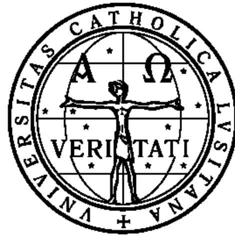

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HUMOUR IS A LAUGHING MATTER:
The Existential Humour of Saki, *Life of Brian* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

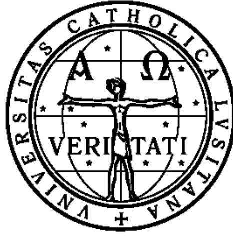
Dissertação apresentada à Universidade Católica Portuguesa para obtenção do grau de mestre em Estudos de Cultura

Por

Hugo Simões

Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas

Outubro 2017



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Sob orientação da Professora Doutora Alexandra Lopes

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Abstract

Humour is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon, the nature of which has eluded authors from Classical Antiquity to contemporary modernity. This dissertation explores some of the most important writings on humour to date, in an attempt to provide a well-rounded, critical approach to its most relevant characteristics, such as its relation to play, incongruity, relief, and superiority. These characteristics, and in particular the fact that humour seems to be deeply embedded in the tragic existential aspects of the human condition, then form the theoretical backbone of the subsequent analysis of three short stories by Saki, Monty Python's *Life of Brian* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, mostly through a practice of close reading. Each of these works, it is argued, reveal a particular outlook on the human condition through the exploration of its inherent incongruities – both on a social and individual level. They are also shown to, in the face of tragedy, encourage the adoption of a detached perspective that derives enjoyment from these incongruities, in what ultimately seems to be a life-affirming practice that seeks solace in the bleakest aspects of our existence. Keywords: Humour, Incongruity, Existential, Relief, Superiority, Saki, Monty Python, Douglas Adams, Laughter.

O humor é um fenómeno complexo e multifacetado cuja natureza tem vindo a iludir pensadores desde a Antiguidade Clássica até à modernidade. Esta dissertação explora alguns dos escritos mais imporantes sobre humor, numa tentativa de providenciar uma análise crítica e completa das suas características mais relevantes, como a sua relação com "o lúdico", a incongruência, o alívio e a superioridade. Estas características, e em particular o facto do humor parecer estar tão profundamente enraízado nos aspectos trágicos da condição humana, informam a análise subsequente de três contos de Saki (Hector Hugh Munro), *d'A Vida de Brian*, dos Monty Python, e d'*À Boleia Pela Galáxia de Douglas Adams*, análise essa que é feita maioritariamente através de uma prática de close reading. Nesta dissertação argumenta-se que cada uma destas obras revela uma visão específica da condição humana através da exploração das incongruências que lhe são inerentes – tanto a nível social como individual. Argumenta-se também que, face à tragédia, encorajam a adopção de uma perspectiva que retire prazer destas incongruências, no que acaba por ser uma prática que procura consolo nos aspectos mais sombrios da existência. Keywords: Humor, Incongruência, Existentialismo, Alívio, Superioridade, Saki, Monty Python, Douglas Adams, Riso.

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1. Introduction – Humour and Culture Studies

The word "culture" has a variety of different meanings and definitions. In order to understand the relevance of humour in relation to this concept and Culture Studies in general, it is imperative to clarify which of these definitions will be used and how they relate to the field.

In her *Introduction to Cultural Studies*, Aleida Assman explores what she considers the six main concepts one can derive from the word "culture". Of these six, three "involve value judgements and three do not" (Assman, 2012: 12). These include: "cultivation in the sense of optimizing and upgrading a thing or an act", which is close to its Latin etymological origin of "colere"; a term for geographical and political entities, describing a "national character"; an ethnographic concept describing the entirety of human activity, past, present and future; a normative concept, synonymous with "high culture"; a similarly normative concept, synonymous with "progress" and civilization" as opposed to "barbarism"; and finally, a third normative concept, mainly indebted to the Frankfurt School, representing the almost "sacrosanct" character of a civilization and artistic production at odds with the mass production of the "culture industry" (*ibid*.: 13-16).

This veritable palette of meanings has a repercussion in the field of Cultural Studies, which is commonly referred to as interdisciplinary to a fault: "Cultural studies – and this is both their positive and their negative character – do not have any clear-cut definitions. They simply study culture. Culture is everything that is made or done by humans" (*ibid*.: 18). In this sense, of course, it would be easy to justify the relevance of humour to the field of Culture Studies – humour is a distinctly human activity. Animals, as far as we can tell, do not engage in humour. This, however, may not be explanation enough for why humour is a relevant slice of culture to the point of warranting research and analysis. This is where the broadest definition of culture becomes troublesome: "[w]ith the complete removal of all cultural boundaries and distinctions between major and minor, high and low, comes the danger of a complete levelling of value and relevance. If everything is culture, the meaning of the term implodes and is reduced to a hollow tautology" (*ibid*.: 13). It suffices to remark that humour is deeply engrained in the way we communicate, however, to make its relevance clear. Any one person's daily life is probably strewn with instances of humour, such as jokes, puns, witticisms and any other accidental occurrences that one may find

humorous. When it comes to artistic production, authors from Mark Twain to P. G. Wodehouse are commonly referred to as humourists; stand-up comedians such as George Carlin and Lenny Bruce have been involved in some of the most controversial debacles concerning free speech of the 20th century, and "satire" is quite consensually considered an essential genre in Western Literature (e.g. *Gulliver's Travels* and *Catch-22*). It therefore seems relatively clear that humour, in both a social and an artistic dimension, plays an essential role, the nature of which many have tried to narrow down to one particular trait.

According to Chris Barker, "[c]ulture is concerned with questions of shared social meanings, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world. However, meanings are not simply floating 'out there'; rather, they are generated through signs, most notably those of language" (Barker, 2003: 7). Although humour is certainly not limited to language, it does seem deeply related to our sense of normalcy – to both thrive on and challenge our shared social meanings and, as Barker's citation of Stuart Hall highlights: "the contradictory forms of common sense which have taken root in and helped to shape popular life" (Hall, 1996: 20). It is of course not clear what exactly humour does to individuals and societies. Maybe humour, even at its Hobbesian cruellest, can only help us further the species, as Nietzsche[1] would remind us, perhaps by hurling injurious laughter at our shortcomings in order to correct them, in keeping with Bergson's theory. Perhaps it is merely the stuff of joy which Max Beerbohm praised, or the expression of repressed desires Freud described in *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*. Whatever its true role(s) may be, analysing humour means analysing how we react to our limitations as human beings, to each other, and to the fundamental awkwardness of human interaction. In this sense the subject is profoundly at home in Culture Studies.

Clifford Geertz, writing within the context of ethnography, claimed that when producing work one should aim to achieve a "thick description" (cf. Geertz, 1973) of the subject at hand – one that recognises the many layers inherent in any observable phenomenon, as well as the many interpretations such a phenomenon may lend itself to. One of the aforementioned advantages of Culture Studies is the breadth of perspectives and subjects it encompasses and allows for. Humour, while the subject of a great wealth of

[1]"Even the most harmful person may actually be the most useful when it comes to the preservation of the species, for he nurtures in himself or through his effects on others drives without which humanity would long since have become feeble or rotten. Hatred, delight in the misfortunes of others, the lust to rob and rule, and whatever else is called evil: all belong to the amazing economy of the preservation of the species," (Nietzsche, 2001: 27).

analysis throughout history, is nevertheless not a traditional subject. It is also particularly complex, and one that clearly benefits from the contributions of a multitude of different fields: psychology, sociology, philosophy, biology, to name a few. While the scope of this dissertation cannot allow for the depth of analysis that an inquiry into the nature of humour requires, in the first half of my thesis I will attempt to move towards a thick description of humour that spans several different fields, in an effort to provide a well-rounded and critical approach to the current state of affairs of humour theory. In this sense a disclaimer is due: each of the many texts written about humour throughout history are not necessarily as systematic or dogmatic as their subsequent analyses may claim. Many are strewn with very well-rounded and far-reaching remarks about humour and its characteristics, rather than intend to give a single answer to the question of its nature. While it is impossible to give each of these authors their due credit in this dissertation, it is important to make this clear.

In the second half of my thesis I will analyse three different works, highlighting the many roles which humour performs in each, as well as the particular characteristics they share: the fact that they were (mostly) written by white Englishmen in the early-to-late 20th century, and mainly, that they provide a humorous look at some of the most tragic aspects of the human condition. These works are a selection of three short-stories by Hector Hugh Munro (Saki): “Esmé”, “The Unrest-Cure” and “Tobermory”; the first instalment of Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series, and Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*. All of these evince our idiosyncratic relationship with ourselves and each other through relentless, uncompromising humour, as well as offer keen, existential insight, while at the same time inducing the comforting, pleasurable effect inherent in comedy. Together, they go a long way towards proving what is also the partial point of this thesis: that humour is deeply relevant and deeply serious.

Before the analyses themselves, a brief methodological note is in order: while these works share similarities, as stated above, they differ in format: three are short stories penned by Saki (“Esmé”, “Tobermory”, “The Unrest-Cure”); one is a feature film by Monty Python, and the latter is a novel. Consequently, the methods used for analysing these works must naturally also differ. While Saki’s short-stories have a subtlety and intricacy of detail that absolutely require a close-reading, both *Life of Brian* and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* do not require such a detailed approach. For the purposes

of this thesis, the former will instead be interpreted with the aid of a laxer form of close-reading adapted to visual artefacts, and the latter will be read chiefly for its themes, to the sacrifice of lengthy plot-exposition.

1.1 Humour, Towards a Thick Description

1.1.1 The origins of the word humour

Etymologically, the word "humour" derives from the Old North French *humour*, which means liquid or dampness, and which itself has its origin in the Latin *humor* (Latin *hūmor, ūmor moisture, fluid, bodily fluid or discharge, fluid in plants, sap, liquid,* OED). In ancient and medieval physiology, what we may now refer to as physical and psychological health was thought to be indebted to the balance of the "four body fluids": blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. An excessive quantity of any of these fluids would lead to physical ills and the adoption of a certain temperament:

> The Human body contains blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These are the things that make up its constitution and cause its pains and health. Health is primarily that state in which these constituent substances are in the correct proportion to each other, both in strength and quantity, and are well mixed. Pain occurs when one of the substances presents either a deficiency or an excess, or is separated in the body and not mixed with others. (Lloyd, 1983: 262)

The theory of the four temperaments: phlegmatic, choleric, sanguine and melancholic, as devised by Hippocrates and developed by many scholars since (though considered pseudoscience today), provided us with a typology of temperaments, which were considered to derive from the proportion of these bodily fluids unique to each individual at any given time. It has been speculated that these temperaments themselves began to be referred to as "humours", something which can today be observed in both the French (*humeur*) and Portuguese (*humor*) languages, for example.

The term then grew to encompass something like what we would more commonly refer to as a "mood" today, which is frequently considered volatile, capricious or an indulgent mental disposition or temperament (OED: 15th cent.; the senses 'temporary state of mind or feeling, mood, temper' and 'caprice, quirk' appear to be attested later in French than in English: 1555 and 1614, respectively).

It is interesting to think how the word evolved into its current usage, which generally refers to a broad spectre of comic phenomena. In his *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, Noël Carroll provides an explanation which, although simple, nevertheless sheds some light on this evolution:

> '[H]umour' became associated with the idea of a person whose temperament deviates from the norm. Such people were regarded as eccentric; by the 16th century they were seen as ridiculous and, thereby, a fit subject for mimicking by comic actors. As a result, 'humour' evolved into what humourists did. (Carroll, 2014: 5)

This position is of course partially influenced by Carroll's own thoughts on the nature of humour, and by the theory of incongruity in particular, about which more will be said further below. However, it does make a point which seems consensual to most modern and historical thinkers who have expressed their views on the nature of the concept: humour is very closely related to the unusual – to the unordinary. Whether or not it has to do with what is empirically unusual is another matter, but it does seem to be keenly related to perceiving something as such. The idea that people who are dominated by their moods are ridiculous and comical can be traced back to Plato in *Philebus*, through the voice of Socrates: "[the ridiculous] is always a failing, one that takes its name from a state of character, and is that specific form of failing with the characteristic quite opposed to what the oracle at Delphi recommends" (Plato, 1975: 47). It follows that someone is ridiculous if they do not "know themselves". People who are excessively choleric, for example, can be said to, on occasion, be "beside themselves" or to have "forgotten themselves". This generally means that they are not acting in accordance to exterior perceptions of who they are or should be. It is perhaps in this sense that we can make a connection between being dominated by one's mood and being ridiculous or humorous.

Having established the possible etymological origin of the word, however, it is nevertheless important to clarify what I will be referring to when talking about humour. Many of the essential texts on the subject, such as Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* and Bergson's *Le Rire*, do not deal explicitly with the word "humour" as the main subject of analysis. Even when referring to humour, the authors' usage of the word may still be somewhat on the etymological path between the humour of the ancients and what we now call humour:

> In the eighteenth century [humour] had a much more restricted meaning. Writers conventionally treated wit and humour as distinctly different phenomena. Wit involved playing with ideas or words, whereas humour occurred when the object of the laughter was a person. The word 'humour' derived from the psychological terminology of the age. The 'humours' were the bodily fluids whose admixtures supposedly provided people with their individual temperaments. A 'humorist' was not originally a comical writer but a person with an extreme character that seemed to comprise a single humour rather than a balance of various humours. (Billig, 2005: 61-62)

Vestiges of these (and other) differences between wit and humour remain in both of the early 20th century works mentioned above, much like in most of the ones that came before them. There is, of course, an incommensurable richness to the shapes that humour can assume and to the amount of different things one may find funny. Dealing with each of them separately would be extraneous to this thesis, however. For its purposes, humour will be considered an umbrella term for all other concepts which it is closely related to, but which it has been differentiated from in the past. Concepts such as: wit, jokes, comedy, slapstick, irony, sarcasm, dark humour, invective, raillery, etc. will all be grouped under the banner of humour. This is not to say that they are not different things – they are, and some of their unique properties will be discussed, but only in passing, and not in a way which could truly do them justice. Kierkegaard famously wrote his doctoral thesis on the subject of irony; in order to get closer to the heart of each of these ramifications of humour, if one can consider them as such, a doctoral dissertation for each would certainly be the bare minimum. Another purpose is at stake here: that of tackling the relevance and characteristics of "that which is funny."

1.1.2 Humour and Laughter

An easy way to define humour would be through its association with laughter; where there is humour there is usually laughter, and vice-versa. The possibility that laughter is a sufficient condition for the existence of humour could prove immensely valuable:

> Laughter deserves that much attention because it is an important clue to the presence of the feeling. The feeling itself is a subjective, internal experience that cannot be observed directly by anyone except the person experiencing it. Laughter, on the other

> hand, *can* be observed by other people, and so it provides public evidence that the feeling is there. (Chafe, 2007: 2)

The presence of laughter, in short, could potentially be decisive when it comes to classifying something as humorous by providing unequivocal, observable evidence. Humour could be, in that sense, simply defined as "that which provokes laughter". However, and particularly as of recent, scholars have questioned the strength of laughter's ties to this subjective, internal experience, or "comic amusement," in Noël Carrol's terminology (see below):

> When theorists have studied humour, they often assumed that laughter was either a necessary or a sufficient condition of humor. It is neither. Although humorous events usually evoke laughter, they do not do so invariably. Humor may evoke smiles or smirks which fall short of laugher. Thus it is not a necessary condition. Nor is it a sufficient condition. People may laugh because they are uncomfortable (nervous laughter), they may laugh at someone (derisive laughter), they may laugh because they are insane or mentally imbalanced (hysterical laughter) or they may laugh because they are physiologically induced to do so (as when someone tickles them relentlessly) (Lafollette, Shanks, 1993: 329)

The very existence of wit, sarcasm and irony, if one is to assume they are different forms of humour, could perhaps be the first significant dent in the laugher-argument. These three forms of humour may provoke uproarious laughter, but more often than not will be of the subtler kind, and may only elicit contented smiles or smirks. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton describes Lady Brandon as a "peacock in everything but beauty" (Wilde, 1997: 9); in his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Professional Cad*, George Sanders, after observing that many actors differ from their onscreen personas, writes: "I mention all the foregoing examples merely in order to make it easier for you to understand that whereas on the screen I am invariably a sonofabitch, in life I am a dear, dear boy" (Sanders, 2015 :73); while it is possible to laugh out loud at these quotes, the reaction most expected is closer to a smile or a faint snigger. This, along with the fact that laughter has causes other than humour (tickling, nitrous oxide, hysterical laughter), would of course indicate that laughter is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition of humour.

A strict definition of what laughter is and is not can perhaps do more harm than good to this discussion, however. While it is easy to see that one will not always laugh when one finds something funny, Lafollette and Shanks' observation that humour may "evoke smiles and smirks which fall short of laughter" (Lafollette, Shanks, 1993: 329) seems to recognise that there tends to be a physical reaction to humour.

In *The Importance of Not Being Earnest*, Wallace Chafe claims that laughing expresses a feeling of "nonseriousness" which may have origins other than humour, but nevertheless seems to underlie it. His argument is deeply steeped in biology: he begins by observing that the act of laughter, which he claims is "parasitic on breathing" (Chafe, 2007: 17), happens primarily in the vocal tract and "consists of sudden, spasmodic expulsions of air from the lungs, and those expulsions often have significantly greater force than those found in either breathing or speaking" (Chafe, 2007: 17). The physical properties of laugher, what laughter makes our body do, Chafe claims, is deeply tied to this feeling of nonseriousness:

> The thesis of this book is that laughter hinders the person who is laughing from performing serious physical or mental activity. Laughter is physically disruptive. Not only does it interfere with breathing, it destroys the rigidity of the torso that is necessary for various physical acts. It makes sense that feeling nonserious should be associated with physical disablement. Furthermore, the fact that laughter is audible, especially when it is voiced, lets others know that the person laughing is indeed experiencing this feeling, so that it contagiously elicits the same feeling in them as well. Laughter, in short, is a hindrance to physical activity and simultaneously a communicative sign that the laugher is experiencing the emotional state with which we are concerned. (Chafe, 2007: 23)

It seems to follow that, among other things, laughter is partially responsible for the feeling of pleasurable lightness or relaxation one generally associates with humour, as well as for humour's social aspect (see below). Even when laughter *stricto sensu* is not concerned, but instead smiling or smirking are present, these too can be said to contribute to the same result:

> If happiness is a basic component of the feeling of nonseriousness, smiling serves to express that component. In many cases it is the only component of nonseriousness that is publicly observable, so long as the feeling fails to rise to a threshold where it produces overt laughter. (Chafe, 2007: 54)

There is the possibility, as Chafe himself seems to conclude above, that in the face of humour smiling is merely the first stage of a reaction which, at its strongest, culminates in overt laughter. This would allow us to ascribe smiling and laughing to the same physical reaction, albeit with different intensities, which would in turn lead to the conclusion that laughter may not be a sufficient condition for the existence of humour, but is nevertheless a necessary one. While this aspect is far too complex to be adequately explored in this

dissertation, it provides an important premise for the understanding of humour: that laughter is certainly deeply – almost inexorably – related to humour, and that humour is thus deeply related to characteristics associated with laughter, such as lightness, pleasure and play. Another important point which the relationship between laughter and humour foreshadows, to be explored below, is the latter's relation to the body.

Laughter is not a sufficient condition for the presence of humour. This begs the question: *is* there one sufficient condition for the presence of humour? Wittgenstein was clearly sceptical of the possibility of finding the true nature of any linguistic concept, illustrating this with the aid of the rope metaphor:

> And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. But if someone wished to say: "There is something common to all these constructions—namely the disjunction of all their common properties"—I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: "Something runs through the whole thread— namely the continuous overlapping of those fibres. (Wittgenstein, 1986: 32)

I agree with Wittgenstein in this respect. I do not intend to find the "nature" of the concept of humour: firstly because that is not the purpose of this dissertation; secondly because it is a task that far exceeds my abilities, and thirdly because I am not sure there is one. What I believe exists and intend to examine is Wittgenstein's "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (*ibid.*: 32) between the phenomena we find funny, in order to shed light on the "state of the art" of humour studies and the phenomenon itself; but more than that, on why we find certain things funny: on what we are thinking (assuming, as most have, that there is a cognitive aspect involved), when we find something funny. This is what I believe will provide us with a thick description of humour. The conclusions will then influence the analysis of the humorous objects indicated above.

1.1.3 Comic Amusement

So what is this state which is induced by humour that tends to manifest itself through laughter? Noël Carroll defines it as "comic amusement" (Carroll, 2014: 1) – amusement: "**5.** The pleasurable occupation of the attention, or diversion of the mind (from serious duties, etc.); *passing from* **a.** (*in early use*) Idle time-wasting diversion, or

entertainment; *through* **b.** (*generally*) Recreation, relaxation, the pleasurable action upon the mind of anything light and cheerful; *to* **c.** (*esp.*) Pleasant excitement of the risible faculty by anything droll or grotesque, tickling of the fancy." (OED). A connection with laughter remains, but there is more to it: does comic amusement provoke laughter, or does laughter provoke comic amusement? Does one, when finding something funny, feel "comically amused" and then proceed to express this by laughing? It is best, I think, to leave this matter unresolved, and instead merely recognise that when witnessing something humorous multiple things happen: most characteristically, one feels a certain degree of pleasure, which points towards Wallace Chafe's use of "happiness" and "nonseriousness". As per Noël Carrol:

> [T]here is, nevertheless, at least typically in creatures like us, a palpable feeling of lightness, a tendency to quicken and then relax. It involves at least a psychological feeling of being unburdened – of tightening up (as in 'uptight′) in the face of a potential difficulty, and then letting go. (Carroll, 2014: 58)

This description, while apt in its solemnity, is missing a certain much needed touch of enthusiasm which, I believe, expresses the joy of laughter or comic amusement:

> There is laughter that goes so far as to lose all touch with its motive, and to exist only, grossly, in itself. This is laughter at its best. A man to whom such laughter has often been granted may happen to die in a workhouse. No matter. I will not admit that he has failed in life. (Beerbohm, 1921: 42)

I have up to this point been referring to nonseriousness on par with comic amusement for one reason only: it highlights Chafe's convincing argument that humour has at least an apparent levity to it – a touch of the playful tongue-in-cheek, as opposed to solemn earnestness. However, comic amusement seems more appropriate than nonseriousness for the following reason: it is neutral. Nonseriousness suggests, much like Chafe literally does, that while under the spell of humour one cannot perform "serious physical or mental activity". While laughter may be physically debilitating to an extent, humour and its perception are certainly not mindless affairs. "Nonseriousness" often suggests irrelevance, and this is exactly what is wrong with some academic and cultural discourse on humour: the idea that "drama" is serious and humour is not. Humour, I would suggest, much like John Cleese has (Cleese, 24:10-26:10), is very serious. It is, however, not solemn. Solemnity and seriousness are different things. As we will see in the analysis

of Saki's short stories, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, dealing with extremely serious subjects: namely death, misery and purposelessness is at the very heart of humour. Humour is not averse to making serious points – it simply does not do it solemnly. The difference between humour and solemnity is in that sense a matter of tone and not a matter of relevance. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard writes of objective thinking and direct communication as invalid means to achieving an existential truth. He instead explores the alternate idea of "becoming subjective"[2] as a means to achieving "the truth" through a practice of spiritual inwardness instead of abstract, objective thought: "[f]or subjective reflection the truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the thing is precisely, in existing, to deepen oneself in subjectivity" (Kierkegaard, 2010: 161). While a matter such as this could seem by its very nature inimical to something as light-hearted as humour, Kierkegaard writes that "[h]umour is the last stage in existence-inwardness before faith" (*ibid.*: 244), and that "an existing humorist is the closest approximation to one who is religious" (*ibid.*: 375). This is because, Kierkegaard claims, "the humorist grasps suffering's meaning in relation to existence but he does not grasp the meaning of suffering. But it is then that the humorist makes the treacherous turn, revoking the suffering in the form of jest" (*ibid.*). While the religious man understands, Kierkegaard seems to suggest, that the nature of existence is pain and then chooses to endure it; the humourist instead recognises the inevitable suffering and seeks relief in humour: "[i]n the pain, he touches the secret of existence, but then he goes back home" (*ibid.*). For those of us who do not believe in God, and thus cannot easily conceive of a religious, existential purpose behind a lifetime of suffering, perhaps humour is the last stage of this existence-inwardness: the last stage when it comes to knowing ourselves – to the truths of inwardness and subjectivity. This seems as traditionally serious an effect as any.

Another crucial point about comic amusement lies in Noël Carroll's discussion of whether or not it is an emotion or a feeling. The author attributes several characteristics to the concept of "emotion", namely: that it should provoke bodily alterations; have a formal object; be controllable to a degree; influence our cognition/mood; be "contagious"; require a belief and serve vital human interests. The discussion on the nature of emotions is lengthy and fraught with difficulty. The main concern lies in whether emotions are merely

[2] "[T]he highest task set for a human being" (*ibid.*: 107).

the by-products of physiological changes induced by external phenomena, or if they also include elements of cognition[3]. In order to strictly qualify comic amusement as an emotion, I would have to take a stand in this debate which, if not empirically backed, is merely semantical. I choose, then, not to proceed with this qualification, but instead to explore, like Noël Carroll, what the effects of humour are and what they express, whether or not it is an emotion.

I have previously argued that whenever one perceives something as humorous, one will, to whatever extent, react physically to it. If this is true, then humour provokes a physiological change. However, the question remains if this act of perception involves cognition. For the time being, I think it is useful to claim that comic amusement involves both bodily alterations (in its inception or as a repercussion) and a cognitive evaluation of the humorous phenomenon. When Noël Fielding sings, while doing the corresponding dance: "*I'm* made of milk, *you're* made of milk, *we're* both made of milk, but we're *living* in separate *glasses*" (Fielding, 6:12-6:21), it is not quite clear what we are laughing at. Milk, perhaps. It would be easier to attribute finding this humorous to a knee-jerk reaction – an automatism. However, when in his song "Leftovers" Jarvis Cocker sings "I met her in the museum of Palaeontology/And I make no bones about it" (Cocker, 0:15-0:25), the wordplay being somewhat straightforward, it is easier to point at the source of the humour – the idiom returning to its literality[4]. There is undeniably something cognitive in the recognition of wordplay.

The cognitive aspect of humour can in some cases perhaps be described as what Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner referred to as "conceptual blending." According to the authors, conceptual blending is not a feature unique to humour:

> We will focus especially on the nature of integration, and we will see it at work as a basic mental operation in language, art, action, planning, reason, choice, judgment,

[3]While Noël Carroll seems to use "emotion" as a complex blend of mental and physical processes with the particularities mentioned above, other authors use the word differently, such as neuroscientist António Damásio: "[f]eelings are mental experiences that accompany a change in body state. External changes displayed in the exteroceptive maps of vision or hearing are perceived but largely not felt directly in the sense of feeling we adopt in this text. However, they may lead to feelings indirectly by triggering an action programme that causes a change in body state and is subsequently felt. […] Thus 'fear' can refer to either an emotion (the set of programmed physiological actions triggered by a fear-inducing stimulus) or a feeling (the conscious experience of fear)" (Damásio, Gil, 2013: 144).

[4]Even this instance, however, is more complicated than it seems. The wordplay itself is virtually skilless. However, Cocker's self-deprecating persona (this is a man who entitled a collection of his lyrics "Mother, Brother, Lover" after his admittedly unimaginative rhyming) provides for much of the humour in this example.

> decision, humor, mathematics, science, magic and ritual, and the simplest mental events in everyday life. (Fauconnier, Turner, 2002: 15)

However, the mere fact that it may also be at work in humour is a step towards recognition of its cognitive aspects. Comic amusement and laughter are certainly more or less immediate responses which leave little room for the existence of conscious forethought. In other words, we rarely have the time to sit down and go through why a joke is funny before evaluating it logically as such and then reacting accordingly. Notwithstanding, this does not necessarily imply that something equally immediate is not happening in our brains: the perception of a humorous blending of concepts, perhaps. But what exactly is conceptual blending? The process is aptly described as "invisible to consciousness" (*ibid.*: 18), and seems to encompass both the processes of metaphor and analogy. Conceptual blending at its most basic, according to Fauconnier and Turner, makes use of two different concepts and blends them, thus creating a third – a new reality. Noël Fielding's milk dance can, surprisingly, be interpreted as a parody of a "solemn" metaphor. He begins by saying that himself and a member of the audience are made of milk – an absurd statement, exacerbated by the accompanying physical gestures. After hearing and seeing this, the spectator does not expect a conclusion, but Noël then continues: "but we're living in separate glasses." We then realise that being made of milk became the premise of a metaphor whose inner workings are not much different than: "We are the hollow men/We are the stuffed men/Leaning together/Headpiece filled with straw" (Eliot, 1962: 79). We are being told that two people are made of milk but are living in separate glasses. This means that something stands between them. On one level, this is a metaphor for loneliness or for the impossibility of true communication. However, it is also funny, which adds other layers to it – it deflates the medium by parodying the solemn metaphor while also providing us with the humbling prospect of being comparable to two glasses of milk.

Within his taxonomy of joke-techniques, Freud includes the metaphor. It is not immediately clear to him, he claims, whether or not there is a different mechanism in place other than the ones he had previously mentioned. Nevertheless, some of the metaphors which he analyses bear similarities to Jarvis Cocker and Noël Fielding's contraptions. The first of these is Lichtenberg's assertion that "[i]t is almost impossible to carry the torch of truth through a crowd without singeing someone's beard" (Freud, 2002: 71). The humorous element is similar to Jarvis Cocker's "Museum of Paleontology" joke in the

sense that it consists in using a well-known idiom literally, thus toying with the hearer's expectations: "[w]hile we scarcely notice the metaphor in 'the torch of truth' any longer, in Lichtenberg's version it is restored to its full original force, for he builds on it further and draws a conclusion from it" (Freud, 2002: 71-72). However, as Freud himself remarked, the torch of truth is a clichéd metaphor, which is what allows the hearer to form expectations regarding its meaning. It is the logical, but unexpected conclusion that Lichtenberg derives from the literal aspect of the expression that makes it humorous. This, Freud describes as a separate technique of the joke: "[t]aking faded phrases in their full meaning" (Freud, 2002: 72). In Noël Fielding's case, what we have is a new metaphor – we are milk poured into separate glasses.

Another of Lichtenberg's quotes: "[i]t is a pity that we cannot see into the *entrails of writers' learning* to find out what they have eaten," which I can only presume must have been funnier in German, bears more of a similarity to the milk metaphor; first because of what Freud describes as a "representation by means of absurdity" (*ibid*.: 72) or rather, because "entrails of learning" is an unusual metaphor, much like the milk one; and second, because they have "[a] characteristic that is not to be found in all good, i.e., apt metaphors. They are to a large extent '*degrading*' […] they juxtapose a thing from a high category, an abstraction […] with something very concrete, and itself of a low sort" (*ibid*.: 74). This remark is of course greatly influenced by Alexander Bain's claim that the cause of laughter is "the degradation, direct or indirect, of some person or interest – something associated with power, dignity, or gravity" (Bain, 1888: 250), and Herbert Spencer's observation that "[l]aughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small – only when there is what we may call a *descending* incongruity" (Spencer, 1904: 7570), about which more will be said below.

In both "the entrails of learning" and "I'm made of milk, you're made of milk, we're both made of milk but we're living in separate glasses," we understand the grim, metaphorical meaning but we cannot exactly let go of the fact that we are talking about entrails and milk, so the metaphor becomes awkward to the point of being a parody of the medium:

> We also find ourselves moved to laughter by an overstraining of wit, by bringing resemblances from subjects of a quite different kind from the subject to which they are compared. When we see, instead of the easiness, and natural resemblance, which

> constitutes true wit, a forced straining of a likeness, our laughter is apt to arise". (Hutcheson, 1973: 110)

Having said this, whether it is conscious or not, it seems that the cognitive aspect of comic amusement is difficult to deny. In the "Museum of Paleontology" joke this is apparent – we clearly understand what Cocker is doing while finding it funny. In examples such as these, finding something humorous almost seems akin to puzzle solving: we are consciously aware of X, and this X makes us laugh. The following limerick is illustrative of this fact:

A man hired by John Smith & Co.
Loudly declared he would tho
Man that he saw
Dumping dirt near his store.
The drivers, therefore, didn't do. (Clapham, Gray, 2009: 101)

It only becomes possible to utter a muffled squeal of self-satisfied laughter once the reader understands that "tho" and "do" should be read like "Co.", which is the abbreviation for Company. The result is then:

A man hired by John Smith & Company
Loudly declared he would thump any
Man that he saw
Dumping dirt near his store.
The drivers, therefore, didn't dump any. (*ibid.*)

The realization that this is what lies beneath the façade of the earlier format, however, is what lends it its admittedly unfashionable humour. This is undeniably cognitive, and seems to be consciously so.

In other situations, like Noël Fielding's "Milk Dance", we certainly laugh without a clear notion of what we are laughing at. However, especially if we can claim that conceptual blending is afoot, this does not necessarily mean that the joke's many facets did not strike us simultaneously and unconsciously. The fact that we can, at the cost of some of its humour, deconstruct the joke and find hidden mechanisms common to other jokes within it shows us that there is, even in these cases, something cognitive to humour.

1.1.4 Subjectivity and Objectivity

Comic amusement, in its mixture of cognition and physicality, is subjective in the sense that it relies heavily on an individual's experience of it; on their perception of something as humorous. On this subject, Hugh Lafollette and Niall Shanks, whose theory of humour relates it deeply to belief, have written:

> Humour is inherently relational – no event, person or thing is intrinsically humorous. It is context dependent. It depends upon the circumstances, the teller (if there is one), the current beliefs of the listeners (or viewers), and the relationship (if any) between the teller and the listener. (Lafollette, Shanks, 1993: 332)

The variables are tremendous. Without delving too much into the nature of humour yet, one can immediately understand this. There is no single instance of humour which, decontextualized, will always retain its "funniness", just like there is nothing which will consistently remain unfunny regardless of context. This has a lot to do with, among other things, the subject matter of the joke. It is particularly easy to understand when applied, for instance, to topical jokes from the past: "why aren't there any good jokes about the Jonestown, Guyana mass murder-suicide? The punchlines are too long."[5] If we happen not to know that the Jonestown massacre, otherwise known as the Kool-Aid massacre, consisted in the deaths of over nine-hundred people through the drinking of poisoned Kool-Aid, a fruit punch, the joke is impossible to understand.

Comic amusement does not depend solely on the presence of a funny joke, however. There are, as per Lafollette and Shanks, other variables which may influence the listener of a joke and prevent him from experiencing comic amusement, namely: the mood of the listener and his relation to the content of the joke. This poses a complicated problem for a thesis which must occasionally resort to examples of humour: if humour is so inherently context dependent, there is a great chance that the reader will not find said examples funny, and if that is the case, understanding my point may become all too difficult. However, while one can hardly speak of any kind of objectivity when it comes to instances of humour, there seems to be a certain glimmer of transversality to it; one rooted in our inevitable common ground as human beings.

At the outset of his examination of the techniques of humour, Freud observes that the humour resides in the way the joke is worded and not necessarily in the thought behind

[5] This joke is scattered across the Internet. I was unable to find its true origin.

it. He proves his point by rewording the jokes into longer, more explicative versions which tend to lose all of their humour – by, in his words, "reducing" them. For example, Herr. N, a famous wit of Freud's time, once remarked of someone: "I travelled tête-a-bête with him" which Freud renders into both "I travelled tête-a-tête with X., and X. is a stupid ass" and "I travelled tête-a-tête with that stupid ass X" (Freud, 2002: 19), which in this context read not necessarily as humour, but as mere insults. While it is hasty to claim that the thought behind a humorous statement need not be funny, Freud makes an extremely relevant point: form is absolutely essential to humour. It is for this reason that he decided to launch into a catalogue of joke techniques, and it is for this reason that there may be a glimmer of transversality to be found in humour – if there are joke mechanisms, then this surely means that we tend to find something funnier if it is worded or delivered this or that way. The limerick format is a particularly good example: while its rhyming scheme may not have necessarily been created for the purposes of humour[6], it has since been shown to be singularly suited to that purpose.

When it comes to the actual subject of a joke, however, there is a particular rule of thumb that, while not necessarily dictating that a joke is funny, is an important characteristic of humour: "emotional detachment" – what Bergson referred to as "l'*insensibilité* qui accompagne d'ordinaire le rire" (Bergson, 1969: 3) and "une anesthésie momentanée du coeur" (*ibid.*: 4):

> Essayez, un moment, de vous intéresser à tout ce qui se dit et à tout ce qui se fait, agissez, en imagination, avec ceux qui agissent, sentez avec ceux qui sentent, donnez enfin à votre sympathie son plus large épanouissement : comme sous un coup de baguette magique vous verrez les objets les plus légers prendre du poids, et une coloration sévère passer sur toutes choses. Détachez-vous maintenant, assistez à la vie en spectateur indifférent: bien des drames tourneront à la comédie. (*ibid.*)[7]

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard claims that "[f]rom the point of view of pathos, a single second has infinite value; viewed comically, 10,000 years are but a

[6] "While the limerick is a largely Anglo-American phenomenon, it is sometimes claimed that the first limerick was composed by Italian philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274)" (Clapham, Gray, 2009: 7).

[7] An opinion voiced earlier by Schopenhauer: "If we turn from contemplating the world as a whole, and, in particular, the generations of men as they live their little hour of mock-existence and then are swept away in rapid succession; if we turn from this, and look at life in its small details, as presented, say, in a comedy, how ridiculous it all seems! It is like a drop of water seen through a microscope, a single drop teeming with *infusoria*; or a speck of cheese full of mites invisible to the naked eye. How we laugh as they bustle about so eagerly, and struggle with one another in so tiny a space! And whether here, or in the little span of human life, this terrible activity produces a comic effect" (Schopenhauer, 1908: 39, italics in the original).

foolish trick" (Kierkegaard, 2009: 78). This is the kind of detachment that a comic perspective provides us with: it allows us to observe a situation with a certain emotional detachment. This does not mean, of course, that we feel nothing when laughing – this would be simplistic. Carroll, referring to Bergson's "anesthésie momentanée du coeur," addresses this as follows:

> Yet I do not think that this should be understood to mean that comic amusement is altogether alien to emotion, but only that certain emotions – such as sympathy – are disengaged either by distracting our attention away from that which might enlist our sympathies for the characters in question, or by de-emphasising the apparent degree of danger and/or pain that threatens them, or by portraying them as antipathetic, or by portraying them as other-than-normal humans, such as clowns and, therefore, not subject to the injuries to which flesh is heir. (Carrol, 2014: 30)

In short, humour relies somewhat on its abilities to distract us from the depths of an individual's suffering – it does not intend to make us fear for them, as Noël Carroll observes. The Monty Python sketch "Sam Peckinpagh's Salad Days" (cf. Monty Python, 2016) is perhaps the best example of this. The jaunty scenery is peopled by characters so stereotypically upper class and buoyant that one cannot help but feel they are not real people such as oneself. When the sheer sunniness ultimately becomes an accidental massacre, during which getting hit by a tennis ball in the eye makes Michael Palin's character squirt blood out of his socket and accidentally impale a lady with a tennis racket, we are not thinking about the repercussions of this terrible event on the characters and their families – this is because they are not real, but more than that, they are not meant to be realistic, so the element of danger is not strong enough to inhibit our comic amusement[8]. Our attention is being instead drawn from their humanity to the contrast between the tone of the setting and its characters, to the deflating of the medium by frustrating our expectations of how a scene like that generally pans out. There is, of course, perhaps a subtext as well: these settings are usually safe and cheery because upper class people tend to be isolated and sheltered from true dangers. By upsetting the scene this radically in the violent manner of Sam Peckinpagh's Westerns, Monty Python are also evincing this. What they were not doing was inspiring fear (a mainstay of horror) and compassion in the public. The underlying theme, in fact, seems to be the idea that Sam Peckinpagh, even when

[8] This explains why we might laugh when, outside the realm of fiction, someone truly hurts themselves, but would be less inclined to if it were clear that their health was truly in danger.

directing an uncharacteristically sunny Edwardian period film, cannot help but switch to a tone he is more familiar with – explicit violence.

A parody of this very characteristic of humour can be found in another Python sketch typically referred to as "The Man Who Makes People Laugh" (cf. Monty Python, 2009). The sketch explores the middling misery of an ordinary man whose every sentence makes people burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter. There are perhaps only two ways in which this distance is created: through rendering the man as stereotypically ordinary and middle-class as possible (bowler hat, glasses, moustache, etc.) and through the hysterical laughter of the others. The notoriously social influence of laughter – its "infectious" side – works wonderfully, along with the oddity of the premise: it seems absurd that the man should be hilarious, but we laugh, and we end up laughing at his and his family's outright misery and downfall.

Other comedies thrive especially on engendering a character's downfall, prompting us to laugh at how consistently cruel life can be to one particular character. Louis C.K.'s *Louie* is an example: a video promoting the first series depicted a desperate Louis C.K. visiting a pornographer for a heart-wrenching purpose: his career is failing and he wants a last shot at making some money in order to provide for his daughters. A viable solution seems to be making a gruesome pornographic video that exploits his minor celebrity status. The antics the pornographer then suggests putting Louis through in order to fulfil his wish become systematically worse and worse, while he finds himself unable to say no because he wants to provide for his children. In the end, he manages to refuse doing the video, but only because he receives a call telling him he has succeeded in securing a new show: *Louie*. As he leaves, the pornographer says "he'll be back" (cf. C.K, 2009). The outcome is bleak, yet the humour is clear, and it lies in the exaggeratedly awful things the fictional Louis will have to be put through if he wants to make a decent living. However, the detachment does not necessarily reach the point of indifference. The humour lies partially in our empathy for Louis and in his self-deprecation, about which more will be said below. A degree of detachment can then be said to be a transversal feature of humour: it must be somewhat imbued within the technique of the "joke", and if the listener is for some reason particularly emotionally invested in its subject, he may not perceive it as funny.

Freud's aforementioned taxonomy of joke techniques is yet another step in the direction of transversality[9]. While, as it often happens with categorisations, it may not be all encompassing, and while the categories themselves may be questionable, they nevertheless provide valuable insight into the inner workings of shaping a thought into a joke, thus shedding light on the transversal aspects of humour. Freud divides his joke techniques into several broad categories which are then subsequently divided into various subcategories.

The first broad category is "condensation". Behind it lies the Shakespearian adage: "brevity is the soul of wit" (Shakespeare, 1996: 682). Freud observes that there is a tendency towards brevity and "economisation" in some humour, resorting to a quote by Theodor Lipps: "[t]he joke says what it says, not always in a few, but always in too few words, that is, in words which in strict logic or in the ordinary way of thinking and speaking are not sufficient to say it. It is ultimately able to say it outright, by not saying it at all" (*apud* Freud, 2002: 7).

The mechanism of condensation is the culmination of an idea of economisation or brevity. The fundamental ways in which it works, according to Freud, are the following: through fusing two words together, thus deriving a third (eg. the alcoholidays), or by modifying an expression slightly in order to change its original meaning (eg. "vanity is one of his four Achilles' heels"). Freud calls these processes "condensation with formation of a composite word" and "condensation with slight modification," but finally acknowledges that "[b]oth the formation of a composite word and modification are subordinate to the concept of substitute-formation, and, if we wish, we can also describe the composite formation as a modification of the basic word by the second element" (*ibid.*: 21). Freud then goes on to give us particular examples of condensation, such as plays on words, *double entendres* or puns.

It is when veering from the broad technique of condensation into others that distinctions become more difficult to make, with Freud often acknowledging that there is a great fluidity in these categories. Bearing this in mind, it seems only appropriate to share a few of what seem like the most distinct categories from the idea of brevity and condensation. The first is perhaps the idea of "displacement". One of the examples of

[9] Bergson too, in *Le Rire*, gives several examples of humorous "mechanisms", in a much more literal, physical sense of the word, such as "le diable à ressort", "le pantin à ficelles" and "la boule de neige" (cf. Bergson, 1969).

displacement which Freud provides is the "salmon mayonnaise joke", a classic joke with apparent Jewish origins:

> An impoverished man borrowed 25 florins from a well-to-do acquaintance, assuring him at some length of his distress. On the very same day, his patron comes upon him in a restaurant with a plate of salmon with mayonnaise before him. He reproaches him: "What, you borrow money from me, and then you go and order salmon with mayonnaise. That's what you used my money for?" "I don't get it," answers the accused, "when I've got no money I can't eat salmon with mayonnaise; when I've got money, I *mustn't* eat salmon with mayonnaise, So *tell me, when* ***can*** *I eat salmon with mayonnaise".*(*apud ibid.*: 41-42, italics in the original)

The technique of displacement, Freud argues, is the first where the actual thought behind the form is evidently the source of the humour: "we have seen that a displacement joke is to a large extent independent of its linguistic expression. It does not depend on words, but on the train of thought" (*ibid*.: 43). This, Freud argues, is because the only way to convey the joke's meaning without using its original form is to have the subject reply to the question directly. The displacement lies in the impoverished man's apparent train of thought: he cannot see, or is taking advantage of that fact, that while it is logical that he should be able to have salmon mayonnaise if he can pay for it, it is not appropriate for him to buy a rich man's meal with money he has borrowed from someone under the pretext of being in dire straits. Referring to this very joke, Freud remarks that what is happening is the covering up of a "flaw in thinking" (*ibid.*: 49) by cobbling together an "appearance of logic" (*ibid*.: 51) which makes apparent sense but fails to apply to the situation at hand.

By contrast, Freud mentions the technique of absurdity, which puts before us a piece of apparent nonsense wherein lies some actual sense: Noël Fielding's milk song could be an example, as mentioned above. Freud's most illustrative example, perhaps, would be that of the army officer who chides a lazy soldier: "Issy, you are no good for us. I'll give you some advice. Buy yourself a cannon and make yourself independent," (*ibid.:* 48). Interpreted literally the idea is absurd, but one quickly realises that the officer is only showing Issy an impossibly exaggerated version of a solution to his sloth, which is compromising his service and affecting the army. The "flaw in thinking" is here only apparent, it can only be deemed as such if the remark is taken literally.

Displacement, in its many forms, seems to play on an element of apparent or real flaws in thought. Freud gives several examples of *Schadchen* (marriage-broker) jokes.

They almost always consist of an unwilling man, an unattractive prospective bride and a very insistent marriage broker who either refuses to concede that the marriage is not very advantageous to the point of absurdity, or is somehow tripped up by his own stubbornness due to a slip of the tongue. Freud refers to these jokes in particular as boasting "sophistical flaw[s]" (*ibid*.: 53). In one of the jokes, a marriage broker attempts to convince a man that he is better off marrying a woman with one leg shorter than the other, because this way he will never have to worry about a healthy wife somehow having an accident and becoming disabled – his crippled prospective wife is, he claims, already "ready-made." In another of the jokes the man complains that his prospective bride's mother is malicious and stupid and that her daughter is old, ugly and poor. The broker convinces him that all these apparent flaws are irrelevant, until the man mentions that the woman is also hunchbacked, to which the broker replies: "Now what are you after? So she's not to have a single fault?" (*ibid*.: 52). In these stories, Freud claims:

> A person who has reacted the same way several times in succession continues this way of speaking on the next occasion too, where it becomes incongruous and contradicts their intentions. They are failing to adapt to the requirements of the situation, succumbing to automatic habit. (*ibid*.: 55)

We must not forget that Freud's work refers specifically to joke techniques, although "joke", having been translated from *Witz*, should be interpreted in the broadest sense of the word – "humour" is the object of a shorter essay from 1927, which I will later discuss. However, if one considers the "joke" as inherently belonging to the broad spectre of humour, and it would be particularly strange not to, it is only natural to find the techniques behind their creation relevant towards remarking that there are transversal elements to humour. Freud's reference to the exposure of an automatism evinces this: "[t]he exposure of psychic automatism belongs to the technique of the comic, as every [act of] unmasking or self-betrayal does" (ibid.: 56). Freud mentions this in order to admit he has not found the particular essence of "the joke", but instead an array of characteristics which are difficult to define and separate. These characteristics and the specific mention of automatism are nevertheless what is truly valuable towards finding the aforementioned glimmer of transversality in humour: they suggest that Freud has read Bergson's 1901 essay *Le Rire*, which he acknowledges and I will later discuss. Freud's use of the word incongruity will also prove a valuable segue into the next subchapter.

Finally, Freud mentions two other mechanisms: “representation by the opposite” and “indirect representation”. Briefly, the purest instance of the first is perhaps irony; it consists of “the replacement of the appropriate ‘no’ by a ‘yes’” (*ibid*.: 61). Indirect representation, however, is more intricate, but can be boiled down to the general category of the simile.

There is yet another hint at transversality to be mentioned. While Freud at first rejects the importance of the subject matter of the joke as essential to its comic value, his later division of jokes into “innocuous jokes” and “tendentious jokes” leads him to say otherwise: “[s]ometimes the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular purpose; at others it does put itself in the service of such a purpose; it becomes *tendentious*. Only the joke that has a tendency or intentions run the risk of coming up against persons who do not want to listen to it” (*ibid*.: 87, emphasis in the original). According to Freud, tendentious jokes are *par excellence* either hostile jokes or obscene jokes (*ibid*.: 94). These jokes, Freud claims, are the ones that provoke the strongest reaction – both positive and negative:

> The pleasurable effect of an innocuous joke is mostly a moderate one; a distinctly agreeable feeling, a slight smile, is usually all it is able to provoke in the listener, and part of this effect can probably be put down to thought-content, as we have seen in appropriate examples […]. An un-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves those sudden outbursts of laughter that make tendentious jokes so irresistible. As the technique can be the same in both, we may find the suspicion stirring that a tendentious joke has sources of pleasure at its disposal – by virtue of its tendency – to which innocuous jokes have no access. (*ibid*.: 93-94)

The motive behind Freud’s observation will be discussed further below. For now, however, it will suffice to say that there seems to be a tendency for jokes with a controversial or taboo subject matter to elicit a stronger response – whether or not making something ruder or more controversial is the recipe for humour –: “[i]n general, it has also been found that people will enjoy jokes more about taboo topics than about non-taboo ones […]” (Billig, 2005: 158). As well as revelling in a number of successful instances of joke techniques, it seems that people tend to enjoy jokes which deal with taboo topics.

Lastly, if humour is deeply context dependent, a more glaring cross-cultural approach would perhaps be the best way to discover if there is anything to an idea of transversality. It was in an effort to provide this approach that Chafe investigated instances of humour in the Navajo, Iroquois, Chinese and Japanese cultures. He found that in the

Navajo, Iroquois and Chinese cultures there was a common element of wordplay and misunderstanding, illustrated mainly through the figure of a grandmother that misuses or misunderstands dubious language and/or new cultural practices. In Japanese culture, Chafe underlines the relevance of “kyoka”, a genre of poetry developed in the Japanese Edo period, which mainly consists in spoofing the tanka genre – which is similar in structure to the haiku but with two extra 7 syllable verses – by playing off its solemnity, introducing incongruous elements that jar with the reader’s expectation of a tanka: “[w]hereas tanka achieve aesthetic effects by evoking nature and nature-related emotions, kyoka are light-hearted and often nonsensical” (Chafe, 2007: 132-133). While, if exposed to this kind of humour without any interpretative aid, we may be unable to see why it should be funny, when we are properly contextualised the mechanisms become at once familiar. In the first three (Navajo, Iroquois and Chinese) cases, wordplay and the general trope of the mistake or the idiot are more than common throughout the whole of Western culture. In the second, Japanese example, it seems clear that it is the mainstay of parody, of toying with expectations, that animates the creation of kyoka.

Noël Carroll offers an example which sheds further light on apparent cultural differences in humour: he recalls that the first time he heard a Newfie joke, he did not know that “Newfie” referred to people from the Canadian province of Newfoundland, but was nevertheless able to laugh at it. Newfie jokes, he claims, are just “moron jokes, localized” (Carroll, 2014: 99). The Newfie is simply a humour token, such as the blonde or the *Schadchen*: a character which, through endless retellings and numerous jokes, has become associated with a particular kind of folly that the audience begins to expect to see enacted in new, fun ways. While the token itself may often change, from Newfie to Polish, Martians, or Blondes, the root remains the same: laughing at fools. It is only the context that varies.

Through Freud’s taxonomy of joke techniques I believe I was able to illustrate that there are mechanisms one can put in place in order to tentatively increase a joke’s “funniness”, despite any subjectivity of taste and experience. More than that, I believe that with the aid of a few cross-cultural examples it has become clear that there are common elements to humour between cultures as vastly different such as the European, Japanese, Chinese and Iroquois. If these techniques exist, then perhaps humour is not a strictly subjective experience, and has instead something not objective, but transversal to it, owing

perhaps to our inevitable common ground as human beings – something intersubjective, if you will.

1.1.5 Incongruity

When explaining the humorous aspect behind displacement – a flaw in thinking of some sort, Freud referred to the concept of incongruity. The word, as defined by the OED, is pregnant with meaning: "**1 a.** Disagreement in character or qualities; want of accordance or harmony; discrepancy, inconsistency […] **b.** (with *pl.*) An instance or point of disagreement; a discrepancy, an inconsistency […] **2 a**. Want of accordance with what is reasonable or fitting; unsuitableness, inappropriateness, absurdity […] **3.** Want of harmony of parts or elements; want of self-consistency; incoherence. Also (with *pl.*) something incoherent or not self-consistent […] †**4.** *Grammar*. Violation of the rules of concord; grammatical incorrectness; solecism. *Obs.*". The general idea seems to be of something which is not in accordance with something else. The reference to an accordance with "what is reasonable or fitting", as we will later see, is essential to the concept of humour, because it suggests a pre-existent conception of what is reasonable or fitting and what is not. The mention of harmony is also telling, as is the grammatical aspect: it points towards the deception of strict rules. Violation of concord and solecism are especially relevant because, outside of a grammatical context, they also mean, respectively, a lack of agreement and a breach in "good" manners: all of it consistent with the idea of incongruity as a mainstay of humour.

Centuries of writing on the subject of humour has led academics such as Noël Carroll and Michael Billig to group authors and their thoughts into several different theories of humour. Namely: the relief theory, the superiority theory, the play theory and finally, the incongruity theory. Each of these theories is intended to supply the question of the nature of humour with a particular answer. According to the incongruity theory, for example, all humour is rooted in incongruity. The burden of this statement is such, however, that it can become easy to refute it and then cease to acknowledge incongruity's true relevance. It seems unwise to continuously discard these theories because they fail to provide one unique answer to all of humour's intricacies. These intricacies, I believe, would perhaps be better explained by employing each of these theories in tandem; by

exploring their different contents as characteristics that highlight the many different aspects of humour, instead of attempting to provide us with one limited answer.

The superiority theory, which shall be discussed further below, is generally held to be the earliest of theories on humour; its tenets were voiced in Classical Antiquity by Plato and Aristotle, before culminating, in the 17th century, in its most recognisable formulation: that of Thomas Hobbes. The theory of incongruity is said to have emerged later, in the 18th century, through the pen of Francis Hutcheson and his essay "Reflections upon Laughter", as a response to Hobbes. However, there is already an element of incongruity to be derived from our investigation of humour's etymological origin – that of the ridiculous. As Michael Billig has written: "[i]nstead of seeking the origins of laughter within the motives of the person who laughs, incongruity theories have sought to identify those incongruous features of the world that provoke laughter" (Billig, 2005: 57). This does not exclude the presence of incongruity in purported superiority theorists such as Plato, Aristotle or Hobbes' observations, however. While they were clearly more concerned with the more controversial aspects of our laughter and with the motives behind it – in that sense they were suitable precursors to the relief theory –, they nevertheless seemed to be making an essential point about incongruity in humour: the ridiculous person, the humourist in the physiological sense of the word, is incongruous. He is discrepant. He deviates from the norm. Whether or not we laugh at what is incongruous because we find ourselves superior to it is another question, to be examined further below.

The question, of course, lies in the nature of this incongruity. In his essay, Francis Hutcheson states:

> That then which seems generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, seems to be the very spirit of burlesque; and the greatest part of our raillery and jest is founded upon it. (Hutcheson, 1973: 109)

Hutcheson's description calls to mind both the idea of "conceptual blending" and Freud's examinations of the mechanisms behind humorous metaphors. It is perhaps too specific in mentioning that incongruity always consists in the "bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea", however. Vaguer, simpler incongruities can also be a source of humour, such as a man

falling down a flight of stairs. In his summary of the incongruity theory, Noël Carroll refers to it as positing that "what is key to comic amusement is a deviation from some presupposed norm – that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be," (Carroll, 2014: 17). This evinces an essential point. In Bergson's *Le Rire*, the author claims that: "[n]otre rire est toujours le rire d'un groupe" (Bergson, 1969: 5). The comic perception of incongruities is tied to this idea, in that the discrepancy or deviation relates to norms which have mainly to do with the experience and the established rules of a particular community. This is part of the reason why humour is such an intersubjective experience – it varies from individual to individual, but always within a social context: "[i]ncongruity is a comparative notion. It presupposes that something is discordant with something else. With respect to comic amusement, that *something else* is how the world is or should be" (Carroll, 2014: 18). The requisite is then that something be incongruous with someone's general expectations of normalcy, expectations which are influenced by the larger infrastructure of the culture they inhabit and the communities they belong to. As per Bergson:

> Pour comprendre le rire, il faut le replacer dans son milieu naturel, qui est la société ; il faut surtout en déterminer la fonction utile, qui est une function sociale […] Le rire doit répondre à certaines exigences de la vie en commun. Le rire doit avoir une signification sociale. (Bergson, 1969: 6)

Plato's ridiculous people fit neatly into this line of thought. They differ from their particular community's expectations of normalcy, and are thus susceptible to cause laughter.

Even the most verbal of jokes can be included in the incongruity theory. In a pun such as "did you hear about the Mexican train robber? He had loco motives"[10], the humour resides in how similar "loco motives" is to "locomotives". This incongruity lies in the fundamental flaws inherent in any language – in the ambiguities we inadvertently incur in, but also in the misunderstandings intrinsic to the existence of several different languages. Uttering the same sounds, in this case, leads to the expression of two different things which nevertheless apply to the descriptor of "Mexican train robber": he now owns locomotives, and he had "crazy (loco) motives". It especially plays off of the fact that there are two

[10] This is yet another example of a joke one could easily find online, but the true origins of which are obscure.

languages at stake: Spanish and English, thus multiplying the amount of possible misunderstandings, but narrowing the public down to speakers of both English and Spanish. To complicate matters, in this case, as is the case with many puns, the humour also resides in the partial ineptitude of the wordplay; or rather, in how facile and unelaborate it is.

The question to follow would be what exactly the relationship between humour and incongruity is. Bergson's essay on laughter is valuable in this respect. We have already discussed two of his foundational claims: that "laughter"[11] requires a degree of emotional detachment and that it must have social significance. There remain two other claims: the first is that laughter is inherently human. By this Bergson means that we are the only animal that laughs and is laughed at. When we laugh at animals or inanimate objects we imagine them endowed with humanity: "On rira d'un chapeau ; mais ce qu'on raille alors, ce n'est pas le morceau de feutre ou de paille, c'est la forme que des hommes lui ont donnée, c'est le caprice humain dont il a pris le moule" (Bergson, 1969: 3). An amusing hat is amusing because it exudes a quirky personality; the famous grumpy cat is amusing because we imagine it to be grumpy much like we can occasionally be – not because, as far as we know, it has that ability. If it had that ability, merely displaying it would hardly be amusing, only natural. Simpler things, like an object falling when we did not expect it to, still seem to play off our own overreaction to it. To Bergson's credit, it is difficult to find an example where there is nothing remotely human behind our laughter.

Bergson's second and final claim is perhaps the most valuable: he believed that when we laugh at incongruous behaviour we are laughing at instances of rigidity in human behaviour: "une certaine *raideur de mécanique* là où l'on voudrait trouver la souplesse attentive et la vivante flexibilité d'une personne" (*ibid*.: 8, italics in the original). He attributes this rigidity to a "distraction", which could also be translated as absentmindedness. Bergson's argument is relatively simple: life requires us to adapt to our circumstances constantly. Failing to adapt momentarily, as in someone who falls down a flight of stairs because they were not looking; or generally, as in someone who lacks any and all social skills, is proof of a certain kind of rigidity. The mechanical aspect of Bergson's theory is perhaps a product of the mechanical anxiety of his time – machines, in our day, are usually taken to be remarkably skilled at adapting themselves, comparatively.

[11] In Bergson's essay the exploration of laughter is often synonymous with an exploration of humour.

However, it is also quite illustrative: when we fail to act according to our exterior circumstances we are similar to a machine. In this sense, a man bumping his head against a wall he did not seems like a sports car trying to fry an egg – a machine performing a task it was not made to perform. Bergson's argument is that we, unlike the sports car, are able to adapt our actions to the circumstances, instead of doing only one thing which is suitable in one given occasion. Consequently, Bergson remarks:

> Toute *raideur* du caractère, de l'esprit et même du corps, sera donc suspecte à la société, parce qu'elle est le signe possible d'une activité qui s'endort et aussi d'une activité qui s'isole, qui tend à s'écarter du centre commun autour duquel la société gravite, d'une excentricité enfin. Et pourtant la société ne peut intervenir ici par une répression matérielle, puisqu'elle n'est pas atteinte matériellement. Elle est en présence de quelque chose qui l'inquiète, mais à titre de symptôme seulement, — à peine une menace, tout au plus un geste. C'est donc par un simple geste qu'elle y répondra. Le rire doit être quelque chose de ce genre, une espèce de *geste social.* (*ibid.*: 15)

His claim is simple: that laughter is society's response (or one of them) to the individual's lack of adaptation – to his inattention or absentmindedness, the "activité qui s'endort" (*ibid.*). Laughter is then, in Bergson's terminology, a social corrective: "Le rire est cette correction même. Le rire est un certain geste social, qui souligne et réprime une certaine distraction spéciale des hommes et des événements" (*ibid*.: 67). In this case, accidental humour, humour which derives from an accidental situation (such as someone tripping and falling) is the expression of an absentmindedness that is then corrected by the vexing experience of being laughed at:

> Mais, d'autre part, même au théâtre, le plaisir de rire n'est pas un plaisir pur, je veux dire un plaisir exclusivement esthétique, absolument désintéressé. Il s'y mêle une arrière-pensée que la société a pour nous quand nous ne l'avons pas nous mêmes. Il y entre l'intention inavouée d'humilier, et par là, il est vrai, de corriger tout au moins, extérieurement. (*ibid*.: 104)

Intentional humour, on the other hand, becomes a way of creating stock characters, of creating "types" which we are invited to laugh at due to their inability to adapt – their antisocial tendencies, their unwavering stubbornness, etc. For Bergson, then, the reason why we laugh at incongruity is to maintain the cohesiveness of our society: the production of intentional humour is only a way to reinforce that same purpose. This seems like a slightly ruthless and utilitarian theory of humour, but the element of correction is indeed

present in many instances of humour: satire is a case in point, for it actively denounces perceived mistakes and wrongdoings in the hope that they will be corrected. The very act of pointing out incongruities and making us aware of them, even if laughter is not somehow a humiliating force, fights the absentmindedness of both the butt of the joke and the listener. Bergson's theory bears a remarkable similarity to the superiority theories in this sense, finding at the heart of humour not a Hobbesian selfishness, but a biological imperative to fight for the perpetuation of (social) life.

There are limitations to this idea of humour and laughter as a corrective force, however. Bergson claims that laughter is pleasurable almost as a biological ploy to make us indulge in it often, thus reinforcing our societal rules just as often – like sex, perhaps. But if Humanity, as Bergson himself claims[12], is willing to squeeze laughter out of every possible occasion, are we not encouraged to fabricate incongruities ourselves in order to laugh at them? This is of course what happens in intentional humour: we produce a collection of incongruities, some of which would never see the light of day, such as my example of the sports car trying to fry an egg. In his HBO special *Jammin' in New York*, George Carlin performs a routine called "Little Things We Share." It consists in pointing out a number of situations which are typically Bergsonian in the sense that they consist of little mistakes, little flaws in judgement that we all find ourselves engaging in at times: "do you ever look at your watch and then you don't know what time it is? And you have to look again! And you still don't know the time. So you look a third time and someone says: 'what time it is?' And you say 'I don't know!'" (Carlin, 1:25-1:40); "you know when you've been eatin' ice cream too fast and you get that frozen spot in the back of your throat but you can't do anything about it because you have to reach it to rub it, you just have to kind of wait for it to go away? And it does? Then what do you do? Eat more ice cream! What are we, fucking stupid?" (*ibid*.: 6:05-6:21) While Carlin is pointing out incongruities, he seems to be treating them as inevitable – the humour lies in exactly that: the fact that we will occasionally commit one of these mistakes, no matter what. There is no wish to correct anyone because it is not possible. What Carlin is doing is making us aware of these

[12] "C'est pourquoi l'idée ne serait pas venue de l'exagérer, de l'ériger en système, de créer un art pour elle, si le rire n'était un plaisir et si l'humanité ne saisissait au vol la moindre occasion de le faire naître" (Bergson, 1969: 78).

incongruities whilst simultaneously approving of them as the things that we share, the things that unite us – the things that make us human.

Frances Hutcheson, in "Reflections Upon Laughter", wrote:

> We generally imagine in mankind some degree of wisdom above other animals, and have high ideas of them on this account. If then along with our notion of wisdom in our fellows, there occurs any instance of gross inadvertence, or great mistake, this is a great cause of laughter. (Hutcheson, 1973: 110-111)

In Bergson's case, this view is particularly clear. According to Billig:

> Bergson constantly argued against materialists who viewed humans as just bodily machines. In Bergson's philosophy, life is not comprised purely of material elements: the world of the spirit, or the intangible force of life, has equal reality. Bergson's theory of comedy rules out the possibility that humans can merely be physical automata. (Billig, 2005: 129-130)

In *Le Rire*, we find the expression of two fundamental discomforts: that of the soul within the body and that of the individual within society. The inherent dignity that Hutcheson claimed we usually assume mankind to be endowed with[13] is limited by the awkwardness of our actual physical existence:

> Du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant, voilà encore notre point de départ. D'où venait ici le comique ? De ce que le corps vivant se raidissait en machine. Le corps vivant nous semblait donc devoir être la souplesse parfaite, l'activité toujours en éveil d'un principe toujours en travail. Mais cette activité appartiendrait réellement à l'âme plutôt qu'au corps. Elle serait la flamme même de la vie, allumée en nous par un principe supérieur, et aperçue à travers le corps par un effet de transparence. Quand nous ne voyons dans le corps vivant que grâce et souplesse, c'est que nous négligeons ce qu'il y a en lui de pesant, de résistant, de matériel enfin ; nous oublions sa matérialité pour ne penser qu'à sa vitalité, vitalité que notre imagination attribue au principe même de la vie intellectuelle et morale. Mais supposons qu'on appelle notre attention sur cette matérialité du corps. Supposons qu'au lieu de participer de la légèreté du principe qui l'anime, le corps ne soit plus à nos yeux qu'une enveloppe lourde et embarrassante, lest importun qui retient à terre une âme impatiente de quitter le sol. Alors le corps deviendra pour l'âme ce que le vêtement était tout à l'heure pour le corps lui-même,

[13] "Again, any little accident to which we have joined the idea of meanness, befalling a person of great gravity, ability, dignity, is a matter of laughter, for the very same reason; thus the strange contortions of the body in a fall, the dirtying of a decent dress, the natural functions which we study to conceal from sight, are matter of laughter when they occur to observation in persons of whom we have high ideas. Nay, the very human form has the ideas of dignity so generally joined with it, that even in ordinary persons such mean accidents are matter of jest; but still the jest is increased by the dignity, gravity, or modesty of the person, which shows that it is this contrast, or opposition of ideas of dignity and meanness, which is the occasion of laughter" (Hutcheson, 1973: 110).

une matière inerte posée sur une énergie vivante. Et l'impression du comique se produira dès que nous aurons le sentiment net de cette superposition. (Bergson, 1969: 38)

The idea of our bodies as crude, heavy garments that tether us to the ground seems to somewhat echo the views of Arthur Schopenhauer, who dubbed the incongruity between our finiteness versus the infinity of things "the vanity of existence"[14] – the vanity being that we tend to (foolishly, Schopenhauer observes) rebel against the idea that our life is brief and meaningless: "[t]he heart rebels against this, and feels that it cannot be true" (Schopenhauer, 1908: 34).

Whether or not there is such a thing as a soul, the claim that we are more than mere bodies is a common one, and the supposed inherent dignity of humanity rests on that presupposition. We, Bergson claims, are more than machines – more than bodies. When we malfunction, we act like machines. This is incongruous, and while correction does not always seem to be the immediate aim of laughter or humour, we are clearly made aware of these incongruities through them. This basic existential discomfort spreads itself to society, the ceremonial side of which, Bergson claims, is merely a puppet show when observed detachedly – it is an awkward mechanism encrusted upon us, much like our body itself:

> Le côté cérémonieux de la vie sociale devra donc renfermer un comique latent, lequel n'attendra qu'une occasion pour éclater au grand jour. On pourrait dire que les cérémonies sont au corps social ce que le vêtement est au corps individuel : elles doivent leur gravité à ce qu'elles s'identifient pour nous avec l'objet sérieux auquel l'usage les attache, elles perdent cette gravité dès que notre imagination les en isole. De sorte qu'il suffit, pour qu'une cérémonie devienne comique, que notre attention se concentre sur ce qu'elle a de cérémonieux, et que nous négligions sa matière, comme disent les philosophes, pour ne plus penser qu'à sa forme. […] Dès que nous oublions l'objet grave d'une solennité ou d'une cérémonie, ceux qui y prennent part nous font l'effet de s'y mouvoir comme des marionnettes. (Bergson, 1969: 34)

Bergson, of course, does not seem to believe that life is merely a puppet-show or a masquerade, but instead that viewed from a certain perspective, the most formal and rigid aspects of social life become comic in the sense that they appear to be an artificial disguise

[14] "This vanity finds expression in the whole way in which things exist; in the infinite nature of Time and Space, as opposed to the finite nature of the individual in both; in the ever-passing present moment as the only mode of actual existence; in the interdependence and relativity of all things; in continual Becoming without ever Being; in constant wishing and never being satisfied; in the long battle which forms the history of life, where every effort is checked by difficulties, and stopped until they are overcome" (Schopenhauer, 1908: 33).

forced on "Nature" – it is here that he recognises the discomfort. Bureaucracy is a fitting example, and Bergson quotes a situation where its counterproductive rigidity is obvious: that of the survivors of a shipwreck near Dieppe who, when met by custom officers, were immediately asked if they had anything to declare (*ibid*.: 35-36). When Bergson lays emphasis on the idea of correction, however, the suggestion seems to be that these are rigidities that can and need be corrected through ridicule. This is, in part, something that humour does: it breaks with conventionality and points towards incongruities. What Bergson does not seem to suggest, unlike George Carlin, is that while we should perhaps always strive to lessen our discomfort and keep everyone alert or aware, a rigidity of some kind will always be present. It is only considered incongruous because our expectations are otherwise. We are creatures of incongruity. Laughing at someone who trips and falls flat on his face does not correct anything at that moment or truly prevent the situation from occurring in the future – it will happen again. It will happen because we are not omnipotent or omnipresent. It seems to be a great part of experiencing a body that it should localise, influence and limit our mind's designs; of society, that its many benefits should be upheld and delivered by rigid, at times meaningless ceremonies – such as bureaucracy. Humour seems, to a great extent, to evince this – to stress our limits and, if not urge us to change the more burdensome of these mechanisms, to at least be aware of them and delight in their ineptitude. In doing this, it delivers fundamental insight into the difficult and troublesome aspects of our existence.

1.1.6 Superiority

Bergson's theory, in its defence of laughter as a social corrective, bears hints of the superiority theory. Towards the end of *Le Rire*, Bergson writes:

> En ce sens, le rire ne peut pas être absolument juste. Répétons qu'il ne doit pas non plus être bon. Il a pour fonction d'intimider en humiliant. Il n'y réussirait pas si la nature n'avait laissé à cet effet, dans les meilleurs d'entre les hommes, un petit fonds de méchanceté, ou tout au moins de malice. Peutêtre vaudra-t-il mieux que nous n'approfondissions pas trop ce point. Nous n'y trouverions rien de très flatteur pour nous. (*ibid*.: 151)

The immediate takeaway seems to be a Darwinistic form of natural selection through laughter: "Le rire châtie certains défauts à peu près comme la maladie châtie

certains excès, frappant des innocents, épargnant des coupables, visant à un résultat général et ne pouvant faire à chaque cas individuel l'honneur de l'examiner séparément" (*ibid*.: 83). The prospect of laughter as a disease that weeds out both those who produce incongruities and those who do not, for the sake of a common good, seems to bear alarmingly eugenic overtones. Thomas Hobbes, though subtler in his description of laughter as an expression of superiority, is nevertheless extremely critical:

> *Sudden glory,* is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. (Hobbes, 1998: 38)

According to Hobbes, we laugh after performing some action that pleases us or when we are clever enough to detect a flaw in someone else. Laughing stems from a sense of triumph over others, or in the case of self-deprecation, a sense of triumph over ourselves. This is not out of tune with Hobbes' view of humanity, as per Billig:

> Hobbes was to rework the same elements of psychology and politics into *Leviathan*. Hobbes argued that humans could not be trusted to control their selfish instincts. […].The apparently innocent joy of laughter is not so innocent. It indicates an unpleasant feeling that strikes at social relations. A society filled with laughter would not be a happy place. It would be a place of mockery where each is trying to outdo everyone else in the competitive game of life – a place where human bears are baited unmercifully. (Billig, 2005: 53)

Unlike Bergson, Hobbes feared laughter served no purpose but to bolster egos for reasons unworthy of merit: "[a]nd therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able" (Hobbes, 1998: 38). While Bergson thought humour and laughter served a cruel but necessary purpose, Hobbes was, like Plato, suspicious of laughter.

The idea of bolstering egos is of course not strange to humour. It is difficult to deny that at times jokes are made at another person's expense, whether or not they intend to cause harm. There is something of this idea in Freud's 1927 essay "Humour", written twenty-two years after *Jokes*. In it, he writes:

> Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world, it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (Freud, 1961: 162)

To some extent, then, humour is "the triumph of narcissism," the preservation of the ego. Freud's paradigmatic example is that of the criminal being led to the gallows who remarks: "Well, the week's beginning nicely". The criminal is of course viciously aware of his imminent, violent death. His use of irony at that moment is not a refusal to recognise the obvious, but a momentary bout of flippancy in the face of the ultimate horror – death. He knows he will not live to see the rest of the week, but refuses to acknowledge it barefacedly, therefore preserving his dignity by showing, instead of fear, a defiant nonchalance. There is an undeniable expression of superiority in this – a rising above our human limitations. However, it is not the kind of mean-spirited, selfish superiority Hobbes refers to – it is not necessarily achieved at the expense of others.

In The Crying of Lot 49, Thomas Pynchon writes of an executive who had worked for Yoyodyne, "one of the giants of the aerospace industry" (Pynchon, 1996: 15). At 39, the executive is made redundant and, having been vigorously trained to do nothing else, begins to ponder the idea of suicide. However, his "previous training got the better of him: he could not make the decision without first hearing the ideas of a committee" (*ibid.*: 78). He decides to place an ad on a newspaper to try to see if anyone who has ever been in a similar situation has come up with a good reason to kill themselves, relying on the fact that no successful suicides would ever reply – they would be hard pressed to. As a result, he receives letters from "suicides who had failed, either through clumsiness or last-minute cowardice. None of them, however, could offer any compelling reasons for staying alive" (*ibid.*: 79). As he finally decides to immolate himself, inspired by a Buddhist monk in Vietnam who had done the same, "the very efficiency expert at Yoyodyne who had caused him to be replaced by an IBM 7094" (*ibid.*) enters the house with the executive's wife, who had left him, and begins to have sex with her. The executive sniggers, his laughter alerting the other elements to his presence. He tells them he was about to "do the Buddhist monk thing", and the efficiency expert replies: "Nearly three weeks, it takes him […] to

decide. You know how long it would've taken the IBM 7094? Twelve microseconds. No wonder you were replaced." (*ibid.*). The joke is relevant in this respect: the executive is portrayed as clueless, but undeserving of the amount of sheer misery which has befallen him. We empathise with him for this. Nevertheless, he is partially the butt of the joke. There are, potentially, two joke-tellers involved: the unnamed narrator of The Crying of Lot 49 and the efficiency expert. It is unclear if the expert intends his remark to be humorous, but it can be interpreted as such, and in that situation he would be amusing himself at the cost of the executive's inability and misery – this is what Hobbes seemed to be referring to. However, from the point of view of the narrator, there is a certain twist to the humour: the sequence of events is so grotesquely cruel and the remark of the expert betrays such an absurd lack of empathy and knowledge of human nature that we, like the executive, laugh: we detach ourselves from the situation and contemplate it for the piece of absurdity it really is. The fact that the executive was fired and that the expert who fired him then interrupts his attempt at suicide by having sex with his wife, and on top of that derides him once again for being indecisive about his suicide, is such perfectly coherent evidence that life is absurd – or that life is against him – that we laugh. We become partially detached and enjoy both the incongruity and the criticism of savage capitalism, while at the same time nourishing an original empathy for the executive who, albeit incompetent, was underserving of his fate. There is no particular idea of superiority on our behalf, though there might be on the executive's: by laughing he is preserving himself.

While Hutcheson's criticism of Hobbes was radical, even he did not deny that there were instances of superiority to be found in humour:

> It is pretty strange that the authors whom we mentioned above have never distinguished between the words laughter and ridicule: this last is but one particular species of the former, when we are laughing at the follies of others; and in this species there may be some pretence to allege that some imagined superiority may occasion it. (Hutcheson, 1973: 106)

But again, the efficiency expert was, arguably, merely observing that the executive was incompetent: it is unclear whether or not he was attempting to be humorous. On the other hand, the humour of this episode certainly also lies in the executive's actual, incredible incompetence: a man who, out of habit, must consult a committee before killing

himself almost forces itself as a funny idea to the reader – but not necessarily a funniness based on our feelings of superiority towards him.

In Hobbes' defence, there are of course situations which consist purely of this kind of ridicule. In an episode of *Blackadder*, the television series, when Baldrick, Captain Blackadder's dim-witted servant, claims that he is carving his name on a bullet so as to avoid ever being shot, Blackadder replies "[y]our brain […] is so minute, Baldrick, that if a hungry cannibal cracked your head open, there wouldn't be enough to cover a small water biscuit" (Curtis and Elton, 1:42-1:52). The remark is of course just as cruel as the executive's, but Baldrick, far from deserving the invective, happens to be tremendously stupid, and we cannot help but laugh at his colossal stupidity this articulately expressed – especially because it seldom seems to affect Baldrick at all. As per Carroll: "Much laughter is nasty, directed at foolishness, and the superiority theory ostensibly explains why this is so. Here, laughter is a sign of pleasure, and the pleasure we take in the foolishness of others is putatively the recognition that we are better than they are" (Carroll, 2014: 11). Behind Captain Blackadder's quip lie unmistakable ideas of superiority towards Baldrick, but even in the case of barefaced ridicule, this need not necessarily be so. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut writes of a group of ragged German reservists towards the end of the war who dread a mission that consists in guarding hundreds of American POW's. He describes their reaction to the state of the American prisoners:

> The eight ridiculous Dresdeners ascertained that these hundred ridiculous creatures really *were* American fighting men fresh from the front. They smiled, and then they laughed. Their terror evaporated. There was nothing to be afraid of. Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves. Here was light opera. (Vonnegut, 2000: 123)

The Dresdeners laughed at the American soldiers not because they found them inferior, but because they recognised their own ridiculousness in them; they saw that the Americans too were only human, subject to the same rigidities and misgivings. More fools like themselves; so they ceased to be afraid and were instead relieved.

In conclusion, there are notorious instances of superiority behind the use of humour and laughter, but it seems daring to claim, like Hobbes, that humour is always such a Darwinistic game of winning and losing. At times, such as in George Carlin's "Little Things We Share", the only ego-bolstering that occurs is that of the self-awareness of

one's own failings met with the laughter of those who identify. At others, such as in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is the realization that there is nothing to fear, not because we are superior, but because the "other", too, is only human – only another fool.

1.1.7 Release/Relief

The idea of a physiological release or relief inherent in comic amusement owes much to 19th-century Victorian England and the writings of Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer. Even then, however, it was not a new thought. Writers such as the Earl of Shaftesbury had, a century before, written about the value of wit and raillery in its disruption of solemnity:

> They know very well, that as Modes and Fashions, so *Opinions,* tho ever so ridiculous, are kept up by Solemnity: and that those formal Notions which grew up probably in an ill Mood, and have been conceiv'd in sober Sadness, are never to be remov'd but in a sober kind of Chearfulness, and by a more easy and pleasant way of Thought. (Cooper, 2001:14)

It was Shaftesbury's opinion that "[t]here are certain Humours in Mankind, which of necessity must have vent" (*ibid*.: 15). In humour lay a way for humanity to vent some of its "humours", to achieve some sort of relief. Shaftesbury, of course, did not delve into the physiological particulars of this line of thinking; it was Bain and Spencer that ultimately did so. Both of these authors rejected incongruity as the sole cause of laughter. Alexander Bain in particular underlined the malevolent aspects of laughter, harkening back to a Hobbesian account of superiority and degradation in humour. However, he also developed the idea of "ludicrous degradation as a mode of release from constraint" (Bain, 1888: 249). Bain's claim was that solemnity or "seriousness" requires a certain rigidity and constraint, which if relieved suddenly provokes hilarity:

> We are sometimes obliged to put on a dignity which we perhaps do not feel, as in administering reproof or correction to inferiors; and still oftener have we to assume an attitude or respect and reverence that does not possess our inward feelings. Both the one and the other situation is a fatiguing tension of the system, and we have the pleasure of a "blessed relief" when anything happens to give a relaxation. (*ibid*.: 251)

Bain, much like Shaftesbury, seems to find this relief commendable on certain occasions:

> The element of the genuine comic is furnished by those dignities that, from some circumstance or other, do not command serious homage. False or faded deities and dignities; splendour and show without meaning; […] vanity and coxcombry; all the windings of the hypocrisy that aims at seeming greater than the reality […] are among the things that commonly induce laughter, when brought into the embrace of meanness and degrading inferiorities. (*ibid*.: 251)

In short, Bain found that humour is a means of disrupting solemnity (especially if it is unwarranted), thus eliminating the effort of constraint and rigidity, and that the mechanism through which it operates is the degradation of that which commands solemnity. The overall effect of this degradation is laughter, mirth, etc. and with it comes a relief or release of tension. This idea of releasing tension was further developed by Spencer, who criticised Bain's account of the process behind laughter. Spencer prefaced his digression into humour by claiming that "[n]ervous excitation always *tends* to beget muscular motion; and when it rises to a certain intensity, always does beget it" (Spencer, 1904: 7562). Sometimes, he argued, the muscular motion which nervous excitation expresses itself through is laughter. In what humorous laughter is concerned – and Spencer also observes that not all laughter is humorous – it is because it arises from a descending incongruity: "[l]aughter naturally results only when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small – only when there is what we may call a *descending* incongruity" (Spencer, 1904: 7570). The nervous excitation arises from the apprehension of the great thing and the anticipation of something greater to follow. When this anticipation is suddenly frustrated, Spencer argues, the build-up of nervous excitation needs to be expended through muscular motion – the "purposeless" convulsions of laughter. Spencer is therefore expanding Bain's explanation of the phenomenon, but disagreeing with him on one fundamental point: there need not be an unpleasant solemnity for one to upset – only the expectation of a certain expenditure of energy.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud's approach to "tendentious jokes" has its own contours of relief or release. As mentioned above, Freud claimed that innocuous jokes are comedy at its purest, bearing no animus other than making someone laugh. Tendentious jokes, on the other hand, have insidious intents, and tend to conceal either sex or hostility. When it comes to sex, Freud examines the role of pure bawdry as an aggressive display of sexuality against an unwilling woman – a form of catcalling, perhaps. However, he observes that in "cultivated society" (Freud, 2002: 97), "[t]he bawdry

becomes witty, and is tolerated only if it is witty" (*ibid.*). Freud then proceeds to explain: "[h]ere at last we can understand what a joke can do for its tendency. It makes the satisfaction of a drive possible (be it lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle in its way; it circumvents this obstacle and in doing so draws pleasure from a source that the obstacle had made inaccessible" (*ibid.*: 98). The obstacle, Freud claims, is repression – both an external mechanism and an internal one:

> Through our culture's work of repression, primary possibilities of enjoyment, now spurned by the censorship within us, are lost. But all renunciation is very difficult for the human psyche, and so we find that tendentious jokes provide a means of reversing [the process of] renunciation and of regaining what was lost. When we laugh at an indecent joke we are laughing at the same thing that causes the bumpkin to laugh in a coarse obscenity. (*ibid.*: 99)

When it comes to hostility, the case is the same. Freud yet again illustrates his point through Herr N. and his tendency for witty raillery: beneath it, he concludes, lies a desire to insult others. However, "his high degree of personal cultivation makes it impossible for him to give vent to these judgements of his in this form. That is why they have recourse to jokes, for jokes will ensure them a reception with the listener which, despite the truth they might well contain, they would never find in an unjoking form" (*ibid.*: 101). The repression in question may of course have many natures and origins: authority would of course be one. One would use humour more readily than a direct insult against a King, especially because it may go unnoticed. Somewhat similarly to Spencer, Freud suggests that the pleasure in bypassing this repression results from saving the "psychical expenditure" needed to abide by an internal or external repression.

There is, of course, much credit to these authors in their recognition of the relationship between mind and body in the context of humour, and in their description of the palpable sense of pleasurable relief that can accompany laughter and humour – a relief from the various solemnities demanded by most social occasions. However, the concept of accumulating and expending nervous or "psychical" energy seems obscure, and has attracted criticism from authors like Carroll, who accuses these relief theories of presupposing "hydraulic views of the mind which are highly dubious" (Noël Carroll, 2014: 38).

Carroll offers an alternative: a relief that comes from the frustration of our collective and individual expectations of normalcy – from incongruity. However, this also

suggests that there is always some sort of build-up and a release, when the details of such a build-up, the existence of which is plausible, are hardly always clear.

1.1.8 Play

The difference between tendentious and innocuous jokes, according to Freud, is that the first betray the need to obtain some sort of satisfaction that one ordinarily could not obtain due to an external or internal repression, while the second reveals no such tendency. It becomes difficult to think of examples of innocuous jokes in these terms, apart from puns: in the "loco motives" joke, the teller is hardly doing anything more than playing with words – the frailty inherent in their disparate meanings and their similarity of sound and spelling. Perhaps puns really are innocuous in this sense. However, writing on the psychological origins of the joke, Freud claims that they lie in childhood – in play.

> Prior to any joke or witticism there is something we may call play or 'fun'. Play – let us keep to this name – makes its appearance in children while they are learning to use words and put thoughts together. This play is probably complying with one of the drives that compel children to exercise their capacities (Groos). As they do so they come upon the pleasurable effects arising from the repetition of what is similar, the rediscovery of what is familiar, similar sounds, etc. […]. It is not surprising that these pleasurable effects encourage children in the habit of playing, and cause them to carry on with it regardless of the meaning of the words or the coherence of their sentences […]. This play is brought to an end by the strengthening of a factor that deserves to be called an attitude of criticism, or rationality. Play is now rejected as being meaningless or plainly absurd. (Freud, 2002: 125)

Having been denied by society the pleasure inherent in play, in toying with words – whether or not rediscovering what is familiar is at hand – the adult tries to regain it by attempting to "evade the criticism and to find a substitute for the mood" (*ibid*.: 126). The substitute, Freud claims, is the joke. What Freud does not seem to explicitly explore, however, is the fact that in this case, much like in the case of tendentious jokes, there is also a bypassing of a(n) (external) repression: that of adult society, which no longer approves of nonsense and play, in order to obtain pleasure from a source from which one, due to that repression, ordinarily cannot. Innocuous jokes, in a sense, are just as tendentious as tendentious jokes – they reveal a desire to play.

The idea of playfulness is certainly at the heart of humour as a pleasurable activity. More than that, it seems to shed light on the idea of detachment: after all, there is a

simulation aspect to playful activity which suggests that it is not real or is not taking place in the real world. When cartoon characters are crushed by anvils or when the characters in "Sam Peckinpagh's Salad Days" are mauled in the most grotesque ways, there is no real danger. In that sense, it is merely play. I claimed above that one way to achieve detachment is to render a character in as much of a stereotypical way as possible. This is because something which is stereotypical lacks depth and ultimately seems like a parody of itself – like an impersonation. Like play.

1.1.9 Conclusion

Humour is a paradigmatically multifaceted phenomenon. Between its effects, its motivations, its function, its nature, there are numberless things to be analysed. With this chapter I have attempted only to do two things: to provide for a modest, yet well-rounded and critical summing up of centuries of literature on humour, and to convey two essential points. Firstly, that humour should be taken seriously: it is a complex, essential element in the way we communicate, interpret and cope with reality which, while naturally not beyond any moral reproach, is often misunderstood and vastly underappreciated by academics and laymen alike. Secondly, that there seems to be, at the very root of humour, a remarkable insight into the contradictions and incongruities inherent in human nature, as well as a deep cherishing and revelling in those incongruities, the foundations of which are fascinating to say the least. Ludovic Dugas once wrote that "toute théorie du rire porte l'empreite d'une philosophie, se rattache à une conception systèmatique de la vie et vaut exactement ce que peut valoir une telle conception" (Dugas, 1902: 138) Perhaps every instance of humour is worth the same.

2. The Humour of Saki, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

2.1 Englishness – A Brief Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis I have mentioned that these works share a humorous look at some of the most tragic aspects of the human condition. A quick amount of researching, however, will reveal that that is not all they share. They were also mostly[15] produced by white Englishmen in the 20th century: Saki's work (mostly) in Pre-WWI, Edwardian England, and *Life of Brian* and *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in 1979, Thatcherite, mid-oil crisis Britain. The two periods, sixty years apart, bear one striking similarity: both are imbued with a sense of impending conflict. However, they are on the whole remarkably different – the society lampooned in Saki's works had long disappeared before Monty Python or Douglas Adams began their careers. Despite this, it does seem to have remained vivid within the English culture and imagination. Indeed, it could be argued that, in their works, all three of these authors operate on the basis of a very particular kind of stereotypical "Englishness", some aspects of which can be traced back to the Edwardian period and the Victorian period before it. The concept is of course elusive, but has nevertheless often been subject to inquiry. An in-depth exploration of the English national character, however (if one can speak of it in such unified terms) would be extraneous to this thesis. Instead, a brief account of stereotypical Englishness, which so-called "English humour" – and these works in particular –, seems to base itself on, is in order.

A notorious example of such an account is George Orwell's "England, Your England," an essay about English culture included in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, where Orwell provides the reader with "a couple of generalizations about England that would be accepted by almost all observers" (Orwell, 1982: 38). It is important to mention that this essay was written in 1941, during WWII, and specifically during the Blitz – a time when national feeling and fervour were naturally reinforced, as well as negative attitudes towards foreigners (particularly the enemy, of course)[16]. Among these generalizations, Orwell claims, are a profound anti-intellectualism, a widespread lack of artistic talent, strong

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[15] Terry Jones is Welsh and Terry Gilliam is American.

[16] Orwell's essay is nevertheless both savagely critical as well as sympathetic towards the idea of Englishness.

community values, a love of privacy, an unwavering belief that the law is "above the State and above the individual" (*ibid*.: 44); a hypocritical anti-militarism combined with a love for the Empire, and an absence of definite religious belief (cf. Orwell: 1982). The combination of these characteristics seems to have bred a (perhaps now dying) particular sense of national identity which eschews all that is "hoity toity" and prizes pragmatism and simplicity. A suitable example would be the following excerpt from "England, Your England":

> [T]he English working class are outstanding in their abhorrence of foreign habits. Even when they are obliged to live abroad for years they refuse either to accustom themselves to foreign food or to learn foreign languages. Nearly every Englishman of working-class origin considers it effeminate to pronounce a foreign word correctly. […] At bottom it is the same quality in the English character that repels the tourist and keeps out the invader. (*ibid*.: 49-50)

While this seems like a particularly serious case of intolerance and ignorance, it is illustrative of a characteristic which is fertile breeding ground for the creation of humour: a very strict and deeply engrained sense of cultural normalcy – of what should and should not be, in social terms. It then becomes easy to both poke fun at what is considered deviating from the norm and, on the other hand, to find what is funny about having such rigid, established convictions. The former leads to the aforementioned eviscerating of anything perceived as maudlin sentimentality and pretentiousness, and the latter to the questioning of this very same instinct and the hypocrisy inherent in it. Both of these tendencies are driving forces behind the humour of all the works examined below, but more than that, make them prime examples of a humorous look at the problematic aspects of human existence: chiefly, the individual as fostered yet bound and constrained by social life.

2.2 Saki and the Ceremonial Farce

> Having suffered from the convention which dictates that art can turn something too horrible to contemplate into something acceptably comedic, Saki exploited it, and constantly tested, and transgressed, the boundaries of acceptability and taste. (Byrne, 2007: 5)

The late Victorian, Edwardian and early Georgian[17] eras in the United Kingdom produced a particular brand of disenchantment among the middle and upper-classes that George Steiner, referring to the Europe of the time, would famously describe as "the Great *Ennui*": a "perverse longing," and an "itch for chaos," (Steiner, 1971: 11), best exemplified by Théophile Gaultier's famous cry of "la bárbarie plutôt que l'ennui!" The "long summer" that followed the end of the French Revolution and the fall of the French Empire in 1815 and which stretched until the brink of World War I, Steiner claimed, was a period of comparative stability and rapid progress, but also one of great frustration: "[f]or every text of Benthamite confidence, of proud meliorism, we can find a counterstatement of nervous fatigue" (Steiner, 1971: 12). The voracious revolutionary upheaval of the French Revolution and the disputes of the Napoleonic Wars had ended with a spiritless fizz, and in the period that followed came: "a long spell of reaction and stasis" (Steiner, 1971: 16). The liberal stability maintained by a bourgeoisie who was less than keen to yet again suffer the excesses of the French Revolution was fruitful and not without strife, but bore little in the way of excitement when compared to the raucous upheavals of the late 18th century. Imprisoned by the gargantuan mediocrity of the rising megalopolises and stiff bourgeois morality: "the Romantic generation was jealous of its fathers" (Steiner, 1971: 17). The generations that followed would subsequently be jealous of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. While this is particularly true of continental Europe, and of France in particular, it nevertheless also applies to The United Kingdom, the literature of which was likewise rife with fantasies of the macabre and cynical Byronic heroes. By 1900, Steiner avers, "[w]hether the psychic mechanisms involved were universal or historically localized, one thing is plain: […] there was a terrible readiness, indeed a thirst for what Yeats was to call the 'blood-dimmed tide.'" (Steiner, 1971: 24). The question is naturally

[17] By "Georgian" I am referring to the period that ranges from 1910 to 1936, during which George V was the reigning monarch; not the period from 1714 to 1830.

not entirely as simple as that: tensions had been visibly rising in Europe during the 19th century:

> Symbolic relationships were, however, not hard currency in foreign affairs, any more than were royal cousinship or marriage ties. Nineteenth-century Europe had produced no solid instruments of inter-state co-operation or of diplomatic mediation. The "Concert of Europe," which had been Napoleon's unintended creation, had withered; so, too, had the anti-revolutionary League of the Three Emperors. It is commonplace to say that Europe in 1914 was a continent of naked nationalism: it was true all the same. (Keegan, 2000: 16-17)

The fear of a modern warfare irrevocably changed by a galloping industrialization as well as tensions surrounding colonial matters and embedded cultural antipathies contributed heavily to the outbreak of the conflict of 1914-1918. Steiner seems to claim that the conflict was truly inevitable, however, because at the root of these exterior manifestations of growing frustration and sizzling aggression lay a latent *ennui* which, at its worst, sought salvation in outright chaos. In the end, beneath the veneer of urbanity and moral irreproachability: "[i]ntellect and feeling were, literally, fascinated by the prospect of a purging fire" (Steiner, 1971: 24).

It would be easy to describe Saki, or Hector Hugh Munro (1870-1916), as the living embodiment of the conflicts of his class in that day and age; a man whose stories are strewn with disenchanted upper-class-pranksters and whose sister first remembers him chasing her with a lighted hearth brush screaming "I'm God! I'm going to destroy the world!" (Munro, 1929: 3). The fact that the outbreak of World War I made a 44-year old Saki lie about his age in order to enlist and that both his letters home from that period and the accounts of his fellow soldiers betray an unmistakable enthusiasm for the war would also seem to point to a strain of sadism lurking beneath a repressed exterior[18].

However, Saki's work (and perhaps his nature) is more complicated than this view would allow. The sense of *ennui* is of course pervasive. At times, such as in "The Mappined Life" and "Sredni Vashtar", there is a keen sense of helplessness and despair in

[18] "During that spring, Munro wrote several letters to Ethel describing the 'fun' and 'rags' of camp life, and his duties as a hut orderly and, subsequently, as a Corporal. In March 1915, he reports that 'most of us find the life very jolly' and that they 'have a good deal of fun, with skirmishing raids at night with neighbouring huts, and friendly games of footer'. He adds significantly: 'it is like being boy and man at the same time'" (Byrne, 2007: 268); "'All the same I wish we could count on going away soon; it is a poor game to be waiting when others are bearing the brunt and tasting the excitement of real warfare' (letter to Ethel Munro dated 5 March 1915 […])" (ibid.: 269).

the face of different forms of repression: that of city life and that of an unhappy family life, respectively. "Sredni Vashtar" in particular is violently vengeful, a theme which is also common in Saki's work.

While the image of a four-year-old Munro proclaiming to be a God hell-bent on world destruction coupled with the violence in Saki's *oeuvre*[19] may suggest something of a sadistic pleasure to be derived therefrom, sadism itself – pleasure derived from inflicting pain and suffering on others – is something he rarely depicts. Instead, we are treated to several instances of a more innocent violence – that of animals and children: "Saki depicts bellicosity as normal and natural, and any attempt to curb it as ridiculous and doomed" (Byrne, 2007: 46). This is particularly true of his story "The Toys of Peace", where an attempt to replace children's war toys with "peace toys" nevertheless leads to a simulation of war. Saki's animals, being animals, are blameless in their violence, while the children show a propensity for mischief and pranking. This mischief and pranking is more often than not directed at adults and is frequently portrayed as a justifiable way of smiting them for their hypocrisy and repression of their childish instincts: "Saki youths take on themselves the role of Nemesis, meting out poetic justice in a number of stories" (Byrne, 2007: 9)[20].

Slightly older protagonists, such as Clovis Sangrail and Reginald (who are of an undefined age but usually described as young men) retain, much like Saki himself did[21], a Peter Pan-esque aura to them which manifests itself through their savage use of humour and constant need to upset the order of things to escape their own utter boredom: "Reginald and the other effectively orphaned Saki youths are social autodidacts who become both prematurely aged, or precociously knowing, and obsessed with staying young" (Byrne, 2007: 26). The Freudian themes are at once apparent here: humour as a manifestation of a child's need to play, and as a veneer for achieving relief through invective and pranking. In this need to insult or prank lies also a hint of Bergson's correction.

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[19] Best exemplified by the death of a child's oppressive aunt at the hands of a vengeful deity in "Sredni Vashtar"; the violent end of Tobermory at the hands of a rival cat in "Tobermory"; the death of a gipsy child at the hands of a hyena in "Esmé" and the hyena's subsequent death after being run over by a motorcar; and the death of a child at the hands of a werewolf in "Gabriel-Ernest".

[20] Suitable examples are that of "The Boar Pig", where a child extorts money from two women who are attempting to infiltrate a garden party uninvited, and "Sredni Vashtar", where a child takes vengeance against his oppressive aunt by praying to a deity that subsequently kills her.

[21] "At 40, settled in London, he was best known as a well-dressed bridge player at the Cocoa Tree club, but still given to childish pranks and extreme prejudices" (Byrne, 2007: 6).

Saki's use of humour is at once hilarious and extremely intricate. Byrne's assertion that he transgressed the boundaries of acceptability and taste seems to suggest that at times Saki tried and failed to be funny and was instead only cruel or inappropriate. This is hardly ever the case, as Byrne herself admits: "Saki can force a guilty laugh out of readers even when the humour is directed against a serious and worthy cause" (Byrne, 2007: 8-9). In Saki's work, humour is neither a clear moralising force, nor is it merely Freud's "narcissistic" need to achieve relief and assert oneself above all others. It is instead a complicated whole through which Saki destroys the foundations of conventionality whilst simultaneously cherishing its existence, in an almost Nietzschean conception of morality, providing the Dionysian in a time of Apollonian torpor. Reginald, in "Reginald at the Carlton" and "Reginald at the Theatre" respectively, is a perfect example: "[s]candal is merely the compassionate allowance which the gay make to the humdrum. Think how many blameless lives are brightened by the blazing indiscretions of other people" (Munro, 1922: 48); "[o]f course I accept the Imperial idea and the responsibility. After all, I would just as soon think in Continents as anywhere else" (Munro, 1922: 21). Reginald is not against the British Empire, he merely refuses to be deceived, instead choosing to point out the hypocrisy behind the idea of clear-cut morality and of the unimpeachable moral rectitude of the British Empire: "And even your philanthropy, practised in a world where everything is based on competition, must have a debit as well as a credit account" (*ibid.*: 22). In "Reginald at the Theatre", moments later, after Reginald further challenges the innocence of the Duchess's imperial views, she replies: "[o]h you're simply exasperating. You've been reading Nietzsche till you haven't got any sense of moral proportion left. May I ask if you are governed by *any* laws of conduct whatsoever?" (*ibid.*). Reginald replies:

> There are certain fixed rules that one observes for one's comfort. For instance, never be flippantly rude to any inoffensive grey-bearded stranger that you may meet in pine forests of hotel-smoking rooms on the Continent. It always turns out to be the King of Sweden. (*ibid.*: 23)

The laws of conduct that govern Reginald are immediately apparent: those of his convenience. Furthermore, it is instead due to having read Nietzsche that Reginald has a sense of proportion – one measure of flippancy for each measure of self-seriousness. There is, in Saki's work, a curious appetite for contradiction and ambiguity wherefrom sprouts a

peculiar sensation of a wisdom beyond limits; a wisdom that lives apart from the world of politics and exists only in the dalliances of one simultaneously oppressed by, and appreciative of the world around him. Munro, of course, had his political and cultural antipathies – some of them outdated and prejudiced –, but even in alluding to them the humour bears little to be criticised.

While a thorough analysis of Saki's *oeuvre* would be extraneous to this thesis, I have chosen three short-stories which I believe are both representative of his sense of humour, due to the common themes of violence, hypocrisy and mischief, as well as steeped with the existential aspects which I believe lie at the root of much humour.

2.2.1 "Esmé"

Esmé is a short story by Saki published in 1911 as part of the *Chronicles of Clovis* collection. It is presented as a tale told by "the Baroness" to Clovis Sangrail, one of the cynical and mischievous youngsters that people Saki's narratives, and perhaps his most famous, along with Reginald.

The story begins with Clovis's remark that "all hunting stories are the same," (Munro, 1948: 7). Upon hearing this, the Baroness launches into a hunting story which she claims "isn't a bit like any you've ever heard" (*ibid*.). She proceeds to tell Clovis how, in her youth, herself and Constance Broddle, "one of those strapping florid girls that go so well with autumn scenery or Christmas decorations in a church" (*ibid*.) had got lost from the remaining party at a foxhunt whilst in pursuit of the hounds. The Baroness' opinion of Constance is immediately clear to the reader: she is merely ornamental and, consequentially, we are led to believe the Baroness does not enjoy her company.

At the inception of the story, the Baroness prefaces her narrative by digressing about her youth: "I wasn't living apart from my husband then; you see, neither of us could afford to make the other a separate allowance. In spite of everything that proverbs may say, poverty keeps together more homes than it breaks up" (*ibid*.) The Baroness' humorous deconstruction of the proverb "when poverty comes in at the door, love flies out of the window," sets the tone of the story even further. Her case, she claims, is the antithesis of the proverb – their "love" was only nourished by the fact that they were too poor to live apart. The almost Wildean quip is a display of the Baroness' wit, but also an intimate

confession: that hers is a loveless marriage. A confession which, if candid, would perhaps have been considered in poor taste – something on which, in "The Way to the Dairy", the Baroness remarks: "I'm always having depressing experiences […] but I never give them outward expression. It's as bad as looking one's age" (*ibid.*: 100).

In a sense, both foxhunting and marriage are presented here as dull affairs engaged in for convenience's sake. Foxhunting in particular, however, is used as the archetype of the pointless social affair, while simultaneously providing a rare chance for the protagonists to be placed out of their comfort zones. The Baroness' tone as well as Clovis' lack of enthusiasm for foxhunting indicate that they neither find it at all pleasurable, nor do they find it useful in any way. The fact that Constance Broddle, who is described as thoroughly unremarkable, is referred to as part of "the usual [foxhunting] crowd" evinces this.

During the hunt, the Baroness invariably treats Constance terribly, rewarding what she perceives as her frivolousness and lack of intelligence with acerbic remarks. The hostilities begin as Constance has "a presentiment that something dreadful is going to happen" (*ibid.*: 7), and asks the Baroness if she looks pale. After reflecting that Constance "was looking about as pale as a beetroot that has suddenly heard bad news" (*ibid.*), the Baroness replies: "You're looking nicer than usual, […] but that's so easy for you" (*ibid.*). The suggestion is that Constance's concern with her own paleness is trivial, but also unfounded, and the Baroness immediately takes the opportunity to chide her with a veiled insult. In a time when paleness was considered a sign of good breeding, the mention of Constance' possible ruddiness may also suggest that she does not truly belong to the Baroness' class, and is instead part of the *nouveau riche*, which immediately places the Baroness at odds with her. The fact that Clovis himself does not seem to be an aristocrat may seem to lessen the emphasis of the Baroness' antipathy towards Constance on class and instead lay it on the latter's demeanour. However, the fact that Constance is part of the so-called *parvenu* so common at that time in England[22], gives her an element of the novice

[22] "After 1832 the old land-owning aristocracy steadily lost power, but instead of disappearing or becoming a fossil they simply intermarried with the merchants, manufacturers and financiers who had replaced them, and soon turned them into accurate copies of themselves. The wealthy shipowner or cotton-miller set up for himself an alibi as a country gentleman, while his sons learned the right mannerisms at public schools which had been designed for just that purpose. England was ruled by an aristocracy constantly recruited from parvenus" (Orwell, 1982: 56). Here there is also a particular sense of degeneracy that Saki seemed to agree with. His constant depictions of the (at times literally) animalistic, of the ruthless within society calls to mind the sentiment behind the continuation of Orwell's quote: "And considering what energy the self-made men

attempting to secure a position akin to The Baroness' – a struggle towards which the latter is not sympathetic.

Riding ahead, the two women come across a peculiar animal which they had not expected to find – a hyena. The discovery is introduced by Constance, who cries: "in Heaven's name, what are they hunting?" (*ibid*.: 8). As the hounds depart, and having been told that they are before an apparently friendly hyena from Lord Pabham's park, Constance follows up with another question: "What are we to do?" which prompts the Baroness to reply: "what a person you are for questions," (*ibid*.).

Constance's questions are annoying to the Baroness precisely because, while understandable, they merely echo the obvious. Faced with a similar situation, anyone would wonder what to do. However, we are given the impression that instead of attempting to provide insight into their situation, Constance is merely asking the Baroness for a solution, which gets precisely in the way of finding one.

The feeling that Constance's interventions are nettlesome to a degree is aided by the way the story itself is constructed. Of all the events that take place in the Baroness' tale, Constance's presence is certainly the least interesting. Moreover, her observations always seem to get in the way of the plot and interrupt and duplicate the Baroness' retelling, which inevitably stalls the delivery of what was promised to be an exciting story and becomes predictable to a fault. The timing of Constance's questions is then calculated meticulously. "What are we to do?" is perhaps the prime example. At that moment Constance had only spoken to ask two questions, which paved the way for the last element of the famous "rule of three", leaving the reader to expect yet another one. The detailed description that follows, however, distracts the reader from Constance's inability to adapt to the situation – both to the hyena's presence and to the Baroness' distaste for her inquiries. We are instead treated to a very vivid picture of the hounds departing in fright and leaving both ladies alone with a strange animal. When the question inevitably comes, the expectation has faded to such a point that the reader half-expects it but is simultaneously surprised, which strengthens the comic effect and the impression that Constance is an annoying, frivolous character.

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possessed, and considering that they were buying their way into a class which at any rate had a tradition of public service, one might have expected that able rulers could be produced in some such way. And yet somehow the ruling class decayed, lost its ability, its daring, finally even its ruthlessness" (*ibid*.).

When the Baroness, through biting sarcasm, voices her displeasure at the questions, Constance insists yet again on stating the obvious: “well, we can’t stay here all night with a hyena” (*ibid*.). The Baroness is fully aware that theirs is a complicated predicament, much like virtually everyone would be, and proceeds to tell her so: “I don’t know what your ideas of comfort are […] but I shouldn’t think of staying here all night even without a hyena” (*ibid*.). She proceeds to remark that her home “may be an unhappy one, but at least it has hot and cold water laid on, and domestic service, and other conveniences which we shouldn’t find here” (*ibid*).

The motives behind the Baroness’ use of humour are intricate, at best. One will of course do well not to forget that she is telling this story to Clovis Sangrail, somewhat of a kindred spirit when it comes to disenchantment and humour. On one level, then, the Baroness intends to avoid being dull and to amuse Clovis, which may demand that she resort to comic exaggeration. However, embedded in some of her quips are unsettling statements about the Baroness’ own unhappiness – such as references to her unhappy marriage. While avoiding at all costs being confessional (and thus risking revealing sentiment, which could be a social *faux-pas*), she is in some way expressing her unhappiness both to a kindred spirit (Clovis) and to Constance. In fact, considering the story’s tragic contours, one could perhaps argue that the telling of the tale alone is a way of coping and achieving some sort of relief through sharing a traumatic story by making it light-hearted and comic – in short, by placing herself above and untouched by it.

In her relation to Constance, however, the situation is more complicated: on some level, we are led to understand that the Baroness is also making use of sarcasm and irony in order to insult Constance and vent her frustration with the latter’s behaviour. This is because Constance either cannot understand the (not so) veiled insults, or because they are subtle enough for Constance not to be able to protest overtly – which would have been a breach of social etiquette, especially if she happened not to be the Baroness’ equal, socially speaking.

Not knowing what else to do, the two ladies are left to find their way back to familiar ground in the hyena’s company. Amid Constance’s unnerving questions, the Baroness herself, though having devised a simple course of action to solve their predicament, seems at a momentary loss when she realises that, not knowing the hyena’s sex, she cannot name her, before eventually deciding on Esmé: “If we even knew its sex

we might give it a name. Perhaps we might call it Esmé. That would do in either case" (*ibid.*: 9). The preoccupation is absurd, and seems to both illustrate how ill-equipped to deal with these matters the two women are and signal the Baroness' determination to remain on top of things. Her need to name the hyena can perhaps initially be ascribed to cluelessness – maybe the Baroness, who surely interacts mostly with people of her own social class, is so unused to dealing with animals, with savages, that in a stressful situation she can think of nothing but to dignify it with a name. However, the act of naming the hyena may just be more complex than that. By naming the hyena, she is appropriating it. In a way, this is a stepping stone for the Baroness to take control of the situation by dwelling on something irrelevant instead of expressing her concern, but also indicates, much like her earlier description of the hyena as friendly, that she is fond of it. In that sense, worrying about finding it an appropriate name also indicates a bond of mutual recognition is formed between the hyena and the Baroness – like Vonnegut's eight Dresdeners, she need not fear.

Making their way through the looming darkness, the women and the hyena come across what the Baroness describes as "a small half-naked gipsy brat picking blackberries" (*ibid.*: 9) whose frightened scream gives the party an "upward perk" (*ibid.*). While Constance wonders "what the child was doing there" (*ibid.*), prompting another dry reply, the child is, unbeknownst to them, attacked by the hyena. Both ladies hear the screams, and Constance expresses her unease about them: "I don't like the way it cried, […] somehow its wail keeps ringing in my ears" (*ibid.*). The Baroness then describes the moment of the realization:

> I did not chide Constance for her morbid fancies; as a matter of fact the same sensation, of being pursued by a persistent fretful wail, had been forcing itself on my rather over-tired nerves. For company's sake I hulloed to Esmé, who had lagged somewhat behind. With a few springy bounds he drew up level, and then shot past us. (*ibid.*)

It never seems to occur to Constance that the child may still be screaming – Esmé being the obvious culprit. She instead draws attention to her own vulnerability, conjecturing that the cry was so terrible that it is still ringing in her ears. The Baroness' own reaction, however, is not much different. She claims she "did not chide Constance for her morbid fancies" (*ibid.*), revealing that she had a similar feeling. A reference to her own sensation of being "pursued by a persistent fretful wail" (*ibid.*), and her "over-tired nerves"

(*ibid.*), seem to suggest that she too assumed herself distressed to the point of imagining things. However, instead of indicating any kind of similarity between Constance and the Baroness, this only seems to signal that the situation that will immediately follow is grave enough to warrant Constance's "morbid fancies" and "presentiments".

As it so happens it is, and the circumstances quickly become obvious to both ladies: "The wailing accompaniment was explained. The gipsy child was firmly, and I expect painfully, held in her jaws" (*ibid.*). While the matter is described with absolute detachment, and while Constance's intervention was merely, as expected, to scream "Merciful Heaven! […] what on earth shall we do? What are we to do?" (*ibid.*) – which prompts the Baroness to say: "I am perfectly certain that at the Last Judgment Constance will ask more questions than any of the examining Seraphs" (*ibid.*: 10), the events seem to cause both distress, and the Baroness tries to help the child:

> Personally I was doing everything that occurred to me at the moment. I stormed and scolded and coaxed in English and French and gamekeeper language; I made absurd ineffectual cuts in the air with my thongless hunting-crop, I hurled my sandwich case at the brute; in fact, I really don't know what more I could have done. And still we lumbered on through the deepening dusk, with that dark uncouth shape lumbering ahead of us, and a drone of lugubrious music floating in our ears. (*ibid.*)

The outcome betrays a particular sense of powerlessness. The Baroness seems unable to think what else she could have done, which considering the futility of what she actually did, seems strange. A faint suggestion that these are faults of her class begins to arise. We are perhaps also left with the feeling that she is too quick to forgive herself, despite the fact that hyenas are dangerous animals and attempting to wrestle with Esmé would have neither helped the child nor have boded well for the Baroness. While the Baroness' slightly Machiavellian turn may yet again imply she is manipulating the tale in her favour, the fact that she reportedly resorted to "gamekeeper-language" seems to suggest that she lost her composure at the time, which to someone of her status is everything. This may indicate that a certain veiled concern for the child's life is present. The mention of a "drone of lugubrious music" (*ibid.*) further evinces this, but the most relevant detail is perhaps that, for the first time, the Baroness refers to Esmé in a negative light, as a "dark, uncouth shape" (*ibid.*).

The hyena carries the child off to some bushes where we are led to understand it is killed, which prompts the Baroness to say: "This part of the story I always hurry over,

because it is really rather horrible" (*ibid.*)[23]. One of the reasons for the omission is relatively clear: the actual details of the child's death can hardly provide for a fun, humorous tale. However, it also suggests that the Baroness' *ennui* and detachment do not reach the heights of cruelty or complete indifference, and that the child's death may have affected her ability to be light-hearted. To some extent, the event was traumatic for the Baroness, and retelling it in such detail would be reliving the traumatic event entirely, instead of treating it with comic detachment. By voicing the narrative in such a way that presents it as a trifle, she is reaching for Freud's narcissistic self-preservation. When she shrinks from making light of the child's death, deeming it "really rather horrible", it becomes clear that the Baroness is not sadistic; on a subtler level, it seems that she cannot bring herself to completely detach herself from the situation and make light of it.

When the hyena returns, the Baroness observes that "there was an air of patient understanding about him, as though he knew that he had done something of which we disapproved, but which he felt to be thoroughly justifiable" (*ibid.*). It is worthy of note that, despite the ambiguity of the name, the Baroness refers to Esmé as a "he", although why remains unclear – perhaps only as a neutral pronoun. Constance, on the other hand, is shocked, and asks how the Baroness can "let that ravening beast trot by [her] side" (*ibid.*).

Again, Constance's intervention comes off as a needless distraction. At this particular junction, Constance thinks that the hyena deserves moral reproach, failing to understand, as the Baroness does, that it is an animal, that there is no safe way to get rid of it and that it is now largely harmless, having been fed: "'In the first place, I can't prevent it,' I said; 'and in the second place, whatever else he may be, I doubt if he's ravening at the present moment'" (*ibid.*).

Having been somewhat appeased, and with a shudder, Constance asks "another of her futile questions: "Do you think the poor little thing suffered much?" (*ibid.*) The Baroness is quick to reply: "The indications were all that way […] on the other hand of course, it may have been crying from sheer temper. Children sometimes do" (*ibid.*). The statement is steeped in a deep ambiguity. On the one hand, it is glaringly insensitive – the death and suffering of a child is spoken of as if it were the growth of a distant plant, and ultimately dismissed as a possible case of "sheer temper." On the other hand, this final dismissal is provocative – the Baroness is also replying to the futility of Constance's

[23] This suggests the Baroness tells the story often to amuse herself and others.

question with an inane contraption of her own, thus pointing out how obvious it is that the child suffered as it was being eaten to death. The Baroness seems to boast, in spite of everything, a greater sense of reality than Constance's. In this respect, the Baroness' attitude could be defined as world-weary. While she is of course mostly unequipped with the ability to deal with difficulties beyond those of her own privileged social milieu, she is aware that they live in a world where the occasional child will be killed by a hyena. Constance, on the other hand, lives entirely in the world of fiction – she is a part of the "usual crowd", who bumble around mindlessly from foxhunt to foxhunt, which makes her reaction to anything remotely "dangerous" absurdly exaggerated. Perhaps her own participation in the foxhunt can be used in order to further explore this. A foxhunt, despite all its aristocratic veneer, is at bottom the killing of an animal for sport[24]. The presence of someone so sensitive and easily impressed at a hunt can only mean a handful of things: they have attended somewhat unenthusiastically but are nevertheless aware of what it entails (similarly to the Baroness' case); they have attended with only the vaguest notion of what actually goes on, not really taking part; they are aware of it all and their sensitivity is dubious. There is of course no comparison between passively engaging in a foxhunt and witnessing the death of a child, but a certain irony still seems to arise from the fact that two women who were taking part in a foxhunt are instead led to witness a child being hunted by a wild animal. If one is to take Constance for a member of the *nouveau riche* who is attempting to edge her way into the Baroness' class, the foxhunt and this tragedy may very well symbolize the gruesome, predatory side of the aristocracy, which the Baroness tolerates and engages in, but which Constance ignores. The fact that Constance perhaps aspires to be in the Baroness' position but is unaware of what it entails is what seems to grate on the latter the most.

A while after the child-incident, Esmé is run over by a man riding a car. "You have killed my Esmé", the Baroness "exclaims bitterly" (*ibid*.: 11). Again, she seems to have become fond of the murderous hyena. The remark, however, seems to bear a degree of facetiousness, calling to mind the mock-sentimentality of Vivian in Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*: "One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de

[24] In "The Bag", a Russian youth sojourning in England sends a community into despair because, due to a misunderstanding, they assume he has shot a fox while out hunting, leaving him wondering why such a fuss was being made around the death of a polecat. Through the youth's perspective one is made to feel that the ceremonial and purportedly noble aspects of foxhunting, as they were often portrayed, are ridiculous.

Rubempré[25]. It is a grief from which I have never been able completely to rid myself. I remember it when I laugh" (Wilde, 1997: 927). While both Vivian and the Baroness clearly shared a degree of disappointment and sadness at the passing of Lucien and Esmé respectively, the degree to which they express it seems maudlin and insincere, considering their disdain for all things sentimental, and seems on a certain level to be meant as a joke. The humour would then lie in the overtly exaggerated concern and fondness for the well-being of a fictional character versus real people, and for a wild animal versus a gipsy child.

The man, clearly concerned, immediately sympathises with the Baroness' loss: "I'm so awfully sorry, […] I keep dogs myself so I know what you must feel about it" (Munro, 1948: 11). The Baroness asks him to bury Esmé, who is treated to a ceremony to which the "gipsy brat" never was. The man's concern, juxtaposed with the previous tragic events, is both undeniably funny and revealing of the Baroness' guile. The fact that she was able to recognise Esmé as a hyena almost immediately, while the man thinks it is a large dog, seems to give her the upper hand. Realising the man's mistake, and noticing he has offered to do "anything [he] can in reparations" (*ibid*.), the Baroness immediately takes advantage of the tragic situation. A slightly disturbing detail lies in the promptness with which Esmé is buried: the man and his motorist carry a spade in the boot of the car, which prompts the Baroness to remark to Clovis that "evidently hasty roadside interments were contingencies that had been provided against" (*ibid*.). The takeaway is clear: unhappy accidents such as these were regular events in these men's lives. The Baroness' remark reads much like: "I'm sure they kill things like this all the time", an attitude to which she is also familiar with.

The chirpy matter-of-factness of both the man and his motorist are made to contrast with the expected gravity of the animal's death even further by the following excerpt: "'I say, what a magnificent fellow', said the motorist as the corpse was rolled over into the trench" (*ibid*.). The contrast is striking to the point of hilarity, and the Baroness again doubles down on the inadequateness, this time in pursuit of her own ends: "he took second in the puppy class at Birmingham last year," (*ibid*.) which prompts a loud snort from Constance. Hearing this, the owner of the car insists he must do something for her by way of reparation, which the Baroness agrees to, allegedly finding him persistent.

In the end, the death of the child and of the hyena has little effect on the world:

[25] A fictional character from Balzac's *Illusions Perdues* and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes.*

> Of course, we kept our own counsel as to the earlier episodes of the evening. Lord Pabham never advertised the loss of his hyena; when a strictly fruit-eating animal strayed from his park a year or two previously he was called upon to give compensation in eleven cases of sheep-worrying and practically to re-stock his neighbours' poultry-yards, and an escaped hyena would have mounted up to something on the scale of a Government grant. The gypsies were equally unobtrusive over their missing offspring. I don't suppose in large encampments they really know to a child or two how many they've got. (*ibid.*)

Lord Pabham suffers no consequences or distress for the unsafe way he keeps dangerous wild animals that continuously cause trouble; and the "gypsies" seem largely unperturbed by the loss of the child, their living conditions so dire that they may have failed to notice that one of their own is missing[26].

As for the Baroness, she receives "a charming little diamond brooch, with the name Esmé set in a sprig of rosemary" (*ibid.*: 12), and loses the friendship of Constance Broodle, but only because "when I sold the brooch I quite properly refused to give her any share of the proceeds" (*ibid.*).

In "Esmé", Saki's greatest achievement is to draw humour from the tragic on multiple levels. Clovis' opening remark suggests that foxhunting is merely a tedious affair – a gathering of foppish dullards which inevitably ends with a fox in some gorse-bushes. The statement is tinged with a pervading sense of ennui. The Baroness objects, however. In her story, foxhunting is never a dull moment. Instead, a child is devoured by a hyena which is in turn killed by a passing motorist, and the only redeeming aspect of the ordeal is that she happens to have profited from it. In a sense, the literal takeaway could be Gaultier's "la barbarie plutôt que l'ennui": the Baroness and Clovis' main purpose is to amuse themselves, even at the cost of a tragedy. However, this is hardly a sadistic tale – the Baroness took no pleasure in the death of the child or the hyena, but merely decided to make the best of it at the cost of people she found just as amoral: first by duping them into increasing her wealth, and second by spinning the tale into a humorous one. While the subject matter of the story is grim, it is the light-heartedness and comic timing with which the affair is described that allows for the humour and makes the story amusing, while

[26] A theme one can find in other Saki stories, such as "The Baker's Dozen", where a prospective couple is about to abandon their efforts to be together because they have too many children between them, before realising that one of them had mistakenly counted five children instead of four; and "Gabriel-Ernest", where the mother of a child, who is killed by a werewolf, is referred to as "decently resigned to her bereavement" (Munro, 1922: 149) because she had eleven other children.

simultaneously revealing a particular outlook on life. It can be said that Freud's assertion that humour is the triumph of narcissism is here taken to its utmost limit: the Baroness, realizing the futility and the inevitable horror of the world around her, chooses instead to pursue her own gains. But we must not forget what else the Baroness' use of humour betrays: ambiguity. The fact that we can laugh at her comment about how the child may have cried from sheer temper puts us in a difficult spot – hers. We are amused by the levity with which the matter is approached, distressed by its literality, and amused again by how she seems to be taunting Constance whilst simultaneously admitting to her own aloofness. The plot itself can be discussed as an exercise in ambiguity and hypocrisy, since the Baroness, who constantly criticises Constance for her superficiality and lack of intelligence, revealing a deeper understanding of reality, is content with obtaining a certain degree of comfort in a world full of boredom and pain: "My home may be an unhappy one, but at least it has hot and cold water laid on, and domestic service, and other conveniences which we shouldn't find here" (*ibid*.: 8). The need to name the hyena, the comment on the child's suffering, the mock-sentimentality are all amusing because they are absurd, but they are also a way for the Baroness to regain control over her surroundings and express her own feelings. Her constant abuse of Constance is only acceptable to us because it is both an accurate response to her inanity and because it rises above mere invective in its art, which coincides with Freud's assessment of the motives behind "Herr N's" repartee:

> Let us look, for example, at the witticisms made by Herr N. which were scattered over the previous pages. They are all of them insults. It is as if Herr N. wanted to shout out loud: 'But the Minister of Agriculture is an ass himself!' […] 'Don't talk to me about ***; he's bursting with vanity!' […] I've never read anything more boring than this historian's essays on Napoleon in Austria! […]. But his high degree of personal cultivation makes it impossible for him to vent to these judgements of his in this form. That is why they have recourse to jokes, for jokes will ensure them a reception they would never have found in an unjoking form. (Freud, 2002: 101)

In this case, as previously observed, the Baroness is frustrated at Constance's behaviour and, like Herr N., finds relief in expressing her invective through humour, which both amuses Clovis and allows her to check Constance without breeching the rules of etiquette. When it comes to the gruesome events themselves, the Baroness' use of humour is different: she is aware of the gravity of it all but refuses to let it disturb her, using humour as a tool for saving face whilst simultaneously acknowledging the dire reality – a reality which she is nevertheless not able, nor perhaps even willing, to change.

The more disturbing aspect of the story, perhaps, is the purported reaction of the gypsies. We must not forget the story is not being told by an omniscient narrator. With this realization come a few more details: the Baroness only knows the gypsies were unobtrusive, she cannot possibly know how they felt about the child's death. Her comment, then, becomes pregnant with ambiguous meaning: maybe she is convinced her observation is accurate, which reveals a stunningly pessimistic approach to humanity whose origin lies in the behaviour of her own acquaintances; perhaps it is simply self-deceit, in order to shield her from the painful aspects of the event; and finally, perhaps it is, rather than condemnatory, imbued instead with the same sense of humour that her comment about the child's suffering was. If the last option is true, it both evinces the gypsies' strife, offering some degree of sympathy, and allows her to move on, conscious of the inevitable aspects of a bygone tragedy.

The Baroness' coldness, wit and disdain for conventional society render her entertaining to the reader, who subsequently sympathises with her. However, they are also what allow her to profit and thrive from the very thing she despises. Her use of humour showcases this very dilemma – she despises the world around her, yet she must deal with it constantly in order to survive on her terms, thus becoming just as much of a disdainful part of it.

The matter of Constance remains intricate. By the end of the tale, it is not only her inopportune remarks that we find frustrating, but chiefly her hypocrisy. In hindsight one gains the impression that, to the Baroness, each of Constance's winces and worries reek of a false assertion of moral superiority: a superiority which, it is revealed – if the Baroness's account is to be trusted –, she does not possess, her presence at the foxhunt alone already hinting at this, because if Constance truly is a *parvenu*, it shows that she merely desires what the Baroness has, and is thus no better, but instead more ignorant, for it. In a general way, the Baroness' attitude towards Constance is hostile to the latter's vanity.

In a great deal of his works, Saki mingles human beings with animals: likening the one to the other, transforming one into another and evincing their differences. In "Esmé", the Baroness seems to feel a degree of understanding for Esmé – an understanding of the necessity of cruelty in order to survive on one's terms. Like Esmé, she is aware of this dreadfulness. Unlike Esmé, she is forced to deal with the ill-feeling through humour. The choice of animal, the hyena, is never exactly clear in its symbolism. However, the hyena

carries its own symbolism in the world of fiction: it is usually represented as a cruel, conniving animal. Furthermore, its call is frequently equated to laughter. While, again, the hyena does little in the story that would differentiate it from any other predator of its size, this last characteristic further helps to establish a slight parallel between it and the Baroness as laughing, calculating predators. In "The Peace Offering" the Baroness claims: "When one lives among greyhounds one should avoid giving lifelike imitations of a rabbit, unless one wants one's head snapped off" (*ibid*.: 109). This seems to sum up her attitude towards the society around her – among the greyhounds she must be a hyena.

We are thus left with an abrasive comment on Edwardian, early Georgian society and humanity in general which suggests little in the way of a solution: with a Baroness who is charming due to her wit and intelligence, but whose cruel one-upmanship and disregard for justice leaves us wary of her actions, even when those around her are just as amoral as she.

2.2.2 "Tobermory"

"Tobermory", part of the *Chronicles of Clovis* collection, is yet another of Saki's forays into the animalesque. The story develops as follows: at a house-party at Lady Blemley's, a number of guests gathers around the tea table. One of them, Mr. Cornelius Appin, is a newcomer who was invited because "some one had said he was 'clever'" (*ibid*.: 16). Despite the "blankness of the season and the triteness of the occasion," the guests are "fixed on the homely negative personality of Mr. Cornelius Appin" (*ibid*.: 16). As they wonder why exactly this man was said to be clever, since he had yet to show anything in the way of qualities, Mr. Appin announces that he has "launched on the world a discovery beside which the invention of gunpowder, the printing press, and of steam locomotion were inconsiderable trifles" (*ibid*.). This discovery, it is revealed, consists in teaching animals human speech, and Mr Appin claims that his first successful pupil is Tobermory, one of Lady Blemley's cats. In fact, he explains, he had lately been experimenting solely on cats, "those wonderful creatures which have assimilated themselves so marvellously with our civilization while retaining all their highly developed feral instincts" (*ibid*.: 17).

He then goes on to claim that Tobermory now speaks English perfectly, at which point Clovis, who is also present, expresses his disbelief. In order to set matters straight,

the guests decide to find Tobermory and see for themselves, while Clovis melts into the background, observing. In a minute, Sir Wilfrid, who had gone to find the cat, comes back and announces that it is true: he found Tobermory and, asking him to come along quickly, heard him say distinctly that "he'd come when he dashed well pleased" (*ibid*.: 18).

The guests are immediately convinced, and a little while later Tobermory enters the room with "velvet tread and studied unconcern" (*ibid*.) He proceeds to reply "I don't mind if I do" (*ibid*.), when offered some milk, to deliver a caustic remark, and to ignore Miss Resker's request to hear if it was difficult to learn "the human language" (*ibid*.), because "it was obvious that boring questions lay outside his scheme of life" (*ibid*.: 19). When Mavis Pellington asks what Tobermory thinks of human intelligence (and hers in particular) he replies that she has put him in an awkward position, and then reveals what he has overheard the surrounding guests say about her behind her back: namely that she is "the most brainless woman" (*ibid*.) of Sir Wilfrid's acquaintance, and that she may be the only person idiotic enough to buy Lady Blemley's old car: "[y]ou know, the one they call 'The Envy of Sisyphus,' because it goes quite nicely up-hill if you push it" (*ibid*.). He then, after being provoked by the Major, who mentions his "carryings-on wit the tortoiseshell puss up at the stables" (*ibid*.) proceeds to reveal a number of harmful secrets and embarrass several of the guests, who immediately panic.

The cat, due to his privileged position as the household pet of a home where many parties are thrown, knows every bit of gossip possible. The people present are immediately nervous for their reputation: Mrs Cornett "who spent much time at her toilet table, and whose complexion was reputed to be of a nomadic though punctual disposition, looked as ill at ease as the Major" (*ibid*.: 20); Miss Scrawen "who wrote fiercely sensuous poetry and led a blameless life, merely displayed irritation" (*ibid*.) (because one's virtue need not be known to all); Bertie van Than, "who was so depraved at seventeen that he had long ago given up trying to be any worse, turned a dull shade of gardenia white"(*ibid*.); Odo Finsberry, who was "reading for the Church and who was possibly disturbed at the thought of scandals he might hear concerning other people" (*ibid*.) dashed out of the room; and Clovis kept a cool exterior, while "calculating how long it would take to procure a box of fancy mice through the agency of the *Exchange and Mart* as a species of hush-money" (*ibid*.).

After more of these actions and reactions, Tobermory catches a "glimpse of the big yellow Tom from the Rectory" (*ibid*.: 21) and escapes the room. While he is gone, the party immediately decides Tobermory is an inconvenience: "[m]y husband and I are very fond of Tobermory – at least we were before this horrible accomplishment was infused into him; but now of course, the only thing is to have him destroyed as soon as possible " (*ibid*.: 21-22). Sir Wilfrid complies without a second thought: "we can put some strychnine in the scraps he always gets at dinnertime (…) and I'll go and drown the stable cat myself" (*ibid*.: 22); the stable cat being Tobermory's companion, whom they fear may have learned the same skill: "a very catching form of mange (*ibid*.)

Mr. Appin is immediately distressed, displeased at the thought of losing the only proof of his great discovery, but he is advised to try to come up with something less harmful next time; for instance, to "experiment on the (…) elephants at the Zoological Gardens" (*ibid*.).

The rest of the day, while Sir Wilfrid busies himself with attempting to deal with both cats, is spent lugubriously. At two o'clock in the morning, the guests are still waiting for Tobermory to show up dead after eating the poisoned scraps, and Clovis breaks the silence: "[h]e won't turn up tonight. He's probably in the local newspaper office at the present moment, dictating the first instalment of his reminiscences. Lady What's-her-name's book won't be in it. It will be the event of the day" (*ibid*.: 23). While fearful of what Tobermory may reveal about him (some mischief or the other), Clovis finds his revealing nature appealing and entertaining – a rupture with the constant dullness of these social affairs.

The following morning, after breakfast, Tobermory's corpse is discovered in the shrubbery, his throat covered in bites and his claws coated with yellow fur, evidence that he had fallen "in unequal combat with the big yellow Tom from the Rectory" (*ibid*.). The guests abandon the house (relieved, surely), and Lady Blemley "sufficiently [recovers] her spirits to write an extremely nasty letter to the Rectory about the loss of her valuable pet" (*ibid*.). A few weeks later, news arrives that Cornelius Appin was killed by an elephant, which he had apparently been teasing. Learning of the news, Clovis remarks: "[i]f he was trying German irregular verbs on the poor beast (…) he deserved all he got" (*ibid*.24).

On the subject of characters such as Clovis and Reginald, George James Spears writes, in *The Satiric Art of Hector H. Munro*:

> Here is where we detect a fundamental flaw in 'Saki's' understanding of human nature. For, although we may tolerate the Falstaffs of the world simply because they amuse us and help while away our idle moments, we do not hesitate for a moment in rejecting them when expediency demands it. (…) There is something Munro simply couldn't grasp; namely, the fact that a Reginald or Clovis has no place in a serious and realistic portrayal of life. (Spears, 1953: 85)

The idea, of course, is that Clovis' constant sang-froid and biting cleverness are not realistic, nor do they make him amiable. Much like Reginald, Clovis is almost omniscient. In that sense, of course, he is "unrealistic." However, Tobermory is the chief testament to the fact that Saki is painfully aware of this. Clovis only succeeds in his antics because he is always very entertaining. Were he to express his most corrosive thoughts or expose his peers as freely as Tobermory, no one would hesitate to arrange his death, as they did the cat's. This is of course a startling indictment of a hypocritical society which, bound tightly by rules of etiquette, is nevertheless no more morally superior for it, but instead reveals its true nature by reacting in the cruellest way possible to a crack in its moralistic façade, while privately indulging in gossip and abuse.

A more difficult point comes with Tobermory's actual death at the hands of the big Tom from the Rectory. Exactly when Tobermory died is unclear – he escapes the party to chase the big Tom. It is only after that moment that his scraps are poisoned by Sir Wilfrid. This leaves us in the dark as to whether Tobermory easily outsmarted the humans but was felled by a stronger cat, or was immediately killed in a fight after he left the room. In either case, it exposes the party's incompetence and Tobermory's essential flaw – he refused to play games. It is by playing games that Clovis both keeps himself from getting bored and avoids becoming useless. Saki knows that, no matter how clever one might be, there will always be a big Tom from the Rectory – this shows in Clovis, who noticing he himself may be in danger after Tobermory begins his revelations, immediately begins to hatch a scheme that will get Tobermory on his side.

Saki's writing has been described as Darwinistic before[27], and in this sense it is – if one is not careful about picking one's adversaries (because there is always someone stronger) death will soon follow. However, Clovis expresses some sympathy and

[27]"Saki had read Darwin, and under Darwin's influence his fiction shows man as not morally superior to animal" (Elahipanah, 2006: 10); "The story also indicates that Saki's view of nature is not a beneficent or Romantic view; it is the Darwinian view of struggle" (Elahipanah, 2006: 319).

admiration for Tobermory instead of just scoffing at his folly. It can be argued that, like the Baroness in *Esmé*, he admires animals as beings who do not stoop to disguising their instincts, their id – Tobermory, who launched unthinkingly into battle, and the elephant, who immediately killed the dull Cornelius Appin. Even Appin's words on the adaptability of cats and his praise of their feral instincts seem to point in this direction. In this case, however, the cat's adaptability was compromised by the "gift" of human speech, which showcases a perceived lingering difference between humans and animals: a need to compromise and to dull one's violent instincts in order to survive. The cat adapted perfectly because it was entirely amusing and did not have the facility of speech to compromise it. When it gained that skill, it was exposed. When Clovis remarks that Appin's death was deserved if he had been trying German irregular verbs on the elephant, he seems to be saying that it is cruel to force the restrictive, ceremonial side of human social life on animals – here represented by language.

In a way, this transformation is the opposite of the one in "Laura", in which a dying woman who hasn't "been very good" in life (Munro, 1940: 46) looks forward to reincarnating into an otter so she can wreak havoc at her leisure. When it happens, she finally gets a proper revenge on a man she disliked when she was human. However, because of their ways, both Tobermory and "otter-Laura" perish violently, the latter at the hands of her human rival[28].

The true, "catching form of mange", in the end, is not necessarily human speech, but being bluntly honest. In "Reginald on Besetting Sins", Saki begins his tale with: "[t]here was once (said Reginald) a woman who told the truth. Not all at once, of course, but the habit grew upon her gradually, like lichen on an apparently healthy tree" (Munro, 1922 53). The woman then proceeds to alienate her friends and sister with her blunt, truthful habits: "[i]t was unfortunate, every one agreed, that she had no family; with a child or two in the house, there is an unconscious check upon too free better emotions. That is why the stage, with all its efforts, can never be as artificial as life" (*ibid*.: 54-55). Wanting to tell the truth, Reginald seems to suggest, is one of our "better emotions". However, it is also an impossible practice in both polite society and practical life, to the point of being just as hypocritical as, and perhaps more harmful than, mendacity: "[f]or instance, she told Miriam Klopstock *exactly* how she looked at the Ilexes' ball. Certainly Miriam had asked

[28] Laura later reincarnates into a Nubian boy who continues to give said rival trouble, which suggests that not even death will get in the way of her impish, prankster nature.

for her candid opinion, but the Woman prayed in church every Sunday for peace in our time, and it was not consistent" (*ibid*.: 54).

Clovis is above this, having mastered the medium. Here there is a parallel with Freud's idea of relief – Clovis uses humour, somewhat like Freud's Herr N. and the Baroness, to express his desire to insult the society he inhabits whilst guaranteeing he stays alive. He consequently feels sympathy towards the ones who simply voice blunt criticism – whether or not it is a less clever strategy. There is perhaps a sense of a Bergsonian correction gone wrong in Tobermory: his criticism is far too candid, far too clear-cut. If it were not for the savagery of Nature, he would have nevertheless been killed by the equally savage house party guests.

For the reader, the effect is similar: we are amused by Tobermory's blunt disruption of the age-old vapid house party and by Clovis' carefully crafted humour – his escape from the permeating tediousness. While Clovis plays the part of the untouchable wit, instead of the tragic one, this is hardly a fault in Saki's writing – it is in fact his intention. When it comes to Tobermory, however, it is hard to think of something more realistic than his tragic demise, so it seems absurd to accuse Saki's understanding of human nature of being fundamentally flawed. In his fiction he creates the perpetually amusing and juxtaposes it with reality – revealing the tragic side of its impossibility and ending on a comedic note.

2.2.3 "The Unrest-Cure"

During a train ride, a man called J. P. Huddle, described as "a solid, sedate individual, sedately dressed, sedately conversational" (Munro, 1948: 40), and as the "human embodiment of [his travelling bag's] label" (*ibid*.) discusses things such as "the backwardness of Roman hyacinths and the prevalence of measles at the Rectory" (*ibid*.) before his chatter, which seems "unwilling to leave anything to the imagination of a casual observer" (*ibid*.) becomes introspective, and he complains about his sudden descent into sedentary middle-age:

> I'm not much over forty, but I seem to have settled down into a deep groove of elderly middle-age. My sister shows the same tendency. We like everything to be exactly in its accustomed place; we like things to happen exactly at their appointed times; we like everything to be usual, orderly, punctual, methodical, to a hair's breadth, to a minute. It distresses us and upsets us if it is not so (*ibid*.).

His friend immediately suggests he try an Unrest-cure: "[y]ou've heard of Rest-cures for people who've broken down under stress of too much worry and strenuous living; well, you're suffering from overmuch repose and placidity, and you need the opposite kind of treatment" (*ibid*.: 41). He then proceeds to give anecdotal advice on the various places where J. P. Huddle might go for a rest cure – ending by suggesting that in order for it to be the most effective it should be tried at home. Clovis, who is sitting nearby, overhears the conversation and becomes "galvanised into alert attention" (*ibid*.) taking note of the man's address from the label on his briefcase, the prospect of visiting a neighbouring relative having now become more appealing.

Two days later, the man interrupts his sister's allotted time for reading *Country Life* with a telegram reading: "Bishop examining confirmation class in neighbourhood unable stay rectory on account measles invokes your hospitality sending secretary arrange" (*ibid*.) Huddle's sister immediately, and out of character, reacts by suggesting they curry the duck, since "the little orange envelope involved a certain departure from rule and custom" (*ibid*.: 42). Her brother "said nothing, but his eyes thanked her for being brave" (*ibid*.). Shortly afterwards, Clovis enters the house pretending to be the Bishop's "confidential secretary", "Stanislaus." He announces that "the Bishop and Colonel Alberti may be [there] to lunch" (*ibid*.) He then asks for a large-scale map of the locality and proceeds to puzzle his two victims during luncheon, prompting Miss Huddle to have a headache, although "it was not her day for having a headache" (*ibid*.: 43). Sometime later he announces the Bishop and Alberti are in the library, that he should on no account be disturbed and that no one should know they have come. Slightly outraged, Huddle questions why the Bishop should not be disturbed in the library, failing to see how he can have his tea otherwise: "what is all this mystery about? And who is Alberti? And isn't the Bishop going to have tea?" (*ibid*.) Even in the face of the absolutely unordinary, Huddle seems to be more distressed by someone (the Bishop in particular) not having his tea. His imagination, it seems, is lacking in a few respects. Clovis is quick to put this in check, replying: "[t]he Bishop is out for blood, not tea," then explaining that "[t]onight is going to be a great night in the history of Christendom (…) we are going to massacre every Jew in the neighbourhood" (*ibid*.). Huddle asks if there is a general rising against them, and is immediately assured that it is "the Bishop's own idea" (*ibid*.) and that "[a] motor is waiting to carry him to the coast,

where a steam yacht is in readiness" (*ibid.*: 44). Huddle protests the ludicrousness of the idea, claiming it will be a blot on the twentieth century, that there are barely any Jews in the neighbourhood, and that some of them, like Sir Leon Birberry, are highly respected. The Bishop, however, seems adamant, and Clovis informs Mr. Huddle that Boy-scouts are also helping as auxiliaries: "when they understood there was real killing to be done they were even keener than the men" (*ibid.*).

When Mr. Huddle decides to rebel and threatens to call the police, Clovis tells him he has men posted in the shrubbery who will kill anyone who exits the house without his permission, while "the Boy-scouts watch the back premises" (*ibid.*: 45). Beckoned by a car horn, Mr. Huddle goes to his hall door and finds Sir Leon Birberry (*ibid.*) in the driveway, who reports having received a telegram telling him to come over immediately. Defeated, Huddle cries: "I see it all!" (*ibid.*) and leads Birberry to momentary shelter in the upper floor. While everyone hides upstairs, Clovis helps himself to a nice tea, and admits more distinguished Jewish neighbours to the house, who join the hosts upstairs.

After a while, Clovis announces that the Boy-scouts have killed the postman by mistake, sending the housemaid, to whom he was engaged, into clamorous grief, which prompts Mr. Huddle to say: "[r]emember that your mistress has a headache" (*ibid.*: 46). After a mock visit to the Bishop, Clovis returns: "[t]he Bishop is sorry to hear that Miss Huddle has a headache. He is issuing orders that as far as possible no firearms shall be used near the house; any killing that is necessary on the premises will be done with cold steel. The Bishop does not see why a man should not be a gentleman as well as a Christian" (*ibid.*).

After this last remark, Clovis disappears into the night, because "his elderly relative liked him to dress for dinner" (*ibid.*); the "lurking suggestion of his presence" (*ibid.*) however:

> Haunted the lower regions of the house during the long hours of the wakeful night, and every creak of the stairway, every rustle of wind through the shrubbery, was fraught with horrible meaning. At about seven next morning the gardener's boy and the early postman finally convinced the watchers that the Twentieth Century was still unblotted. (*ibid.*)

As he rides the train back to town, Clovis muses: "I don't suppose (…) that they will be in the least bit grateful for the Unrest-cure" (*ibid.*).

It is somewhat clear that Clovis' purpose in performing "pranks" such as these is mainly to amuse himself. However, while outrageously shaking up the lives of the two Huddle siblings, he also evinces a number of issues. Indeed, some of the elements of the story have become difficult to read without bearing in mind the events of the Holocaust and the rise of totalitarianism throughout Europe, a mere twenty-odd-years after "The Unrest-Cure" was published. The general sentiment towards Jewish people in both Europe and the United States was, at the time, balefully negative. Britain was, unfortunately, not an exception to this rule:

> Britain in the 1900s was by modern standards an ethnically homogeneous society. Even immigration from Ireland had dwindled to the point at which the Irish-born numbered only 1 per cent of the entire population. Alien immigrants did not quite reach this figure. The largest group among them was Jewish, driven by persecution from Eastern Europe. They had, however, settled in the cities, concentrated in small inner districts, in a pattern which foreshadowed later waves of immigration, not only through overcrowded housing and competition with older residents for already poorly paid work, but also in their uneven path towards social integration, marked by considerable social prejudice and political protest […] Even the socialist Sidney Webb's Fabian pamphlet on *The Declining Birthrate* complained of the danger of 'freely-breeding alien immigrants' so that the country would be 'gradually falling to the Irish and the Jews' (Thompson, 2005: 17, 141).

In this sense, Munro was not beyond his time. In "Reginald at the Theatre" he remarks, for instance, that the Anglo-Saxon Empire is "rapidly becoming a suburb of Jerusalem" (Munro, 1922: 19); and other references to the Jewish people, while mostly humorous, betray a certain amount of prejudice. However, and contrary to Byrne, who detects true Anti-Semitism in "The Unrest-Cure", I believe this is hardly a clear-cut example of it. The idea of the massacre of Jews seems instead to be foisted by Clovis on the unsuspecting Huddles as 1) an atrocity; 2) a plausible atrocity. If anything Saki is exploiting the unfortunately common feelings of ill-will towards the Jewish people in order to lend a shockingly believable element to his tale, which makes his intervention all the more savage. The fact that the Huddles in particular seem not to bear any anti-Semitic prejudice only reinforces how absurd their eventual passive complicity is. Beyond this, the farce of the massacre also evinces the bubbling tensions lurking beneath the gelid Edwardian surface that Steiner spoke of, as illustrated by the Boy-Scouts, who are helping in the effort as auxiliaries because: "when they understood there was real killing to be done they were even keener than the men" (*ibid.*: 44). The Boy-Scouts, who were then a recent

organization which had sprouted out of Lord Robert Baden-Powell's book *Scouting for Boys*, were of course never officially intended to prepare boys for military life, but nevertheless had certain paramilitary overtones (such as the uniform), owing to Baden-Powell having been a Lieutenant General in the British Army. This is of course what Saki, through Clovis, is spoofing by suggesting that beneath the façade of peaceful scouting and outdoors life lurks a degree of bloodlust, which also echoes the disturbing (but not unpredictable) sentiment that Munro was to later share with much of the youth who enlisted: that of the war as one's duty, but also as "great fun".

The fact that in Saki's last work, *When William Came* (1913) – an invasion novel which imagined an England under German occupation –, the country is ultimately saved by boy-scouts, adds to the contradiction between it and Saki's previous works, which have led some to remark that *When William Came*: "seems to renounce [Saki's] earlier work and to denounce his characters" (Byrne, 2007: 7).

At the apparition of Clovis as "Stanislaus", the Bishop's secretary, the Huddles are so dumbfounded by an unexpected disruption brought about by a false authority figure that they barely question his orders. Their unparalleled descent into placid sedentariness has rendered them unable to adapt, in Bergson's terminology, and with only some degree of protest they fall prey to Clovis' rigmarole, ready to partake in one of the greatest atrocities they can imagine only because it will be easier to cope with – because they are numb and unable to react.

Clovis' assuming air of matter-of-factness thoroughly convinces the Huddles, who seem almost too embarrassed to protest. Even when faced with the possibility of a "blot on the Twentieth Century," both Huddles seem to be more or at least equally preoccupied with avoiding distress at all costs, to the point of telling someone who is screaming out of intense grief to stop, because Miss Huddle had a headache. This last point is particularly sensitive. It eviscerates an English tradition of sedateness very easily made comic – the idea of the stiff upper lip, and that "one mustn't grumble." The Huddles find the maid's desperate cries distasteful and maudlin, but are shown to be dismissing the maid's grief and instead focusing on the relatively minor affliction of Miss Huddle's headache.

While, again, Clovis is an amoral force, adamant to amuse himself in a world of people dulled by conventionality, it is his sense of amusement and humour that ends up shedding light on the dangers of tediousness, morality and routine. The Huddles are, in a

certain respect, the embodiment of sheltered sedentariness – their very name a suggestion of cowering in the face of adversity. Clovis' Unrest-cure causes them deep distress, amuses him, but also eventually breaks them out of the slumbering activity which led to their unwilling cooperation in what they considered a "blot on the Twentieth Century."

Bergson claimed that laughter corrects men's manners. As we have seen, this association is perhaps more complicated than it seems. However, Clovis, while not directly laughing at the Huddles, is indeed toying with them, and Saki is clearly inviting us to laugh at their rigidity. Is this truly corrective, however? Saki, like many authors of so-called "dark humour" is often accused, contrary to most satirists, of providing no solution or hope. One could reply with the Unrest-cure: perhaps it is Saki's recommendation, his solution. But here lies another complicated snag in Saki's story: it was not Clovis who suggested the Unrest-cure. In fact, Clovis seems to be toying with the very idea of the Unrest-cure itself by taking it to its diabolical and literal extreme. His very last remark on the situation seems to betray a certain "be careful what you wish for" tone: "I don't suppose (…) that they will be in the least bit grateful for the Unrest-cure" (Munro, 1922: 46).

Saki then seems to be tearing into the idea of conventionality while simultaneously eviscerating such a pathetic solution as an "Unrest-cure" – defiantly choosing to take no side at all, but instead to point out a general absurdity, which seems to be the most valuable thing in his *oeuvre*: his savagely funny attacks on both the disease and the cure. He both diagnoses excessive seriousness and pickiness as the passive fuel of cruelty and chides the victim for complaining about it. In this respect, Saki duly performs Bergson's task of fighting absent-mindedness, providing insight which does not urge to action, but instead provides awareness of the intricacies underlying all options.

2.3 Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

Life's a piece of shit,
When you look at it
Life's a laugh and death's a joke, it's true
You'll see it's all a show,
Keep 'em laughing as you go,
Just remember that the last laugh is on you.
(Jones, 1979: 01:25:12-01:28:20)

Monty Python's Life of Brian is a 1979 British film directed by Terry Jones and written by the members of Monty Python, the famous British comedy troupe composed of: Eric Idle, Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Michael Palin, Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. The story follows the life of Brian, a man who was born on the same day as, and only a few doors away from, Jesus. The film caused remarkable uproar at the time, and was banned in several countries such as Norway and Ireland on the grounds of blasphemy due to, among other things, its purported ridicule of Christ through the figure of Brian. Brian, as we quickly see, has little in common with Christ, even in the Pythons' understanding. He is instead a figure parallel to Christ (cf. Crossley, 2011), built in contrast to him. During the famous 1979 debate between John Cleese, Michael Palin, conservative Roman Catholic journalist Malcolm Muggeridge and Bishop Mervyn Stockwood on *Friday Night, Saturday Morning*, when asked by Tim Rice, the host, "[w]hy the name Brian?", Palin replies: "Well, I don't know, we've always used Brian in Python to portray a certain sort of character, fairly anonymous and […] a touch dim, […] slow to catch on" (Rice, 2011: 4:31-4:49). Contrary to Jesus, Brian has a touch of the (perhaps less-than) everyman to him – he is scarcely ever pictured as expressing anything other than fear, worry or befuddlement. Very early on in the film we are led to believe that Brian has very little choice in his life – not necessarily because the Pythons believe in the ideas of God or fate, but because his surroundings chafe and bound him and he lacks the ability to understand them.

2.3.1 The Beginning: The Three Wise Men and Brian's Journey to Adulthood

The film begins with a pitch-black sky in which multiple stars begin to appear, in what scans as a visual metaphor for the creation of the Universe. One of these stars begins

to move rapidly, and as the silhouettes of three men riding camels appear in the distance, we realise that this is the Star of Bethlehem, which is naturally leading the Three Wise Men to the birthplace of Jesus. When the Three Wise Men surprise Brian's mother Mandy (a clear play on Mary), played by Terry Jones, who immediately proceeds to fall off her chair, it becomes clear that something may be amiss – namely, that they have got the wrong address. Mandy may be atypical: she is rude, irascible and has a penchant for stonings. However, both the Wise Men's mistake and her reaction are "plausible incongruent outcomes" in ordinary life – just not so in the context of the Bible. From the beginning of *Life of Brian*, Python imbue the New Testament with commonplace human frailty, thus dispelling the liturgical solemnity built around it. The absence of awkwardness and aura of holiness that typically provide for religious pathos are derailed by the clumsiness and inattentiveness of the people involved. We are almost made to think that in the "real world", the Magi, who are merely human, would have had to knock on a few doors before getting it right, as Michael Palin seems to suggest[29]:

> That kind of approach is absolutely automatic to us, that we don't look at these events in order to mythologise them more, we're kind of looking at them saying 'hey, wait a moment, what was it really like, folks? What were people really thinking? Could everyone at the Sermon on the Mount really hear every word? Supposing someone misunderstood something and actually wrote it down wrong' (Jones, 1979: 0:36:16-0:36:42).

To Mandy, the Magi are simply three flamboyantly dressed men who barged into her cow-shed; they lack a superior aura of wisdom: "well what are you doing creeping out in the cow-shed at 3 o'clock in the morning? It doesn't sound very wise to me" (*ibid.*: 00:02:23-00:02:29) When told that they are astrologers come from the East, she replies: "Is this a joke?" Seen from a distance, the situation is so out of the ordinary that it very much looks like one, but we are so acquainted with the narrative that it takes Mandy to show us. As the Magi step out, having praised Brian and given Mandy their gifts, they stumble into the real Messiah just a short distance away. They promptly turn around, take their gifts back and throw Mandy to the floor. We are thus introduced to Brian as a man who is most definitely not Jesus. More than that – he seems genuinely unremarkable.

[29] In the film commentary of the 2008 Immaculate Edition DVD.

The animation that follows further drives the point home by depicting a baby Brian falling helplessly through the sky into the depths of Roman civilization, to the sound of an epic song detailing his voyage to adulthood. This is clearly a wonderful parody of the initial credits of films from the James Bond franchise – specifically, the theme song is a clear parody of the Goldfinger theme, as sung by Shirley Basset. While the Goldfinger theme is a rollicking, boisterous power ballad which tells of the many qualities of the remarkable Goldfinger, "the man with the Midas touch" whose mellifluous words get him everything and everyone he wants, the "Brian Song" is about a boy who "had arms, and legs, and hands, and feet" who became a teenager whose "face became spotty", whose "voice dropped down low", who "started to shave/And have one off the wrist/And want to see girls/And go out and get pissed" and who ultimately became a " man called Brian." At one point the singer seems to be at such a loss to mention something relevant about Brian other than that he is male, that she sings he "was certainly no,/No girl named 'Brian',/Not a girl named 'Brian'" (*ibid*.: 00:04:40-00:07:04). The point is clear: Brian is no more than anyone else. He is not Jesus, nor is he a hero (James Bond) or a villain (Goldfinger).

2.3.2 The Sermon on the Mount

Brian's second appearance is as an adult man in the crowd at the Sermon on the Mount. The focus begins on Jesus, who is delivering the sermon, but the camera quickly pans out to reveal the extent of the large crowd listening to the sermon, and ultimately focuses on a group who is at the back of the crowd. This shift of focus yet again derails the pathos of the sermon in order to focus on the inevitable incongruities of a real story – namely that those who were rather far away, seeing as there were no PA systems at the time, would have been hard pressed to hear anything at all. As Palin claims in the 1979 debate, it is not the words of Jesus that are being mocked in this scene, but his followers' misinterpretation of them: sometimes due to having misheard them, others due to their own stupidity and pettiness (Rice, 2011: 46:00-46:27). Phrases like "Blessed are the meek" are misinterpreted as "Blessed are the Greek", before a woman finally exclaims "Oh, it's the meek! Blessed are the meek! Oh that's nice, innit. I'm glad they're getting something, 'cos they have a hell of a time" (Jones, 1979: 00:09:49-00:09:57). Eventually a fight breaks out between them after a woman, who is telling her husband not to pick his nose, is told by

another man to be quiet. They tease each other until the scuffle begins, and ultimately miss the rest of the sermon. During the debate, Cleese comments that the group had toyed with the idea of a character who arrived five minutes late to one of the miracles performed by Jesus – the point being that five minutes late and two thousand years late are not that different (Rice, 2011: 8:20-8:30). The idea here is similar: these people are present at one of most monumental events in the history of Christianity and they did not hear a word because one of them decided to pick his nose and his wife would not have it. Whether or not Christ's teachings were valid or valuable is beside the point – the point is that even if they were, it is only plausible that some may have misheard his word and that others should have been far too distracted with their own issues to notice. More than that, the scene showcases an inherent quarrelsomeness to humanity that cannot be magically dispelled and will rear its head wherever people flock together.

2.3.3 The Stoning

Tellingly, Mandy and Brian leave the Mount directly to go watch a form of execution, which is depicted as capital punishment but also popular entertainment. On the way there, Brian asks his mother, who is wearing a fake beard, why women are not allowed to watch stonings, to which she replies: "it's written, that's why!" (Jones, 1979: 00:10:55-00:11:00) revealing an inability to question the rules, yet an ability to break them. She nevertheless proceeds to buy two rocks to take part in the stoning. At the stoning, we see that the same disregard for established rules is truly widespread – the crowd is entirely composed of women in fake beards. A Jewish official announces that the man about to be stoned has uttered the name of the Lord – an instance of blasphemy within the Jewish faith. The Roman guards look on in a display of befuddlement and spite. As the scene unfurls, the crowd of disguised women shows itself unbearably eager to stone the man, Matthias, for its own amusement. When Matthias explains that he had only said "that bit of halibut was good enough for Jehovah" and that saying Jehovah should not be blasphemy, the official tells him not to make matters worse for himself. Matthias, who was already going to be stoned to death, then begins taunting the official and the crowd by saying Jehovah multiple times. The official reacts by warning him that if he says Jehovah one more time – and is immediately pelted by a rock. Confusion ensues when the woman who had pelted

the clergyman with a rock says she did so because he "did say Jehovah", and is immediately stoned by the crowd. In an attempt to re-establish order, the official warns everyone to only stone someone when he blows a whistle – even if they do say Jehovah. He is then immediately stoned and buried beneath a gigantic rock (*ibid*.: 00:11:33-00:14:00).

The technique behind this joke would have been familiar to Freud – he would perhaps have likened it to some of the *Schadchen* jokes. The absolute coherence of the official's desire to punish someone for saying Jehovah leads him to, inadvertently, and without much of a choice, say Jehovah twice – the last time proving fatal. Bergson would perhaps claim that he was unsuccessful at adapting to his situation – distracted by his position to the point of forgetting that saying Jehovah is blasphemy and punishable by death. But the clergyman is not necessarily the butt of the joke. Part of the humour certainly lies in the hypocritical aspects of his slip of the tongue, of course. But the overarching joke is that saying Jehovah is a remarkably stupid reason over which to kill someone: not only because the punishment seems disproportionate, but also because it can be particularly hard not to say Jehovah. Had the official not made the mistake of saying it twice, because the occasion demanded it and because it is such an easy slip of the tongue, the humour could have resided in how cumbersome it would have been to get his point across clearly without saying Jehovah. The result is multi-faceted: a parody of the silly particulars of organised religion and a satirical depiction of the hypocrisy behind most of its followers, who delight in stoning a blasphemer but forgo the rule about women's presence at a stoning; a depiction of the all too common inability of individuals to abide strictly by rigid rules. In short, the rule is absurd and humanity will err.

2.3.4 Nortius Maximus and the People's Front of Judea

When Brian and Mandy return home, a Roman officer is waiting for her. Brian is confused, but the officer's bashful demeanour, holding his helm on his knees, leads us to assume that Mandy occasionally works as a prostitute. When Brian asks her what the Roman is doing there, Mandy reacts as if ranting against the Romans is typical of Brian: "now don't start that Brian," adding: "now look Brian, if it wasn't for him we wouldn't have all of this, and don't you forget it" (*ibid.*: 00:16:19-00:16:28). When Brian replies that

he does not owe the Romans anything, Mandy confesses that Brian's father was a centurion in the Roman army by the name of Nortius Maximus, who had had a liaison with Mandy and then left her. Finally, she tells Brian that whenever he thinks ill of the Romans, he should remember that he is one himself. Brian is reviled and storms off, denying that he is anything like a Roman, while Mandy proceeds to cater to the needs of the Roman officer. The fact that Brian is a Roman renders his situation less morally clear. He hates the Romans, but both he and his mother are indebted to the Nortius Maximus: without him they would not have all they do. This will later also apply to the PFJ as well, who hate the Romans but have simultaneously benefited a great deal from the occupation, in a further suggestion that nothing is quite as simple as it seems.

The following scene begins with the aftermath of a fight at the Jerusalem Colosseum. We see an image of the colosseum with dead bodies and loose bits of armour strewn in the sand, followed by a caption that reads "Children's Matinee". Cleaners are scooping up body parts and scavenging for valuables before a fight between "the Macedonian Baby Smasher" and "Boris Mineburg" begins. Brian is selling his odd delicacies to the crowd, among which are the members of the People's Front of Judea (PFJ). While clearly indulging in watching the carnage, they are discussing the anti-imperialist nature of their group, and Judith is defending that it should reflect a divergence of interests in its power base. As Francis is about to suggest that the group should never forget the one unalienable right of any man, he is interrupted by Stan, who adds "or women." Stan proceeds to add "or women" to every instance of "man" or "brother" in Francis's speech. The latter eventually loses his train of thought, and forgets what he was going to say.

The PFJ is of course one of the clearest instances of the chief mechanism behind *Life of Brian* and much of the Pythons' work. In the words of Michael Palin during the 1979 debate: "we have taken a certain group of people which are generally sort of England in the present day and put them in a historical context" (Rice, 2011: 34:35-34:4). This ties into Terry Jones' comment on the documentary *The Story of Brian* to the effect that in all the old Hollywood Biblical films the Pythons watched to prepare for writing *Life of Brian*, the actors spoke with the ethereal otherworldly voice of one who knows he is living in a holy time where wonderful holy things are happening. Jones then comments that, at the time, he had told the other Pythons people would be shocked by *Life of Brian* because it

would possibly be the first “Biblical” film where people spoke “in normal voices” (Yapp, 0:04:45-0:05:15). This measure of normalcy is of course based on the standards of modern Britain – the Britain of Jones’ lifetime. The incongruity inherent in someone saying “blessed are the meek! Oh that’s nice innit” in the Roman province of Judea provides for a great deal of the humour, as the incongruities of a past age are exposed to modern eyes, much like the incongruities of modern behaviour when placed out of its proper context. But Jones is assuming something else: that the best approximation to what people would have talked like back then would be how people talk now – aggressively, jokingly, kindly, nervously, etc. and not solely in the stereotypically enlightened and holy way of Hollywood Biblical films. More than that: he is assuming that people have always been more or less the same, and that the speech and folly of 1979 Brits would be the best approximation to the speech and folly of 1 BC Romans and Jews[30]. The film’s insistence on parodying mid-20th century British political and cultural discourse and artefacts emphasises the idea that the concept of congruity or normality essential to humour varies from culture to culture[31], but also the fact that there is a deeply transversal aspect to humanity: our flaws. The Pythons seem to observe that the incongruities of 1979, mid-oil crisis, Thatcherite Britain, cannot possibly have been much different from the incongruities of a “holiest of times.” They seem to admit that they can never have immediate access to what Raymond Williams referred to as the “structure of feeling”[32] of Roman Judea – but they do have access to their own structure of feeling, and suggest that the only thing that has changed is the setting.

[30] Michael Palin, in *the Life of Brian* 2008 Immaculate Edition DVD commentary, adds: “Bearing in mind, as we did with Holy Grail, that human nature doesn’t change much you know. People have the same arguments. They wind each other up, they get stroppy, they get difficult about the same sort of things throughout history. So the same niggly things that make us sort of cross now, when we, you know we, you can’t get a cab for half an hour in the street, would have made sort of Pontius Pilate or somebody else cross in another way, you know. But it was trying to find parallels in history […]” (Jones, 1979: 0:01:40-0:02:20)

[31] It also makes clear that, being English, that is the culture the Pythons know best.

[32] “The term I would suggest to describe it is *structure of feeling*: it is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization. […]I think it is a very deep and very wide possession, in all actual communities, precisely because it is on it that communication depends. And what is particularly interesting is that it does not seem to be, in any formal sense, learned. One generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come ‘from’ anywhere. […] Once the carriers of such a structure die, the nearest we can get to this vital clement is in the documentary culture, from poems to buildings and dress-fashions, and it is this relation that gives significance to the definition of culture in documentary term” (Williams, 1965: 64-65).

This technique is of course pervasive in the film: Brian acts much like rebellious adolescents have been portrayed since the mid-20th century, for instance. But it is much more glaring in the case of the PFJ – a parody of 20th century post-modern left-wing political movements, as confirmed by John Cleese:

> There were an enormous number of them and they were all Leninist or Trotskyite or they sort of were Maoist or they were Leninist/Maoist or they were Maoist/Trotskyite and they all had these extraordinarily precise labels and they all fought with each other and hated each other – it seemed to everyone else – much more than they actually hated the Parties on the Right. You would think being on the Left there would've been a kind of coalition… but no, they hated each other – much more strongly than the real opposition because it was so necessary for them to be doctrinally pure. (Jones, 1979: 0:20:20- 0:20:56)

John Cleese points out the hypocrisy behind these groups' selfish desire to remain above all ideologically pure rather than attempt to make a difference, even if at the cost of prioritising. The PFJ is portrayed as largely inept and inefficient[33] – they cannot even engage in a discussion on the basic principles of their movement without getting entangled in the particular political interests of each of its members. Stan is a feminist with little interest in the PFJ's revolutionary agenda, while Reg has little interest in the feminist agenda and chooses instead to focus on the anti-imperialistic one. Both Judith and Francis are conciliatory elements in the discussion, bent on fostering a diverse movement. The conversation we witness[34], which began as a discussion on the fundamental ideology of the PFJ, ends with Stan proclaiming he wants to be a woman and will henceforth be called Loretta, because he wishes carry children. While most of the group are relatively dumbfounded but supportive, Reg finds this idiotic because it simply is not possible. Loretta claims Reg is oppressing her, to which he replies: "I'm not oppressing you, Stan! You haven't got a womb! Where's the fetus gonna gestate, you're gonna keep it in a box?" Loretta seems unaware of the limitations of her body. When Francis and Judith agree that, while Loretta cannot have children, they can at least fight for her right to, claiming that it will be "symbolic of [their] struggle against oppression", Reg says that it is "symbolic of [Loretta's] struggle against reality" (Jones, 1979: 00:19:40-00:20:23)

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[33] At the beginning of the film the group is portrayed as walking past the Sermon on the Mount and dismissing the words of Jesus, in a way that not only foreshadows their foolishness, but seems to portray the latter in a positive light.

[34] The fact that this conversation is taking place at a Colosseum is particularly relevant as it foreshadows the contradictions inherent in the group itself.

What is chiefly comic about Loretta is her absolute detachment from the reality of her body's limitations. While in the present day, and even in 1979, some of those limitations have become surmountable, the idea that Loretta wants, through sheer social agreement, to be able to do something her body naturally cannot, is evidence of a deeply funny fundamental unawareness. Perhaps one can even detect hints of Spencer's descending incongruity in the way that the PFJ gets completely side-tracked from their anti-imperialistic mission by literally everything else: Loretta's quest, their hatred of all the other Judean rebel groups, etc. The PFJ seems to be far too occupied with their divisive, all-encompassing, all-pleasing agenda to ever take real and effective action. Reg's point about Loretta is that it is hardly worth letting her indulge in the fiction that she can give birth to a child if it is a physical impossibility. He is not oppressing her because acknowledging reality is not oppression. He is, however, grounding Loretta by pointing out the absurdity of her demands.

When Brian approaches the PFJ, he mistakes them for the Judean People's Front, causing an outrage: "the only people we hate more than the Romans are the fucking Judean People's Front", Reg says. "And the Judean Popular People's Front", Francis adds. "And the People's Front of Judea", Loretta concludes, prompting an all-around agreement which is only cut short by the general realisation that they are the People's Front of Judea – once again, they get tripped up by the particulars (*ibid.*: 00:22:02-00:22:22:20).

Brian decides to ask to join the PFJ, but the close-up of Judith that immediately precedes his request suggests that his attraction to her is the main reason why he decided to join. The PFJ immediately requests that Brian perform a mission – a mission that lands him in trouble instantly[35]. As Brian flees from Roman guards, he is rescued by Judith and taken to the headquarters of the PFJ, where the members are planning a kidnapping of Pontius Pilate's wife, in order to blackmail him into dismantling "the entire apparatus of the Roman Imperialist State". If Pilate should fail to comply, the PFJ's plan is to execute his wife, by "cutting all her bits up". Reg proceeds to declare that they should "point out that [the Romans] bear full responsibility when we chop her up, and that we shall not submit to

[35] A mission whereby he is to write "Romans go home" in Latin on a large wall in graffiti. He is immediately caught by a centurion however, who, in a blatant case of inattention, is so distracted by Brian's poor grammar that, instead of punishing him for his interference, makes him write the same thing all over the wall one-hundred times. As Brian finishes the task, he is immediately chased by another patrol of guards, who realise his mistake. In a sense, this partially introduces the theme of bureaucracy, to be further explored in the analysis of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* below.

blackmail!" (*ibid.*: 00:27:00-00:27:22). The fact that the PFJ is a group which plans to, through violence, end the Roman's violent oppression and which, while blackmailing the Romans, claims that it will not submit to blackmail, makes the entire movement risible – not necessarily because what they are attempting to do is inherently wrong or laughable, but because they simply cannot see the hypocritical nature of their statements. When Reg claims that the Romans have "taken everything [they] have", and asks what they have given in return, someone replies: "the aqueduct?" Then other members proceed to mention the sanitation, the roads, irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths and public safety, with Francis commenting: "they certainly know how to keep order; let's face it, the only ones who could in a place like this". Reg, however, is defiant: "Alright, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the freshwater system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?" When someone replies: "brought peace?" Reg says "Oh, Peace! Shut up!" (*ibid.*: 00:27:24-00:28:42) The fact that the group cannot simply admit that, no matter what good or evil the Romans have done, what they want is to be freed of their rule, makes Reg just as much of a broken record as Loretta in the previous scene. Providing all the true details of the Roman occupation would not, and ultimately does not make up for a rousing speech. The members who point out that the Romans may have contributed much more than Reg is claiming are robbing the scene of its action-oriented pathos – until they are eventually repressed by Reg who, lacking any further arguments, tells them to shut up.

The frailties of the PFJ are exposed when, attempting to carry out their plan, they bump into another rebel group, the Company for Free Galilee, and enter a scuffle in which everyone dies but Brian (and Francis, we later find out), who had been trying to convince them to unite against the Romans and is eventually captured in the aftermath. As the rebel groups kill each other, the Roman guards yet again look on in a mixture of amazement and disapprobation. Theirs is a distant, detached look at events similar to ours: they are watching motion without substance – a masquerade –, and cannot possibly understand why two groups of Jews are murdering each other inside Roman facilities.

2.3.5 Brian's Arrest: Pontius Pilate and Biggus Dickus

As Brian is thrown into a dungeon, he is berated by a man (Ben[36]) chained to the wall who claims Brian is lucky for his treatment. When Brian complains that he has been spat at in the face, the man replies: "Oh, what wouldn't I give to be spat at in the face! I sometimes lay awake at night dreaming of being spat at in the face" (*ibid.*: 00:34:50-00:34:58) When Brian asks him what will probably happen to him, Ben replies: "Oh you'll probably get away with crucifixion," seeing as it is Brian's first offense, later calling it "the best thing the Romans ever did for us!" and saying "if we didn't have crucifixion, this country would be in a right bloody mess! Nail them up! Nail some sense into 'em!" (*ibid.*: 00:35:30-00:35:48) Ben is essentially portrayed as a parody of subservient conservatism. He has been thoroughly mistreated by the Romans, but instead of sympathising with his fellow convict, he accuses him of being the teacher's pet and refuses to acknowledge he is also being mistreated. He eventually tells Brian:

> They hung me up here five years ago. Every night, they take me down for twenty minutes, then they hang me up again, which I regard as very fair, in view of what I done, and, if nothing else, it's taught me to respect the Romans, and it's taught me that you'll never get anywhere in this life, unless you're prepared to do a fair day's work for a fair day's… (*ibid.* 00:36:04-00:36:24)

When the Centurion announces that Pilate wants to see Brian and jokes that he must want to "know which way up [Brian wants] to be crucified", Ben makes an ingratiating effort to laugh and says: "nice one, Centurion. Like it!", and is immediately told to shut up. As Brian leaves the cell, Ben muses: "terrific race, the Romans. Terrific" (*ibid.* 00:36:34-00:36:48) It seems to be Ben's opinion that everything the Romans do is right – including their treatment of him, and naturally their treatment of others. His conservative narrative seems idiotic: it is hard to understand how being chained to the wall for doing whatever he has done has helped him understand the idea of fair work for fair pay. In that sense, Ben is the opposite of Reg – he considers himself perennially below the Romans, but seemingly above his countrymen who, like Brian, do not seem to want to fall on the Romans' good graces. Ben's attitude is somewhat reminiscent of one spoofed in another Monty Python sketch: "The Four Yorkshiremen" (cf. Monty Python, 2017). In it, four self-made-men claim that the youngsters of the time do not understand the hard times

[36] All character names not explicitly stated in the film were, due to how difficult it is to find an official version of the *Life of Brian* script, retrieved from the 2008 Immaculated Edition DVD script read-through bonus feature.

they were put through when they were their age. As they listen to each other's accounts of an impoverished childhood, they begin to exaggerate their own strife in an attempt to outdo each other. Compared to what they went through, of course, the younger generations have no troubles at all (cf. Monty Python, 2017). Ben shares this sentiment when it comes to Brian: he was lucky to be spat at in the face – had he been (fairly) chained to the wall for five years, he would not be complaining about some spittle on his brow. The culmination of Ben's comical insistence in the same narrative arrives with the idea that even the conceivably worst possible sentence – crucifixion – is somehow a walk in the park for "lucky-lucky" Brian. As we laugh at Ben, however, we cannot help but wonder if there may be something to his twisted logic: perhaps being crucified is better than a lifetime of torture.

When Brian is brought before Pontius Pilate, it is immediately apparent that the latter has a severe case of rhotacism: he cannot say his r's. He also seems completely unaware of this inability and devoid of a sense of humour. Brian does not seem to understand Pilate has a speech defect either, and thus proceeds to correct him at each turn, not realising how pointless – and dangerous – this may be for him. When Brian mentions that his father is called Nortius Maximus, the guards begin to laugh. Pilate does not understand why, and one of the guards must explain to him that it is a joke name: it sounds a lot like Naughtius Maximus – a joke name like Sillius Soddus or Biggus Dickus. Pilate sees nothing odd in the name Biggus Dickus, claiming he has a very good friend in Rome whose name is Biggus Dickus. The guards immediately begin to snigger, making a genuine effort to suppress laughter. Pilate is livid, and confronts one of the guards, who eventually cannot resist laughing at Biggus Dickus and burst into open laughter. He cries that he "will not have [his] friends ridiculed by the common soldiery!" (*ibid.* 00:39:26-00:39:31) and has the guard arrested. He then proceeds to test the remaining soldiers. His method is particularly illustrative of the difficulties inherent in explaining humour to the humourless. The joke seems obvious enough, yet the only thing Pilate seems to understand is that the soldiers find his friends' names funny, so he tries to see if they will laugh at Biggus Dickus's wife's name: Incontinentia. The guards do not react. Pilate seems to give up, and then utters the full name: "Incontinentia Buttocks", prompting uproarious laughter from the guards, who keel over, clutching their stomachs. Pilate then shouts that he's had "enough

of this webel, sniggewing behaviour!" and Brian escapes amidst the confusion (*ibid.* 00:40:22-00:40:43)

Pilate sees the guard's laughter as unacceptable insubordination: by laughing at him they are disrupting the solemn, respectful demeanour which, as praetorian guards, they owe him and his friends in Rome. One can hardly blame them, however, for laughing at an authority figure with a severe speech defect whose friends all have ludicrous names that sound as if they were conjured by Latin students at an English public school. In fact, the upper echelons of Roman society in Judea are portrayed as foppish, detached from reality and inherently ridiculous in the film – worthy, perhaps, of the Gussie Fink-Nottles and the Pongo Twistletons of Wodehouse's novels. The guards' explosive laughter showcases the fickle nature of power structures – they are not holy institutions, but human ones, based on convention and perpetuated by habit and force. It is the perception of Pilate and his class's glaring defects that dispels the reverential aura around him and allows the guards to see an authority figure as just another fool like them – a figure whom habit, and not the unforgiving mechanisms of meritocracy, has put in power.

On the other hand, fits of uncontrollable laughter did provide for a big enough distraction for Brian to escape – an argument towards Chafe's concept of a laughter that paralyses.

2.3.6 The Prophets and the Haggling

As Brian flees from the Romans, he finds himself forced to pretend he is a mere customer at the nearby market. We immediately realise that Brian, who simply wants to buy a fake beard in order to disguise himself, has absolutely no grasp on the concept of haggling. For a grown man, at the time, this would be absurd. Brian then comes off as particularly clueless and sheltered: a stranger to human communication, a man who does not know the basic rules of human carrying-ons. It seems logical to Brian that he should pay twenty shekels for something which the salesman is selling for twenty shekels: no more, no less. He does not understand the theatrical aspects of salesmanship – the complicated game of wit and expectations. To cultures such as ours, where the practice of haggling is all but gone, it seems as absurd as it does to Brian. The difference is that Brian is supposed to be a part of that culture, yet he is as removed from it as we are – here Brian

is most obviously a 20th century British man inserted in a historical context which is absolutely foreign to him. At one point, while the salesman tries to coach him haggling-wise, Brian cries “oh tell me what to say, please!” When he seems to finally get the hang of it, he relapses into ineptitude when the salesman gives him a gourd for free and he attempts to pay four shekels (the change the salesman owed him) for it, in order to get away quickly. The scene points to the ridiculousness of the ceremonial from Brian and our points of view – not only is it an obscure practice, but the salesman cannot seem to forgo it in order to expedite things when Brian is clearly in a hurry. Haggling becomes, like Bergson’s customs officers after a shipwreck, a needless ceremonial obstacle to natural life. However, the scene also suggests that there is method to its madness: that haggling has its use and Brian is unable to understand how or why – that Brian is too sheltered to understand this primeval form of selling which is perhaps more natural than it seems.

Eventually, Brian makes it back to the PFJ, who refuse to help him and chastise him for leading the Romans to their HQ. When the Romans arrive to search the premises, the old man who harbours the PFJ in his home, Matthias (who had escaped the stoning before), seems little moved by the one of the guard’s threats. The exchange is as follows:

> **CENTURION:** You know the penalty laid down by Roman law for harbouring a known criminal?
> **MATTHIAS:** No.
> **CENTURION:** Crucifixion.
> **MATTHIAS:** Oh.
> **CENTURION:** Nasty, eh?
> **MATTHIAS:** Hm. Could be worse.
> **CENTURION:** What do you mean, 'could be worse'?
> **MATTHIAS:** Well, you could be stabbed.
> **CENTURION:** Stabbed? (Takes a second.) Crucifixion lasts hours! It's a slow, horrible death!
> **MATTHIAS:** Well, at least it gets you out in the open air.
> **CENTURION:** You're weird. (*ibid.*: 00:48:11-00:48:40)

Afterwards, when the Centurion asks if Matthias has ever seen anyone crucified Matthias, with a provocative smile, replies: “crucifixion’s a doddle.” It seems clear that Matthias is using humour to confuse the Centurion and rob him of his authority, thus engaging in the self-preservation that Freud called the “triumph of narcissism.” The greatest evidence of Matthias’ success is that the Centurion finds him “weird” and tells him not to “keep saying that” when Matthias derides crucifixion as a doddle. The Centurion

cannot put his finger on what is going on in Matthias' mind, and therefore holds – or has that impression – little power over him.

Behind and below the PFJ's quarters, we had seen a long line of would-be prophets, caked in mud, covered in ominous rags and holding staves: doomsayers, all of them. Each of the scarier ones, such as the one played by Terry Gilliam, has a sizable crowd before him. It is only the inept one, who cannot for the life of him come up with an interesting account of the apocalypse, that has barely attracted an audience:

> There shall, in that time, be rumors of things going astray, erm, and there shall be a great confusion as to where things really are, and nobody will really know where lieth those little things wi-- with the sort of raffia work base that has an attachment. At this time, a friend shall lose his friend's hammer, and the young shall not know where lieth the things possessed by their fathers that their fathers put there only just the night before, about eight o'clock (*ibid.*: 00:43:33-00:44:05)

The point made is that these prophets are mostly entertainers – the duller one is the only one making plausible predictions, yet he is barely being listened to. It is this prophet that Brian knocks over into a barrel as he falls from the window of the PFJ headquarters – the crowd applauds. Brian notices the Roman guard's suspicious look and decides to pretend he is a prophet himself in order to blend in. His first attempt is: "don't pass judgement on other people, or you might get judged yourself" (*ibid.* 00:50:30-00:50:34). In this sense he is echoing Jesus, but the crowd is not impressed. As he begins to make further points through analogies with birds and flowers, the crowd begins to pick apart at his words, rendering his message ridiculous. This could perhaps be an instance of the uglier side of humour: Brian's message is becoming lost in the midst of the crowd's attacks on his analogies. However, the crowd is not making fun of Brian: they are just being excessively literal minded. This is what is funny. When Brian asks them if the birds have got jobs, one of the members of the crowd reacts: "have the birds got jobs?!" and another says "he says the birds are scrounging!" (*ibid.* 00:51:07-00:51:11)

Brian's subsequent attempts continue to fall on deaf ears. As he speaks, one of the men covets the gourd he had obtained from the haggler earlier, and asks him how much he wants for it. When Brian gives it to him and subsequently refuses to haggle, the man suspects something must be wrong with the gourd, and begins to analyse it. Much in the same fashion, the crowd only begins to pay attention to Brian when he, noticing the Romans are leaving, stops his speech mid-sentence:

BRIAN: Ooh! Eh, uh, b-- b-- now-- now hear this! Blessed are they...
DENNIS: Three.
BRIAN: ...who convert their neighbour's ox, for they shall inhibit their girth,...
MAN: Rubbish!
BRIAN: ...and to them only shall be given-- to them only... shall... be... given... (*ibid.* 00:52:10-00:52:30).

When Brian was giving the crowd spontaneous and straightforward bits of information, the latter was combative and suspicious, much like the man who attempts to haggle for the gourd when Brian is giving it away for free. When Brian accidentally begins to haggle himself, by creating suspense, the crowd is immediately curious – he must be hiding something from them. In this case, what those who convert their neighbour's ox will be given. The crowd immediately mobs him, asking him what the "secret is". When Brian does not tell them, they begin to hail Brian as their master, worshiping the objects that he accidentally leaves behind, such as the gourd or one of his shoes. In an instant, a thousand different sects are formed: the ones who worship the gourd, the ones who worship the shoe, the ones who worship the shoe but claim it is a sandal instead, the ones who take the shoe as a sign that the things of the body do not matter, the ones who think all should cast away one shoe, and the ones who think that Brian's message is that they should all gather shoes. This is of course a parody of the difficulties inherent in the interpretation of the holy word, and namely of the numerous schisms which have affected the Christian faith (and others) through time. Each individual's thirst for protagonism and eagerness to believe in anything that might promise them a fuller life is shown to illustrate the impossibility of the worldwide consensus that most religions seem to demand.

The crowd's haste to follow someone and to know the "secret" which Brian is hiding – a chiefly selfish motive[37] –, make for another instance of hard-headed, clueless insistence on labouring a point. The extent of the crowd's unawareness reaches the point of barefaced absurdity when a blind man who claims he has been cured by Brian wanders into a hole. When Brian denies his Messiah status one of the followers claims that Brian must be the messiah, and that he should know – he has followed a few. A woman, a parody of the American Hippies of the 1960s, begins to say that only the true Messiah denies his

[37] A selfishness paralleled by the ungratefulness of the "ex-leper" whom Brian meets on the streets, complaining that now that Jesus has cured him, he is out of a job.

divinity. When Brian says that in that case he *is* the Messiah, the crowd takes his word for it. Once more, it becomes clear that Brian has no choice but to surrender.

When a hermit begins to attack Brian for having made him break his vow of silence and led the crowd to destroy his juniper bush, the crowd rushes him in order to please Brian, finally leaving him alone and revealing that Judith had been there the entire time. The following morning, Brian and Judith, having spent the night together, awake to find a gigantic crowd at Brian's door. Judith reveals herself just as much of a believer as the rest of them: the only one who is sceptical is Brian's mother. In order to attempt to dispel the crowd, Brian begins yet again to preach 20th century Britain common-sense, such as: "you don't need to follow me, you don't need to follow anybody! You've got to think for yourselves! You're all individuals!" He adds: "you're all different!" and "you've all got to work it out for yourselves!" The crowd proceeds to echo his words: "yes, we're all individuals" and "yes, we're all different" – they have entirely missed the point. Amid the crowd, one man screams "I'm not!" (*ibid.*: 01:03:51-01:04:14). He seems to have paradoxically understood the point, but is immediately hushed by the others, in a collective effort to suppress independent thought.

2.3.7 Brian's Capture, Pilate's Speech

As Brian leaves his home, he discovers that the PFJ have decided to take advantage of his status as the Messiah. He meets Judith at the back, but she is far too concentrated on Brian's purported anarchic speech against Reg and for the revolution – she does not seem to acknowledge that Brian is infatuated with her. Brian is then captured by the Romans and sentenced to crucifixion. The PFJ, after producing a rousing speech about the need for action instead of talk, upon hearing of Brian's fate, claim: "right, this calls for immediate discussion!" and call for a motion for immediate action (*ibid.*: 01:06:42-01:09:04). They do not help Brian, and are seemingly stuck in a perpetual loop of pointless rituals such as calling for new motions and voting, instead of taking direct action.

After sending Brian to his death, Pontius Pilate and Biggus Dickus, whom it is revealed has his own amazing speech defect, make a speech announcing that they will release one wrongdoer from their prison. Instead of making a genuine request, the crowd suggests various names which neither of them can pronounce. Pilate and Biggus do not

understand. Judith finally shouts for them to release Brian, which the crowd interprets as another joke, but which the Romans decide to carry out as a genuine request.

This scene in particular showcases a less than benign form of ridicule – here the crowd indulges in teasing Pilate, simultaneously neglecting to make a genuine request which can save someone's life.

2.3.8 The Crucifixion

In the Roman jails, the convicts queue up for their crucifixion much like the patients at the waiting room of a doctor's office. An amenable official with a notebook keeps tabs on all the prisoners, sending them to their deaths with a sympathetic smile. As each convict passes, he asks: "crucifixion? Good. Out of the door, line on the left, one cross each." One of the men, "Mr. Cheeky", ultimately replies: "uh, no, freedom." He almost convinces the official, who is about to send him on his way, before he ultimately confesses "no, I'm only pulling your leg, it's crucifixion, really!" (*ibid.*: 01:10:06-01:10:34) Both men share a hearty laugh before Mr. Cheeky goes on his way to the cross.

Just before tending to Brian, the official reflects: "it's such a senseless waste of human life, isn't it?" As Brian attempts to get out of his mess, asking for such 20th century standards as the right to a lawyer, Mr. Cheeky shouts "come on big nose, there's people waiting to be crucified out here!" and "how about a retrial, we've got plenty of time!" When one of the guards tells him to shut up, he cries: "miserable bloody Romans, no sense of humour!" (*ibid.*: 01:14:03-01:15:05)

The character of Mr. Cheeky, whom we had seen before at the Sermon on the Mount making fun of Brian and another man's noses, scans much like a classic, cartoon prankster type – a Bugs Bunny or a Roadrunner. They are forces of perpetual flippancy and seem to be endowed with a strange immortality – perhaps because they take nothing seriously – and thus, like Freud's condemned man, convey the image of being perpetually above their constraints. These prankster types have, like Saki's pranksters, an impish side to them which comes to fruition at the expense of others and which upsets the social order, challenging bureaucrats and forcing the rest of us to strict attention.

As Mr. Cheeky finally takes part in the crucifixion party, marching on its way to the crucifixion site, it seems his luck is over. As the men carry their crosses, Ben, the

prisoner, cries out “lucky bastards!” from the dungeon. A man offers to shoulder another man’s burden, and the latter flees, leaving him to be crucified -- behind him, Mr. Cheeky laughs: “he had you there mate, didn’t he? That’ll teach you a lesson!” (*ibid.*: 01:16:35-01:16:52)

Arriving at the crucifixion site, one of the guards chides Mr. Cheeky to no avail:

PARVUS: Get a move on, there!
MR. CHEEKY: Or what?
PARVUS: Or you'll be in trouble.
MR. CHEEKY: Oh, dear. You mean I might have to give up being crucified in the afternoons?
PARVUS: Shut up!
MR. CHEEKY: That would be a blow. Wouldn't it? I wouldn't have nothing to do. Oh, thank you (*ibid.*: 01:17:44-01:17:56)

At the mount, the same men who were quarrelling at the Sermon on the Mount are being crucified. When Parvus, the guard, calls one of the men, Mr. Big Nose, a “Jewish turd”, the latter is outraged and replies he is a Samaritan. Gregory, the upper class Jewish man who had been in the previous altercation with Mr. Big Nose, immediately complains that they are in a Jewish section, and that Samaritans should be crucified separate from Jews. Other voices immediately add: “Pharisees separate from Sadducees” and “Swedish separate from Welsh.” Not even the prospect of coming death seems to be an equalizer for these men, who cling to their prejudices and petty squabbles up to the very end (*ibid.* 01:19:19-01:19:44)

As Brian is tied to the cross, he tells Parvus: “you don’t have to do this, you don’t have to take orders!” Parvus simply tells him he likes orders, which seems to suggest that Brian’s hopes for mankind have little chance. As they raise the cross, Mr. Cheeky addresses Brian (*ibid.*: 01:20:19-01:20.24):

MR. CHEEKY: See? Not so bad, once you're up. You being rescued, then? Are you?
BRIAN: It's a bit late for that now, isn't it?
MR. CHEEKY: Oh, now, now. We've got a couple of days up here. Plenty of time. Lots of people get rescued.
BRIAN: Ohh?
MR. CHEEKY: Oh, yeah. My brother usually rescues me, if he can keep off the tail for more than twenty minutes. Huh.
BRIAN: Ahhh?
MR. CHEEKY: Randy little bugger. Up and down like the Assyrian Empire. Heh heh heh heh. (*ibid.*: 01:20:44-01:20:05)

Brian is subsequently visited by the PFJ, who thank him for his martyrdom and refuse to rescue him. When the guards finally arrive to carry out the orders of releasing Brian of Nazareth, Brian is still blindingly cursing the PFJ to infinity and Mr. Cheeky decides to say he is Brian of Nazareth. This causes an immediate uproar during which everyone claims they are Brian in order to be set free, in an inversion of the famous scene from the 1960 film *Spartacus*, where the rebels put their lives at stake by crying they are Spartacus in order to shield him from punishment and demonstrate their allegiance. The guards proceed to get Mr. Cheeky down and untie him, while he cries:

> **MR. CHEEKY:** No, I'm only joking. I'm not really Brian. No, I'm not Brian. I was only-- It was a joke. I'm only pulling your leg! It's a joke! I'm not him! I'm just having you on! Put me back! Bloody Romans! Can't take a joke! (*ibid.*: 01:23:05-01:23:20)

Due to his joke, Mr. Cheeky is ultimately saved and Brian is left at the cross, where he finally witnesses the doings of the Judean People's Front – their crack suicide squad kills itself in front of Brian –, is thanked by Judith for his sacrifice, who says she understands everything now that Reg has explained things to her, and is disowned by his own mother: "if that's how you treat your poor old mother in the autumn years of her life, all I can say is go ahead, be crucified, see if I care" (*ibid.*: 01:24:52-01:25:00).

Brian looks dejected and defeated, having lost all hope and been abandoned by everyone he cared for to be sentenced to death by a people he despises, yet partially belongs to. However, suddenly, the camera pans out to reveal a man to his right, also tied to a cross. He addresses Brian: "cheer up Brian, you know what they say!" and bursts into a rendition of the famous "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life", which Malcom Muggeridge dismissively described as a "music-hall song" (Rice, 2011: 48:50):

Some things in life are bad,
They can really make you mad
Other things just make you swear and curse
When you're chewing on life's gristle
Don't grumble, give a whistle,
And this'll help things turn out for the best.

And always look on the bright side of life,
Always look on the light side of life.

If life feels jolly rotten,
There's something you've forgotten
And that's to laugh and smile and dance and sing
When you're feeling in the dumps, don't be silly chumps
Just purse your lips and whistle, that's the thing!

Always look on the bright side of life
Always look on the light side of life

For life is quite absurd,
And death's the final word
Forget about your sin
Give the audience a grin
Enjoy it, it's your last chance anyhow!

Always look on the light side of death
Just before you draw your terminal breath

Life's a piece of shit,
When you look at it
Life's a laugh and death's a joke, it's true
You'll see it's all a show,
Keep 'em laughing as you go,
Just remember that the last laugh is on you. (Jones, 1979: 01:25:12-01:28:20)

As the man begins the song, Brian looks at him with a desperate, unbelieving look. He cannot quite believe that he is being told to be optimistic at a moment when there is nothing to look forward to but a slow, painful death. As he looks about bemusedly, the piano, bass and drums kick in. The song grows more ornate as guitar flourishes and a string section begin to play over the melody and the men join in the song's trademark, carefree whistle. Finally, the men sing the melody in a chorus while the swooning, rollicking baritone horns kick in, giving the song its bawdy, music-hall feel. We are shown panoramic shots of the men at their crosses, their synchronised bobbing of the heads resembling a Busby Berkeley choreography, and towards the end Brian has already begun to dance and sing, which is perhaps the only moment of the entire film where Brian finally fits in – where he finally joins the human masquerade.

In a way, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* has a simple message: life is nothing but a show, but an absurd and painful joke, so we might as well laugh at it – it is what saved Mr. Cheeky, after all (for a little while). This is of course not the only conclusion one can take from the film: John Cleese famously claimed that *Life of Brian* is a film "about closed systems of thought" (Rice, 2011: 34:50-34:52). This is what we see among the religious Jews, the revolutionary groups, the Romans, Brian's followers, and even Brian himself on

occasion – a fundamental sloth which boils down to a complete inability to think for oneself. When Brian, in a hurry and failing to understand the haggler, asks him to "please tell [him] what to say!" he is echoing a much larger sentiment that the Pythons seem to think adds to the lunacy of social life. By urging people to think for themselves, the film is fighting for awareness and against mechanic, rigid, bureaucratic behaviour, as well as unthinking acceptance of authority.

The ideas of thinking for oneself and finding no inherent meaning in life also seem to owe a lot to nihilism. In fact, the relentless tugging and pulling that occurs in Brian's life, with little of his voluntary intervention in the mixture, suggests a certain agreement with Nietzsche's thoughts on the inexistence of true free will. Tellingly, in his *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche refers to "the comedy of existence" (Nietzsche, 2001: 28) when claiming that whether one wants to or not, one is always contributing to the fundamental goal of preserving humanity. On the subject, Nietzsche writes: "[p]erhaps even laughter still has a future – when the proposition 'The species is everything, an individual is always nothing' has become part of humanity and this ultimate liberation and irresponsibility is accessible to everyone at all times" (*ibid.*: 27). The realization that we have no real free will, Nietzsche seems to claim, should liberate us to the pleasures of laughter – laughing at our condition. Laughing, Nietzsche claims, out of wisdom: "[p]erhaps laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom; perhaps only 'gay science' will remain" (*ibid.*: 28). To use Bergson's terminology, laughter could then, for Nietzsche, also be the consequence of an ultimate awareness. In fact, Nietzsche himself used the concept of "corrective laughter" before Bergson:

> There is no denying that *in the long run* each of these great teachers of a purpose was vanquished by laughter, reason and nature: the brief tragedy always changed and returned into the eternal comedy of existence, and the 'waves of uncountable laughter' – to cite Aeschylus – must in the end also come crashing down on the greatest of these tragedians. Despite all this corrective laughter, human nature on the whole has surely been altered by the recurring emergence of such teachers of the purpose of existence – *it has acquired one additional need*, the need for the repeated appearance of such teachers and such teaching of a 'purpose'. (*ibid.*: 29)

In this, the Pythons were also drawing near to Nietzsche when observing humanity's desperate need to search for a purpose – best exemplified by the ludicrous religious fervour of Brian's ready-made followers. No matter how much Brian told them

to think for themselves, they completely missed the point by instead embracing whatever it is he told them unquestioningly. In this, the Romans are shown to be the same: their purpose, as exemplified by the guard who seems to be merely "following orders" – the perpetuation of human existence. Nietzsche seems to suggest that both the tragic and the comic, like the Dionysian and the Apollonian, need to exist on some level. Our very existence, Nietzsche seems to say, is tragic: our free will is an illusion. Realising this, however, we should not despair, but instead rise above it – through laughter.

The life of Brian is perhaps as relevant a story as the life of Jesus in the sense that, contrary to the latter, it is the life of an everyman[38] – of a Brian: a wispy-haired, shorts-wearing, foolish, lust-addled, lovelorn, oppressed man who is flung into life's steaming bowl of soup – clinging to his crouton for dear life. His life is the exaggerated, pantomimic version of all our lives. It is the story of humanity and its perennial failings: fostered yet bound by Bergson's masquerade society and obliged to the iron-willed intervention of their desires.

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[38] Michael Palin, in the *Life of Brian* 1008 Immaculate Edition DVD commentary, comments: "[w]e all recognise the sort of people that are being portrayed here, you know: misguided idealism, dogmatic bureaucracy, sheer sort of pig-headedness of power in the case of the Romans or whatever. You know, we all recognise these people, it's very important to keep that going throughout, that we should believe in all these situations, because whereas the Bible story was all about what happened to one man in history that was different from anything that had ever happened to anyone else in history, this is all about things that happened all the time to everyone. In a sense Graham is everyman there. He is a figure who merely just wants to carry on living life in a reasonably decent, honourable way, minding his own business, and he can't do that, you know. The world is full of loonies." (Jones, 01:27:01- 01:28:00)

2.4 *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

> In *Hitchhiker's Guide* and its sequels, a trilogy (in five parts), Douglas Adams presents us with what can easily be seen as an extended philosophical meditation on absurdity. (Kind, 2012: 76)

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (*HGTG*), originally a radio show created by Douglas Adams in 1978 (cf. Gaiman: 2009), is the title of a 1979 novel and the first volume of the five that comprise the so-called *Trilogy of Five* written by Adams[39]. While the length of this dissertation cannot allow for a full analysis of each of the five volumes, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*'s self-titled first volume will provide us with the fundamental characters and themes developed throughout the rest of the trilogy. It is these themes which, rendered in Adams's characteristically comic way, are worthy of analysis from a Culture Studies standpoint.

The book begins with the following introduction:

> *Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral Arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow Sun.*
>
> *Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-two million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.* (Adams, 2002: 5, italics in the original)

From this point on it becomes clear that the Earth and Humanity itself will be examined within the much larger context of the Galaxy. Within the first two paragraphs of the novel it has already been stated that our Sun is small, our planet is insignificant and human beings are nothing but primitive ape descendants, unaware of the unremarkable nature of digital watches. This degree of detachment in dealing with matters such as the whole of humanity is an appropriate indication of what quickly follows: namely, the destruction of the entire planet Earth; a planet, the narrator claims, riddled with unhappiness and greed, whose primitive population had "nailed [a man] to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change" (*ibid.*), and was now quite convinced that "they'd all made a big mistake in coming down from the trees in the first placed. And some said that even the trees had been a bad move, and that no one should

[39] A six instalment, *And Another Thing…,* was written by Eoin Colfer in 2009.

ever have left the oceans" (*ibid.*). One begins to suspect a certain degree of pessimism and disappointment is afoot.

The story about to be told, we are quickly informed, is of the "terrible, stupid catastrophe" (*ibid.*) that occurred exactly on the day that "a girl sitting on her own in a small café in Rickmansworth suddenly realized what it was that had been wrong all [that] time, and she knew how the world could be made a good and happy place" (*ibid.*). The catastrophe is, of course, the destruction of the Earth before happiness can be attained (or so we think[40]).

On that day, Arthur Dent, a British man of "about thirty, tall, dark haired, never quite at ease with himself" (*ibid.*: 7) who had moved from London to the depths of rural West Country because the city made him "nervous and irritable" (*ibid.*) and who is generally perceived as looking worried, awakes to the startling realisation that his house is about to be demolished. The decision is revealed to be the result of an obscure and slightly authoritarian decision made by a highly bureaucratic local entity bent on constructing a bypass. Arthur vehemently opposes the demolition and lays down in front of the bulldozer in protest. Moments later however, Ford Prefect, a close friend of Arthur's, whisks him away to a nearby pub in order to tell him two very important things: one, that he is actually an alien from Betelgeuse who has been stuck on Earth for fifteen years while working as a researcher for the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – a budget travel-guide and encyclopaedia; and two, that the entire Planet Earth and its population are about to be obliterated by a race of bureaucratic aliens – the Vogons – to allow for the construction of a hyperspace highway. Prefect plans to escape before this happens, and subsequently sneaks a bewildered Arthur and himself into a Vogon spaceship, where they are both eventually captured. After being cast into outer space and left to die, the pair is miraculously rescued by a passing ship. There, Ford Prefect is reunited with his childhood friend Zaphod Beeblebrox, now President of the Galactic Empire, who had just stolen the Heart of Gold, a spaceship powered by the Improbability Drive. Put simply, the latter is a device powered by improbability – the possibilities of which are virtually endless. Zaphod, accompanied by his human girlfriend Trillian and their clinically depressed robot, Marvin, the Paranoid Android, intends to use the Heart of Gold to find the legendary planet of Magrathea, for reasons unclear, and Arthur, having lost everything he has ever known, is

[40] The situation is more complex: the Earth is a supercomputer designed to find out what "The Question of the Meaning of Life, the Universe and Everything" is, and is destroyed just before it achieves that purpose.

tossed into the widest reaches of the Galaxy without any possibility of going back – forced to adapt himself to Zaphod and Prefect's manic, adrenaline-fueled personas. By virtue of a series of extremely improbable events, the group eventually finds its way to Magrathea, where legend had it planets used to be custom built for the richest inhabitants of the Galaxy. In Magrathea, Arthur Dent is accosted by a Magrathean called Slartibarfast, who reveals he was part of the team that originally created the Earth. He tells Dent that the latter was an incredibly sophisticated computer designed by a previous computer, Deep Thought, to run a 10 million-year-old programme. Deep Thought had formerly, in a distant dimension, been created to answer The Question of the Meaning of Life, the Universe, and Everything. After seven-thousand million years of waiting, Deep Thought finally gave its answer to the great question: "Forty-two". A dismayed group of aliens protested, and Deep Thought finally claimed that what needed ascertaining was what exactly the question was. The Earth would eventually fill in this gap, and the alien race responsible for Deep Thought would operate it under a new guise: that of mice. Unfortunately, the bureaucratic Vogons destroyed the Earth just before the programme was completed, and, after failing to retrieve the information they wanted from Arthur Dent's brain, the surviving mice eventually decide that it is not worth the trouble to wait another 10 million years, and that they will instead craft their own cryptic answer in order to tour their home dimension's "5D chat-show and lecture circuit" (*ibid.*: 175): "how many roads must a man walk down? Forty-two" (*ibid.*). Thus left without much in the way of an answer or purpose, Arthur and his companions drift off to have a meal at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe.

For the entire duration of the novel, Adams lampoons Humanity's blatant stupidity, voicing a comic misanthropy that echoes Saki's in its mercilessness. It is the narrator's clear contention that if there were alien life in the Galaxy, human beings would certainly not be amongst the brightest and the best – in fact, it is revealed that they were never even the brightest species in their planet; the omniscient narrator famously claims that humanity was only the third most intelligent species on Earth: the first were the mice and the second the dolphins, who escaped just before the Earth's destruction amid cries of "[s]o long, and thanks for all the fish" (*ibid.*: 136). In this sense Adams provides us with an interesting take on the Bergsonian view that we must be more than just flesh: the narrator's disenchanted depiction of humanity as mere ape-descendants suggests disappointment. It suggests that, by being no more than ape descendants, humanity is falling short of his (and

its own) expectations. However, unlike Bergson, the narrator does not necessarily see humour as a corrective, redemptive force. Humanity's faultiness seems undeniable to him. *HGTG*'s comedy bears traces of bitterness and pain; it is the comedy of purposelessness, of frustrated hopes, of mindless bureaucracy. We should be better, but we are not – this is our perpetual incongruity.

The revelation that there is an entire Universe of sentient beings beyond Earth seems, for a moment, to promise the existence of much more advanced civilizations than humanity; the narrator writes that during the fifteen years Ford Prefect spent stuck on Earth he grew to like his human neighbours but "he always remained desperately worried about the terrible number of things they didn't know about" (*ibid.*: 46). Indeed, we are quickly shown that the other characters, such as Prefect and Zaphod, are leagues above Dent and humanity in general in the scientific sense. It subsequently becomes obvious, however, that they are just as clueless. The fact that Ford Prefect, whose real name is said to be unpronounceable, named himself after a car model before visiting Earth is an immediate red flag: "[h]e had made one careless blunder, though, because he had skimped a bit on his preparatory research. The information he had gathered had led him to choose the name 'Ford Prefect' as being nicely inconspicuous" (*ibid.*: 13). The mice too, which are ultimately revealed to be highly intelligent trans-dimensional beings, have their flaws: they have failed in their million-year-old search for the meaning of life and are just as cruel and money-obsessed. In fact, in *HGTG*, many of the characters seem to be driven by a wanton and haphazard quest for meaning. Zaphod Beeblebrox is perhaps the most obvious example of this: he is resolute in his quest for the discovery of the ancient planet of Magrathea, for reasons unknown even to him[41]; Trillian, having no prospects on Earth and seeing her grasp on mathematics and astrophysics bulldozed by meeting Zaphod at a fancy-dress party on Earth, wanders along at his side; Ford Prefect, before his Earth predicament, travelled the Galaxy on the back of a destroyed home-planet with only a towel to his name and an edition of the *HGTG* to do research for; Arthur Dent is unwillingly thrown into his own galaxy-wide search for meaning, having previously sheltered himself in his West Country home. Ultimately, none of these characters differ much from Dent in their progress towards achieving happiness or discovering the meaning of life – they have only been searching for longer, while Dent has been hiding in the

[41] It is only later that he discovers he had cauterized part of his brain in order to keep his true motives from himself.

comforts of his West Country home, oblivious of the Universe around him, but more importantly, of even the parish councils beyond his.

Other characters, however, are shown to be of a different nature: the Vogons are entirely uninterested in anything other than shouting and following orders, especially if they do others harm; they are oblivious to any other purpose:

> …when the first rays of the bright young Vogsol sun had shone across them that morning, it was as if the forces of evolution had simply given up on them there and then, had turned aside in disgust and written them off as an ugly and unfortunate mistake. They never evolved again: they should never have survived. (*ibid*.: 43)

The destruction of the entire planet Earth at their hands is perhaps the first clear sign that things are as arbitrary and mistake-prone in the whole Galaxy as they are in Arthur's parish council. The Vogons are presented as creatures that defy evolution in the sense that they indulge only in the worst primeval instincts, are entirely unable to think for themselves and have absolutely no aesthetic sense[42]. It is for that reason that they are the backbone of the Galaxy's civil service, which means they are the backbone of Society on a galactic level. The narrator completely eviscerates both the Vogons and Earth's civil services precisely because they are entirely unaware of either the meaning of life or the lack thereof, and are instead totally and unquestioningly devoted to upholding something which seems to matter very little in the great scheme of things – the very opposite of Bergson's "vivante flexibilité d'une personne" (Bergson, 1969: 8):

> [The Vogons] *are one of the most unpleasant races in the Galaxy – not actually evil, but bad-tempered, bureaucratic, officious and callous. They wouldn't even lift a finger to save their own grandmother from the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Trall without orders signed in triplicate, sent in, sent back, queried, lost, found, subjected to public inquiry, lost again, and finally buried in soft peat for three months and recycled as firelighters.* (*ibid*.: 50, italics in the original)

The implication is, of course, that if the Vogons were not such absolutely lazy sticklers for the most inane of rules, perhaps their grandmothers would be safer – metaphorically, that the ceremonial aspects of society should exist for the benefit of all, instead of being a hindrance to life itself. Indeed, bureaucracy was more than an apt target

[42] As exemplified by their love of writing horrible poetry: "Vogon poetry is of course the third worst in the Universe" (ibid.: 59).

for Adams to satirise, due to its meteoric rise during the 20th century, as civil services increased in size and importance throughout Western Europe. To drive the point of the Vogons' inanity home even further, it later comes to light that with the invention of the Heart of Gold, hyperspatial express routes would soon become useless, which makes the destruction of Earth and the death of its billions of inhabitants an entirely purposeless tragedy. Here, the Vogons' rigidity is shown quite literally to be inimical to life.

Oddly, Arthur Dent seems to share an iota of the Vogons' unthinking, almost automated bureaucratic nature: he has taken refuge in the country from actually dealing with life and its issues. The destruction of his home, both literally and on a planetary scale, forces Arthur out of his self-involvement and comfort zone, as exemplified by his befuddled comment as Ford Prefect takes him into the pub to prepare for the end of the Earth: "'[d]id I do anything wrong today,' he asked, 'or has the world always been like this and I've been to wrapped up in myself to notice?'" (*ibid.*: 23-24). The *HGTG* may be the story of the guide and the destruction of the Earth, but it is also the beginning of a *Bildungsroman* in the sense that it is the story of a man who is torn from everything he has ever known and plunged into a Universe where he is forced to learn and adapt to vastly different circumstances. In Arthur Dent, much like in Brian (to a lesser extent) there is a quintessential Englishness that manifests itself through his unwavering love of tea and his voluntarily sheltered life. It is in part this cultural side of things that Adams is lampooning and upsetting by sending Arthur off on an unwilling adventure that he cannot come back from, and that Saki also parodied through Clovis' pranking of the Huddles – a tendency towards insularity and peaceful mediocrity.

Marvin the Paranoid Android is a peculiar case – he boasts awe-inspiring cognitive abilities and his constant verdict is that everything is awful: "'[l]ife,' said Marvin dolefully, 'loathe it or ignore it, you can't like it'" (*ibid.*: 123). The fact that he does not search for meaning nor seems to have any glimmer of hope is not due to brute ignorance and rigidity, as is the Vogons's case. Instead, it would at first seem that his conclusion is merely the natural conclusion anyone with such astounding intelligence would reach – life could easily prove a simple and dull affair to an all-encompassing mind. However, Marvin seems to ascribe his outlook on life to his manufacturer's attempt to create robots with Genuine People Personalities. Another example of such a prototype would be the doors of the Heart of Gold, which are thus described in the sales brochure: "[a]ll the doors in this spaceship

have a cheerful and sunny disposition. It is their pleasure to open for you, and their satisfaction to close again with the knowledge of a job well done" (*ibid*.: 85). These doors have no will of their own: they were programmed to be cheerful. Likewise, although to a lesser extent since Marvin does have volition, Marvin is "a manically depressed robot" (*ibid*.: 119) because he was programmed that way: "*Let's build robots with genuine people personalities,"* they said. So they tried it on me. I'm a personality prototype. You can tell, can't you?" (*ibid*.: 86) The humour intrinsic to Marvin stems exactly from how stereotypical he is – from the fact that he is a parody of depression and thus is constantly repeating that everything is awful, while simultaneously being safe from the life-threatening effects of true depression, being a fictional robot. Marvin's programming distorts, not his ability to perceive and gather information, but his ability to react to it in any way other than being depressed:

> 'Night's falling,' [Arthur] said. 'Look, robot, the stars are coming out.'
> From the heart of a dark nebula it is possible to see very few stars, and only very faintly, but they were there to be seen.
> The robot obediently looked at them, then looked back.
> 'I know,' he said. 'Wretched, isn't it?'
> 'But that sunset! I've never seen anything like it in my wildest dreams…the two suns! It was like mountains of fire boiling into space.'
> 'I've seen it,' said Marvin. 'It's rubbish'. (*ibid*.: 130)

Here the suggestion seems to be that things are not quite as clear-cut as they seem: neither absolute cheerfulness nor stalwart negativity are the appropriate, ultimate responses to the tragedy of existence – both are rigid, and thus potentially comic, in their own way.

The other character whose search for meaning seems to have ended is Slartibartfast, the Magrathean:

> 'Perhaps I'm old and tired,' he continued, 'but I always think that the chances of finding what really is going on are so absurdly remote that the only thing to do is to say hang the sense of it and just keep yourself occupied. Look at me: I design coastlines. I got an award for Norway'. (*ibid*.: 165)

If there is such a thing as the meaning of life, Slartibarfast, like Kierkegaard, doubts that it is within our abilities to discover it objectively. Instead of wasting our time with potential answers, he prefers to, like Candide, keep himself busy: "Cela est bien dit […] mais il faut cultiver notre jardin" (Voltaire, 1983: 125). Even his outlook, however, is

revealed to have something of the humorous to it when, as he is discussing the creation of Earth Mark II, he observes that he has been tasked with rebuilding Africa and insists on doing it entirely in fjords:

> ’I’m doing it with fjords again because I like them, and I’m old-fashioned enough to think that they give a lovely baroque feel to a continent, And they tell me it’s not Equatorial enough. Equatorial!’ He gave a hollow laugh. ‘What does it matter? Science has achieved some wonderful things, of course, but I’d far rather be happy than right any day’. (Adams, 2002: 165)

Slartibartfast’s refusal to adapt his method to different objects is also revealing of a certain Bergsonian rigidity – and is thus humorous. No matter what he is tasked with, he will unfalteringly apply the fjord formula. But Slartibartfast is not interested in the fact that fjords may be considered an inappropriate way to rebuild the African coastline – he is interested in being happy. His voluntary rigidity is rooted in an unwillingness to conform to Society’s (his Magrathean colleagues’, in this case) conceptions of right and wrong. In the face of an existence with no discernible meaning or purpose to it, Slartibartfast chose to stop wasting his time figuring things out or to cater to convention and instead to be happy. When Arthur asks him if he *is* happy, however, Slartibartfast replies: “no. That’s where it all falls down, of course” (*ibid.*), revealing that his solution too is not final – or even entirely logical. It is only a tentative approach at living a bearable life: humorous in its inadequacy, but deep in its acceptance of the absurd.

Indeed, the *HGTG*’s Universe seems barefacedly absurd – it is a Universe unsupported by any traditional, religious conception of a meaningful life, or perhaps even of metaphysical knowledge; a Universe where the actual answer to the question of the meaning of life (Forty-two) is incomprehensible, which suggests that even if there is such a thing, no one will ever understand it. At times, however, the novel’s startling number of coincidences seems to be animated by a taunting, mischievous force: the Improbability Drive provides for a number of felicitous (or disastrous) and meaningful encounters that further the plot along towards an indefinite conclusion. When the trans-dimensional mice point out to Arthur and the rest of the gang that they need to know more than “Forty-two” and preferably something that “sounds good” (*ibid.*: 171), they seem to be endorsing selfishness as a response to existential nihilism – to the possibility that there is no such thing as a purpose or a meaning of life. Arthur is shocked, but the mice continue:

> Well, I mean, *yes* idealism, *yes* the dignity of pure research, *yes* the pursuit of truth in all its forms, but there comes a point I'm afraid where you begin to suspect that if there's any *real* truth, it's that the entire multi-dimensional infinity of the Universe is almost certainly being run by a bunch of maniacs. And if it comes to a choice between spending yet another ten million years finding that out, and on the other hand just taking the money and running, then I for one could do with the exercise,' said Frankie. (*ibid*.: 172)

The two mice are reacting to the void in a way vastly different from Nietzsche's gay science: when they say "*yes* idealism, *yes* the dignity of pure research" they clearly mean "*no* idealism, *no* the dignity of pure research" in such a way that, in this case, entails either attempting to remove Arthur's brain surgically against his will[43], or conning their entire dimension with a made-up Ultimate Question to match Forty-two. Their amorality does not give way to a defence of laughter and cheerfulness in the face of an either indifferent or intentionally mischievous Universe – it is merely the politics of self-gain. But it is not only to purposelessness that the mice are reacting: they are also reacting to the possibility that their purpose is merely to be toyed with by a sadistic, omnipotent force. Their rationale seems to be that, if that is the case, then they will try to make the best out of their lives by in turn proceeding to toy with other people's need for meaning to their gain.

The idea that humanity is either stuck between the cruelty of an absurd and senseless world or at the hands of a perverse deity seems to be considered the mainstay of much of what is typically dubbed "black humour": two suitable examples would perhaps be the *Louie* promo and *The Crying of Lot 49* excerpt mentioned above. In both of those situations the suggestion seems to be that there is either no reigning logic to the Universe, a logic which our hopeful, pattern-seeking nature seems to presume; or that if there is any logic to be found, it is a cruel, mocking one that toys with us mercilessly. It is also our expectations of logic or of a benevolent deity that Adams is toying with, matching them at each turn with an extreme bout of undeserved cruelty. But again, the Improbability Drive seems to evoke the suspicion that a certain amount of synchronicity is at play – that some sort of ordaining force is at work. In his essay "A Comedy of Enthropy: the Contexts of Black Humour," Patrick O'Neill writes, apropos M. F. Schulz's *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*:

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[43] Since Arthur is the only human being left alive who was on Earth right up to the moment when it was destroyed, the mice assume that "the Question" must be somehow imbedded in his brain.

> The literary black humourist, for Schulz, is a post-existentialist for whom the condition of universal absurdity no longer needs to be demonstrated. All versions of reality are only mental constructs; no principle is necessarily truer than any other, morally or intellectually, and nothing has any intrinsic value. Life is a labyrinth, multiple, meaningless, and endless, and the black humourist reacts variously with such all-embracing encyclopedic endgames as John Barth's Sot-weed Factor or Giles Goat-boy, with the programmatic scepticism of a Kurt Vonnegut, or with the parody of all systems, as in Thomas Pynchon […]. (O'Neill, 1983: 148)

I do not mean to claim that *HGTG* is a work of black humour – the length of this dissertation cannot allow for such an exploration of genre. However, it can be argued that all of the works analysed in the second half of the dissertation share the aforementioned characteristic which Schulz attributes to the "literary black humourist": they operate within the context of absurdity – a context in which traditional structures are immediately called into question. However, and especially if one is to take a slightly Bergsonian approach[44] to the concept, then all humour may just operate on the basis of a fundamental absurdity, even at its most innocuous. One of the most innocent jokes to be found in *HGTG* comes apropos the meaning of the fictitious word "sass". It is described as meaning: "*know, be aware of, meet, have sex with*" (Adams, 2002: 27). Like Freud's *kalauer*, this is an innocuous joke that truly only seems to betray playfulness. However, observing that one word can have such disparate meanings as "knowing" and "having sex with" points to a fundamental flaw in language[45], in what also seems to be a reference to the Biblical usage of the word. The undeniable prominence of language in human affairs then suggests that a deeply flawed language is, in that sense, a deeply flawed existence. It may suffice realising that we cannot even prevent woeful misunderstandings on the scale of one single word to assume that the Galaxy is run entirely on the principle of insanity. In other words, even in the most harmless of puns one can find evidence of the "multiple, meaningless and endless labyrinth".

In *HGTG*, this is perhaps more than evident. A paradigmatic example of the novel's outlook on life arises when Arthur turns on the Improbability Drive in order to avoid a disastrous fate at the hands of two thermonuclear missiles, inadvertently turning them into "a bowl of petunias and a very surprised looking sperm-whale" (*ibid*.: 116). The narrator

[44] An approach adapted to a post-modernity in which belief in God and the concepts of spirit or soul are outwardly waning.
[45] If one is to take the narrow view that language is merely a tool for direct, unequivocal communication.

then relates what went through the whale's mind as it journeyed from "several miles above the surface of an alien planet," (*ibid.*: 117) directly into the ground below, quickly explaining that: "[that] poor innocent creature had very little time to come to terms with its identity as a whale before it then had to come to terms with not being a whale any more", (*ibid.*). As it gains consciousness, the whale immediately proceeds to ask questions:

> Ah…! What's happening? It thought.
> Er, excuse me, who am I?
> Hello?
> Why am I here? What's my purpose in life?
> What do I mean by who am I? (*ibid.*)

In its quest for getting to the bottom of things, the whale decides it must begin to find names for things, such as "world", "head", "wind" and "tail". After some of this it asks itself: "Now – have I built up any coherent picture of things yet? No" (*ibid.*: 118), before finally coming up with the name "ground", thinking "I wonder if it will be best friends with me?" [*ibid*], and crashing to its death. In a sense the whale's journey is entirely akin to Arthur, Prefect, Zaphod and all other sentient beings' lives, but compressed into a matter of seconds. If one were to fast-forward through any one's life, the apparent result would probably be a curious, frightened, hectic journey from birth to death, during which nothing close to a "coherent picture of things" is achieved[46]. The prospect of our journey being equivalent to a whale created on a whim out of thin air that immediately plops into the ground below and dies is humorous for a few different reasons: a dangerous missile was just turned into a harmless whale, the whale apparently thinks and talks, it is surprisingly nonchalant, its life was but an irrelevant instant and it still entirely resembles our own. The scene blatantly exploits the fundamental incongruity of life – the incongruity between our desire for dignity and godliness and the reality of death in the form of a gelatinous, cetaceous heap on dry land. This last element possibly makes for a descending incongruity and a metaphor that thusly provides us with bathos, not pathos. The only thing that seems to somewhat redeem the whale's journey is that the way down must have been beautiful. On the other hand, the journey of the bowl of petunias seems to have been slightly different:

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[46] "When it comes to the absurdity of our existence, we're really no different from the poor sperm whale plummeting towards a collision with the hard surface of the planet Magrathea (although we might have a little more time for reflection than the whale did)." (Kind, 2012: 77)

> Curiously enough, the only thing that went through the mind of the bowl of petunias as it fell was: Oh no, not again. Many people have speculated that if we knew exactly why the bowl of petunias had thought that we would know a lot more about the nature of the universe than we do now. (*ibid.*)

Here the humour derives, of course, from the prospect that a bowl of petunias may have a more experienced grasp on the nature of the Universe than we (humans or aliens) do. The idea that the petunias had somehow been through that extremely specific situation before is particularly interesting, because it also suggests that a bowl of petunias is wise to the ancient concept of eternal recurrence. The comic effect is perhaps best demonstrated by explaining that, among those most familiar with this concept are: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Camus and a bowl of petunias. The incongruity inherent in the depiction of a scene wherein both a whale and a bowl of petunias are falling through the sky is built on by the suggestion that not only the petunias, like the whale, are surprisingly sentient – they are possibly wiser and more experienced than the whale. Considering the fact that the whale is supposed to echo humanity's confused journey from birth to death, the underlying suggestion is that a bowl of petunias has a degree of consciousness and wisdom much greater than the average man.

In his first exploration of the concept of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche describes the concept in the form of a hypothetical question:

> What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence […]'. (Nietzsche, 2001: 194)

Nietzsche then observes that one would either curse or praise such a demon, and that knowing such a thing would weigh heavily on every decision, prompting the question "[d]o you want this again and innumerable times again?" (*ibid.*) Nietzsche concludes: "[o]r how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?" (*ibid.*: 194-195, italics in the original). The suggestion, in *HGTG*, is that the bowl of petunias had not really had a very nice time – over and over again. It also seems to be that most of us would be hard

pressed to. The possibility that everything one does will be experienced again and again forever seems to, at first, add drastic importance to whatever one decides to do with one's life, and great alarm to the prospect that it may be an unpleasant experience – as the bowl of petunias seems to suggest. However, the fact that such a cycle is infinite, and thus has neither beginning nor end, adds to the meaninglessness of our existence – a meaninglessness which brings comfort even in death, a comfort here exemplified by the understated reaction of the bowl of petunias: "oh no, not again." In such a meaningless, helpless situation, all that is left for one to do is detach oneself from one's troubles and enjoy the harmless farce. Here, Amy Kind's comment on the *HGTG*'s outlook seems particularly astute: "in many ways, Adams's assessment of the absurdity of the human condition is similar to Ford Prefect's assessment of Earth and its occupants: it's mostly harmless" (Kind, 2012: 77).

Yet this is a particularly difficult conclusion to reach. Without any particular purpose intrinsic to life, society seems to truly become Bergson's masquerade, and existence a mere plunge into death. In the context of such a masquerade, the hassle and tyranny of bureaucracy becomes painstakingly obvious – if nothing truly matters and there is no purpose to life, things such as "*orders signed in triplicate, sent in, sent back, queried, lost, found, subjected to public inquiry, lost again, and finally buried in soft peat for three months and recycled as firelighters"* (ibid.: 50, italics in the original); would seem to immediately lose their purported importance. It is at the hands of this self-important bureaucracy that both Arthur Dent's house and planet are destroyed.

Arthur Dent is told by Mr L. Prosser, which conveniently rhymes with "tosser", a local council worker who is "forty, fat and shabby" (Adams: 2002: 9), and oddly enough "a direct male-line descendant of Genghis Khan" (*ibid*), the genetic remains of whom had been watered down to "a pronounced stoutness about the tum and a predilection for little fur hats" [*ibid*], that there is nothing he can do to save his house – it must be demolished because a bypass must be built.

Prosser is portrayed as the archetype of the bureaucrat. He is unremarkable in every aspect except for his biological relation to the ruthless founder of the Mongol Empire, from whom he has inherited a penchant for violence and oppression. In fact, an apt descriptor for Prosser would be a genetically watered-down tyrant: he lacks the intellect, the strength or drive of a true tyrant, so he seems to have settled for council work. This becomes

evident when Arthur questions him on why the house must be demolished. Prosser can only reply that it must be demolished because the bypass must be built, and the bypass must be built because "you've got to build bypasses" (*ibid*.: 10), showing just as much of an ability for questioning orders as Parvus in *The Life of Brian*. The arbitrary injustice of the demolition becomes obvious when Prosser tells Dent he should have complained at the appropriate time, but we quickly realise that news of the demolition were absolutely inaccessible:

> 'But the plans were on display…'
> 'On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them.'
> 'That's the display department.'
> 'With a torch.'
> 'Ah, well the lights had probably gone.'
> 'So had the stairs.'
> 'But look, you found the notice, didn't you?'
> 'Yes,' said Arthur, 'yes I did. It was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying *Beware of the Leopard*.' (*ibid*.: 11)

When Arthur refuses to get out of the bulldozer's way, Prosser is haunted by "inexplicable but terribly attractive visions of Arthur Dent's house being consumed with fire and Arthur himself running screaming from the blazing ruin with at least tree hefty spears protruding from his back" (*ibid*.: 12), but only manages to stutter a vague threat and storm off. Moments later, the Vogons announce their intention to destroy the entire planet Earth in order to build a hyperspatial express route. When the planet's population naturally complains, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz of the Galactic Hyperspace Planning Council – Prosser's Vogon counterpart – delivers a familiar speech:

> There's no point in acting all surprised about it. All the planning charts and demolition orders have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your Earth years, so you've had plenty of time to lodge any formal complaint and it's far too late to start making a fuss about it now. (*ibid*.: 33)

The parallel between the Vogons and Prosser, and consequently the bureaucratic civil services of the 20th century, is obvious. Through their characterisation, bureaucracy is, among other things, shown to be a lawful passive-aggressive outlet for those with a lurking strain of sadism, such as the Vogons, who delight in berating others, and Prosser, with his secret love of axes and violent fantasies. But the fact that their incompetence and

inadaptability are what force Dent out of his comfort zone, places the Prosser and the Vogons in a very particular position: firstly, one that has already been established – that of the worthy victims of Bergson's "correction"; secondly, however, that of having a pivotal role in the grand, maniacal scheme of things. Were it not for Prosser or the Vogons's extreme incompetence and fussiness, Arthur would have carried on living a sheltered life, clueless as to his surroundings yet vaguely pestered by disappointment and the feeling that something sinister is afoot: "'[a]ll through my life I've had this strange unaccountable feeling that something was going on in the world, something big, even sinister, and no one would tell me what it was'" (*ibid*.: 164). Ultimately, Arthur will never find out what is going on in the Universe, and Slartibartfast immediately explains to him that that strange feeling is "'just perfectly normal paranoia. Everyone in the Universe has that'" (*ibid*.); but he did find out what was going on in his home-world and broke out of his shell of placid insularity – a necessity also echoed by Brian when he says that his followers have to "all work it out for [them]selves" (Jones, 1979: 01:03:51-01:04:14).

Lastly, in his journey, Arthur is guided by Prefect and the rest of the group, but also by the overarching mechanism of the guide. The guide becomes, in and of itself, a substitute for the meaning of life: a pragmatic manual for navigating an absurd existence, full of practical, sometimes prejudiced, and erroneous advice and information which caters shamelessly to indulgent tendencies:

> [The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy] *has many omissions and contains much that is apocryphal, or at least wildly inaccurate, it scores over the older, more pedestrian work in two important respects.*
>
> *First, it is slightly cheaper; and secondly, it has the words* DON'T PANIC *inscribed in large friendly letters on its cover.* (*ibid*.: 6)

This becomes evident when we are shown the difference between the prestigious Encyclopaedia Galactica and The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy through their entries on alcohol:

> *Here's what* The Encyclopaedia Galatica *has to say about alcohol. It says that alcohol is a colourless volatile liquid formed by the fermentation of sugars and also notes its intoxicating effect on certain carbon-based life forms.*
>
> The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy *also mentions alcohol. It says the best drink in existence is the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster.* (*ibid*.: 21-22, italics in the original)

The Guide goes on to describe the effects of drinking a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster as "like having your brains smashed out by a slice of lemon wrapped round a large gold brick" (*ibid*.: 21) before explaining in detail how one can prepare said drink. The narrator concludes by observing that: "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy *sells rather better than* The Encyclopaedia Galactica" (*ibid*.: 22, italics in the original). While the conclusion seems to be that The Encyclopaedia Galactica is certainly a better source of knowledge, it also seems like it is useless when it comes to explaining the meaning of life or helping people navigate through existence. This seems like another nod to Kierkegaard's criticism of objective, scientific knowledge as a means to discovering the purpose of our existence. This is not to imply that the novel is somehow against science and formal logic – it is quite enthusiastically the opposite – but there is a certain despair with its ability to achieve some sort of meaningful answer, as demonstrated by the parody of formal logic in the Guide's entry on the Babel Fish, a fish that is otherwise normal but which, when placed in one's ear, renders every language immediately understandable:

> '*Now it is such a bizarrely improbable coincidence that anything so mindboggingly useful could have evolved purely by chance that some thinkers have chosen to see it as a final and clinching proof of the* non-*existence of God.*
> *'The argument goes something like this: "I refuse to prove that I exist," says God, "for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing."*
> *'"But, says Man, "the Babel fish is a dead giveaway, isn't it? It could not have evolved by chance. It proves you exist, and so therefore, by your own arguments, you don't. QED."*
> *'"Oh dear," says God, "I hadn't thought of that," and promptly vanishes in a puff of logic.*
> *'"Oh, that was easy," says Man, and for an encore goes on to prove that black is white and gets himself killed on the next zebra crossing".* (*ibid*.: 56)

Notwithstanding the clear amount of pessimism in *HGTG*; the amount of descending that the reader does from ideal to reality, there is a certain glimmer of hope throughout. While on the fifth book of the series the ending is certainly grim and hopeless – death – along the way the characters never stop trying to live their lives meaningfully, nor is the quest of discovering The Question truly abandoned, while Arthur's adventures continue to be animated by an obscure, coincidental force bringing unlikely events together. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the novel's attitude towards the tragedy of existence, however, is that it is funny. Comedy, even when at its most cynical is still, hopefully, funny. Things such as words which mean simultaneously "to know" and "to

have sex with" may be considered flaws if we, above all, hope to avoid misunderstandings at all costs, but they are also part of the richness of life and communication – a richness which humour exploits to our knowledge and enjoyment. *HGTG* may be at its root bleak and absurd, but it also conveys a feeling of extreme comfort – perhaps a triumph of narcissism which tells us that if we can understand and diagnose all of this Galactic folly, and most of all laugh at it, there is no reason to panic; not because there is an answer, not because there is a question, but because our whale-like journey from the sky to the ground is extremely funny.

3. Conclusion

When it comes to humour, there are very few certainties to be found. The prospect that a single, unified theory will one day provide an answer to all its intricacies seems unlikely. However, the works of comic authors and scholars from Classical Antiquity to the present day, many of which I was not able to survey for this dissertation, have provided us with a wealth of information and opinions which, to a large extent, have allowed for a very well-rounded understanding of the ways in which humour works: its effects, its tentative origins, its mechanisms. While there is much more to be accomplished, I hope to have achieved an adequate portrait of the wealth of information that the works covered contain.

From this portrait, it arises that humour is deeply related to the frustration of a common expectation of congruence. This frustration can be either accidental or intentional. Especially when intentional, it seems to have elements of play to it, of a desire (on behalf of the humourist) to derive fun from whatever topic or situation, as well as being an indirect way to express other desires which, if done so openly, may be frowned upon, such as hostility, sexuality and, in the case of Saki's Baroness', a possible expression of unhappiness. Here, as well as in the biological aspects of laughter itself, which seems undeniably related to humour and to the "feeling" it produces – comic amusement –, there seems to be a palpable element of relief to humour, whether due to the fact that laughter breaks down the rigidity of the torso, that it allows one to express one's desires, to release the energy needed to withstand the solemnity of certain situations, or to allay our fears of inferiority. The latter aspect is related to what seems like yet another relevant characteristic

– superiority; it too seems to be a key element of humour, whether it expresses an individual's attempt to remain above his circumstances, is truly the expression of one's feeling of superiority over another, or is merely the recognition that all of humanity is subject to the flaws and imperfections that each individual suffers from. The idea of emotional detachment also seems to have great relevance – whether it is induced by the make-believe aspects of play or fiction, or by simply adopting a distanced, birds' eye perspective over human affairs.

The combination of this information, but especially the idea of social incongruity, led me to explore the idea that humour is deeply rooted in what Schopenhauer described as the vanity of existence: the fundamental incongruity between humanity's lofty aspirations and the limited reality of its existence – the physical restrictions of the body and the social constraints to behaviour. To illustrate this, I enlisted the aid of several of Saki's short stories which provide a comedic, ambiguous perspective on the farcical yet necessary elements of the ceremonial in society; of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, which explores the discrepancy between the everyman-reality of someone such as Brian and the ideal of Jesus, as well as the idea that a haphazard journey to death is inimical to the existence of a purpose, and of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which explores the seemingly purposeless ruthlessness of life in the face of either an inexistent meaning of life or of an impish deity that toys with us, pushing us into a continuous, relentless search, the end of which arrives only with death.

These works share not only the fact that they deal with these themes, but mainly the fact that they are works of humour – that they derive enjoyment from this incongruity by, among other things, making us look at ourselves and others from a distance. In the words of Patrick O'Neill:

> All humour, like all art and all literature, is Janus-faced, looking in one direction towards cosmos and in the other towards chaos. All humour […] must ultimately be affirmative of life and a celebration of the victory of the embattled spirit over the void". (O'Neill, 1983: 166)

The comic treatment of any subject seems to be both imply a recognition and criticism of its intricacies, and the deriving of enjoyment from them. Applied to themes such as existential angst and death, it more than ever becomes a refusal to let bleakness win, and an encouragement for one to see the larger picture – and hopefully laugh.

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