

Article

Comic Intelligence and Its Anarchic Origins in Modernity

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Abstract: This paper examines what constitutes comic thinking in light of Agnes Heller's understanding of freedom in modernity. Heller famously argues that freedom in the modern age is based upon a fundamental paradox. Freedom is the foundation of everything; but in itself is groundless, making freedom constitutively anarchic. The paper investigates two key efforts to conceptualize comedy in modernity under such an ambiguous and anarchic idea of freedom. Taking as the point of departure Walter Benjamin's famous distinction between two types of experience of reality in the modern world—the short-term experience of *Erlebnis* and the long-term *Erfahrung*—the paper connects their relation to the concept of the comic in Charles Baudelaire and Henri Bergson. It further examines how they are in effect two different types of responses towards the singular tension opened by the paradox of freedom. Such a dynamic of modernity would generate what we would call the “problem of comic intelligence.” Moreover, the paper would try to argue that while Bergson seeks to overcome the anarchic *impasse* of modernity torn between mechanical utilitarianism of technology and the vitality of meaning and life, Baudelaire envisions a more complex image of modernity which cannot reconcile the fundamental opposition of modernity.

Keywords: Benjamin, Baudelaire, laughter, representation

The Antinomic Problem of Modern Freedom: Heller

In his 1939 essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,”¹ Walter Benjamin argued that the plight of modern experience emerges in Baudelaire, in the form of a struggle between two modes of temporal experience. The modern predicament is captured, according to Benjamin, in the tension

¹ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Harry Zohn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

between what he calls *Erfahrung* (long experience) and *Erlebnis* (isolated experience). *Erfahrung* can be understood as the process by which consciousness produces meaning by combining actual elements of reality from the individual's past with elements of the collective past. *Erfahrung* therefore is related to the production of meaning through the production of duration. Tradition provides experience with a sense of the past giving it a duration thereby producing the narrative which fulfils the demand for meaning. *Erlebnis*, in contrast, absorbs the shock of existence unleashed by a technologized modernity which is instantaneous, repetitive, and expressive of "homogeneous, empty time."² Here, the demand for meaning is exposed as a desire which remains unfulfilled and lacking. Time is experienced in fragmented, atomized form as the accumulation of successive instances. *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* express the tension of modern consciousness as continuously splitting itself between a search for meaning-orientated, narrativized, historical rationality and the production of a goal-oriented instrumentalized technological reason. The tension which Benjamin hints towards is made possible in modernity when the world starts oscillating between two sources of imagination: the historical and the technological, each caused by the emancipation of reason from all types of transcendental conditions.

There is little doubt that this tension which Benjamin identifies at the heart of the modern experience reflects a more fundamental tension opened by the problem of freedom. Our challenge is to situate modern efforts to conceptualize comedy—specifically the efforts made by Henri Bergson and Charles Baudelaire within this problematic of freedom. Agnes Heller's understanding of freedom and its relation to comedy can be very useful in this context. For Heller, freedom is the sign of a particular symbolic *impasse* of modernity. Freedom signifies a new foundation of modernity which emerges "in and through the destruction and deconstruction of all foundations."³ Moreover, freedom, Heller argues, is the *arche* of modernity which opens a paradox insofar as "freedom is entirely unfit to serve as an arche because it is a foundation that does not found. As a *Grund*—to speak with both Hegel and Heidegger—it opens the *Abrund*: that is, the ground opens the abyss."⁴

² Benjamin would propose a critique of progress as a movement through empty, homogeneous time against which he would contrast the revolutionary idea of a now-time (*Jetztzeit*) or fulfilled time. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 261.

³ Agnes Heller, "The Three Logics of Modernity and the Double Bind of the Modern Imagination," in *Thesis Eleven*, 81 (2005).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 63–64.

Since modernity is based on freedom and freedom cannot act as a sovereign foundation, modernity remains without an *arche*—without a founding principle. It is precisely at this point when freedom is presented as “an-archic” —without foundation or as the destroyer of all foundations—that the aporia is simultaneously born and concealed. This paradox or aporia is therefore at the heart of the problem of freedom which becomes critical of all hitherto logics of the foundation of society as well as reality. Freedom becomes a problem in modernity precisely now when it emerges as an object of thinking. The modern subject is not only deemed free, but it has the capacity to freely think “what is freedom,” “what is its basis,” “what is the truth behind freedom,” and so on. This is what Heller calls the “dynamic of modernity” which allows a new form of social arrangement to emerge.⁵ Heller writes:

This dynamic consists of the constant and ongoing querying and testing of the dominating concepts of the true, the good, and the just. They delegitimize the traditional norms, rules, beliefs, and suchlike of any given world as ‘mere opinion’ and legitimize other concepts and contents of the true, the good, and the just in their place – ‘this is not good, something else is good’.⁶

Clearly what Heller calls the dynamics of modernity is its critical spirit to question all principles, to problematize all sources of authority and all principles of governance. The problem of freedom is therefore entangled, on the one hand, with the desire to problematize, which is a dynamic process, and, on the other, with the aporia of a groundless ground which abolishes all fixity.

However, Heller argues that the problem of freedom, which carries a paradox at its heart, is soon suppressed by offering a solution to the problem. The solution offered is simple: re-present freedom itself—which is absolutely contingent, singular, and lacking all foundation; in other words, anarchic—as the very necessity of modern life. Freedom insists as the only and necessary foundation because it is impossible to found anything on the basis of freedom. This is the antinomic configuration of modernity whose *arche* comes into existence only on the basis of the anarchic which is immediately suppressed. The paradox of freedom leads to a further problem. A second level of contradiction is produced as a result of the primary contradiction of freedom as *anarchic arche*. The freedom which fuels the

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶ *Ibid.*

modern machinery of power simultaneously conceals any possibility of articulating any genuine concept of freedom. On this point, Heller notes that the paradox of freedom is not only unsolvable, but it is mostly not recognized as a paradox even though we are confronted with it or endowed with it in our reflection. In other words, although the problem of freedom might remain unsolvable, the sting needs to be neutralized by offering an immediate solution. She calls this moment of concealment “the temporalization of the paradox” when the problem of freedom is neutralized of its paradoxical and anarchic nature and presented as an *apparent* contradiction which can very well be solved. Heller, therefore, notes:

In my view, this ‘temporalization of the paradox’ is a normal modern phenomenon. The paradox remains unnoticed if groups that in one or the other direction do so with the conviction that if they can only manage to do the right thing the ‘other’ will disappear. They can regard the paradox as a seeming paradox that can be eliminated, or as a problem that can and must be solved.⁷

There are, according to Heller, at least two modes of the temporalization of the paradox of freedom in modernity. One way is to neutralize the paradox through a technological imagination where life becomes a technological problem which can easily be solved. The other way, of course, is to mobilize the historical imagination of modernity, embedded in enlightenment, which abolishes “otherness” by offering a theoretical or conceptual knowledge overcoming all forms of earlier prejudice of exclusion. Temporalization of the paradox of freedom therefore becomes identical to the closure of the problem of freedom in modernity. It is here that the problem of freedom in Heller opens onto the question of comedy.

The paradox of freedom which operates as a “a foundation that does not found” can very well be recognized in other forms. Heller argues that although the paradoxicality of freedom saturates modern consciousness it is hardly acknowledged in certain formalizations of knowledge. For example, when it comes to the question of universality or homogeneity and heterogeneity or differences, no paradox is allowed to contaminate the clear opposition between such categories. It is here that thinking through the comic becomes, for Heller, a crucial mode of intervention. Comedy, according to Heller, not only offers a way to *expose* but *formalize* the paradox of freedom without resolving it. This is perhaps the reason why comedy, as Heller argues, is impossible to conceptualize which is evident from the lack of

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

interest shown by modern philosophy to take up the problem of comedy. So, in certain sense, comedy or the comic imagination passes diagonally through the technological and historical imagination that Heller identifies as the two sources of modern imagination. We can perhaps even argue that the comic imagination, which resists conceptualization, *de-temporalizes* the paradox of freedom. The comic imagination spells out the impossibility of the closure of the paradox of freedom. It re-situates the paradox of freedom in its original anarchic context.

In her seminal work, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomena in Art, Literature and Life*, Heller emphasizes the impossibility of bringing all the heterogeneous elements that define the comic, whether in life or art under a unifying concept. She calls this “the undeterminable essence of the comic.”⁸ Heller underlines this failure of discourse to make “some order out of the disorder, of suggesting guidance to mark the way of inquiry into the comic.”⁹ This heterogeneity works, according to Heller, at two levels. First, at a historical level. The modern experience with its essential heterogeneity, embedded in an anarchic idea of freedom, aligns itself more to the comic than to a tragic sensibility. Heller notes that “it has been argued that in modern times there are no more tragedies. If this were true modern times could open the space not just for comic presentation, but also for philosophical reflection on comedies.”¹⁰ However, if philosophy is to take up comedy it must ascertain a certain ground which can unify the various comic genres as well as the comic experience of modern existence. The impossibility to do so is symptomatic not only of the failure of philosophy to provide a unifying concept of the comic, something that it is able to do for tragedy, it also marks the very limits of philosophical thinking itself which often fails to understand the modern experience. Heller notes that maybe it is the very heterogeneous nature of the modern experience that resists conceptual homogeneity making it inherently comic. She writes, “is the Modern way of life itself comic to a degree that makes comic presentation becomes impossible and transforms reflection on the comic phenomenon from philosophical, to a low-level empirical exercise, such as rude humour?”¹¹ Again, the problem of the ground becomes apparent. Heller remarks “but if we accepted that modern life is through and through comic then against what standard would we juxtapose it?”¹² We are back to the anarchic origins of modernity. Hence Heller is skeptical of someone like Umberto Eco who, in his famous novel *The*

⁸ Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

Name of the Rose, argues that human tolerance is the condition of possibility of comedy while fanaticism emerges as the enemy of the comic. However, it is not at all evident that comedy flourishes in tolerance. She writes, "So, we should also ask the question as to whether in a world of widespread tolerance, comic genres would still be possible."¹³ This problem of tolerance takes significant importance in our age of liberal democracy and political correctness, where tolerance can be seen as working in the opposite direction curtailing the inherent negativity any genuine comic imagination carries. This is the kind of tolerance, paraded today, which allows only system-compatible differences to flourish and rejects any form of radical difference which reveals a trace of negative residue. Today's cancel culture, which significantly affects the comic imagination, can be seen as a byproduct of such a version of system-compatible difference.¹⁴

Instead of tolerance acting as the unifying essence of the comic, Heller provides a more complex but elegant logic. Heller argues that comedy, or the comic genres perform a unique but common function of formalizing the anarchic experience of modern heterogenous existence into a second order of artistic heterogeneity. Comedy as an artistic genre, Heller remarks, is akin to modern life being equally chaotic and heterogenous. However, comedy, particularly the high comic genres in themselves are also formally restrictive. They formalize at the level of artist expression "relatively homogenizing most of them, since they must all be subordinated to the structure, to the characters and the plot."¹⁵ This is what Heller calls first-order homogenizing which transforms the heterogeneity of life into the heterogeneity of the high comic genres. Heller argues that we must distinguish between two levels of heterogeneity. The heterogeneity of modern experience based on the paradox of freedom and the heterogeneity of the comic genres. This second type of heterogeneity which informs the comic genres is symptomatic of the paradox of freedom working *within* the modern aesthetic regime: anything can be art, yet art is also something distinct seeking its own singularity. Following Heller's logic, we can argue that the comic imagination as expressed through the comic genres is perhaps better equipped to not only express the paradox of freedom in modernity but the aesthetic regime which modernity unleashes. Heller notes:

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ The question of system-compatible difference and its relation to a society of positivity in neoliberal societies has been significantly developed in the work of the Korean-German philosopher Byung Chul-Han. See particularly the chapter "The Terror of the Same" in *The Expulsion of the Other*, trans. by Wieland Hoban. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Heller, *Immortal Comedy*, 7.

The second-order heterogeneity and the second-order repetitiousness of the comic genres can also be understood as a reflective distance from the first-order heterogeneity and first-order repetitiousness of everyday life. One could say at first approach, that the comic genre makes fun of everyday life and everyday characters, which they simultaneously present and represent.¹⁶

Comic reflection or intelligence takes place in the distance between the first- and second-orders of heterogeneity: between life and art. Through the restrictive boundaries of the homogeneous form of the comic genre (art) we gain a critical perspective on the heterogeneity of life. The formal restriction of the comic genre cannot be reduced to a unifying logic of a concept of the comic. This is the essence of comic thinking: it cannot be unified and made identifiable. The artistic heterogeneity of comedy affirms the experiential heterogeneity of modern life. Comic intelligence, therefore, unbinds any totalizing logic of reflection. Comic intelligence cannot lead to a unifying discourse which is easily recognizable. Comedy, by making fun of every form of everyday heterogeneity of experience, re-presents them or re-situates them under a critical lens informed by reflective distance. The second-order repetitiousness of comic thinking that Heller talks about hollows out everyday representations of their substance, allowing us to realize that they are nothing more than images. However, one might argue that comic genres are themselves forms of representations with recognizable formal features, which is why comedy is not anti-representation or anti-image. Comedy depends on images—or types—perhaps more than any other genre. Tragedy, on the contrary, belongs to the realm of the exception to the image. Tragedy seeks to demonstrate how exceptionality embodied in the figure of the tragic hero cannot be captured by any commonsensical image. Comic intelligence on the other hand cannot but represent the common sensical: *everybody knows there is heterogeneity in the world which nobody can deny*. However, comic intelligence or comic thinking takes this common sense as an object of thought and does not succumb to the temptation of merely representing or repeating it. Heterogeneity is not repeated factitiously without reflecting upon it by opening a gap between art and life through the intrusion of homogeneity. Heterogeneity and homogeneity no longer occupy strictly oppositional places but become entangled with each other, allowing comedy to simultaneously present and re-present heterogeneity. In other words, the paradox of freedom, which is the heart of heterogeneity, is able to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

expose itself as a problem. Comic representation founded on repetition-of-the-second order hollows out any substance which might claim to be the ground of heterogeneity and freedom of modern experience. The second-order re-presentation which presents and represents reality at the same time dissolves any effort to temporalize the paradox of freedom. Comic intelligence exposes the anarchic basis of modern freedom by transforming freedom into a problem. The fact that comedy challenges the temporalization of the paradox of freedom is the reason that Heller sees comedy as bearing the temporal stamp of “absolute present time.”¹⁷ It comes as no surprise that for Heller laughter is the quintessential sign of the present time unlike crying which has a different temporality. As she writes:

The circus clown plays his tricks before our eyes, the fool whispers his truths into the ear of the king, the Thracian maid watches Thales fall down...One can cry thinking of the past. Indeed, mourning is deeply involved in the past, as hope is vested in the future.¹⁸

Comic thinking is an index of the “absolute present time.” But, as we all know, absolute present time is no-time-at-all. Through the introduction of the “absolute present” the effect of de-temporalization begins to work in the comic understanding of time. Even when captured in the works of comic authors that might represent images from the past, they can only become comic when someone laughs at them in the present. This is the emancipatory moment of comedy which freely constitutes “situations and characters which will or can elicit comic experience, in the ever-present time of their listeners, watchers and readers.”¹⁹ Comedy expresses not only the paradox of freedom in modernity it also makes impossible any attempt to close or temporalize the anarchic origins of modern freedom by drawing our attention to the problem of the absolute present time: the time of *Erlebnis*.

We need to examine the theories of comedy proposed by Henri Bergson and Charles Baudelaire in light of an understanding of comic intelligence which de-temporalizes and renders impossible the closure of the problem of freedom in modernity. Following Heller, we would argue that comic intelligence does not offer a solution to the paradox of freedom in modernity but seeks to formalize it as a problem. The true radicality of comic intelligence, which is consequently rare, is to keep alive the crisis of freedom as a problem not allowing it to be occluded by any image of thought which

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

seeks solution. Isn't comic intelligence the ideal domain of thinking where every recognizable pattern of things, every commonsensical answer to the questions of everyday modern experience becomes simultaneously unrecognizable and non-sensical? To put it more concisely, isn't comedy the paradigm of modernity? This is our first level of problem which leads to the second level: Do modern conceptualization of the comic remain faithful to the paradox of freedom and the problematics of comic intelligence or do they succumb to the temptation of proposing a solution in their effort to conceptualize comic intelligence? Taking Bergson's and Baudelaire's concept of the comic we shall test the thesis that beneath any concept of the comic lurks the impossible problem of comic intelligence.

The Corrective Sign of Insufficient Impetus: Bergson

Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the meaning of the Comic* insists on not providing an abstract definition of the comic in favor of examining it as a "living ideal."²⁰ The work is symptomatic of his deeper philosophical desire to overcome the alienation of scientific knowledge from social reality which plagued knowledge systems under industrial capitalism.²¹ Bergson argues for an understanding of the essence of the "comic spirit" as a "living thing"²² which is expressed in his famous formula "something mechanical encrusted on the living."²³ The essay remains a study of Bergson's use of "intuition as method"²⁴ which develops the problem of the comic as something given to immediate experience that can be expanded to cover its multiple modes of expression through the singularity of this simple phrase. Unlike a concept which reduces all concrete, empirical reality to empty abstraction, Bergson proposes a formula which would function as a crossroad for thinking the comic. For Bergson the comic turns on the same point, capable of "re-turning" to the same spot—expressed by this formulaic prescription—yet advancing in many directions leading to different forms of the comic. This is what Bergson calls the "expansive force of the comic"²⁵ which follows the living

²⁰ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. by Cloudesely Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Rockville: Arc Manor Publishers, 2008), 21.

²¹ For a brilliant analysis of how Bergson's philosophy was conditioned by the epistemological crisis of his time which witnessed a growing rift between philosophical abstraction and social reality, see Max Horkheimer, "On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time," in *Radical Philosophy*, 131 (May/June 2005), <<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/on-bergsons-metaphysics-of-time>>.

²² Bergson, *Laughter*, 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 13.

²⁵ Bergson, *Laughter*, 9.

movement of thinking. He calls it by many names: the “comic fancy,” “logic of imagination,” and “logic of dreams.” The formula therefore resists hypostatization towards an abstract concept. It will not absolutize the different categories of comic imagination. This is part of Bergson’s larger philosophical approach to the question of thought infused with the impetus of life—*élan vital*—which is creative and intuitive. He would later call such thinking “supra-intellectual”²⁶ which cannot be reduced to the rigidity of habitual thinking but transcends into a pure plane of intuitive and creative living thought and is the basis of an open society. The expansive nature of comic thinking is the opposite of mechanical, repetitive thinking which is reduced to habit and symptomatic of intellectual stasis which he would call “infra-intellectual” which is the basis of a closed society. The theorizing process of the comic—generated only when the dynamic flow of life and thought encounters something mechanical, repetitive and therefore static—cannot *itself be static*. If automatism provides the *content* of comic thought, the form of comic thinking is never mechanical or habitual. It is dynamic and imbued with the living force of thinking. In other words, thinking about comedy is different from comic intelligence itself. As we shall see in Bergson, the latter is inextricably entangled with the comic material which is not free enough to gain a “living personality.” Living thought, which informs the expansive nature of the spirit of comedy, is therefore distinct from comic intelligence which is connected to the immediate corrective function of the comic material. At this stage it is important to underline that the Bergsonian analysis of the comic expressing his vitalist methodology strongly reinforces his dualist preoccupation. The distinction between the expansive spirit of comedy and the materialist function of comic intelligence is founded upon an “aprioristic and rather abstract”²⁷ duality which perpetuates the dualism between spirit and matter.

Let us begin by trying to demonstrate how the emancipatory potential of comic reversibility of matter into spirit (and vice versa) is, in the final analysis, compromised in Bergson, reduced to an aprioristic dualism of spirit/matter which proliferates into other sets like elastic/inelastic, soul/body, living/automaton, etc. As a result, rather than an articulation of the paradox of freedom, Bergson reduces the foundational problem of modernity into an already existing dualist logic of freedom as elasticity of living thought and unfreedom as rigidity of habitual practices. The dualism between the spirit of comedy (thinking the comic) and the materiality of the comic content (comic intelligence) has to be evaluated upon the backdrop of

²⁶ See Henri Bergson, “Two Sources of Morality and Religion,” in *Key Writings*, ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson and John Ó Maoilearca (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

²⁷ Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (London: The MIT Press, 2008), 114.

the paradox of freedom in modernity. I further argue that this dualism between the elasticity of the spirit of life and the inertia of the material body appropriately fits into the immunitarian paradigm of modern biopolitical distinctions between *bios* and *zōē*—the former signifying the free, fluid form of life of modern political society while the later denoting the rigid life of unfreedom reduced to its bare necessity.²⁸

“Something mechanical encrusted on something living”—what does this formula entail? At times Bergson refers to it as “the mechanical and the living dovetailed into each other.”²⁹ In her fascinating analysis of Bergson, Alenka Zupančič demonstrates how the opposition between “something living” and “something mechanical” is truly the “the real core or ‘matheme’ of all other comic oppositions.”³⁰ It has the “expansive force” of encapsulating all the different comic categories of opposition such as body/soul and animate/inanimate and so on. Zupančič calls this its “principle of flexibility.”³¹ She argues that the formula implies that “in the comic the same element can stand at the two sides of an opposition.”³² Therefore, if “mind” denotes the living and “body” indicates the mechanical, it is possible that in another variation “body” might just as well stand for the suppleness of life while something else, like a piece of inanimate cloth, could stand for rigid automatism. Ironically this also marks Bergson’s limitation as he reduces the essentially comic relationship between something elastic and something rigid, to an *a priori* dualism made available by his philosophy. This is the dualism at the foundation of Bergsonian philosophy between what he understands to be life as creative change (*élan vital*) and the repetitive, habitual, law-governed automatism of experience determined by a mechanistic and technological imagination of modernity. In Bergson, “life” is therefore informed by an already existing dualism between an elastic, living yet immaterial singularity of the spirit and the rigid, material automatism of the body. These two levels of life are distinct and separate from each other

²⁸ While *bios* was the Greek term used to designate form or way of life for a given community or a particular group, *zōē* was simply life, i.e., what we understand today as biological life which is common to all. This distinction has been the point of departure for the magisterial work of Giorgio Agamben who has shown how any contemporary understanding of biopolitics cannot bypass the problem of these two terms and the way they are related in modern jurisprudence. For a detailed understanding of these terms and their complicated genealogy see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, 24.

³⁰ Zupančič argues that though there have been previous thinkers who have tried to identify the comic essence as inversion of opposing categories arranged hierarchically—mind-body, divine-human, human-animal, etc.—Bergson’s formulation is singular because of its flexible nature. See Zupančič, *Odd One In*, 112.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

³² *Ibid.*, 112–113.

held in a hierarchic relation: the immaterial spirit of life being superior to the rigid materiality of life. And since each level is an autonomous discrete order, they are identifiable singular categories even though one claims to be open (immaterial life) and the other closed (material life). The problem, however, with such an understanding of life is that the *pure* immaterial life of the spirit becomes an abstract (utopian) concept while material everyday life is seen as rigid and repetitive, which remains alienated from the fluid spirit of existence. This pure concept of life therefore becomes self-identical. It answers positively the question: Can life be reduced to itself completely? For Bergson, the crucial question remains how to overcome life's mechanicity, its automatism so that life comes to identify with itself on another plane. Behind such an abstract dualist understanding of life lurks a monism which anticipates a concept of life which transcends all the rigid symptoms of material existence. Rather than *producing* a dualism as the effect of an original paradox between matter and spirit, which according to Zupančič is the true function of the comic logic, Bergson reverts to an already existing dualism between the openness of an immaterial transcendental life and the *closedness* of everyday mechanical immanent existence in order to explain his idea of the comic. Zupančič argues that genuine comic duality is something different. It articulates the paradoxical nature of the comic split *within life itself*. Here the concept of life fails to coincide with itself. In this comic concept of life, while the abstract pure idea of life (self) tries to pull away from the material inelasticity of habitual existence (other) it is pulled back into it with redoubled force. What we experience as mechanicity of life is nothing other than the paradoxical relation between spirit and matter. Further, what we experience as mechanicity, repetition, or rigidity is the externalization of this relation into an object-form. If previously elasticity and inelasticity belonged to two separate and autonomous planes, now with comic dualism they start existing as an intersection which is given the shape of an object. Comic life is this rigidified intersection between pure and impure life instead of an ideal singular life detached from the discreet plane of material inelastic life. This life is a kind of "one" which repeats itself but cannot coincide with itself yet cannot completely detach itself either to produce another "one." It is what Zupančič calls the "inconsistency of the One"³³ which is the essence of comic duality. Seen from this angle, the spirit of comic thinking and the materiality of comic intelligence can either be placed as two autonomous modes of thinking which presupposes hierarchy and a metaphysical return to a transcendental moment of thinking. Or comic intelligence can be seen as the torsion of thought itself in its effort to inscribe the substance of thought onto the subject of thought.

³³ *Ibid.*, 123.

Bergson is aware that the comic cannot survive without exposing the discontinuity where previously we found only a consistent whole. However, he never develops this mode of thinking comic dualism.³⁴ Bergson's principal formula—the double binding of the elasticity of life and the inelasticity of the mechanical configuration encrusted upon it—can very well be argued from this perspective. As I tried to illustrate, rather than envisaging them as separate orders brought together in the comic, Zupančič argues that comedy unlocks the constitutive paradox of life: mechanical repetition is the basis of the singularity of life. Bergson never pursues this line of argument. Too hasty to analyze the complication of comic duality which he himself introduced, Bergson distorts the radical possibility of comic paradox reducing it to an *a priori* dualism which seems to follow the pattern similar to the “spontaneous afterimage” that Benjamin indicates. The *a priori* nature of the dualism acting as a complementary image perceived by the eye as it shuts itself to the inaugural reality of laughter where two configurations—“elasticity” and “inelasticity”—coincide and separate simultaneously. Rather than arguing, as Zupančič does, for an opposition which is produced *retroactively* because of an originary paradox between the singularity of life and the mechanicity of its repetition, Bergson has a *puritanical* approach.

Confronted with the contradiction of modern life, Bergson wants to retroactively return to an already existing discreet order of life. I would argue that this retroactive operation to return to a pure order of life is how we can understand Benjamin's statement that in Bergson we see the “spontaneous afterimage” of modern alienation. Through the spirit of the comic Bergson wants to return the pure elasticity of life to its discreet transcendental domain separate from the impure rigidity of reality. Closing his eyes to the alienation of modern life effacing all its inconsistencies introduced by rigidity, stasis, and finally death, Bergson searches for that utopic vision of pure life.³⁵

³⁴ Bergson is aware of the paradox of comic dualism. While talking about “reciprocal interference of series,” he argues for an overlapping of two separate series to produce a unified but heterogeneous series. It is a kind of overlapping where one is not sure whether it is a new unified albeit heterogeneous series or two separate series. This is quite different from a simple dualism of two separate elements. Other examples are also present. For example, when he analyzes absurdity as irrational rationality comparable to dream logic, he reproduces a famous interaction between Mark Twain and a reporter where Twain plays on the doubling of his identity with his dead brother William. It is a case study of comic confusion of dual identity which follows the logic of an “inconsistent One.” *Ibid.*, 89–91.

³⁵ Max Horkheimer would identify this problem, suppression of death, in the general Bergsonian philosophy as a return to metaphysics—a metaphysics of time—in spite of Bergson's idea of *durée* as a philosophy of time based on constant change. Horkheimer argues that in his concept of *durée* Bergson wants to overcome the existent metaphysics of time which he shows hypostatizes the concept of time by reducing it to spatialized moments or discrete instances which follow a linear pattern. Through *durée* Bergson wants to set up a concept of time which does not coincide with spatialized, extensive reality but follows the logic of time as pure movement

In his theory of the comic, this “return” is envisioned by the *corrective* principle of the comic. Social life corrects itself by exposing the mechanical, repetitive elements of society and by the same process eliminates them: “This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective.”³⁶ Comedy therefore operates very similar to a form of social catharsis, Bergson calls it “social ragging,”³⁷ where certain rigidity of habits has to be eliminated by evoking them comically. But what does it entail? How can social inelasticity be exposed and rectified by comedy? Here again Bergson displays his subtle understanding of how the comic operates when he illustrates the method of comic externalization of affects. Talking of emotions and its relation to action, Bergson observes that tragic action evokes the fluidity of an emotion seamlessly flowing into action. Action becomes inseparable from emotion expressing the singular interiority of the *individual* character which in turn infects the audience emotionally. In comedy, the same emotion which provokes tears in tragedy causes us to laugh because it is immediately *generalized* hence avoiding the tragic quality of pitching the individuality of the character against fate or destiny. This is the Bergsonian distinction between tragic action and comic gesture. Comic gestures do not invoke the exclusive interiority of the character. It externalizes the emotion, isolates it, and gives it an independent existence like a “parasitic organism.”³⁸ The character is so completely saturated by the independent existence of an emotion that it loses all its individuality and becomes what Benjamin would call a “citation.”³⁹ Talking of the Brechtian use of gesture, Benjamin would propose his famous idea of a “dialectic at standstill” which explodes times, introducing a kind of reflux or astonishment which makes visible the very condition of its production. Comic gesture, according to Bergson, performs something similar: the “explosive”⁴⁰ function of “citing” the emotion, generalizing it, and therefore awakening the audience from its emotional reveries.

of an intensive experience. However, the fact that Bergson de-historicizes time as change by negating the finite human experience prompts Horkheimer to argue that the “suppression of death” and the promise of eternal life makes Bergson into a new metaphysician who promises a new eternity of ever-changing life. Human life which is informed by continuous change is nevertheless exposed to the discontinuity of death—as the ultimate stasis. One can even argue that death is the inconsistency in the consistent flow of life which has to be effaced to return to an eternal life. See Horkheimer, “On Bergson’s Metaphysics of Time,” 9–19.

³⁶ Bergson, *Laughter*, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁹ See Walter Benjamin, “What Is Epic Theater?,” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998).

⁴⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, 69–71.

Unlike Brecht where the gesture, according to Benjamin, has the revolutionary function of waking the audience not only from the emotive and immersive reality of the stage but also from bourgeois society, Bergson sees the potential of comic gesture having a cathartic function of purification. It rids society of its rigidity and returns it to its suppleness which is necessary for any sociability. The purificatory function of social catharsis starts resembling the immunitary function of modern social imagination which tries to isolate itself as a separate autonomous entity (community) unified and protected against the dangers of modern dissipations of life. Therefore, laughter as a form of social catharsis starts coinciding with one of the essential categories of modernity: the biopolitical category of immunity and its antinomic relation to the modern concept of community.⁴¹ This relation between the comic function of social catharsis and the immunitary logic becomes evident when Bergson talks of laughter and how it tries to rectify society. Bergson writes:

We should see that vanity, though it is a natural product of social life, is an inconvenience to society, just as certain slight poisons, continually secreted by the human organism, would destroy it in the long run, if they were not neutralized by other secretions. Laughter is unceasingly doing work of this kind. In this respect, it might be said that the specific remedy for vanity is laughter...⁴²

This is the pharmacological basis of immunity that comic laughter articulates. It injects society with that very disease: mechanicity, automatism, rigidity or absentmindedness which can “destroy it in the long run.” Bergson regards absentmindedness as nothing other than the rigidity of mind which is unable to adapt to the flow of reality it encounters in life. It is like something which “lives upon him without forming part of his organism, after the fashion

⁴¹ See Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011). While this essay was being written, we were witnessing one of the most serious medical crises of our times, in the form of the corona virus pandemic. While there was a serious medical concern and scientific basis for the crisis, it also exposed the category of immunization as a fundamental basis of modern society which pathologizes the other and consolidates common identity on the basis of individual security. What we witnessed during the pandemic in a brutal fashion was already dormant in the alienating mechanicity of life in early modernity which Bergson was so antithetical towards and against which he conceived a philosophy of “contagious” life.

⁴² Bergson, *Laughter*, 82.

of a parasite; that is the reason this state of mind is observable from without and capable of being corrected”⁴³ by laughter.

Laughter exposes this immunitarian paradigm of society and tries to correct it. Laughter itself cannot be fused with creative life, but it can provide protection against rigidity. Such is the paradoxical state of laughter when seen through immunitarian logic. For Bergson, laughter is caught in a double bind because of its symptomatic as well as curative function. He seeks to diagnose the immunitarian crisis of modern life through the symptom of laughter while simultaneously trying to cure society against this crisis through laughter. Comedy therefore cannot be categorized as art like poetry or tragedy. These latter are antithetical to society and closer to nature while comedy has a social function. Moreover, the generalizing factor of comedy⁴⁴ is devoid of emotions and merely appeals to intelligence. Unlike tragedy which, true to all genuine artistic processes, displays the singularity of experience and elicits sympathy from the audience, comedy provokes no emotional contagion. Comic intelligence produces a shared sensibility which is culturally determined such that they can “share the joke” so to speak. Comedy, Bergson argues, is never meant for all humankind. It is something which creates small, *closed* groups because laughter does not provoke sympathy in the expansive and contagious fashion of tragedy and the affects of suffering it generates. Comedy merely unveils what is lost behind the utilitarian, obligatory habits of a closed society—a society of small groups which are locked in the immunitarian paradigm. Comic intelligence does not belong to the spiritual domain of artistic thinking because of its material nature—it exposes and corrects the rigidity of material practices of such closed societies. Comedy therefore belongs to the material domain of culture while art has the natural-universal, expansive importance of creative life. Laughter is caught in this *a priori* dualism between elastic-inelastic, nature-culture, open-close. For Bergson, one domain must be separated from the other; the open and dynamic society has to be protected from becoming static and closed. Comic intelligence though not creative has to ensure that creative, meaningful experiences (*Erfahrung*) remain immune from the entropy of modern material experience (*Erlebnis*). The paradox of immunity leads to the maintenance of a dualist hierarchy of two levels of reality. The limitation of Bergson’s theory of comedy seems to be underpinned by his dualist approach to materialism.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁴ The generalizing tendency of the comic has been pointed out by both Zupančič and Mladen Dolar. See Zupančič, *Odd One In*, 22–40. Also see Mladen Dolar, “The Comic Mimesis,” in *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (Winter 2017).

The Object Sign of Power: Baudelaire

In his essay "Of the Essence of Laughter and generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts," Baudelaire writes, "The wise man laughs only in fear and trembling."⁴⁵ He argues that the comic unequivocally belongs to the domain of the profane such that "the wise man is afraid to laugh, just as he is afraid of profane entertainments or concupiscence."⁴⁶ And because the "Incarnate Word has never laughed,"⁴⁷ laughter can never belong to the sacred domain of the divine absolute. This is the "essence of laughter," if there is any, in Baudelaire's essay. Laughter inevitably evokes relativity because it "disappears at the level of absolute knowledge and power."⁴⁸ Like the profane domain of human existence, laughter is relative to an original degradation, an original fall. Laughter is satanic⁴⁹ because it comes from human's idea of one's own superiority which is made possible only because of an original *degradation*. Therefore, its "satanic" character also makes laughter profoundly human because it belongs to the profane domain of human existence. Baudelaire writes:

In man it is the consequence of his idea of his own superiority; and in fact, since laughter is essentially human it is essentially contradictory, that is to say it is one and the same time a sign of infinite greatness and of infinite wretchedness, infinite wretchedness in relation to the absolute being, of whom man has an inkling, infinite greatness in relation to the beasts. It is from the constant clash of these two infinities that laughter flows.⁵⁰

Comic relativity cancels its presence in absolute spaces: there is no comedy in paradise, neither in the Garden of Eden nor in any socialist utopia though there might be joy. I argue that this immanence of laughter in Baudelaire can be seen from a genuinely materialist point of view. It means

⁴⁵ Charles Baudelaire, "Of the Essence of Laughter, and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts," in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. by P.E. Charvet (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 141.

⁴⁶ Baudelaire, "Essence of Laughter," 142.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Baudelaire would associate figures like Satan and Cain with the proletariat and their spirit of revolt in his *Flowers of Evil*. For a detailed analysis of the image of Satan, see Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Harry Zohn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 56–57.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

that the one who laughs does not merely laugh at an object against which one finds oneself superior. There is no absolute position of superiority available because there is no transcendence available outside the world. Therefore, laughter becomes the expression of a relation between transcendence and immanence, between spirit and matter *within* immanence, within the profane order. Laughter itself is the externalization or “objectification” of this relation. It is not some laughing subject placed in relation to the object eliciting laughter. I argue that in Baudelaire laughter as the expression of a pure relation implies a subject in relation to itself and this relation is non-identical. The self’s non-coincidence with itself. In other words, laughter exposes a paradox. Degradation is the *causa sui* of “pride.” The human being’s idea of her own superiority also reveals her place in the profane order, her degradation. This, I argue is the materialist basis of Baudelaire’s thinking which cannot be reduced to any simple dualism.

But is Baudelairean laughter not the effect of another *a priori* dualism, much like Bergson, between the sacred and the profane? Here we must return to the theological understanding of the “fall” in Baudelaire. For Baudelaire, the fall is nothing other than an accidental degradation: “it is certain that human laughter is intimately connected with the accident of an ancient fall, of physical and moral degradation.”⁵¹ This is not merely a Christian theological understanding. In fact, Baudelaire consciously develops a “poetic supposition” to underline his historical point of view of the fall. He is not interested in any mystical understanding of the original degradation of human. At the same time, his understanding of comic degradation is very different from Bergson for whom degradation, like exaggeration, is a form of *transposition*. Degradation is brought about when language repeats itself to transpose an idea from one key to another. It therefore follows the basic Bergsonian idea of mechanicity which attaches itself to the living idea by repeating it in a degraded form.⁵² To illustrate degradation as a historical problem, Baudelaire evokes Virginie—the principal character in Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s novel *Paul et Virginie* written on the eve of the French Revolution criticizing the moral corruption and inequality of eighteenth-century French society under the ancient regime. Virginie comes from a primordial utopic society which knows no class division, no violence, and no repression. Baudelaire invites us to imagine Virginie, who represents the natural utopia of a primordial society, in the midst of the squalor of nineteenth-century Paris. She is looking with absolute confusion at a

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵² Bergson, *Laughter*, 61.

caricature—probably of Gavarni.⁵³ Baudelaire argues that this pure and simple soul uncorrupted by the modern city, who is still “gilded by the tropical sun,”⁵⁴ will not only *not* understand and therefore fail to laugh at the caricature: she would feel scared. But eventually she will begin to laugh. Baudelaire writes, “the angel has sensed that there is something shocking here.”⁵⁵ Fear would be her immediate response which, with time, would probably change into laughter. But why this transition from anxiety to laughter?

It seems there is something overwhelming about the caricature for Virginie whose consciousness still belongs to the pure and abstract domain of nature. I suggest that what overwhelms her, causing a sudden rush of panic, is a sense of fall from nature into human society. However, it seems to me that it is not so much the sudden degradation of an uncorrupted consciousness as a sudden feeling of void, a feeling of groundlessness which is the source of her anxiety before nature could provide her with any ground for the generation of meaning. But once she confronts the caricature it hollows out this grounding, which was previously provided by nature. Virginie loses the very foundation of her freedom. Now there is nothing that guarantees that freedom. But she is yet to figure out that groundlessness is the very basis of her freedom, that freedom no longer requires a foundation but itself has become foundational. In other words, her anxiety is the expression of being overwhelmed by a groundless anarchic freedom devoid of natural meaning. Laughter is the point when this anxiety is replaced with enjoyment because she develops the comic intelligence, the self-consciousness of her alienated existence which is also the source of her freedom. Comic intelligence in Baudelaire is the privileged position of self-consciousness of nature which has become aware of its alienation. But it is nature’s alienation not from another order but from itself. This self-alienated nature is the source of meaning in modernity because it is identical with historical consciousness. It is not historical consciousness which is separate from natural consciousness. It is historical consciousness which is inscribed onto natural consciousness as its other. The profane order of history with its dualism of superiority/inferiority is what is inaugurated at the moment of the fall when nature and history become indistinguishable from each other. This is what Baudelaire defines as “diabolic.” Evil is this non-distinguishable element that haunts human progress. Thus, he writes that “the angelic element and the diabolical element operate in parallel. Humanity works its way up and

⁵³ Gavarni was the pseudonym of Sulpice-Guillaume Chevalier (1804–66), see footnote 4 of “The Salon of 1946” in Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. by P.E. Charvet (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 440.

⁵⁴ Baudelaire, “Essence of Laughter,” 144.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

acquires a potential for evil and an understanding of evil, proportionate to the potential for good.”⁵⁶ This is why civilizations cannot understand caricature for whom nature remains abstractly pure and untouched by the self-consciousness of its own alienation which coincides with the consciousness of its anarchic freedom.

Comic degradation is marked by the disintegration of all artistic auras. In a little-known prose piece titled “Loss of Halo” brought to our attention by Benjamin, Baudelaire talks about losing his artistic halo and finally being free to laugh at those artists who still possess such an aura.⁵⁷ The anonymous superiority of Baudelaire, the poet, who is indiscernible from Baudelaire the “ordinary mortal,” is not merely marked by degradation but by the destruction of this auratic presence of the artist. “Besides, dignity bores me,”⁵⁸ Baudelaire would say. And this loss of aura is the source of his laughter. Benjamin explores this willful disintegration of the aura in Baudelaire the artist by proposing a theory of desire effectuated by the gaze. Benjamin argues that aura is that distance woven into a work of art which has been loved and admired through the ages and has procured an inexhaustible potential which it exudes.⁵⁹ This inexhaustibility is captured within the distance which the artwork projects back onto the audience. It is like the return of the gaze by the artwork—its ability to look back at us when we look at it. What is captured in this gaze is the unquenchable desire which the artwork retrieves from the depths of time. When we desire beauty, when we look at an artwork with expecting eyes, the work looks back at us with the timeless desire captured in the “unique apparition of a distance.”⁶⁰ This is the auratic experience which Baudelaire, according to Benjamin, wants to deny his audience. Baudelaire erases the reciprocity of the desire which the gaze of the human eye evokes in the artwork. And it is precisely at this moment that a particular type of enjoyment—what Benjamin calls “charm”—is produced despite the “mirror-like blankness”⁶¹ projected by the artwork devoid of any distance.

Is this not exactly what comic enjoyment entails? Comedy showcases an enjoyment which is always in excess, and which frequently comes at the

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁷ Benjamin, “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 209.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *Selected Writings*, 3: 1935–1938, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 105.

⁶¹ Benjamin, “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 206.

cost of desire.⁶² The charm of the “decline of aura”⁶³ is captured in eyes that are completely self-referential and knows nothing of the auratic distance of the other. It is a gaze informed by a restless dullness, a self-protective gaze of some “beast of prey” which Baudelaire describes while talking of the prostitutes depicted by Constantin Guys.⁶⁴ This disintegration of the aura is perfectly captured at the moment when Virginie looks at the caricature but understands nothing. As Baudelaire remarks, “she is looking at the unknown.”⁶⁵ Virginie whose expectant gaze is not returned by the caricature because it knows only the profane and degraded power of history: it is oblivious of that inexhaustible promise of temporal fulfilment. As Benjamin notes, “what makes our delight in the beautiful unquenchable is the image of the primeval world”⁶⁶—a world Virginie descends from and expects to find while gazing upon the Gavarni caricature. But it is a desire which is denied and, in its place, comes the anxiety of being overwhelmed by looking into the abyss of the unknown. However, when this “nothing” is captured by the comic form of the caricature, terror is replaced by the enjoyment of laughter. The “charm” of the caricature is something akin to what Benjamin calls the detachment of *sexus* from *eros*⁶⁷—an enjoyment in spite of desire. The caricature projects the charm of its “mirror-like blankness” onto Virginie who first receives it with fear which slowly transforms into comic enjoyment. This enjoyment is a product of disintegration: it is an embodiment of Virginie’s comic degradation.

To conclude this section, we must emphasize that what Baudelaire argues to be comic degradation—the “fall”—ought to be seen as the original split of a unified field, a doubling of an Edenic absolute space creating a sacred and a profane order.⁶⁸ Where previously there was only one domain,

⁶² For a detailed elaboration on how comic enjoyment functions as a dislocated autonomous factor which carries within it the lack of castration, see the excellent essential appendix on phallus in Zupančič, *Odd One In*, 181–199.

⁶³ Benjamin, “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 204.

⁶⁴ Baudelaire based his famous study of modernity in his essay on the French artist Constantin Guys (1805–1892). See Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. by P.E. Charvet (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁶⁵ Baudelaire, “Essence of Laughter,” 145.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 203.

⁶⁷ Benjamin argues that unlike in Goethe’s poetry where love is sated by the experience of the aura, Baudelaire produces an irreconcilable gap—“to multiply the miles/That separate my arms from blue immensities”—which produces a strange opaque intensity of enjoyment cancelling all distance which Benjamin identifies as *sexus* while the auratic fulfilment of love through longing he calls *eros*. Clearly the reference seems to be Felix A. Theilhaber’s *Goethe: Sexus Und Eros*.

⁶⁸ Two understandings of the comic nature of the “fall” emerge from our discussion of Bergson and Baudelaire. For Bergson the fall would be an expression of absentmindedness, inelasticity and the mechanical inability to adapt to the flexibility, suppleness and elasticity of

now there are two: “Joy is a unity. Laughter is the expression of a double or contradictory feeling.”⁶⁹ Much like the character Giglio Fava, in E.T.A. Hoffman’s *Princess Brambilla*, which Baudelaire mentions a number of times in the essay, comic doubling brings together two antinomic elements not in two separate bodies but paradoxically conjoined as one body. Giglio Fava and his mortal adversary the Assyrian prince Cornelio Chiapperi—friend and enemy—are the same, yet not exactly. The abject power of comedy is something similar because it emanates from the antinomic presence of power which requires its opposite of wretchedness.⁷⁰

On the Threshold of Comic Intelligence: Heller, Bergson, Baudelaire

To return to our inaugural problem of a dialectic of experience which Benjamin expresses through his idea of *Erfahrung* (long experience) and *Erlebnis* (isolated experience) and the problem of comic intelligence reconstituted from Agnes Heller’s work we can easily discern Bergson’s position. Bergson sees the modern tension as a crisis which has to be overcome. Though he is intuitively aware of the paradox of freedom which informs the crisis, in his hastiness to escape it, he proposes a dualist model. He categorizes the technological imagination which conditions *Erlebnis* as rigid and mechanical against which he pitches the wholesome experience of a life—something similar to *Erfahrung*—which is elastic and fluid. This hierarchic dualism between two levels of reality becomes the product of the ideological fiction—an image of thought—of a new metaphysics of life. We have tried to retrace Bergson’s comic intelligence to such a fiction where a new metaphysical ground of life and creativity is imagined to solve the paradox of freedom.

In contrast, Baudelaire develops, as we tried to illustrate, a paradoxical image of the anomie of modernity through his thesis on laughter. Baudelaire tried to trace the possibility of extracting something lasting (*Erfahrung*) out of that which is passing, which is immediate experience (*Erlebnis*) without creating a false dualism between them. Clearly this means

life that elicits laughter. For Bergson the “fall” is the comic *effect* of an already existing duality between mechanicity and life. But for Baudelaire the “fall” is always the comic *source* which opens up a duality in the world between sacred and profane. Laughter is produced not merely because there are contradictions in the world but because all contradictions can be traced back to an original displacement—the “fall.”

⁶⁹ Baudelaire, “Essence of Laughter,” 150.

⁷⁰ For Baudelaire, the archaic figure of the wretched power of modernity is the urban bourgeois. While talking of the caricatures of Honoré Daumier, he would describe this class as “so common place and so eccentric.” See Baudelaire, “Some French Caricaturists,” 221.

to work with the negative; long experience—modern representation of reality—will be hollowed out of its meaningful content complying with an empty heterogeneity. Such representation would express the empty meaning of modern life, *re-presenting the hollowness of all representation*. Comedy, for Baudelaire as well as Heller, presents and represents reality, simultaneously transforming it into a paradox. Conversely, immediate experience will allow itself to be meaningful when it shows the impossibility of producing meaning. This is the anarchic freedom of modernity: to produce meaning out of nothing and exercise the power gained out of its own destitution. Anarchic freedom and abject power embody the figure of the poet without an aura. If “the ground [of modernity] opens the abyss,”⁷¹ then Baudelaire—unlike Bergson who wants to imagine a new ground—stares right into it. Benjamin offered an inimitable and secret image of modernity in his writings on Baudelaire. He argued that if time were a photographer trying to take pictures of the essence of our profane reality, then those pictures would only be registered on negative plates. Baudelaire, he says, is one of those exceptionally rare creatures who might not be able to transform those pictures into positive images but he “alone is able to read the plates.”⁷² Perhaps Benjamin meant that Baudelaire had the courage of thought to stare into the darkness of the abyss of freedom and thereby bring its anarchic origin to light. Laughter, Baudelaire argues, reveals the power of modern wretchedness, what he calls “weakness delighting at weakness.”⁷³ For Baudelaire comic intelligence is indistinguishable from the artistic capacity to reveal this anarchy of power⁷⁴—this angelic monstrosity of modernity. Such intelligence is what gives him the courage to be conscious about the wretchedness of his vanity to look into the abyss of his own existence; therein rests the true anarchy of Baudelaire’s laughter.

⁷¹ Heller, “Three Logics of Modernity,” 141.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, “Baudelaire,” in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Harry Zohn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 27–29.

⁷³ Baudelaire, “Essence of Laughter,” 146.

⁷⁴ What we are calling the “abject power of the comic” in Baudelaire—which in the final analysis is anarchic—is something similar to what Agamben calls “destituent power” (*potenzadestituente*). Like the consciousness of the antinomic relation between power which grounds law in anarchy can lead to a form of life which is no longer captured by the paradigm of exception—an anarchic form of life—so does the anarchic function of comedy lead to a new practice of destituent power in Baudelaire. For a short but important exposition of destituent power, see Giorgio Agamben, “From the State of Control to a Praxis of Destituent Power,” in *Critical Legal Thinking* (5 February 2014), <<https://criticallegalthinking.com/2014/02/05/theory-destituent-power>>.

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