing humor that the person unhappy with this world takes as his joy. This is the cynical joke, which is not directed against a certain person, but rather as a general expression of moral alienation from the political order.

At the level of local politics, there is a cynical joke about a southern Bavarian farming community that saw through the tricks of its mayor. "To put it mildly, he had taken a slice for himself from everything and everybody. At first, there was a common demand that he must be removed. But then in a special meeting of the community council it was unanimously determined otherwise. 'He stays! We know all his tricks. Better him than breaking in a new one . . .'" (Fuchs 1975, p. 196).

The second example is of greater import. It originates from the period of the Cold War, though one also finds it in later anticommunist collections of jokes. Like all cynical jokes, it unmaskes pretensions, doing so in an often vulgar way, even though such jokes usually originate with intellectuals. It critiques ideology or publicly professed ideas in a terse, penetrating way.

Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin meet in heaven and reminisce about the Second World War. Churchill takes a cigar out of his leather case and leaves

⁷ This is told by Fuchs in his afterword to "Witz der Kölner" (1975, p. 152).

it open on the table. The other two gentlemen notice an inscription inside: "To the Savior of the Empire from the Grateful Nations of the Empire." After a while, Roosevelt lights a cigarette. He, too, leaves his silver case on the table without closing it. Churchill and Stalin surreptitiously notice the engraved dedication: "Mankind in Gratitude to the Savior of the World." Stalin's expression does not change, but slowly he takes a golden case out of his breast pocket. While he is holding a match to his cigarette, the gentlemen in his company read the elegant engraving: "The Vienna Jockey Club—to Count Esterhazy."

This aggressively anticommunist joke points, of course, to the thievery of the Red Army in occupied territories. But it goes well beyond that. It relegates nationalism, as well as all other ideological promises of collective happiness, to the realm of delusion, confronting such delusion with the alleged reality of naked utility. The joke aims less at Roosevelt, Churchill, or even Stalin than it does at all moral justifications for politics, whether capitalist or communist, whether promising justice, glory, or peace.

THE REALM OF HUMOR

The province of political wit lies within the larger realm of humor itself. Just as political wit can clearly be directed toward political goals in a playful, melancholy, or cynical way, so, in the case of a nonpolitical joke, we often laugh about the very same things that might spur us on to earnest action under other circumstances. We can, for instance, laugh about a man who makes a mistake or behaves foolishly, or we can try to enlighten him so that in the future he can escape his error or eliminate his ignorance altogether. We can try to help a man who fails through a psychological or moral blunder, instead of seizing the opportunity to make a joke at his expense. We feel sorry for the deformed and the feeble, although they are often mocked. In short, the comical lies in the eye of the beholder. Nonpolitical jokes include a refusal of a stance of helpfulness or improvement; the same thing applies to the battle of healing and defusing political jokes. Only aggressive, defensive, and diversionary political jokes are pragmatic means to victory in political disputes.

This brief essay on the political joke cannot review all the many reasons for laughter nor plumb the substance of humor as much as we would like. Yet political jokes depend on certain general techniques and basic meanings of humor.

To begin with, we should briefly mention certain techniques of humor, especially the element of surprise, as well as other methods that emerge out of the character of language and of logical thought. Cicero provides the first foundational writing of such spoken humor, that is, on word or thought play (*De Oratore* 2.59). Following his lead, one notices that some types of verbal jokes appear time and again as political jokes. This pro-

vides an opportunity to allude to the meaning of a phenomenon that one can call the aura of a joke: that is, both the nonpolitical as well as the political joke open us to a second, that is, alternative view of our world.

Along with verbal jokes, there are also comical situations. One finds this ancient distinction as early as Homer. Odysseus escapes Polyphemus with the help of a pun with which he outwits the monster. When the Cyclops asks him for his name, Odysseus replies: "Nobody." When Polyphemus is later asked by his comrades who had blinded him, he could only give the foolish answer: "Nobody." In another case, the lame Hephaestus uses a pliable net to catch his wife and her lover in bed. When he calls upon the gods to witness the scandal, they break into laughter about the comic plight of the captured lovebirds.

The centerpieces of the comical situations covered in both political and nonpolitical jokes almost always revolve around the nature of men and women and the world in which they live. Moreover, in many political jokes, the unchanging realities of political life, and not just the physical state of the world, contribute to the longevity or the rebirth of old forms of humor. The paradox of the transcendence of political humor, as we shall see, consists in the time-bound quality of the wording of jokes, coupled with the timeless quality of distinctive linguistic techniques and typical human situations.

Surprise

The forcefulness of every joke, whether political or nonpolitical, depends on how it surprises the listener. The unexpected statement surprises the listener depending on its brevity. The most effective surprise occurs with a single unexpected word. During the Nazi period, Karl Valentin told this story in his Munich cabaret: "Earlier we had the big industrialists. And what did we have? Party bosses. Then, after the revolution, the Marxists came. And what did we have? Party bosses. Now finally we have the National Socialists. And what do we have? Friday" (Dor and Federmann 1971, p. 63). Similarly explosive is the end of the story about the school course in an agricultural cooperative of the German Democratic Republic. "The Soviets will soon fly to the moon!" says the speaker emphatically. A farmer asks: "All of them?" (Dor and Federmann 1971, p. 71).

The comical effect of surprise is not restricted to jokes. One also encounters it in humorous prose and poetry. A story in Ihara Saikuku's book *Five Amorous Women* (1686) contains the description of a beautiful woman who was discovered by a group of young fellows on a street in Kyoto. She exhibited her charming ways, her graceful movements, and her expensive garments to the obvious pleasure of the onlookers. "What

a prize for someone who is lucky,' said one of the young men. But these words had scarcely left his mouth when the woman, turning to one of her servants, opened her mouth. It turned out that she lacked one of her lower teeth" (Hibbett 1970, p. 38). Another example is Heinrich Heine's poem "Donna Clara" (1824), a ballad of secret and sorrowful love between a haughty lady and an extremely pleasant young knight. During the foreplay to lovemaking, Donna Clara makes no secret of her intense prejudice against the "dirty Jews." When she finally pulls herself out her lover's arms amidst the myrtle leaves, she asks him his "sweet name."

And the knight, calmly laughing,
Kisses the finger of his Donna,
Kisses her lips and her forehead,
And says finally:
I, Señora, your lover,
Am the son of the widely famous,
Great, and learned Rabbi
Israel of Saragossa.

(Heine, n.d., 1:129-31)

The effect of surprise in political jokes is at its greatest when the unexpected has to do with life and death, that is, in the macabre political joke. Different versions of the following story were extant during Stalin's lifetime.

Stalin is giving a speech before a mass gathering in Moscow's Red Square. Someone sneezes. The commanding officer of the squad of guards on the square asks: "Who sneezed?" Icy silence. The commander had the first row of the crowd step forward and gives the order for the men at the machine guns to fire. Stalin starts to speak once more and again someone sneezes. After the same procedure, the second row of the crowd is mowed down. When Stalin is interrupted a third time with a sneeze, and the crowd is asked who has done it, a trembling old man in the last row says: "It was I." Then Stalin calls out in a friendly fashion: "Good health, Comrade!"

Because the effect of many jokes depends on a surprise factor, a story known by the listener is no longer a joke. The joke is scarcely told and it calls forth disconcertment rather than laughter. Similarly, one can also ruin a joke when one has to explain it to someone who did not understand it. This is a little like releasing the safety catch on a powerful grenade that has already exploded.

Puns

Puns occur at all times and in all languages, in Sanskrit, in Greek and Latin, in Chinese and Japanese, and in all living languages of the West. Many great writers have cherished puns, including Wu Ch'eng-en, author

of the Chinese folk novel *Monkey*, as well as Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson, Rabelais, Grimmelshausen, Melville, and Artemus Ward, no less than Lewis Carroll, James Joyce, Groucho Marx, and Winston Churchill. In *Monkey*, we find: "But tell me, what is your *hsing* [surname]?" "I never show my *hsing* [agitation]," said Monkey, thereby demonstrating that many puns are untranslatable (Wu 1958, p. 19; for a discussion of the humor in *Monkey*, see Wells 1971, pp. 169ff.). And from Mark Twain we have the following jewel. At a dinner given by his very wealthy friend, one Mr. Rogers, another guest sitting near Mark Twain said: "Your friend's money is tainted." Twain quickly retorted: "It's twice tainted. 'Taint yours and 'taint mine" (cited in Bier 1968, p. 158).

Punning turns reality around. We do nothing but laugh and wonder. We laugh because the world that we know and in which we live and suffer seems changed through a second view of it. Following Henri Bergson's interpretation, a situation is invariably comical "when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time."⁸ But it is important to make special note that this understanding of the "second level," that is, the second sight or view, is the playful result of creative insight and intelligence. In this sense, there is no contradiction between Aristotle's oft-repeated opinion that punning is the lowest form of humor and Sidney Smith's famous dictum that it is the foundation of all wit.

Now this notion of second sight, which both puns and jokes open up for us, can be best understood by examining the poem "Anto-logie" [Antology] by Christian Morgenstern (1952).

Im Anfang lebte, wie bekannt,
als grösster Säuger der Gig-ant.

Wobei gig eine Zahl ist, die
es nicht mehr gibt,—so gross war sie!

Doch jene Grösse schwand wie Rauch.
Zeit gab's genug-und Zahlen auch.

Bis eines Tags, ein winzig Ding,
der Zwölf-ant das Reich empfing.

Wo blieb sein Reich? Wo bleib er selb?—
Sein Bein wird im Museum gelb.

⁸ See Bergson (1928, p. 5). Although pedantic and filled with jargon, see also Zijerveld (1968, p. 290), who seems to me to come closer to the heart of the matter: "Joking is

Zwar gab die gütige Natur
den Elef-anten uns dafür.

Doch ach, der Pulverpavian,
der Mensch, voll Gier nach seinem Zahn,

erschiesst ihn, statt ihm Zeit zu lassen,
zum Zehen-anten zu verblassen.

O Klub zum Schutz der wilden Tiere,
hilf, dass der Mensch nicht ruiniere

die Sprossen dieser Riesneleiter,
die stets noch weiter führt und weiter!

Wie dankbar wird der Ant dir sein,
lässt du ihn wachsen und gedeihn,—

bis er dereinst im Nebel hinten
als Nulel-ant wird stumm verschwinden.⁹

Morgenstern's poetic license provides us with an intellectual double sight on the notion of "elephant" among other things. Such a "double consciousness" is the result of a process analogous to solving a riddle. In a remarkable article written over a hundred years ago, Hughlings Jackson referred to the creative intelligence at the root of an appreciation of puns (and other jokes) as the "surplus mind," something over and above that required for getting food and for mere animal indulgence.¹⁰ In the same vein, he also comments on the phenomenon of "quasi-healthy" reminiscence and its morbid forms in certain kinds of epilepsy. He relates such "dreamy states" to punning as a "morbid activity in a slender sense" (Jackson 1887, p. 360). These surprising observations may suggest an explanation of why

defined as the conscious or unconscious transition from one institutionalized meaning structure to another, without changing much of the original role behavior and logic."

⁹ *Trans. note:* In *Alle Galgenleider* (Gallows songs), poems originally published in 1905 and 1910, Morgenstern (1871–1914) turns the German language inside out, continually playing with meaning by inverting letters, words, and metaphors. The poem "Antologie" is, at one level, about numbers (*gig-ant* [billionish being], *zwölf* [12], *elf* [11], *zehen* [zehn = 10], and *nulel* [a variant of "null," meaning naught or zero]). But the poem is also a parody of the notion of evolution, here considered as devolution, the measured descent from a world inhabited by great beings (*Gig-ant*), through an epoch inhabited by *zwölf-anten* (*twelefants*), and *Elef-anten* (*elefants*), to man who kills such beings for commercial gain, hastening the day when only the ant will inhabit the earth, followed by *Nulel-ant* (nothingness). For an elegant translation of "Antologie," indeed of all of Morgenstern's *Galgenleider*, see *Songs from the Gallows*, translated by Walter Arndt (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 28).

¹⁰ See Jackson (1887). My thanks to Sybil Barten for calling my attention to this remarkable article.

many practical people, upon hearing a pun, become uncomfortable or at least pretend that the punster ought to be rebuffed by conventionalized moaning and groaning. Perhaps an experiment will someday show that people who regularly miss the point of a joke, and possibly even those who have an aversion to puns, are also scandalized or dumbfounded by poetry and nonrealistic art. Along the same lines, one might note that interest in children's art and that of the mentally ill was taken over from the Expressionists by the Dadaists who were recklessly extravagant in their use of language and of visual imagery. Hugo Ball, one of the main figures of the movement in Switzerland, defined the Dadaist as a "child-like, quixotic man, entangled in word play and in figures of speech" (Schiff-ferli 1963, p. 40). Is the understanding of the second sight a faint echo of the ancient tie between the poet and the seer possessed with enthusiastic madness?

Inversion of Letters

The humorous play with the meaning of words by changing their spelling, sometimes by as little as a single letter, seems to be very widespread as well. Cicero mentions the manipulation of the name *Nobilior* by substituting an "m" for the "n," turning someone who is "noble" into one who is "mobile." More than a thousand years later, the 17th-century German satirist Grimmelshausen used the exact same joke in deflating the pretensions to respectability of Courage, a fictional camp follower in the Thirty Years' War. It is unlikely that Grimmelshausen borrowed his slightly sexual joke from Cicero. He probably discovered the humorous possibilities of this play on letters quite independently. Castiglione changes Alexander VI into Alexander Vi; in Latin, this makes "Pope Alexander the Sixth" into "Alexander, Pope by force." This is scarcely a harmless jest. Even more tendentious is the story that one hears about Rabelais. When death approached him, he asked to be clad in the checked domino cloak worn at Mardi Gras. When he had put on the costume, he died uttering the parody: "Beati sunt qui in Domino moriuntur." [Blessed are those who die in the Lord (Domino); i.e., as a domino.]

In the 18th century in Germany, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg was a master of this kind of humor. Sigmund Freud often quoted him in his pathbreaking work on jokes and their relationships to the unconscious. One of Lichtenberg's best jokes of this kind is the remark about a Greek scholar who each time he encountered in his German books the word "angenommen" ["accepted"] read "Agamemnon."

There are a great many political jokes that rely on such letter inversion. In Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange*, we find "Ministry of the Inferior." In the German Federal Republic of 1973, one joke asked, "What do

the [Berlin] Reichstag building and the government of the German Federal Republic have in common?" The answer: "Both were destroyed through Brand(t)." An East German typesetter was imprisoned for printing that Walter Ulbricht, first secretary of the ZK (Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party) was first secretary of the KZ, the former abbreviation for concentration camp.¹¹

A spoonerism is a joke that depends on the transposition or omission of a letter or the transposition of sounds to achieve a surprising result. Political spoonerisms are rare. An especially good one comes from Franz Mittler, a master of the art (1969, p. 70). It is signed "GI in Germany" and, in German, it reads

An Wotans Wunderesche
Hängt er die Unterwäsche.

This translates into the English:

On Wotan's marvelous ash-tree,
He hangs his underwear.

One could scarcely point out more effectively or succinctly the characteristic weaknesses of two nations without indulging in malice.

There are word manipulations of a greater sort than the transposition of letters, and, when they succeed, they are very funny indeed. The prize for the best political declaration of this sort of opinion certainly belongs to Johann Nestroy. In the last days of Schiller's sojourn in Graz in 1830, there was a political demonstration at a performance of *Don Carlos*. The audience responded to the words of the prince directed to the marquise of

¹¹ *Trans. note:* Jokes about Ulbricht abounded during his rule. Discovered in Speier's papers after his death was an incomplete manuscript entitled "Der politische Witze in der DDR" [The political joke in the German Democratic Republic]. The authorship is uncertain, although it seems to be Speier's work. The manuscript contains a number of jokes about Ulbricht:

Brigitte Bardot visits the DDR and is greeted by Walter Ulbricht: Ulbricht asks her: "Miss Bardot, is there anything, anything at all, that I can do to make your visit a pleasant one?" Bardot replies: "O yes, Mr. Ulbricht, if you will grant me one wish, then tear the Berlin wall down and open the borders of your state for all of its citizens!" Ulbricht replies: "Ah, my dear, I see that you want to be alone with me."

During a conversation between Walter Ulbricht and Willy Brandt, Ulbricht asks Brandt: "Do you have a hobby, Mr. Brandt?" Brandt replies: "Yes, I collect jokes that the people tell about me." Ulbricht says: "With me, it's the other way around. I collect the people who tell jokes about me."

See also Lukes and Galnoor (1985), a sprawling and uneven collection at best, but one that contains a number of jokes about totalitarian regimes, particularly that of Ulbricht.

Posa: “Arm in arm with you, I challenge my hundredth year!” [Arm in Arm mit dir, so fordr’ ich mein Jahrhundert in die Schranken!] with a storm of applause. The police correctly understood this as a long-suppressed exclamation of a yearning for freedom, and the authorities eliminated the piece from the repertory. More than a century later, the Nazis did the same thing. In Graz, *The Marriage of Figaro* was hastily substituted for *Don Carlos*. Nestroy sang the role of Bartolo. In the scene in which Bartolo encounters the scheming Basilius, Nestroy took him by the arm and led him close to the stage apron. There he hesitated while the tension in the audience grew. Then he said suddenly: “Arm and arm with you, I challenge narrow-minded stupidity for a century!” [Arm in Arm mit dir—so fordr’ ich Baschränktheit fürs Jahrhundert!] After a hurricane of laughter, Nestroy had to climb out of a window in disguise to escape from the police, although he was later arrested backstage in Vienna (Waldemar 1959, p. 8).

Playing with the Ambiguous Meaning of Words

Ambiguity of meaning abounds in joking, as in poetry and diplomacy. Cicero commends such jokes because of their elegance and scholarship. In particular, he mentions the case of Titius, who was an excellent tennis player suspected of having broken sacred images at night. Terentia Vespia excused his absence from the Campus Martius by saying “he has broken an arm.” This jocular remark depends, of course, on the unique coincidence of two dissimilar, unconnected events, that is, tennis playing and vandalism. The joke works because of the double meaning of the apology.

Some double meanings retain their accessibility and intelligibility through centuries of experience, at least within certain traditions. In the Christian context, for example, Rabelais, and probably many others before him, as well as Grimmelshausen after him, used the expression “the resurrection of the flesh” in a way that alluded to its obscene meaning. John Donne also made use of this imagery. One can attribute a blasphemous, but scarcely a political meaning to this. However, during the Nazi period, the same expression became the point of a political joke in which the newlywed Frau Göring was said to have left the church because of her waning faith in the resurrection of the flesh. In the new version, the joke continued to be obscene and blasphemous, since doubt in the sexual potency of her husband was equated with lack of religious faith. But, of course, this suddenly involved the Reichsmarshal, a prominent person in public life (Speier 1969, p. 83).

Even today the political joke that makes use of the double meaning of the word “hanging,” that is, of an opponent or of his picture, enjoys wide popularity. One can trace the story not only to the French Revolution,

but even back to an English book written in 1630 (see *Humor seit Homer* 1964, p. 7; see also Brandt 1965, p. 242). One can predict with certainty the constant rebirth of this joke. It will keep recurring in cycles as long as some men wish other men dead, but when the wish is too weak to lead to homicide.

Literal and Intended Meanings

Cicero, as well as many observers of verbal jokes after him, noted that it is comical when the literal meaning of an expression is taken for its properly intended meaning. Today, we connect this kind of joke with the fool, Till Eulenspiegel or, as he was called in an early (1528) English translation of his pranks, Howleglas. For instance, a merchant, one of his many employers, told Howleglas to "make the wagon ready . . . and grease it that it may go trim." Howleglas greased the wagon both outside and in. The next morning, the merchant picked up a priest and by the end of their journey into town, they were both covered from head to toe with grease (Zall 1963, pp. 208–9). Another time, after Till Eulenspiegel had finished a good meal, he told the innkeeper that the latter owed him money because the innkeeper had promised him a good meal "for money." About 400 years later, many answers along the same line drove the superiors of Jaroslav Husek's good soldier Schweik to despair. And even today there flourishes a character named Amelia Bedelia in children's books by Peggy Parish who instructs young readers in the same devices. Since this joking technique well befits the mocking of a dumb victim, we should not be surprised to find its predecessor in Greek antiquity. In Greek jokes, usually written about inhabitants of certain cities, stupidity was especially denounced. In *Philogelos*, the cities where stupidity flourished were Abdera on the north coast of the Aegean Sea, which is known today from Christoph Martin Wieland's novel *The Republic of Fools* (1863), and the remote Kyme in Asia Minor, as well as the Phoenician city Sidon. Moreover, other peoples also have such preferred cities of fools. For example, the Persians had Emessa, the Germans Schilda—and more lately East Frisia—and the Eastern Jews, Chelm. Even in Castiglione's treatment of the court of Urbino, the citizens of Venice, Florence, and Brescia were mocked because of their stupidity. In an old Greek joke, an inhabitant of Kyme wanted to find an acquaintance and called him by name at his house. Someone advised the man to call louder. Thereupon he forgot the name of his friend and called: "Mr. Louder!" (Dor and Federman 1971, p. 53). Essentially the same joke ridiculed President von Hindenburg in the 1930s and before him Emperor Franz Joseph, as well as other aged potentates, always to make them appear ludicrously senile (Blyth 1959, p. 487).

Nonsense

Each joke gives us a second sight. It places us in a world where one can transcend the laws of logic, where exaggeration is allowed, and where the bizarre is less surprising than the conventional. In this arena, nothing is impossible: beasts, rocks, and even the dead can speak; objects cast no shadows; trees grow in the sky; and the language of humor that resembles a puzzle takes on a high-spirited recklessness.

This magical power of jokes reaches its zenith in the best Oriental jests. At a reunion of happy people, one asks: "Has anyone here eaten thunder with vinegar?" "No, of course not. Nor has anyone as far as I know. Have you tried it?" "Oh, yes." "How did it taste? Sweet or sour?" "No, a little cloudy."

This joke points to a kind of humor that is known in the West as absurd poetry. It delights all children because they love verse in which the laws of logic do not apply and the wonders of a topsy-turvy world are celebrated. In this world, a blond-locked youth with jet-black hair sits on a green bank, which is glossed over red, and giant creatures descended from elephants leap from branch to branch. Iona Opie and Peter Opie, in their book on the language of schoolchildren, record many fine examples of nonsense rhymes and of "the deliberate juxtaposition of incongruities" that creates "utter nonsense," as distinguished from ordinary nonsense. They also point out that adults are mocked in certain children's satirical nonsense rhymes (Opie and Opie 1959, p. 19). One can certainly understand this as a playful childish revolt against authority and adult propriety and as the companion piece to certain kinds of political jokes of the powerless against those who hold power. But it is mistaken to suggest, as Opie and Opie do, that this kind of children's humor is typically English (see Opie and Opie 1959, p. 24). In fact, such humor has parallels in many languages and stands on a continuum that reaches from ancient religious paradoxes even to the clanging poetry of the Dadaists, to the nightmares of Karl Valentin, and to the theatre of the absurd. In the Indian *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, there is a puzzle:

The blind man found a jewel;
The man without fingers picked it up;
The man with no neck put it on;
And the man who could not speak gave it praise.

(Quoted in Zimmer 1969, p. 409)

Compare the view of the world contained in this verse with a story that Pulcinella tells. The actors of the *Commedia dell'Arte* in the 16th and 17th centuries, who improvised much of their speech, used *zibaldoni* or "gag

books” to enhance the quality of their performances. These compendia contained so-called *lazzi* or stage jests in mime or words that were handed down from one generation to another. One of these *lazzi* is a story told by Pulcinella:

There were once three hunters; the first was armless, the second eyeless, and the third legless. The armless one says: “I will carry the gun”; the eyeless one says: I will shoot as soon as I see it [the quarry]” and the legless one says: “I will run and fetch it.” They go hunting. The armless one says: “There is the hare”; the eyeless one shoots at it; and the legless one runs to pick it up. Then, wanting to cook it, they go to a house without a floor, without doors or windows and without a roof; the one without hands knocks at the door and the man who is not at home appears and says: “What do you want?” They ask for the loan of a pot of water. The man who is not at home brings a pot, without a bottom, full of water, when all of a sudden a man who isn’t there, without eyes, without hands and without feet, carries off the hare. (Oreglia 1968, p. 15)

Many other riddles also have the same structure, for example the Arab joke: “Three mutes carried a dead person, and the dead person spoke” (fingers and a pen); or the German riddle that one can also mark as a political jest: “Who takes everything away right in front of the nose of the emperor and the king?” “The barber” (Rauch 1965, pp. 166, 45). And there are many riddles, in verse or prose, that sound like nonsense. For example, there is the 17th-century riddle: “What work is the faster ye work, longer it is ere ye have done, and the slower ye work the sooner ye make an end?” The prosaic solution: “That is turning of a Spit; for if ye turn fast, it will be long ere the meat is roasted, but if ye turn slowly the sooner it is roasted” (Aston 1968, p. 96; Aston’s book was first published in London in 1883 and contains many other riddles of this sort. See, esp., pp. 128–29, 140, 267, 287, 304, 311).

For an example of a Dadaist sound poem, the first three lines of Hugo Ball’s “Clouds” may suffice: “Elomen elomen lefitalominai / wolminiscaio / beumbala bunga” (Schiefferli 1963, p. 63). The exertions of natural and mechanical noises stand in place of a musical tone; the Dadaists called this *bruitismus*. In June 1918, the first Dadaistic sound poem was recited in Zürich at the Cabaret Voltaire. Hugo Ball noted in his diary that he thought it desirable not to write secondhand poetry, that is, “to take over words (to say nothing of sentences), which are not invented brand new for one’s own use” (Schiefferli 1963, p. 32). The comedy of Eugène Ionesco’s *The Bald Prima Donna* as well as other pieces of the modern theatre of the absurd, also rests on unlikely, ordinary, everyday speech. Strictly speaking, Dadaistic sound poems are meaningless, and not humorous like traditional nonsense or “utter nonsense,” the humor of which resides in contradictions and incongruities of meaning. Sound poems are

rather like the pastime of the bored old man in Peter Bichsel's imaginative short story, "A Table Is a Table." The man invents his own "language" by using common words unconventionally, saying, for example, "picture" when he means "bed," or "to ring" instead of "to stand." The old man gets so absorbed in this game that he finds it perfectly natural to convey the meaning of a sentence like: "In the morning, the old man continued to lie for a long time in bed," by saying: "In the man, the old foot continued to ring for a long time in picture." In the end, the lonesome man loses all contact with the people who used to bore him and he fails to understand *their* language. "He fell silent, spoke only to himself, and did not even say 'hello.'" By inventing a nonlanguage, he loses his humanity (Bichsel 1969).

Absurd poetry deceives the reader who pays attention only to grammar. It seems to be poetry that principally pleases children. But Edward Lear's poetry and the absurd literary writings of Lewis Carroll suggest to readers, with foreboding and uncanny nightmares, a situation in which the order of the world as we ordinarily know it does not obtain. We tolerate this antiphilistine chaos only because we laugh at it with astonishment. The ordinary loses its power, the names of things are forgotten, gravity is lightened, the grins of disappearing cats remain, and capital punishment is decreed before judgment is rendered. Also Karl Valentin's "Lachkabinett" and "Panoptikum" deal with a world of chaos, one that is, at least by his own account, very droll. Also in his work one chances upon the absurd comedy:

He who are is all too long
Whether poor, goes himself with that
Which once are often rather it
Therefore will without that
together with, of course, then so can
with yours not already are
as long as one can be supposed to remain
together to be fine . . .

(Liede 1963, 1:143)

Hugo Ball mentions in his diary that he had written one of his books "in a peculiar kind of split existence" (Schiefferli 1963, p. 32). We know from the lives of English poets of absurdity, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, that they amused their public with fantastic absurdities that emerged out of deep pathological spheres of their beings, something that was also the case with Karl Valentin. Edward Lear was an epileptic. He was so sensitive "that to him noise, gatherings of people, loud entertainment, dogs, fools, and tedious people brought him close to madness" (Liede 1963, p. 170). He led the life of a loner, in which women had no place. Lewis Carroll was just as touchy. He is said never to have laughed and out-

wardly he gulped and stuttered. His overall form and his face were asymmetrical. He admired the beauty of young maidens whom he photographed nude, while he could not endure male children. His conduct led him, in spite of sexual blamelessness, to the very boundaries of what was considered proper behavior in Victorian England. It provoked him when someone interchanged Lewis Carroll the poet with Charles L. Dodgson, the pedantic professor of mathematics (Liede 1963, p. 172). All of these cases confirm the surprising observation of Hughlings Jackson about the morbid origins of the second sight opened up by comical word and thought play.

Defects—Physical, Spiritual, and Moral

A great many political jokes place individuals or figures of political life in everyday comical situations or attribute to them certain characteristics, such as stupidity or boastfulness, in order to ridicule them. Aggressive political jokes especially draw on this source of comedy again and again. Certain characteristics and events, which we can generally call defects and misfortunes, strike people as comical in every historical period and culture.

We can treat defects, mistakes, and misfortunes pragmatically—that is, turn them to our advantage when they happen to others—or we can diminish them by offering a sympathetic response. We can also laugh about defects, either faintly or heartily, provided that we accept them. We do not shrink from exploiting a calamity that is, for example, the result of a mistake even if enemies, rivals, or competitors find out about our action, unless moral sentiments hold us in check. We are inclined, of course, to help an ally in distress. But, if an opponent finds himself in trouble, even if we find no fault with him personally, we may laugh maliciously. If he has power over us, we laugh maliciously but secretly. Often if a clown stumbles or Bacchus is thrashed soundly, as in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, we laugh not only because we are spared the stumbling or the pummeling, but also because it is indeed comical to see the order of the world turned upside down.

Aristotle felt that the very essence of comedy rested in some defect. Now, the most basic defect of humans is some kind of bodily problem. Thus, one often sees naive laughter directed against dwarfishness or deformity, the lame, the one-eyed, the stammerer, the staggering or indistinct speech of drunks, fat people, women with lanky beanstalk figures, eunuchs, and the frailty of old age, along with many other infirmities. In our supposedly refined and respectable society, we do not laugh about such defects. Yet people still do laugh, and laugh uproariously, when they see deformities of certain sorts presented on the stage or in film. Perhaps

such theatrical representations dispel the terror that the monstrous inspires.

But the civilized control of laughter at bodily defects is a relatively recent phenomenon. Not only in stage comedy, but also in general speech and in the whole social life of classical antiquity, historians have noted “a naively malicious enjoyment, which today is entirely alien to us, in the defects of one’s dear neighbors” (Suss 1966, p. 31). *Philogelos* tells many jokes at the expense of eunuchs, of people with unusual bodily odors, or of those injured through hernias. Even Cicero, who warns the orator not to deride the miserable unless provoked by insolence, includes in his collection of exemplary jokes an anecdote that in hindsight casts doubts on his sensibility. He tells a story about an acquaintance, Caius Sextus, who was blind in one eye. One Appius said to him: “I will sup with you tonight for I see that there is a vacancy for one.” Cicero comments as follows: “This was a scurrilous joke, both because he attacked Sextus without provocation, and also because what he said was equally applicable to all one-eyed persons” (*De Oratore* 2.60). Evidently Cicero would not have considered the joke mean and small-minded had Sextus provoked Appius. Moreover, Cicero’s reference to the fact that other one-eyed persons could have been victims of the joke suggests that, at the least, he preferred to comment on the intended aim of the joke rather than express sympathy for the one-eyed person. Indeed, there are deformities that elicit horror instead of laughter, despite Bergson’s mistaken assumption that a person only laughs at bodily defects that he can imitate, such as lameness or stuttering.

One finds a similar story in Quintilian. Although he too held the view that jests about the miserable are inhumane, he approved an allegedly witty remark by Cicero about Vatinius who was lame. Stressing the improvement of health, Vatinius said that he could now walk a distance of two miles, whereupon Cicero replied, “Yes, because the days are longer” (*Institutio Oratoris* 6.3, 77).

Also, Macrobius’s collection of jokes in *The Saturnalia* contains a number of cruelties. For example, he reports that Marcus Lollius once directed a popular jest at the distinguished speaker Galba. Lollius said, “Galba’s intellectual talent is poorly housed.” As it happens, Galba was a hunchback (Davis 1969, p. 178).

It was no different in the middle ages. In Byzantine literature, little observance was paid to the Christian principles that Constantin Manasses (c. 1100–1150) urged upon his readers in his epigram “Laughter.” One should, he counseled, laugh only at the transitory quality of this world and at one’s own weaknesses, but not at the mistakes and bad luck of one’s fellow men. Instead, he noted, many authors amuse themselves in other ways. “It is mostly laughter that springs from scorn, personal hatred

and envy, or sarcasm and abusiveness that clangs from the writings of Christopheros of Mytilene and of one Psellos, and from the acclamation of people, from uncouth parodies like 'Mass of the Beardless' and from pamphlets of many unimportant squabblers. The purpose of this scurrilous writing and verse is not to right cutting reproaches or to redress grievances, but only to degradate and make fun of others" (Soyter 1928, p. 147).

Karl Mannheim (1928, p. 18) pointed out that, in medieval drama, blindness and lameness have comical connotations. Nor does Japanese humor spare the blind or cripples. In Germany, the hard of hearing were not too long ago a regular staple of the comic pages. In America, a blind man who caused an automobile accident with another person was a source of great popular merriment; and Johnny Carson delighted millions of television viewers with unappetizing jokes about infirmity and old age.

The widespread nature of such ridicule of bodily defects did not, of course, reduce the suffering of its victims, nor did it lessen their resentment. Moreover, Plutarch relates that jokes among friends at somebody's blindness or body odor are not only considered offensive, but also that clever jibes at the physical defects of the socially powerful occasionally lead to wrathful punishment. His example: "Antigonus joked about himself because he had lost an eye, and once, holding in his hands a supplication written in large letters, he exclaimed: 'Now truly, even a blind man can read this.' Nonetheless, he had Theocritus of Chios put to death merely because the latter, in reply to someone's assurance that he would be pardoned if he came before the king's eyes, had replied: 'Well, then, relieve is impossible'" (Kaltwasser 1911, 1:59).

In political jokes about absent powerholders, bodily defects are often ridiculed both in word and image: one need only think of the club-footed Goebbels, the gross corpulence of Goering, the senility of von Hindenburg, or the long nose and pear-shaped figure of de Gaulle. There are also many jokes of this kind not directed at a particular person, such as the one about the Jewish stutterer who sought a position as a radio announcer and, when he was refused the job, attributed his rejection to anti-Semitism.

Next to bodily infirmities, intellectual deficiencies are an important source of humor. Let us begin with mistakes in judgment connected to a dull nature. This human weakness appears often in popular humor, such as in the story about the swimmer who ducks into the water in order to avoid getting drenched by rain, as well as in stories about the dumb farmer's maid who uses a sieve instead of a dipper to draw water from a well. In an old Greek story, a young man is about to eat a bunch of grapes. But his father, lighting a candle in the darkness, surprises him, whereupon the boy closes his eyes and begins to snore while standing up. The same joke appears in later versions, most recently in a new German version about the East German who stands before a mirror with closed eyes in

order to see how he looks when he is asleep. And there is also a charming Korean saying: "With stuffed-up ears, he steals a bell."

A comparison of three stories, American, Chinese, and a European version from the middle ages, impressively demonstrates the timelessness of such a theme. In *Sesame Street*, the educational television program for children, two men often appear, whose incompetence to master the fundamental relationships of the everyday material world is a continual source of cheerfulness. They try in vain, for instance, to drag a large wardrobe from one room to another. One opens the door and then goes back to help the other with the wardrobe. But when both reach the door, it has already shut. They change their assignments but to no avail, since it does not occur to either of them to prop the door open. A collection by Han Tanch'un, a Chinese poet and official from the third century B.C.E., contains the following story with a similar point. "There was once a man in the kingdom of Lu who tried to enter a castle gate holding a long bamboo pole. First, he held it upright, but it caught at the top and the bottom, and he couldn't get it in. Then he held it sideways, but couldn't pass through with it. While he was cudgeling his brains about what he should do, a passerby said jeeringly: 'I am no genius, but, if I were you, I would cut the pole in half. Then you could go through the gate'" (Blyth 1959, p. 98). The same point comes through a third time in a story in the *Gesta Romanorum*, which was probably compiled in the 14th century. A fool carried a beam in his chariot. "He wished to enter his house, but the gate was so narrow and low that it would not admit him. So he violently whipped the horse, until they fell together into a deep well" (from Story CLXV in Swan [1959, p. 314]). It is highly improbable that the Latin and American versions of this story were indebted to their Chinese precursor. Instead, one must regard the similarities in the several jokes as comical reflections on the clash of irremediable human stupidity with an intractable physical world. The world is simply more unbending than humankind can possibly be.

In the case of a man who frequently makes mistakes or is regularly wrong in his judgment, we are dealing with a natural fool (i.e., not a man who only plays the role of a fool)—with a weak-minded, credulous dolt, a superstitious or disturbed person. Also, forgetfulness, which is very prevalent as a comic theme especially in Chinese humor, belongs in this category. Lack of judgment, whether sporadic or regular, becomes comical in proportion to the absurdity of its consequences, as for example, in the many jokes about the inability to distinguish between identity and resemblance. The confusion of persons, of course, is always comical. Even more comical is the confusion of twins; and this in turn is most comical when a surviving twin is mistaken for the one who is dead. In the same way, the confusion of the imaginary and the real is usually comic. In any case, the ability to distinguish between imagination and reality depends on

one's standpoint: anxiety about ghosts makes even those who do not believe in ghosts laugh. Finally, one should include in the category of jokes where stupidity or lack of judgment becomes an occasion of laughter the many anecdotes and jokes in which a man is made a cuckold or becomes the victim of a swindler. The comic theme of the deceiver, who plays the role of a god or an angel with a credulous young girl in order to possess her, is treated in the literature of many peoples at different times: with the Greeks and Romans, in an Indian *Panchatantra* story, and in the novels of Bandello, Boccaccio, Grimmelshausen, as well as many others (see Weinreich 1911).

Stupidity is the universal basis of mild political jokes that make merry over one's social opponents. One abundantly attributes defective intelligence to farmers and servants, poor people and the oppressed, but also with the greatest satisfaction to the socially privileged classes and status groups. Austria boasts of a great many jokes whose main character is a fictional count, almost affectionately called "Bobby" (see the collection by Reinhold Federmann [1971]). One night Count Bobby, walking with his friend Mucki through the streets of Vienna, beholds the stars in the sky and exclaims: "Would you look at that. What splendor! What intensity! And just think of it: All this only for Vienna!" When one hears this joke for the first time, one might perhaps be inclined to take it for a typically Viennese joke, indeed one that is not political.¹² In fact, it is neither one nor the other. Although Austrian in form and polish, the joke's fundamental meaning is not bound by time or culture. *Philogelos* contains the story about a young man who sees the moon and asks his father whether such a moon appears in other cities. There is also an old Jewish joke, in which an orthodox Jew, in the midst of a courtship, waited a long time on the new moon to say a blessing. Finally, he turned to someone he did not know coming down the road and asked: "What's going on? How come the moon is not coming out?" The stranger replied: "How should I know that? I'm not from around here."¹³

In the Viennese joke, mental dullness as such is not the butt of the joke, but rather that of a privileged social stratum. These Viennese jokes differ from the sharper wit once found in stories and cartoons in the weekly *Simplizissimus* directed at Prussian officers during the empire or in David Low's work aimed at "Colonel Blimp" in England, although both of these

¹² Compare this joke with Berlin humor. A Berliner is walking through Vienna one night accompanied by a native of that city. The Berliner points at the Big Dipper in the sky and asks his friend the name of that constellation. The Viennese tells him. The Berliner replies: "That's your Big Dipper? With us, even the Little Dipper is bigger" (see Schöffler 1955).

¹³ See Thierfelder (1968, p. 49). Also, *Humor seit Homer* (Humor since Homer), p. 81.

also poke fun at socially privileged groups. Out of Berlin comes the following story, whose comic import is the foolish confusion of persons. In the officers' mess, First Lieutenant Zitzewitz says: "Something crazy happened here yesterday. I rode through the park. And I see before me an absolutely terrific chick on a beautiful horse. I speed up, get close, and say hello. You won't believe this—it was my mother" (Fuchs 1974, p. 61). From Japan comes a story that mocks the illiteracy of a samurai. The samurai goes walking along the streets of Kyoto with his servant, looking at the signboards of the shops he passes. In front of a house that is locked, he asks his servant in a whisper: "What does this sign say?" The servant says: "House and warehouse to let." The samurai nods and replies in a loud voice: "The handwriting is poor, but the style is excellent" (Blyth 1959, p. 469). Wit of this kind flourishes when the prestige of the social group being ridiculed has outlasted the group's actual power or when outsiders no longer respect the style of life and the valued beliefs of the victimized classes.

The story about the samurai not only mocks the samurai's lack of education and culture, which is an intellectual deficiency, but also his arrogance, a more grievous moral shortcoming. A man who pretends to be other than he actually is and in the course of doing so betrays himself becomes laughable, as long as his misrepresentations do not succeed in fooling others. It doesn't matter a great deal exactly what his pretensions are—scholarly learning, courage, love of truth, dignity, or whatever else; so long as others know that he is actually an uncultured man—cowardly, deceitful, or simply pompous—he makes a highly comic impression on them.

Leo Strauss points out that: "The laughable is the defective of a certain kind. Given the variety of views as to what constitutes shortcomings, a man is most clearly laughable if he pretends to have an excellence while in fact he has only the corresponding defect, that is, if he is laughable according to his own admitted standard. Hence pretense, affectation, or boasting become the preferred theme of comedy" (Strauss 1959, p. 143). It is comic enough when a man is drunk or is disoriented. It is even more comical when a drunk man claims to be sober or when a distracted professor prides himself on his ability to concentrate.

Jokes that mock such weaknesses are often political, for example, when they unmask an ostentatious but thin veneer of knowledge or the hopelessly bad manners of parvenus. Roda Roda's "Guide for the Rich" contains a list of absurd confusions of foreign words, for example, "champignon" for "champion," "curaçao" for "cuirassier," "antinomy" for "anatomy," among others (Rezzori 1956, pp. 68–70). One can also go too far with this. So Andreas Gryphius became a victim of his own vanity in his comedy *Horribilicribrifax*, in which he wished to criticize severely the mingling of languages; he made use of no less than seven languages, "often

in a deliberate distortion to comic effect," but also, obviously, to broadcast his own knowledge of languages (Palm 1961, 1:60).

Mishaps

The comedy of a situation in which a person temporarily loses his dignity because nature plays a trick on him is inexhaustible. Some psychologists suggest that laughter at the man who slips on a banana peel and falls on his nose is a kind of relief that such an accident did not happen to those laughing. But this reduction of the comic to the motive of a common malicious pleasure becomes problematic when we consider that we laugh hardest when pretentious dignity comes to grief. The stumbles of the arrogant amuse us more than the mistakes of the modest. As George Orwell said: "And the bigger the fall, the bigger the joke. It would be better fun to throw a custard pie at a bishop than at a curate" (Orwell 1968, 3:284). Other theorists are of the view that we only laugh at small mishaps, since we have sympathy with the victims of greater misfortunes. Critics of this view cite Homer, as well as observations from the Fiji Islands and China, and among American schoolchildren, in order to prove that such theories rest on a false sentimentality (Rapp 1951, p. 38). In any event, the comedy of mishaps is clearly not restricted to a certain time and culture.

In American slapstick comedy, there almost inevitably comes the ridiculous moment when a custard pie is thrown at somebody's face. The Japanese don't throw custard pies, but they laugh at equivalent events. In the 18th-century novel *Hizakurige* by Ikku Jippensha, Yagi, one of the two main characters, finds a piece of wood floating on top of a bath already filled with water. The wood serves to protect the bather from the red-hot bottom of the bathtub. But Yagi takes the piece of wood out of the bath and hides it. Then he persuades Kita, his friend, to take a bath and Kita gets his feet badly burnt. The story ends with Yagi hardly able to contain his laughter over the burnt feet of his friend.¹⁴ The Japanese story seems gruesome to Western readers, while the American prank, involving the face instead of the feet, may strike the Japanese as more shocking. One should not consider the cruelty of the Japanese story as "typically oriental." Spanish, French, and German picaresque novels are replete with episodes in which suffering, far more painful than blisters on the feet, is treated as laughable. Just as pain and even death can be comical in classical comedy, so neither the pummeled knave, nor the roughed-up seemingly holy monk, nor the abused virgin, nor the flea-plagued fool who imagines himself to be Jupiter, necessarily excite a natural compassion.

¹⁴ See Satchell (1960, p. 26). *Trans. note*: See also the 2d ed. of *Dochu hizakurige* issued by the same publisher in 1988.

Even the obscene accident, in which the whitewash of culture is besmirched with filth, provides an occasion of laughter from ancient times. If, along with the political import of pranks, comedy proper, and picaresque novels, one adds the regular laughter of superiors about vulgar blockheads, as well as the laughter of ordinary people about the accidents and altogether human weaknesses of those higher in the social order, then one must come to the conclusion that the view that political jokes made their first appearance in the 19th century is obviously false.

The Paradox of Timelessness

Many political jokes seem to be so entirely unbounded by time or place that it is especially difficult to locate them in a particular cultural milieu, age, or social stratum. For example, it is impossible to tell just where the origins of the following anecdote lie: "A woman is asked to clarify why it is that, among the lower animals, the females mate only for the purpose of conception. She replies: 'Why, because they *are* the lower animals.'" "

We would not expect this joke to be told in a society in which feminine reserve and demureness is prized. But these social determinations appear to apply more to the fact that a woman, rather than a man, gives the unexpected answer. Had a man given the reply, or had a man told the story with a woman giving such an answer, the joke would be coarser, but still amusing. If we surmise that it is an upper-class joke, which happens to be correct, we are still at a loss in locating its time and place. It could have originated in a modern urban setting, but also possibly from 18th-century France, or Renaissance Italy, or perhaps even from the world of an Eastern courtesan. Finally, one should not dismiss the possibility that the story originated in an entirely unconventional milieu, say, a libertine bohemia. In reality, it comes from early 5th-century Rome. One finds it in the collection of jokes that Macrobius tells in his *Saturnalia*. The timelessness of this joke rests on its universally accessible meaning and its universally effective technique of surprise.

Now, one can see a difference between such nonpolitical and especially erotic jokes and some political jokes and anecdotes. For example, around the time that Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy führer, unexpectedly flew to England in the midst of the Second World War, there was a whole string of jests about the affair. But these jokes have no spark today because the incident is of purely historical interest. Yet political jokes that deal with a particular incident can effectively outlive the event if a symbolic meaning gets attached to the event in a way that makes it transcend its particular historical period. So the ambassador Helmut Allardt recounts in his *Moscow Diary* that, in August 1968, at the time of the Russian invasion of Prague, a joke from the legendary Radio Yerevan made the rounds.

“The Czech cry for help, which, as is well known, the Kremlin used to justify the invasion, was actually made in March 1939, when Hitler invaded the Czech Republic. But the processing of the demand through the Soviet bureaucracy took such a considerable time that a positive response could only be made in 1968” (1973, p. 43). Whatever this joke has lost in immediacy after many years, it still makes one laugh because the experience of bureaucratic tediousness is still present for all victims of bureaucracy and because the nicely delineated foundation of the use of force is by no means a thing of the past.

An old, time-bound political joke can also be adapted to new circumstances by changing its exterior trappings while retaining its universal technique on which comedy rests. The following story was current during Ulbricht’s rule in the German Democratic Republic. In place of the second as a time-unit, a new socialist measure was to be introduced, namely, the “ulb.” “The ulb is the time that passes between the moment Ulbricht’s voice can be heard on the radio, and the instant the listeners turn it off” (Hirsche 1964, p. 222). When Ulbricht disappeared from the political scene, the joke lost its spark. Then a few years later, one heard a very similar joke in the German Federal Republic about Minister Friderichs. “A business leader encounters Minister Friderichs on the street and greets him: ‘Good day, Mr. Frider.’ ‘But my name is Friderichs!’ ‘Well, then you can see how quickly I leave the television when you speak!’” (Kühn 1974, p. 56).

There are “migratory” political jokes that travel from one country to another with only minor adaptations. Instead of being reinvented, they are borrowed for use in a new habitat that resembles their place of origin. Now if the countries involved have similar political regimes, and are also geographically contiguous and historically contemporaneous, one can easily account for such migration. Under certain circumstances, the joke does not even have to travel. Many jokes poking fun at the government of the postwar German Democratic Republic closely resemble, right down to the wording, anecdotes that circulated in Nazi Germany from 1933–45. In other instances, the same joke is told about dictators and their regimes in different countries, without regard for the severity or extension of their tyranny and in spite of historical and geographical discontinuities. The very amusing joke about the Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who kept a portrait of Hitler on the wall of his one-room apartment in New York “to ward off homesickness,” was also told about a man from East Germany escaping to the West with a portrait of Ulbricht, and about a Hungarian fleeing the Kadar regime carrying, of course, the appropriate picture.

If the alteration of the details of a political joke affects its meaning, one might better refer to reworked rather than adapted jokes. Take, for example, the anecdote about the empress Maria Theresa, a story that came

to light again during the Hitler period in Germany. At a high reception, the empress broke wind very audibly, whereupon a young second lieutenant threw himself at her feet and cried: "Pardon me, Your Majesty!" The monarch responded graciously: "That's quite all right, *First* Lieutenant!" This joke, whose scatological import is truly timeless, was later adapted to ridicule the arrogant crudeness (rather than the gallantry) of Nazi diplomats. An ambassador under Rippentrop sullenly witnessed the same painful kind of event at a high reception; a young French diplomat had saved the situation as gallantly as had Maria Theresa's lieutenant. When the calamity repeated itself, the German ambassador sprang up, clicked his heels together, and announced in a clanging voice: "The German Reich takes responsibility for this one, as well as the next three" (Gamm 1971, p. 107).

Near the end of Willy Brandt's rule, aggressive jokes against him and his politics were told that had earlier been told against Hitler and Stalin. Those laughing seemed to make no distinctions between dictatorship and democracy, although it was dangerous to put abroad such jokes in the Third Reich, while, of course, there was no danger at all in the Germany of 1974. To wish Hitler or Stalin death, even though only in jest, was brave; but to wish Willy Brandt the same thing not only suggests a lack of moderation but eviscerates the same joke when told about Hitler.

The nonpolitical joke also has a specific form. Certain known symbols perform the function of specific and timely detail, directly evoking in listeners the expectation of a joke such as, for instance, when one cites a certain locale or dialect, uses a foreign accent, or especially when one highlights a familiar character, like an Irishman, a man from Abdera, Colonel Blimp, a mother-in-law, or a child. Anyone unfamiliar with the meaning of these symbols has a poor chance of getting into the right mood for the joke and may miss its point. Similarly, anyone seeing for the first time a modern production of an old *Commedia dell'Arte* will miss the clues provided by the characteristic costume and bearing of each actor that were familiar at a glance to audiences from the 16th to the 18th centuries in European courts and marketplaces alike. They knew immediately that Harlequin was credulous and bashful; Brighella, a cunning servant; Pantalone, senile, slanderous, avaricious, and vehement; the Doctor, amorous and pedantic; Pulcinella, fluctuating between recklessness and cowardice, feigned stupidity and feigned brightness, pummeling others and being pummeled himself; the Captain, a Spaniard given to pomp, swagger, and vanity over which cowardice finally prevails; and Scaramouche, combining laughter and pathos.¹⁵

¹⁵ Oreglia (1968, p. 114). Tiberio Fiorilli (1602–94), regarded as the greatest actor of the 17th century, played the role of Scaramouche. It was his performance that inspired La Fontaine's verse: "He was Molière's master / His own was Nature."

The very specificity and concreteness of detail that bind all political jokes to a certain time and set of circumstances make it difficult for outsiders and newcomers to grasp them fully, just as the typical forms of nonpolitical jokes, shaped by custom and locale, simultaneously embody and obscure humor. Typically, when one is learning to speak a language, jokes and poetry are the last frontiers of the new culture that one masters.

Scholars and laymen alike distinguish between Greek, Japanese, Jewish, and other ethnic or regional jokes. Indeed, Otto Schöffler has written a kind of topography of German humor with his *Little Geography of German Humor*. Still, one should not exaggerate the significance of ethnic differences. A careful pursuit of the issue leads one to the view that a great many new jokes are actually old or even ancient, and that many jokes attributed to a certain people or groups of people are actually well known by still other men and women in different settings, although usually in what we might call different historical clothing. If one sets aside the historical clothing of characteristic symbols, such as names, historical allusions, specific dialects, and typical figures that trigger local audiences' expectations of something humorous, then one cannot so easily assign jokes to a certain style as one can with painting, music, poetry or furniture, clothes, weapons, or coiffures.

How can one account for this paradox of the transcendence of jokes in spite of the time-bound quality of their historical form? The answer is simple. The essence of the comical does not depend on the allusive detail or the concrete historical form of a joke. To be sure, concreteness of detail enhances the comical effect or, in the case of allusions that the listener finds completely alien, blocks such a response. But the prime cause of laughter is the substance of the joke itself, particularly in the technique of surprise and the word and thought play at the core of the joke. Neither such techniques nor the perennial subjects of the nature of language and reasoning, that is, human defects and mishaps, or the human condition and the world in which men and women live, are restricted to particular places, times, or cultures. Moreover, certain political jokes, whatever the epoch of their origin, are constantly discovered anew, since their basic meaning rests on political experiences that are both common and transhistorical.

THE VICTIM OF POLITICAL WIT

Political Wit as an Act of Communication

Like every joke, the political joke is an act of communication. As such, one can examine it with the model for the analysis of propaganda originally proposed by Harold D. Lasswell. *Who says what* in what *medium* to *whom* with what *effect*? "Who" obviously asks about the narrator of the joke; "what" asks about the content; "whom" inquires about the listener, the

reader, or other publics. One can elaborate this scheme in various ways. In analyzing political jokes, one should add to these three basic questions inquiries about access to the communication, about the social situations where jokes are told, and, of course, their effects on audiences.

Access can be restricted not only by physical distance, illiteracy, and ignorance, but also by political censors and terror. Since the form, severity, and ultimately the influence of censorship depend on political circumstances, the open access to political jokes is partly a function of the form of government. If the open meaning of a joke is subject to no political restrictions, then it is possible to tell political jokes fearlessly and with impunity. When citizens are politically restrained, there is also a kind of civic humorlessness.

There are circumstances when, in spite of open freedom of expression, only a few political jokes circulate. At the time of the great coalition, there were fewer political jokes in circulation in Germany than earlier when the Socialist Democratic Party stood in opposition to the regime, and later, when other opposition parties did not share in power. Controversies in politics were dampened because the coalition left an oppositional void. Willy Brandt thought that the absence of jokes during this period was a distressing phenomenon (Ihlefeld 1971, p. 107).

Around the middle of the 18th century, Johann Martin Chladenius had already pointed out that the original intent of any communication is difficult to preserve. Whether determined by the audience or by the publishers and commentators of the educated “channels” or media, to take only two possible sources, certain kinds of alteration in meaning, such as exaggeration, diminishment, mutilation, distortion, or omission, are inevitable. Chladenius knew also that the viewpoints of those participating in a channel or medium depend on particular psychological, cultural, and social circumstances. Although this analysis anticipates much of what Karl Mannheim has called “perspectivist thought,” Chladenius, as both sociologist of knowledge and a theorist of how meaning is formed, has been largely ignored.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Trans. note:* The reference is probably to Chladenius’s (1710–59) *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünftiger Reden und Schriften: Mit einer Einleitung von Lutz Geldsetzer* (Introduction to the correct interpretation of rational speech and writings: With an introduction by Lutz Geldsetzer) (Düsseldorf: Stern Verlag Janssen, 1969). There is an important subtext to Speier’s comparative remark about Chladenius and Karl Mannheim. Speier was Mannheim’s first doctoral student. But he later broke with Mannheim over intellectual issues, particularly Mannheim’s epistemological equivocation, expressed most notably in his “perspectivism” and the lack of empirical grounding in his work. See Speier’s “Karl Mannheim as a Sociologist of Knowledge” (trans. by Robert Jackall in *The Truth in Hell* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989], pp. 35–49).

We should not forget that word-of-mouth communication remains important in societies even where communications systems are technically and commercially highly developed. Just as newspapers and books do not displace conversations, proverbs, and rumors, so entertainment in cabarets, or humor magazines, books, television, picture postcards, or recordings, does not put an end to the informal oral transmission of jokes. And just as rumors fill in some of the gaps in information created by the political regimentation of news (Dröge 1970), so “whispered jokes” circulate when critical opinions cannot be freely expressed in public. In Ulrich von Hassel’s diaries, which he had kept secretly from 1938 to 1944, he records many jokes and handles them as though they are communications (Hassel 1946, pp. 45, 59, 217, 220).

We know more about how jokes are sold to the public than about the characteristic *social situations* in which they are told informally.¹⁷ But we can gain some insight from observing the settings of jokes—the street, the train compartment, the barracks and the foxhole, the officers’ mess, the barbershop, the men’s club, the ladies’ social gathering, or city hall. The dinner party and the after-dinner gathering are the social settings of Macrobius’s collection of jokes and of Plutarch’s discussion of propriety in joking. In antiquity, social parasites often repaid their hosts for the free meals they were given by entertaining the company with diversions. These were the forerunners of the bores whom we have all encountered at modern parties who consult their notebooks in order to tell jokes in a preplanned order.

The most important jokes of the Renaissance were gathered by Castiglione and Poggio. At the castle of Urbino, Castiglione describes a social life that was the courtly forerunner of the later urban salons in which social intercourse flourished with anecdotes, witticisms, and jokes. Poggio talks about the *bugiale*, something like the “lie factory,” a place where the papal secretaries entertained one another with *facetiae* [drolleries] in Latin.¹⁸ In the introduction to his collection of stories, Poggio writes: “Since the time of Pope Martin, we regularly sought a quiet room in which

¹⁷ *Trans. note:* The specific cultural milieux of the production of knowledge and culture were central to Speier’s sociology of knowledge and of intellectuals. He was deeply interested therefore in coffeehouses, salons, pubs, clubs, lending libraries, and other public and semipublic gathering places that fostered the exchange of ideas. See, e.g., his essays, “The Social Determination of Ideas” (*Social Research* 5 [1938]: 182–205), “The Social Conditions of the Intellectual Exile” (*Social Research* 4 [1937]: 316–28), and “The Rise of Public Opinion” (in *The Truth in Hell and Other Essays*, pp. 143–61).

¹⁸ *Trans. note:* Albert Rapp translates *bugiale* as “liar’s haven.” See his wonderful collection *The Facetiae of Poggio, Anecdota Scowah*, no. 5, privately printed by the Roxburghe Club of San Francisco (April 1, 1962).

we tell each other the news and speak of various matters, whether serious or frivolous, to distract our minds” (Storer 1928, p. 9). The *bugiale*, a kind of ecclesiastical club, foreshadowed the modern smoking room for men. Even to the present day, the coffeehouse has always been another site for the traffic of anecdotes, news, and jokes. The titles of German jestbooks from the 16th and 17th centuries suggest other sites: Wickram’s *Rollwagenbüchlein* [the stagecoach and, in the subtitle, the ship and the barbershop]; Montanus’s *Gartengesellschaft* [The garden party]; Lindner’s *Rastbüchlein* [The place of rest on a journey]. In the houses of artisans and farmers, anecdotes and jokes from almanacs like Grimmelshausen’s *Ewigwährendem Kalender* [Eternal calendar] were read aloud.

It is especially difficult to ascertain the characteristic sites where whispered jokes are told in modern dictatorships. However, prior to the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, refugees from East Germany were asked in interviews where political jokes were told in Ulbricht’s German Democratic Republic. Surprisingly, only 8% of those asked mentioned the family, while not less than 83% answered that they had heard joking in the factory or in the office. If one included the university and the schools as places of work, then the tally rose to 88%.¹⁹

For our purpose, it is important to supplement the question: “Who says what to whom?” with the addition: “At whose expense?” The success of the *aggressive* political joke does not depend on its constant retelling like rumors that morally enrage people, even while they afford secret delight. Instead, the most important thing about a joke is that listeners laugh. In the case at issue, the originator of laughter says something laughable to listeners who laugh at the expense of some victim who has been made to become ridiculous in some way.

Most often, the true originator of a joke is unknown. For analytical purposes, we can consider the narrator and the originator of jokes as one and the same. Many times, the roles of originator and victim fall together. Such is the case with the involuntary and unintended comedy of a child. For example, we might laugh at a child’s words or actions (here, the originator of the joke), but at the same time we try to suppress our laughter in order not to lose the child’s affections. The clown amuses us at his own expense, but also often at the expense of other clowns. Naturally, it is possible not to take oneself too seriously. With the requisite self-confidence, one can even join in another’s laughter at an opponent’s joke in which one is ridiculed. In this case, the victim meets the joker in reciprocal laughter. Perhaps the victim disassembles; if he plays his role well, he diminishes the significance of the joke, if not necessarily its quality. This

¹⁹ For these statistics, see Krach (1961, p. 19). Unfortunately, the author does not state how many refugees he interviewed.

reaction on the part of the victim is only one among many at his disposal. He can also ignore the joke and remain silent. This is not very easy to do if the joke is made in his presence. If the victim is himself a witty person, he can respond to the originator of the joke with a counterjest so that the joker and the victim exchange roles. This demands, just as in the fencing room, an ability at repartee, a certain presence of mind, which many people possess in enviable proportions. Finally, the victim of a joke can proceed to an assault. Especially if he lacks quick-wittedness, he can soundly thrash the joker and the person who laughs. Of course, this depends on the customs of the country and on the bodily strength of the victim. With political jokes, it depends obviously on the political shape of public affairs, as well as on the political strength of the victim.

We must mention here the relationship, within a framework that is political, between the originator of a joke, the person who laughs, and the victim. The relative power of the three persons is obviously crucial. This is the case whether a powerholder amuses himself with the powerless, the powerless makes jokes about the mighty, or the originator of the joke and the victim stand on the same rung of the power ladder. Even the self-ridicule of the mighty is not the same as that of the powerless. We can recognize further significant differences in jokes among equals, depending on the power positions which make them acceptable. In a moment, we shall treat these fine differences. Still we will not deal further with the special case in which the narrator is inferior in power to the victim but enjoys immunity from retaliation, because, as client to a powerful master, he is protected from the victim's revenge. This is the case of the court jester who entertains his master with jokes at the expense of the master's courtiers whose power exceeds that of the jester but does not equal that of the lord. In a more modern situation, one sees professional comedians working for gain and public applause with impunity because the mighty defer to the power of public opinion, which protects the storyteller. If the mighty censor or punish the comedian, as they do in oppressive regimes, the power and freedom of public opinion is curtailed or abolished altogether.

Jokes among Equals

Aggressive jokes among political equals resemble thrusts in fencing except that they result in a coalition between the joker and the listeners laughing at the victim's expense. Such thrusts are frequent in democratic election campaigns. Candidates striving for power can earn the goodwill of voters with aggressive jokes about their rivals, and this can be decisive. A well-known example is Churchill's remark about Clement Attlee, his rival at the time, that he was a "sheep in sheep's clothing."

Witty heckling may also be regarded as joking among equals. Not only in parliamentary debates and at comparable occasions, but also in public meetings, the citizen who heckles a candidate running for office is the equal of the distinguished speaker, since until the votes are counted the latter has to pretend that he enjoys no more power than any other citizen. When Theodore Roosevelt was campaigning, he was once interrupted by a man who seemed to be drunk and kept shouting: "I am a Democrat." Eventually, Roosevelt, who was a Republican, stopped in annoyance to ask: "Sir, why are you a Democrat?" The man answered: "Because my father was a Democrat and my grandfather was a Democrat." Roosevelt said: "And what would you be, Sir, if your father had been a jackass, and your grandfather had been a jackass as well?" The man shouted: "A Republican!"

In a three-way negotiation, the joke among equals can also be used to build a coalition between the originator of the joke and the listener who laughs at the victim. At the Yalta Conference, Franklin Roosevelt tried to break the ice in his relationship with Stalin with a few jokes at the expense of Churchill.

The victim can also make a counterjoke so that victim and narrator exchange roles. Thus, the following story is told about Talleyrand. Madame de Staël's novel *Delphine* gave rise to the rumor that the character of an old woman in the book was actually a caricature of Talleyrand. When Talleyrand saw de Staël again, he said: "This is the book, is it not, Madame, in which you and I are exhibited in the disguise of females?" (Ramsey 1966, p. 24). One can find the prototype of this type of repartee in Cicero. He says: "It is a very happy stroke, too, when he who has uttered a sarcasm is ridiculed in the same strain in which he has attacked another. For example, when Quintus Opimius, a man of consular dignity, who was reported to have been licentious in his youth, said to the witty Egilius, who seemed to be an effeminate person, but was in reality not so, 'How do you do my Egilia? When will you pay me a visit with your distaff and spindle?' And Egilius replied: 'I certainly dare not; for my mother forbade me to visit women of bad character'" (*De Oratore* 2.68).²⁰

The heat of the battle of wits between equals may become so intense as to engender an exchange of insults in which the moral survival of the contestants rather than the applause of the audience is at stake. An often quoted illustration is the remarkably vitriolic exchange between the earl of Sandwich and John Wilkes. The former predicted that Wilkes would die either upon the gallows or from venereal disease. Wilkes replied: "That

²⁰ *Trans. note:* The same joke is repeated almost verbatim in the *De Sermone* (1502) by Giovanni Pantano (1422–1503). See *One Hundred Renaissance Jokes: An Anthology* (Barbara C. Bowen, ed. [Birmingham, Ala.: Summa Publication, 1989], p. 39).

depends, my Lord, on whether I embrace your principles or your mistress” (Harris 1966, p. 16).

Queen Victoria once remarked about William Gladstone: “He speaks to me as if I were a public meeting” (Ramsey 1966, p. 45). The salt of this remark seems to be a grain of humor at her own expense mixed in with the queen’s scorn at her prime minister. Many other politicians, including John F. Kennedy and Senator Barry Goldwater have occasionally joked at their own expense.²¹ Politicians may employ such conflict-reducing behavior either because political strife does not always appear that serious to them or because they hope that their ability to laugh at themselves in public will strengthen their appeals for political support. Adlai Stevenson, who had the reputation of being a great wit, claimed in retrospect: “I noticed in my campaigns that humor about myself and about general non-controversial things was much more effective than sharp wit directed against adversaries” (Harris 1966, p. 248).

Nonetheless, one can make the case that in democracies the average citizen, if not the intellectual, values other qualities in the candidate running for high office more highly than the candidate’s ability to laugh at himself, as was apparently the case with Stevenson, whose two bids for the presidency failed. A self-assured man is expected to tolerate some laughter at his expense. But why should the voter be impressed by the fact that the candidate seems to regard himself, and thus the office he seeks, less seriously than the office appears to the citizen? Humor directed at oneself requires a touch of melancholia, a quality more suitable to poets or philosophers than to heroes or to wielders of power.

The Laughter of the Mighty

When a superior laughs *with* a subordinate but not *at* or *about* him, the superior clearly does not degrade the subordinate. He merely engages in a playful episode of suspended superiority, since laughter equalizes those who laugh together. The servant may value being allowed to laugh together with his lord. He also has the feeling that a refusal to laugh would be insubordinate, and, if the occasion arises, will feign cheerfulness, instead of giving the impression of symbolic revolt through a display of indifference. Thus such humor always buttresses the domination of the joking master over the servant. One can characterize the jokes of the lord in such situations as paternalistic humor. Just how easily this kind of humor can turn around at the cost of the subordinate is shown in an anecdote

²¹ On Barry Goldwater’s humor, see *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor* (Spalding 1969, pp. 369ff).

about Konrad Adenauer. At cabinet meetings, the ministers gave signs with their fingers if they wished to say something and the chancellor knew at a glance if the advice they wished to give was unpleasant. When he had already ignored several requests of one cabinet member, he said to him at the end of a meeting as they were leaving: "Herr —, if you need to go to the bathroom, you needn't advise me of it" (Henkels 1966, p. 79). This joke, which treated the minister like a schoolchild, suggests how quickly paternalistic humor can become aggressive.

In sadistic pranks and jokes, the victim is placed in a comical situation so that his laughable qualities, for example his stupidity, anxiety, superstition, or helplessness, become especially visible. The humorous literature of the old Southwest offers several examples of such savage pranks. In George Washington Harris's *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* (1876), for example, the picaresque hero assists in the evening prayer service of blacks by releasing stink bombs and hornets in the church. The wild uproar and flight of the black congregation ensues, presumably to the enjoyment of white readers (G. W. Harris 1966, pp. 128–37; see also Lynn 1969, chap. 6, pp. 226–42).

Deriving pleasure from the pain of others is no preserve of the heartless. The mighty are not naturally compassionate and their aggressions are directed not only at equals or, more heroically, against others who are more powerful than they. They also laugh at weakness and physical deformity, although Thomas Hobbes has perceptively singled this out as a sign of small-mindedness.²²

One should add that definitions of political wit that presuppose that political life is confined to a struggle for power fail to recognize certain causes of laughter. We laugh or weep not only about the deformity of others and about those of our own actions that please or distress us, but we are also sometimes stirred by the joys of good fortune. The difference lies in the causes of laughter. There is the laughter of Yahweh and that of the High God El. El brings to the dry land the glad tidings that the rains have returned. Yahweh's laughter is triumphant, "an expression of his complete and sovereign superiority to his opponents and those who will not bow to him" (Hvidberg 1962, p. 154). But "when the High God El laughed and was noisy, and gods and goddesses had a meal with drinking of wine and sexual intercourse, all the people of the god must also feast with noisy manifestations of joy and erotic wildness. The feast . . .

²² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* 1.6. Hobbes regarded all laughter as "sudden glory" caused "either by some sudden (pleasing) act" of the person that laughs or by a deformity he perceived in others. Hobbes condemned the second kind of laughter. In his view, those who indulged in it were pusillanimous since great minds "help and free others from scorn."

was experienced by ancient Phoenicia-Canaan in weeping and laughter” (Hvidberg 1962, p. 52). While Yahweh’s laughter sets the triumphantly strong and anointed apart from their enemies and from strangers, El’s laughter is an embrace of nature, a celebration of fertility and rebirth: its spirit is one of solidarity and it knows no victims. The people seized by this spirit perform a cult in which the community encounters itself beyond all strife. The experience is nonetheless eminently political, not because it may be viewed as generating energies for future struggles against enemies, but because it is a manifestation of joy and sorrow felt by the people in common.

The social equivalent of physical deformity is vulgarity in the broadest sense of this word, that is, the boorish, the crude, the powerless and, in the intellectual and moral arenas, stupidity, cowardice, lying, superstition, and imperfect command of language. The extreme form of vulgarity and of undignified behavior is the unrestrained performance of bodily functions. Such instances, when they occur, are often funny in an entirely simple and natural way, so that no additional joke is required to produce mirth. Richard Alewyn (1957, p. 149) has noted that in the scatological literature from the 14th to the 16th century in Germany “the bare mention of unappetizing proceedings without any further treatment seemed fully sufficient to elicit horse-laugh.”

The baroque age followed the old rule that comedy and comic literature generally had to do with the common folk. And so baroque comedy is filled with vulgarities and lewdness. According to Opitz (1954, p. 20), the comedy “consists of base conduct and characters,” and Henry Fielding (1929, p. 20) said that the comic novel “differs in its Characters by introducing Persons of Inferiour Rank, and consequently, of inferiour Manners” (from the author’s preface to the novel *Joseph Andrews*).

Laughter at vulgarity and impotence is both the triumph and shield of power. The powerful laugh at their fortune by beholding what they are not but would be without power and dignity. They laugh at what others are at the moment and what they themselves were as children and what they will be again at the hour of death, that is, helpless and mortally weak.

Even the briefest discussion of the laughter of the mighty at the expense of the weak would be incomplete without mentioning the jokes used by totalitarian governments as weapons of propaganda. Their victims are political, religious, and ethnic minorities, or the hostile foreign country. Such were the jokes and caricatures that not only were recited in the officially approved humor magazines, newspapers, cabarets, and other media in Germany during the Nazi period, but *had* to be recited. These kinds of jokes are also spread like rumors by word of mouth or in handbills through party organizations. In the communist states as well, jokes and

satire without deeper meaning were also generated strictly for political purposes.²³

Just as after the French Revolution, de Jomini spoke of the emergence of a new type of war, which he called “ideological war,” so one might refer to these modern products of the totalitarian mind as “ideological jokes,” except that ideologies are always humorless. Moreover, such jokes were also spread as well-planned rumors by party organizations and by the army. Conversely, authorities later openly valued the spontaneous gallows humor of people as proof of high civilian morale.

Interestingly enough, none of the jokes made up and put abroad by the Nazis about, say, the Catholic Church were as funny or as radical as some of the best anticlerical jokes that originated within the church hierarchy. Around the time of the Nazi strictures on foreign exchange, which were aimed against Catholics, the following official joke made the rounds: “A man comes into an employment agency and asks whether there is any chance of an apprenticeship for his son there. The father said: ‘He wants to be a foreign-exchange broker, but I will not send him into a cloister!’ ” (Hirsche 1964, p. 71). One might compare this with the keenness of Catholic wit. For example, the old collection of Ludovico Domenici contains the story of a priest preaching to his parishioners a sermon based on the gospel story about the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. But the priest had Jesus feeding only 500 instead of 5,000 people. “His assistant whispered to him *sotto voce* that he had made a mistake, speaking of 500 instead of 5,000. ‘Shut up, fool,’ said the priest, ‘they’ll be hard put to believe 500, let alone 5,000’ ” (Storer 1928, pp. 116–17; see also Bemmann 1970). Or consider the story in which a Jesuit archaeologist tells the father general of his order with the greatest excitement about his excavations in Jerusalem where he has discovered the grave of Jesus. “Well, that’s wonderful,” said the father general. “Yes, yes,” said the archaeologist, “but the grave wasn’t empty. The skeleton of Jesus lay inside!” “You don’t say!” exclaimed the astonished father general. “Then he really did live!” (Bemmann 1970, pp. 102–3). A comparison of anti-Semitic Nazi jokes with Jewish self-mockery reveals similar differences in standards.

A similar kind of joke often puts the mighty in a bad public light, namely, the cynical political joke. This kind of joke mocks the belief in the value of things and does not take seriously the very issues that citizens

²³ There are several books about jokes during Hitler’s rule. An especially useful treatment of this literature is Torberg’s “Fug und Unfug des politischen Witzes” (1967). On the cabaret during the Nazi period, see Greul (1967, pp. 324–66). On jokes and caricatures in communist lands, see Andreevich (1951), Swearingen (1961), Jacobi (n.d.), Bazarov (n.d.), and Schiff (1972).

are supposed to treat with gravity. The cynical joker undercuts the authority of the statesman. One wonders, for instance, just how clever it was, in praising Willy Brandt's published work, to mention that the chancellor especially treasured the following, rather good, joke: "What is the difference between capitalism and socialism?" "In capitalism, man exploits man. In socialism, it's exactly the other way around" (Ihlefeld 1971, p. 137; see also p. 103). Perhaps much more mischievous is the following incident. John F. Kennedy, admired both for his patriotic eloquence and for his wit, said in his inaugural address to millions of Americans: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." This praiseworthy remark rapidly became famous. Not long afterward, Kennedy took part in a dinner in New York. On this occasion, he spoke jestingly of the same sentiment, but not with reference to the country, but to his own political party: "Ask not what the Democratic Party can do for you; ask what you can do for the Democratic Party." Specifically, he wanted the well-heeled guests to dig deeply into their pockets to raise money for the party. The guests laughed, perhaps without noticing that the president was gently ridiculing the very patriotism that he had only recently invoked.

The Laughter of the Powerless

The observation of Henri Bergson (1928, p. 148): "In laughter, we always find an unadmitted intention to humiliate [someone]," applies to jokes in which both the mighty and the lower echelons of society are victims, as well as to the laughter of power about misfortune. Because the humiliation of the unfortunate is to a certain extent completed through nature and power, laughter is only a confirmation of a *fait accompli*. Moreover, even with jokes about the mighty, whether they stem from the cynical observations of politics or from the people themselves, George Orwell's trenchant observation holds true: "Each joke is a tiny revolution" (Orwell 1968, p. 284).

The boldest joke at the expense of the mighty is one made in their presence. Of course, this is highly dangerous. There is a Chinese proverb: "Don't joke in front of a prince." Castiglione and others have given the same advice. Even a joke at the expense of another in the presence of the mighty is not proper and can get the narrator into trouble, since he has laid claim to the informality of communal laughter where inequality, in fact, prevails and the maintenance of a respectable distance is expected from him. Indeed, this goes for all social interactions that are hierarchically ordered, and not just for the political arena. The strict father may make sport of his son, but not the son of his father. The sick person, who is set back to a state of great, almost childlike dependency, does not joke

with the doctor, although the doctor can use his dominating role to liven up the patient. "And how are *we* doing today?" asks the surgeon, not the patient lying on his sickbed.

There are only two exceptions to the general rule that the weak may not joke in the presence of the strong. First, the powerless may ridicule themselves, thereby demonstrating their subjugation. When all goes well, they may incite laughter at their own expense. Poggio's old collection of *facetiae* contains the anecdote of the criminal who is brought before a judge known for his severity. Moreover, the criminal knows that this very judge has already sentenced three of his companions to death. When the judge asks him for his name, he answers: "My name is *Sedicesimo*" (the sixteenth). The judge wonders about this answer and demands an explanation. "Sir," the criminal said, "this is my name because you have already dispatched three of my friends to the hangman. It would please me greatly if first another dozen were tried, before my turn comes." The judge laughed and let him off cheaply. This story resembles the tales in which the reward of life or love depends on solving a riddle. Joking can impinge upon and, indeed, sometimes curb power.

Second, only fools and professional humorists may laughingly say the truth in the presence of the mighty. Sometimes even these pay a price for doing so. They are laughed at and possibly beaten for their impudence, but fools, whether professional or not, are not taken seriously. It was a different story with the unfortunate old woman in Milan who prayed every day for the long life of a most cruel duke. When she was asked why she did this, she told the duke that his predecessors were less cruel than he was and she feared that his successors would be even crueler. Because of her foolish reply, the duke had her put to death precisely because she was no fool.

The behavior of Si-Djoha, as reported in a collection of Arabic jests from the 10th century, cogently illustrates the relationship of the fool to power. The conqueror Timur-Lenk sees his face in a mirror and weeps. His obsequious courtiers join him in weeping. After two hours, Timur-Lenk regains his composure and his courtiers also cease weeping. Only the fool Si-Djoha cries on and on. His Lord asks him: "Why do you still weep?" The fool replies: "You saw yourself in the glass for only a moment and wept for two hours. But I see you every day. Are you surprised that I continue to weep?" (Storer 1928, p. 46). This story calls to mind a modern Polish epigram by Stanislaw Jerzey Lec: "Where laughter is forbidden / Weeping is usually not permitted" (Lec 1967, p. 59). Only the fool may both laugh and weep at will (Speier 1969, chap. 12). Of course, under a reign of terror, one can laugh only at jokes that are permitted or officially put abroad.

Laughter at the mighty is not necessarily the product of enlightened

minds. Radically aggressive political humor does not just criticize the powerful victim. The victim of popular jokes, who enjoys power, honor, and wealth, finds himself robbed of his dignity and stripped naked, so that he becomes a natural man no different from the lowliest of the low. Every claim to distinction is unmasked as a pose. Those who say they are chaste are shown to be lechers. The brave are liars who soil their pants when in danger. The tyrant turns out to be sexually impotent. The rich die as penniless as the poor. The wise are scorned because of their stupidity. In the story from the 15th century about the deformed farmer Marcolf, King Salomon, embittered at Marcolf's pranks, says that he never wishes to see his face again. Whereupon the rascal creeps into an oven so that the king may behold his rear end. Law is but a fence with gaps, honor nothing but a vain facade, and power as frail as virtue. The physician lives by killing his patients or, as in the Japanese tale, prescribes for a woman a natural injection, as it were, administered in the presence of her gullible husband. Even theology is not spared. In Grimmelhausen's extraordinary novella, the expectation of the Jews for the Messiah is fulfilled nine months after the effective impersonation by a merchant of the prophet Elias in the bedroom of the charming Esther, by the birth of a child, who, it turns out, is a girl, "a slit Messiah" (Speier 1969, chap. 16). The raucous laughter of the powerless and the lowly is the raging revolt of nature against culture, of *physis* against *nomos*.

The preferred form of the political joke of the powerless is not erotic, but scatological, although such jokes do not shrink from describing the venereal diseases or sexual aberrations of the mighty. Obscenities as well as imagery from bodily functions, digestive and otherwise, fill the classic comic literature of all languages. For instance, German literature has the distinction of containing in its annals a novel whose hero excels all men in the art of breaking wind. The Spanish picaresque novel abounds with scatological jokes and grotesque obscenities. In Francisco Quevedo's *Don Pablos the Sharper* (1626), the young hero receives a letter from his uncle, a public hangman, informing him of his father's death. His life was ended on the gallows by his brother who "afterward cut him up and scattered his pieces along the highway. . . . But I feel sure that the pastry makers in this part of the country will use him for their meat pies, and thus bring some consolation to his relatives" (Flores 1957, pp. 128–29). And, the Korean word for a shooting star is *pyol-dong*, which literally means "star dung." In addition, scatological humor is ancient. In Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, to take only one example, Socrates explains the origins of divine thunder with a reference to gastric rumblings. And, of course, to this day, sexual and especially scatological humor, allusions, and expressions thrive among soldiers in their barracks, in prisons, among rebellious students,

and among street people at the bottom of the social order (see, e.g., Labov et al. 1968).

The aggressive joke of the powerless is brutish and remorseless. But such jokes do not destroy power. Instead, they caricature power. To get a proper idea of the nature of caricature, one might turn to Annibale Carracci who painted the first caricature portrait around 1600 and who reflected about the essence of caricature. He said that caricature, like every work of art, emulates reality. But, while classical art seeks the perfect figure [gestalt], caricature seeks the perfect monster [missgestalt] (Gombrich and Kris 1940, pp. 10–11).

Whispered Jokes

In totalitarian regimes, many jokes get put abroad against the government, but only by word of mouth and, even then, they are usually whispered. Contrary to a widely held view, whispered jokes are not necessarily an indication of resistance. In all rigidly controlled organizations, such as the army or the prison, bitter joking is a regular occurrence. But the soldiers and prisoners who laugh at the superiors whose orders they follow are not about to rebel. In real mutinies, ridicule and laughter stop. Instead, laughter about whispered jokes eases the adaptation to the discipline and regimen of a strict regime. Indeed, throughout history, whispered jokes have been safety valves, enabling men to reduce the frustrations inflicted through taboos, laws, and conventions. Institutionalized opportunities for license at certain times or on certain occasions exist in many primitive societies, when highly esteemed clowns make ritualistic sport of all that is held sacred (Levine 1969, chap. 14). In ancient Rome, even the slaves were allowed to joke at the expense of the victorious conqueror when he triumphantly returned from war. In the middle ages, ecclesiastical ranks were reversed in mock masses, and holy rites were subjected to riotous jesting. Later, secular societies of fools flourished in many cities, relieving social discipline of its sting. Even today, we still celebrate Mardi Gras, Halloween, and April Fool's Day. The point is that such customs are scarcely a form of resistance to the social order in which they occur; indeed, they contribute importantly to the maintenance of that order. One might even suggest that the totalitarian persecution of those who laugh at whispered jokes is counterproductive.

Whispered jokes can also serve as a psychological alibi. By occasionally telling or laughing at a subversive jest, one can live more easily with nagging, half-conscious insights about accommodation or one's own failure to revolt. Accommodation, however much one peppers it with scorn, remains accommodation. Whispered jokes do not constitute a rebellion; in muti-

nies, the laughing stops. As the Berliner said at the end of the Second World War: "Before I let them hang me, I believe in victory."

Wit and Death

Radical political jokes give expression to the wish to kill one's opponent. They play with death thoughts and mock the enemy by rejoicing about his mortality, or even treating his death as a comic event. It is worth mentioning jokes that emerge out of the realm of black humor, even if they are tasteless or vulgar. We mourn for the death of a just lord, who brings relief from the hardships and poverty often created by tyranny. The death of a hero is a tragic misfortune. But we do not lament the ends of criminals and knaves. Above all, we know that we all must die, and the comedy of a macabre joke consists not just in its implicit death wish for another, but especially in the bizarre impression that death makes on the living. Macabre jokes make death and mourning banal. Radical political jokes transform hatred and misfortune into grotesque laughter.

Macabre nonpolitical jokes are, of course, as old as laughter. *Philogelos* contains many comic stories about gravesites (in "unhealthy" districts), funeral orations (composed during the lifetime of the mourned person so that the speaker, speaking extempore, would not ridicule him), coffins (which were too small and therefore were reserved for children), and many more of the same. "A man from Abdera had his dead father cremated according to custom. Then he ran to his sick mother's house and said: 'There is still some wood left over. If you want to, and are able, why don't you come and be burned with him?'" (Thierfelder 1968, p. 73). In this case, the listener laughs freely because of stupidity, that is, the stupidity of the man from Abdera. But the macabre can also be comical even when directed at oneself alone, as we see in the following story written for the *Berliner Abendblätter* by Heinrich von Kleist: "A Capuchin monk accompanies a wastrel to the gallows in rainy weather. The condemned man complains to God on the way that he must go through the bitter process in such bad and unfriendly weather. The Capuchin monk wishes to be charitable to him and says: 'You, scoundrel, why are you complaining so much about this weather? You only have to go one way, but I must go back along the same route in the rain.'" Kleist closes the story with the dry comment: "Whoever has experienced just how dreary the road back from a place of execution is, even on a fine day, will not find the remark of the Capuchin monk so dumb" (Kleist, n.d., p. 1131).

There are a great many macabre political jokes in which powerholders lose their lives. Such jokes may seem to the admirers of victims entirely tasteless, although they are not necessarily so. Put simply, the more unre-

strained the expression of the death wish, usually the worse is the joke in terms of vulgarity and tastelessness. However, the more one grasps the meaning of the joke from the point of view of the listener, the funnier the story appears, and if neither fanaticism nor fear hinder us, we must laugh. One heard constantly about Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, and other thugs who had achieved absolute power, that one would like to hang them on the wall, referring, of course, to their portraits. If not tasteless, this popular political joke was still pretty shallow. But the same jesting intent becomes immediately more comical in the following context: "On the coathook in the parliament stands the admonition: 'Only for congressmen!' A visitor remarks: 'Well, it's also for coats!'" (Kühn 1974, p. 54).

The newest form of a macabre joke is by no means always the best. For example, in a story that one hears about all dictators in this century, the mighty man is saved from drowning by a brave fellow and, out of gratitude, extends him a wish. But the man, finding out whose life he has saved is shocked and cries out: "Please, tell no one that I have saved you." In the last months of Willy Brandt's rule, jokes proliferated against the chancellor, his cabinet, and the Social Democratic Party. One about Egon Bahr goes as follows: Bahr had fallen in the Rhine and was pulled out of the water by three youths. When given the customary choice of a free wish, the first youth asked him for a world trip and the second for a Mercedes. The third wanted a state funeral. Bahr: "Why a state funeral?" "Because when my father hears that I saved your life, he will strike me dead" (Kühn 1974, p. 14). In this version, the joke is tasteless because it is spoiled through the pedantic trebling of the wishes and made coarse through the goals of the wishes. The result is that listeners feel ill-disposed to the joke and do not laugh. Even clumsier, indeed blockheaded, because its trashy form of enmity mirrors only a political barbarism, is a joke that made the rounds at the same time. "When will the German Republic once again be in order?" "When Chancellor Strauss at the grave of Willy Brandt asks the widow of Herbert Wehner: 'Who really shot Egon Bahr?'" (in *Der Spiegel*, November 2, 1974). If it is true to a certain extent that each regime gets the jokes that it deserves, so is it also correct that each joke reveals the character of the narrator and of the person who laughs.

Since a man's name is felt to be a constitutive part of a person, something that is true both in primitive and contemporary cultures, jokes that disfigure or make sport of a name are especially aggressive. They kill in a magical way. The satirist Gottlieb Wilhelm Rabener could not bear one Mr. Gottsched because of his acerbity and overbearing presumptuousness. "At a gathering, he spoke continually of him as this 'Sched.'" A guest asked Rabener, "Tell me, why do you always call this famous man only 'Sched?'" In a bad-tempered way, Rabener explained, "One should not take the

name of God in vain'” (*Humor seit Homer* 1964, p. 155). A friend of my own, a famous political philosopher,²⁴ constantly said “Gitler” and “Geidegger” instead of “Hitler” and “Heidegger.” When I asked him why he did that, he answered that, although he despised communism no less than National Socialism, “In Russian, one says *G* instead of *H*.”

There are also macabre political jokes that stand close to gallows humor and that bypass the political censor by being veiled in melancholy obscurity. The following excellent joke addresses the situation of men in our time and, almost imperceptibly, pulls with it into the darkness the sputtering emptiness of all bureaucratic regimes. The joke comes from Russia and is attributed to Radio Yerevan. “What should we do in the event of an atomic attack?” The answer: “Put on a shroud and walk slowly to the next cemetery.” “Why slowly?” “In order to avoid causing a panic” (Levi 1961).

Of course, the same joke could have come from a democratic country, especially during the period of the Cold War. Its melancholy irony fits the precariousness of modern civilization, regardless of the form of government under which one happens to live. The spirit of the joke resembles that of the disenchanting French farmer in the Vaucluse who, in 1951, refused to follow the good advice of experts on how to improve his economic situation. “Plant apricot trees? So that the Russians and Americans can use the orchard as a battlefield? Thank you. But I’m not that dumb” (Wylie 1957, p. 33).

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²⁴ *Trans. note:* The reference is probably to Leo Strauss, Speier’s colleague for many years at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research.

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