

CHIT CHAT CLUB  
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A WISDOM GAY AND SOCIABLE.

Chit Chat is a club of essayists. We write essays, listen to them, then praise them or shred them—and usually do both. For this meeting of the essayists, I select as scriptural text the last words of the first and grandest of all essayists, Michel de Montaigne. The concluding words of his concluding essay are: “Old age needs to be treated tenderly. Let us commend it to that god who is protector of health and wisdom, a wisdom that is gay and sociable.” In passing, I note that Montaigne wrote the French word “gaye,” obsolete for “gaie,” and I refuse to correct him politically: we all know what he meant. Most Chit Chatters, wherever we hover around “old age,” might agree with Montaigne that old age, whatever that might mean in dates or in stamina, should be treated “tenderly.” But notice that by “tenderly,” Montaigne does not mean handicap accessible, comfort care or senior fares. Tender treatment is to be blessed by the gods with a wisdom that is gay and sociable. In another essay, he expands, “the blaze of gaiety kindles in the

mind vivid, bright flashes beyond our natural capacity...I love a gay and sociable wisdom (and) agree with Plato when he says that humor is of great importance to the goodness and badness of the soul.”<sup>1</sup> “A wisdom gay and sociable” might be a perfect motto for a club of essayists such as ours, a coterie of mature persons, at present all male, striving for a wisdom gay and sociable.

Essays are a wondrous form of literature. The writer is held to very few rules of the road. Apart from the three components of effective writing posited by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, that is, a beginning, a middle and an end, essayists may roam where they will. The very noun “essay,” as we all know, means “an attempt, a trial, an experiment.” To write an essay is to try out an idea or an argument: it is a meandering of the mind. Even when guided by logic and stylistic rigor, the mind of the essayist is taking liberties with his ideas.

Some essays instruct, and are held to some standard of factual truth; others illuminate, shedding new light on some commonplace, and these are held to some criterion of fine perception and insight. Over the years, our Chit Chat essayists have given us many instructive and illuminating essays,

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<sup>1</sup> Essais, D.Frame, ed. Book III, 13, 827. [La vieillesse a un peu besoin de ester traitee plus tendrement. Recommendons la a ce dieu protecteur de las sante et de sagesse, mais gaye et sociale.[*Oevres Completes*, Pleiades 1962, p. 1096]; III, 5, p. 641.

often arising from their endeavors, experiences and enthusiasms. Our own Montaigne, the late Frank Sloss, bequeathed to us twelve miniature masterpieces motivated by his loves, opera and the law.<sup>2</sup>

The *Epistles* and *Satires* of the Latin poet Horace were essays in verse. He describes metaphorically his mode of composition: “I wander about wherever I wish, stopping to check prices at the greengrocer, mingling with the characters in the streets and, if in the forum at sunset, even dropping in at religious services.”<sup>3</sup> An essay can, without reproach, compare the cost of apples and lettuce and visit pubs and churches, obliged only to weave these diverse moments into some general impression, with requisite beginning, middle and end. Of course, most essayists will not roam but pick a path and march with logical steps to a clear conclusion.. But roaming through ideas is a license granted to essayists, and I intend to take it tonight.

Since this is the annual Christmas meeting of Chit Chat, at which our most important guests are the usually excluded ladies in our lives, I wondered about where to roam. This meeting takes place when the merchandisers incessantly remind us of the words of the old carol, “’Tis the season to be jolly.” Jolliness belongs, it would seem, to the department of

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<sup>2</sup> *Always on Monday*, San Francisco, Lawton Kennedy, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Horace, *Satires*, I, 6, 111

humor. Jolly is a rather phony form of humor, to be put on as a bulbous red nose and a bulging tummy, with a repetitious and unmotivated laugh, like the one that issued from “Laughing Sal.” Of course, one might use the word jolly as a synonym for cheerfulness, “gentlepersons of good cheer” and this jolly season is, in its nearly forgotten origins, a remembrance of tidings of great joy. Jollyness and joy and cheer are in some way associated with humor. I read a paper on humor and ethics several years ago, and so I decided to wander back to the topic of humor, searching for a broader landscape.

It is very difficult to define humor. Dr. Samuel Johnson wrote an essay, “On the Difficulty of Defining Humor.” And who is this minor Dr. Jonsen to contest the great Doctor Johnson? Perhaps we must, as Justice Stewart Potter said of a quite different topic, “I know it when I see it.” Philosophers whose business is to explain the meaning of difficult notions have from time to time made an effort to explain humor. Aristotle defined our species as *Homo risibilis*, laughing man. The phrase appears in his essay, *On the parts of animals*. He offers this profound thought in a discussion of tickling, an act having more to do with nerve endings than humor. It is a little amusing, is it not, to consider humor as rather like a leg or a nose or a kidney. Still, Aristotle may have had something. We know

that humor is not solely an intellectual flight of fancy: it is a physical fact as well. The physiology of laughter is well understood. Laughing is a major physical spasm. Oxygen floods into the cardiovascular system, muscles contract and relax, the diaphragm convulses; endorphins, the body's intrinsic pain relievers, are released into the bloodstream. The producer and writer Norman Cousins, you may recall, wrote a book entitled *Anatomy of Illness*, claiming that laughter, stimulated by watching Chaplin and Hardy films, was therapy for his cancer. Still, I would have liked Aristotle to have made more of *Homo risibilis*.

In another book, *The Poetics*, the great philosopher tells us that he is going to discuss the nature of both tragic and comic theater. "Comedy," he tells us, "is an imitation of men worse than average; worse, however, not as regards any and every kind of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the ridiculous...The ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm..."<sup>4</sup> Defining humor in terms of ridiculousness is, it seems to me, the fallacy that ancient rhetoricians called, "obscura per obscuriora, "making the obscure even more obscure." Scholars tell us that Aristotle's second book of the *Poetics* has been lost to history. The ingenious Italian linguist, Umberto Eco imagined in his novel *The Name of*

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, Poetics, I, 5, 1449a 31-35.

*the Rose* that the Second Book had been found but destroyed in a great conflagration that consumed the monastery library in which it was preserved. Aristotle's known words suggest that humor arises from a harmless contrast between the best and worse, the good and the bad, and that contrast causes laughter. In Eco's novel, the discoverers of the lost book find that Aristotle expands on that definition to extol the essentially humorous side of life. It was that praise of humor, coming from the great philosopher that stimulated the villain of *The Name of the Rose*, the grim monastic librarian Dom Jorge, to murder in order to keep the lost Comedy hidden: humans, charged by God to save their souls, should never be distracted by laughter or deceived into seeing evil as laughable.

That lugubrious doctrine was not uncommon in the early Christian church. The Holy Books of Judaism and Christianity do not ring with laughter. Surprisingly, the Bible opens with a splendid comic scene. Abraham and Sara break into uproarious laughter when Jahweh announces that they, at ages respectively of 100 and 90 years, shall have a child. Yahweh hears Sarah laughing inside the tent and says to Abraham, "why does she laugh?" Sarah answers from within, "I didn't laugh," and Yahweh says, "oh yes you did." (Gen 17:17;18: 26). Their child is named Issac, which means in Hebrew "Laughter." Sarah says, "God has made me laugh

so that all who hear will laugh with me.” (21:6). That fine comic scene is a great start for the Holy Book but after it, joyful laughter disappears from the Bible. One ancient rabbi advised his students, “if you feel the temptation to laugh, turn immediately to Talmud.” Fortunately, subsequent Talmudic students found other rabbis, and created a sparkling tradition of Jewish humor.

The forbidding Dom Jorge, of *The Name of the Rose*, was well aware that the Fathers of the Church had noted that Jesus never laughs. Does this mean that laughter is evil, they wondered? The meaning of this divine silence is even debated in the formal disputes of the medieval universities. One of the most benign interpretations is that Jesus refrains from laughter to show that while this life is a vale of sorrow, the next life will be pure joy. The biblical text from *Ecclesiastics*, “there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, is interpreted in that light: hold you laughter until heaven.

The rules of monastic life prohibited unseemly laughter and counseled gravity. But rules failed to quench what was called, *risus monasticus*, monkish laughter. We have medieval manuscripts of monk jokes. I imagine they went something like this:

A very tall monk from Cluny,  
wore a habit just down to his knee;

when he sang in the choir, he hoped to inspire,  
but instead aroused impious glee.

St. Francis, patron of our city, was an exception: he commended to his brethren a holy hilarity. The mirth of the Franciscans, newly arrived in Oxford in 1220, had to be silenced by the bobbies of the day; the laughing and joking friars apparently distracted the serious dons from their deep studies.<sup>5</sup> The strictures on unseemly laughter were everywhere endorsed but hardly enforced. Some preachers had a reputation as the stand up comics of the pulpit. One friar, Brother Mariano, was jester at the court of Pope Leo X.. Catholic admonitions and Puritan excoriations could not stifle laughter among the faithful. This censoriousness was not confined to Christianity. The unsmiling bearded faces of the Ayattolahs that hang over violent demonstrations are the descendants of the Islamic moralists who crushed the joyous poetry and dancing dervishes of medieval Islam.

Behind those melancholy condemnations, a veritable hurricane of humor was building. Start with Boccaccio, born 1313, then Chaucer, 1334, then Erasmus, 1466, then Rabelais, 1493, then Cervantes, 1543, with Shakespeare and Voltaire as late-comers. One after another, three centuries of a perfect storm of comedy. All of it swirling around and shaking mightily the *gravitas* of church and the *dignitas* of prince. This tornado of jest, parody

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas of Eccleston: *The Coming of the Franciscans*. Oxford, 1964.

and satire may have been more important than the Reformation in reforming the church; perhaps more important than the French revolution in bringing down tyranny. Desiderius Erasmus, in his *Encomium Moriae* or *The Praise of Folly*, written in 1509, is a monument to humor.

Erasmus was intent on writing a book about the serious problems of his time. In that volume, all the serious people appear, popes and bishops, professors and doctors, princes and generals, merchants and monks. All of them perform the serious roles they assume and all of them make fools of themselves in so doing. They are made ridiculous, in Aristotle's term, or laughable by the contrast between what they should be and what they are. Erasmus dedicates *Encomium* to his dear friend, Sir (Saint) Thomas More, Chancellor of England (the Latin title, *Encomium Moriae* is a pun on More's name). He writes "you take great pleasure in jokes that do not lack learning and manifest wit. You habitually...make fun of the ordinary life of mortals...with the incredible sweetness and gentleness of your character (that) make you a man for all seasons." In his dedicatory preface, Erasmus hopes that "these trifles lead to serious ideas...nothing is more delightful than to treat trifles in such a way that you do not seem to be trifling at all."<sup>6</sup>

We might recall that these moral trifles were meant to amuse the man whose

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<sup>6</sup> Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, C.H. Miller (trans. and ed.) New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 2.

high moral seriousness led him to place his neck under the axe of his sovereign, Henry VIII, also said to be a witty man..

Voltaire wrote that “those who seek metaphysical causes for laughter are never humorous people.”<sup>7</sup> As if to prove this, his successor *philosophe*, Henri Bergson penned a quite unfunny philosophical essay on Laughter. He opens by saying what a difficult subject he undertakes, “baffling every effort, slipping away only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophical speculation.” He concludes by comparing humor to the froth stirred up on the great waves of life: “Laughter comes in the same way. It indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life...It is a sparkling froth with a saline base...The philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty and the aftertaste bitter.”<sup>8</sup> Between those opening and ending words, Bergson struggles arduously to discern the causes of laughter. Perhaps one reason why it so difficult to find a metaphysical cause is the inexplicable diversity of the things we are amused by. The follies of Falstaff and of *Fawlty Towers* evoke laughter; a sardonic cartoon and slapstick comedy summon a smile—each so different yet each quite funny.

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<sup>7</sup> “Questions sur L’Encyclopedie,” *Oeuvres Completes*, vol. 20, p.374. )

<sup>8</sup> Henri Bergson, Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. Cloudeley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, (trans.) New York: The Macmillan Co, 1928, pp. 1, 200

But we live in a not very funny world, marred by holocaust, genocide, terror, exploitation, the miscreance of governments, the misbehavior of business and the malfeasance of religion. These are serious in the extreme. At the same time, we, in the United States, are engulfed in a flood of humor, produced by a comedy industry. Since humor is very much a matter of taste, many of us find much of that humor quite unfunny. I am bored by Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*, sometimes amused by its offspring, *The Colbert Report*, but find both inferior to the master of political satire, Mark Russell.

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I used to love every *New Yorker* cartoon; I cannot understand most of them now. Still, to remind us of the good old days, we recently bought a book of great price, the *Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker*, starting with a 1925 mommy telling her little girl, "It's broccoli, dear," who answers, "I say it's spinach and to hell with it." I have set it on my lectern, displacing the Bible and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and each day we turn a page and have at least one or two "bright, vivid flashes." It is impossible to find a

theme to all that humor. There is, as Voltaire said, no metaphysic. Yet, unquestionably, the same types that Erasmus punctured are punctured again on those pages: business tycoons, generals, doctors, preachers and professors, the elite and the socialites.

Often enough a witty remark, a cartoon, a comedy skit serves as harmless test cases for serious condemnation. The harmless test case reveals, in a “bright, vivid flash” the nature of the misfit that, when it moves into the world of actuality, does cause harm. A *New Yorker* cartoon depicts a businessman on the witness stand, saying to the court, “From a purely business viewpoint, taking what doesn’t belong to you is usually the cheapest way to go.”<sup>1</sup> The tycoon and his testimony are misfits. No CEO would say that in public. We laugh to see him offer this maxim as a defense for some purported offense. Yet some CEOs certainly think it and some companies act upon the maxim in a multitude of nefarious ways, to the harm of their customers, suppliers, the IRS, their stockholders and the public. Business ethics is serious business: the cartoon provides a harmless, jocular insight into that seriousness. Dennis Kozlowski of Tyco and the \$6,000 shower curtain, will outlive the clink but will he ever survive the ridicule?

In another cartoon, the doctor conveys bad news to a weeping wife outside the Intensive Care Unit. She asks, “Will he ever be able to produce

revenue again.?”<sup>2</sup> Again, a misfit: no grieving relative would ask such a question of the doctor, but that question is a harmless, laughable introduction into the very serious decisions that surround life-support: to what extent should quality of life influence crucial decisions (and, after all, isn't revenue an essential ingredient of quality of life?). Humor, then, is the gentle side of morality, the witty edge of reproach. It allows us an easy entry into the serious and an easy exit from the intolerable.

Bergson's principal insight in *Laughter* was that humor reveals the rigidity of behavior in a fluid society. His opening example (which does not seem very funny to us) is a man taking a pratfall. He explains "...through lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, as a result of rigidity...the muscles continue to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case call for something else. That is the reason of the man's fall, and also of the people's laughter."<sup>9 3</sup> Some of us may recall the hilarious French films of the 1950s, featuring Mr. Hulot. It is almost as if the star of those films had modeled his character, who was mechanical in his movements and in his thinking, on Bergson's insight of thirty years before. We laugh at the rigid inability to move with the flow. A *New Yorker* cartoon couple pay their last respects to a corpse, laid out in

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<sup>9</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 9

tropical shirt, shades and beach hat. He says to her, “Wherever he’s going, I just hope they have frozen banana Daiquiris.”<sup>10</sup> The deceased is rigid, not only physically, but in his inability to adapt to new conditions.

Bergson’s insight came to my mind several weeks ago when I read a book review by Christopher Buckley, a humorist whom I find not very humorous. He was reviewing *Animal House*, a book about the frat house that was the model for the film of the same name. In preparation for writing the review, he rented the film, and watched it with his father, who “rolled on the floor with laughter.” Now that is funny! William J. Buckley rolling on the floor in convulsive laughter. The rigid becomes fluid.

Any contemporary study of human thought and emotions must acknowledge the extraordinary science of neuroimaging. We can now watch on television screens our brains lighting up in marvelous flurries of neuronal activity as we respond to any and every sort of experience. These pictures show the flow of glucose and oxygen as electrical energy is consumed when neurons communicate across brain synapses. Humor has not escaped the all seeing eye of the fMRI scanner which really depicts Montaigne’s “bright and vivid flashes. Permit me to read the findings from one of these studies

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<sup>10</sup> <sup>10</sup> The New Yorker, March 31, 1997, p. 90; March 24, 1997, p.53; December 19, 1996, p.64.

entitled quite seriously *The Functional Anatomy of Humor: segregating cognitive and affective components*. “Humor, a unique human characteristic, is critical in thought, communication and social interaction. Successful jokes involve a cognitive juxtaposition of mental sets, followed by an affective feeling of amusement. We isolated these two components of humor by using fMRI on subjects who listened to puns. Our findings suggest that whereas there are modality specific pathways for processing the juxtaposition of mental sets necessary for the appreciation of jokes, a common component of humor is expressed in activity in medial ventral prefrontal cortex, a region involved in reward processing.”<sup>11</sup> What a striking finding! Our brains perceive humor as a form of reward!

Why a reward? What is it a reward for? How is Montaigne’s “bright, vivid flash,” Aristotle’s “harmless perception of a misfit,” Bergson’s “fluidity in the midst of rigidity,” a reward? We are, in our laughs, smiles, and mere amusement, being given a gift. Solemn Sigmund Freud, who wrote several essays about humor, exclaimed “humor is a rare and precious gift.”

<sup>12</sup>A reward is a gift or an acknowledgment of some achievement and, in humor, the achievement may be that we have slipped away or broken out the

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<sup>11</sup> Goel, V., Dolan Raymond, “The functional anatomy of humor: segregating cognitive and affective components.” *Nature Neuroscience* 2001: 4: 237-238.

<sup>12</sup> Freud, “Humor.” *Works*, vol.21, 166. London: Hogarth, 1961.

intense seriousness of life and its tasks, without ignoring them. We have escaped, without deserting, the oppressive tragedies of our world. Those moments of relief are not effortless, although we usually think of humor as simply happening. They must be crafted and designed by those who know what the best is and how life should be. It is a call to relax, in a harmless way, the tensions of responsibility. It shows us, in Bergson's concept, how to flow in a flowing world, how to relax the rigidity of a serious world, the fluidity with which we refresh our view of ourselves and our world. Just as the fMRI scan pictures the flowing of blood oxygen through our cortical regions, a good joke or comic scene: both are forms of the fluidity with which our human nature is blessed. They cause wisdom to flow through a soul that may be tight with responsibility and beset with trials and through a community clouded by disputes and tragedy. Humor, great or slight, should create a sociability that unites those who recognize in the bright and vivid flash our common humanity and folly. That flash is the signal of a gay and sociable wisdom. We cannot live together unless we can laugh together.

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