

Introduction: A History of English Laughter?

[...] the history of literature is the history of laughter and pain. The imperatives from which there is no escape are: *Laugh till it hurts, and hurt till you laugh.*¹

I.

Is there a *history* of laughter? Does laughter have a history that could then be written as its 'History'?² Or isn't laughter an anthropological constant rather and thus beyond history, a human feature that has defined humanity as *homo ridens* or, at least, *homo risus capax*, from cave man and cave woman to us? Do we not all share, across the centuries and the cultures, the same impulse to laugh, the same organs and the same physiology of laughter, the same range of laughter, from the smile to the sneer, from the chuckle to the belly laugh? If you tickle us, do we not all laugh? To be sure, there is an enormous variety to laughter; it can be merry or bitter, conciliatory or aggressive, disarming or provocative, pathological or remedial, foolish or wise, salacious or anguished, excessive or muted, scoffing or rollicking... But these varieties of laughter appear to exist side by side in each period of human history, seem to be an unchanging element of human nature rather than one of changing specific cultural situations, and even less so do they seem to fall into any historical pattern or developmental trajectory.

And yet: New Historicism's injunction to 'Always historicise!' seems to have a particular application here. What may appear as nature only, as mere nature, pure and simple, and is often given out or celebrated as such, on closer inspection proves to be the product of the cultural processing of nature. If there is, therefore, a 'history of laughter', it can only be the history of social discourses, representations, performances and practices through which such cultural processing of laughter is effectuated. The history of laughter is the history of the – often conflicting – norms circumscribing, and giving a social shape to, the anthropological impulse of laughter in a particular society. And these norms change significantly from one period and one society to another. Where many Elizabethans went to visit Bedlam for a good laugh at the antics of its inmates, in our society laughter about the physically or mentally handicapped is no longer acceptable, nor is, under the auspices of political correctness, racist laughter about Jews or Blacks, misogynist laughter about women, or arrogant laughter about the poor and simple. There have been cultures like that of Puritanism, highly suspicious of all kinds of laughter, and others, like the culture of eighteenth-century sentiment and sensibility, which cherished a particular kind of laughter, a benign laughter closely allied to the tears of sympathy. Even the elevation of laughter to man's defining and timeless essence, which we have referred to above, is an instance of such cultural processing, and so is the denigration of laughter, be it for religious or political reasons.

A historical 'risology' could fruitfully draw on recent work on the history of sexuality here, in particular on the distinction between biological or anthropological 'sex' and socially and historically processed 'gender'. In both cases, an instinctual drive or corporeal reaction forms the anthropological basis that is given widely divergent socially acceptable expression and functions in the various cultures; and in both cases, the anthropological drive – sexual desire or the *vis comica* – constantly threatens to subvert the social bounds set up to contain it. In the case of both sex and

¹ Lawrence Durrell: *Clea. A Novel*. London 1960, 138. – I owe this reference to Kay Himberg.

² The most recent attempt at writing such a history is Georges Minois' *Histoire du rire et de la dérision*. Paris 2000.

laughter, what emerges is that both their histories are mainly histories of attempts to limit, control and civilise them, be it through negative injunctions and taboos or through setting up particular forms of gender relations (Petrarchan love, Christian monogamy...) or particular forms of laughter (intellectual laughter related to wit, sentimental laughter...) as positive models to be aspired to.

Sex and laughter are, of course, related to each other in other ways as well. They are both closely linked to our corporeal nature, in particular to the 'lower bodily stratum', as Bakhtin's English translators phrase it, and do constantly, and often embarrassingly, remind us that with all our higher aspirations we have, and, indeed, *are* bodies, whatever our respective cultures may have to say about that. In the course of history, both sex and laughter have frequently found themselves in direct opposition to, and therefore repressed by, dominant notions of what is pure, sublime and sacred. The charge of obscenity often brackets them together, and that charge often entails that of blasphemy. One of the main incentives or targets of laughter has, indeed, been the sexual sphere, and, in particular, female sexuality, and gender roles, relations and hierarchies – and, in particular, their transgressions! – have proved the common laughing stock of cultures otherwise far apart from each other. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that in many cultures the norms regulating socially acceptable laughter are in themselves gendered, imposing, for instance, more rigid and narrower restrictions on female than on male laughter in certain social set-ups. Where a good belly-laugh is acceptable with men here, women are often allowed not much more than a smile, and where a man's smutty joke may pass in male company, female salaciousness is ruled out in any company. Clearly, there is a double standard of laughter at work in many societies, which in turn reflects a wider double standard of morals for men and women.

Laughter is always a *fait social*. This is as true of convivial laughter as of the lonely or even pathological laugh of an alienated individual. Each instance of laughter is inextricably tied up with social and power relations and framed within a social situation; it is conditioned by, and reflects upon, the social constellation. The triangular relationship between (1) the 'laughter-maker', i.e. the one who incites laughter by making a joke or drawing attention to some absurdity, (2) the 'butt of laughter' as its target or victim, and (3) the 'laugher(s)', i.e. the laughing audience, is always also a social triangle, constructed along parameters of gender, class, race, age or other crucial differences operative in the respective culture. William Hogarth's etching of 1733, which we have chosen for the title image to this volume, points up the theatricality of this triangular relationship by focussing on 'The Laughing Audience'.³ We do not see what happens on stage to make this audience laugh; we rather become the audience to this audience, laughing in turn at the rich diversity of reactions exhibited by Hogarth – the three wind musicians in the orchestra pit, too seriously absorbed in the execution of their art to notice anything laughable; the two amorous couples in the box and a third girl offering her services (or herself), not laughing at the play, which they completely disregard, but smiling flirtatiously; finally and centrally, in the stalls ten spectators of differing age and gender laughing with various degrees of enviable abandon and, amidst them, the malcontent critic, ostentatiously 'not amused'.

Moreover, laughter is always caught up in the kinds of distinctions between centre and margins every society employs to establish and stabilise its identity: in one society, the predominant form of laughter can be that which aims from the site of the ideological or power centre at what is to be marginalised or excluded altogether; in another, the most significant form of laughter can arise from the margins, challenging and subverting the established orthodoxies, authorities and hierarchies. Laughter can be affirmative or subversive and any history of laughter will have to take that into account. In terms of such a historical project the impact of Bakhtin's highly influential and persuasive model of 'carnavalesque' or transgressive and subversive laughter⁴ is perhaps somewhat unfortunate, as it has tended to obliterate historical difference once again and thus re-instated one particular historical form of laughter as laughter's anthropological and timeless essence.

As we have seen, laughter takes part in, and is a part of, social history. And it is not just any part, but a particularly significant one – an indicator of tensions and contradictions, which helps to

³ Joseph Burke: *William Hogarth – Das graphische Werk*. Wien 1968, plate 146.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World*, transl. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington 1984.

illuminate social situations and can be made to function like a litmus test in assessing the state of a given society. If this is the case, why not then study actual instances of laughter in real life and everyday situations rather than, as we shall do here, literary or theatrical representations of laughter or discourses about laughter? There are simple as well as more complex answers to this question. The simplest is that we, the authors of this collection of essays, are not primarily sociologists or social historians but literary critics. Our professional expertise lies in reading texts, in analysing the symbolic systems of representations rather than the social reality they represent, or, to be more precise, in analysing culture as first, second and higher order systems of signs. And then, of course, a history of laughter has to dedicate itself as much to the laughter of the past as that of the present, and the laughter of the past is only accessible to us in representations and discourses and can never be directly studied in its quotidian real-life actuality. Real laughter in real-life situations is volatile and evanescent – an ephemeral performance, not a lasting text or monument. It vanishes with the situation that occasioned it, leaving traces only in the aesthetic representations of the visual, theatrical and literary arts and in the discourses that framed it. It is these traces of 'textualised' laughter that we have to learn to read – both the laughter represented in the texts and the laughter they intend to raise. Finally, we believe that the representations of laughter reveal the faultlines of the anxieties and the social pressures at work at a given historical moment more distinctly than actual laughter does. After all, they do not only 'represent' the laughter of a particular society, but at the same time give a pointed and pregnant shape to it, analyse and frequently problematise it. What they also demonstrate is that actual laughter itself always contains a more or less marked element of self-conscious performance and theatrical representation, complete with actors and audiences.

II.

But why, then, a history of *English* or *British* laughter? Is there – can there be – a specifically English or British brand of laughter that would justify or merit to have its history written? If we take that to mean a form of laughter that expresses an essential, transcendent 'Englishness', it certainly does not exist. On the other hand, laughter has played, and continues to play, an important role in the construction of a sense of national identity, of what it means to be English or British.⁵ Any nation, and the English in particular, defines itself also in terms of a special sense of humour and special kinds of laughter that set it off from other nations. Indeed, laughter in its dialectic of exclusion and inclusion can be particularly effective here: it is inclusive in that it presupposes or creates and affirms a community or solidarity of laughers joined in the shared awareness of being different from, or superior to, the targets of its derision; and at the same time it excludes its victims from this shared sense of identity.

This applies to social groups as well as to nations, and in particular to the English nation. From the incipient stages of an English nation state under the Tudors, we find English writers defining their national and cultural identity amongst other things also in terms of a particular sense of humour and a particular significance and quality of laughter. This autostereotype has been widely accepted by England's neighbours; there actually has been a recent attempt by a German Anglicist to write the entire social history of England in terms of an over-arching comedy pattern, a series of comic resolutions to conflicts which in other, less fortunate and less balanced nations, in Germany in particular, have led to tragedy.⁶ Well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the very notion of 'humour' was claimed and exalted as peculiarly English and accounted for by the humid and changeable English climate.⁷ In many accounts by early English continental travellers as well as in, say, Shakespeare's history plays, foreigners – from the Spaniard and the Italian to the Dutch and the German – are represented as ridiculous above all because they lack a sense of humour and the gift

⁵ John Bourke: *Englischer Humor*. Göttingen 1965; Hans-Dieter Gelfert: *Max und Monty. Kleine Geschichte des deutschen und englischen Humors*. München 1998.

⁶ Dietrich Schwanitz: *Englische Kulturgeschichte 1500-1914*, 2 vols. Tübingen 1995.

⁷ Waldemar Zacharasiewicz: *Die Klimatheorie in der englischen Literatur und Literaturkritik von der Mitte des 16. bis zum frühen 18. Jahrhundert*. Wien 1977.

of laughter: foreigners are ridiculous, the English laugh. Essayists and philosophers in the eighteenth century, both in England and abroad, related this particular appreciation and culture of laughter above all to the more liberal political constitution of England, which allowed for, or even cherished, individual diversity and eccentricity, tolerance and generosity of sentiment, where the absolutist constitutions of the Continent enforced a uniformity and formality of conduct hostile to laughter.

The encounter between Laurence Sterne's 'Sentimental Traveller' and the French aristocracy is emblematic for these auto- and heterostereotypes: the English clergyman bears the name and the fool's cap of Yorick – the fool from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* scandalising French notions of tragic *decorum*. There is, indeed, no national literature in Europe in which laughter is so close to the core of the national canon as in English literature. From Chaucer to Shakespeare, from the Restoration Wits to Fielding and Sterne, from Byron to Dickens, from Lewis Carroll to Wilde and Waugh, English classical texts of all genres resound with laughter. And there is no national theatre in Europe that can draw upon such a rich tradition of comedies in their own language as the English. Where the German theatre has less than a handful of comedies made in Germany or Austria that still work on the stage, the English theatre has an embarrassment of riches in the plays of Shakespeare and Jonson, Wycherley and Congreve, Sheridan and Goldsmith, Shaw and Wilde, Noël Coward and Joe Orton, Alan Ayckbourn and Tom Stoppard, and can afford to generously supply the stages of the rest of the world with them. English humour or laughter made in Great Britain and Ireland has become a trademark both at home and abroad, and one could argue – as one of the contributors to the present volume does – that an entertainment industry geared to laughter had its first beginnings in England, in the Elizabethan public playhouses. This predominance of English products on the European laughter market has continued from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Taming of the Shrew* right down to our days of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *Mr Bean* on television or *Funny Bones*, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* on the big screen.

Laughter is all-pervasive in the canon of English literature; it is not limited to special genres such as comedy or the humorous novel, as in other national literatures which tend to relegate laughter to its appointed niches and to strictly segregate it from the serious, the sublime, the sentimental or the tragic. Where in Spanish literature, for instance, the coexistence and coincidence of laughter and pathos in *Don Quixote* is a rather rare exception, in England – from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and medieval and Elizabethan drama to modernist and postmodernist writing – the mingling of laughter and tears, of the laughable and the pathetic or even the horrifying, and their tragicomic juxtaposition or conflation are the rule rather than the exception.

III.

For this reason alone, this present collection of essays cannot restrict itself to comedy and to comic genres; some of the essays actually go out of their way to discover laughter at the margins of texts where one would not have expected it at all – in *Beowulf*, for instance, or *Paradise Lost*, or the Gothic Novel. Laughter at the margins of texts, which often coincides with laughter from the margins of society and its orthodoxies, is one of the special concerns of this book. This goes together with an interest in 'impure' forms of laughter – with laughter that is not the serene and intellectually or emotionally distanced response to a comic stimulus which is at the heart of many philosophical theories of the comic, but with emotionally disturbed and troubled, aggressive and transgressive, satanic and sardonic laughter. Some of the types of laughter studied here are entirely independent of any comic stimulus; they are uneasy corporeal reactions to anxieties and embarrassments often bordering on the pathological, rather than the expression of an awareness of contradictions and the means to regain one's balance and control which theorists of the comic have in mind. In this sense, our collective endeavour aims less at contributing to a history of the comic as a psychological, cognitive or aesthetic category, than to a history of the body and its motions, languages and symptomatics. We do not ask, then, what is comic nor what is *the* comic, but: who laughs at, and with, whom, where, when, why, and how?

What we are offering here is not a 'history' in the traditional sense of the word. It is not an all-comprehensive account of a millennium of English laughter emplotted in some over-arching teleology – some story of progress and refinement towards more civilised or humane forms of laughter free of smut, aggression or *Schadenfreude*, or a story of decadence and loss, of the trivialisation or commodification of a once authentic *vis comica*. With the indefinite article in our title already – 'A', not 'The History of Laughter' – we intend to suggest our renunciation of all such claims to authoritative completion and closure; they are difficult to maintain these days anyway and impossible when it comes to a field as vast and under-researched as ours. And there are, of course, obvious absences and lacunae with respect to periods, authors and genres: the Restoration culture of provocative wit and transgressive laughter, for instance, or Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, the music hall and film and television, or, most regrettably, popular culture in general, a main site of laughter. Instead of a 'proper' history, all we can offer is, therefore, a fairly discontinuous and roughly chronological series of representative case studies ranging from *Beowulf* to Howard Barker, held together not by any linear historical trajectory, but by the shared concern of all contributors with the historicity of laughter.

This shared concern articulates itself above all in certain leitmotifs, in the repeated attempts at relating particular forms and functions of laughter to their historical and social frames. Each case study introduces new distinctions and revisits and revises old ones: laughter for laughter's sake vs. instrumentalised, corrective or satirical laughter; laughter of inclusion vs. laughter of exclusion; laughing *with* vs. laughing *at*; aggressive vs. benign laughter; laughter of superiority vs. laughter as a symptom of weakness; divine vs. satanic laughter; remedial vs. pathological laughter; laughter expressing physical well-being vs. laughter linked to physical deformity; pure vs. impure laughter; laughter as a subversive force vs. laughter creating and affirming social cohesion and consensus; laughter as an uncontrollable and anarchic bodily itch vs. laughter hedged in by injunctions against blasphemy, obscenity, misogyny, homophobia, racism, and other moral or political correctnesses... Each one of these and similar oppositions points at historical difference and historical transformations; it implies a story, or stories, and thus history. Some of these stories about the fortunes of English laughter are short-range, as, for instance, the transformation of the ugly grimace and sneer of the Juvenalian satirist into the urbane and elegantly polished Horatian *ridentem dicere verum* in the development of Elizabethan verse satire, the drawing of laughter's sting of aggression from Restoration to sentimental comedy, the sheer increase in the range of laughter from Dickens to Joyce, or the laughter of postmodernism at previous art's high-seriousness; others are part of a long-range *Prozess der Zivilisation* (Norbert Elias) which works towards an increased control of the social display of the body and thus also control of the corporeality of laughter.

As the social norms defining and regulating laughter in any society are hardly ever coherent or consistent, none of these stories is absolute, or can be the only true one. In Anglo-Saxon England, for instance, Christian and Germanic norms existed side by side, and these divergent views on laughter created contradictions and tensions between Christian injunctions against unrestrained and obscene, blasphemous or uncharitable laughter on the one hand and feudal ideals of laughter in the royal hall, the noise and merriment of the *dream* celebrating joyful togetherness. And none of these stories is irreversible: the repressed always returns and so does repression. There is, for instance, one particular kind of laughter that cuts against the grain of all remedial and ameliorative hopes for mankind in being ineradicably linked to suffering, pain, and alienation. Our epigraph from Lawrence Durrell's *Clea* draws attention to it. Let us call it laughter *in extremis*, or laughter *de profundis*, or laughter at the heart of darkness, or, with Shakespeare, 'wild laughter in the throat of death'⁸. It is a scandal, a shock to any society, to any orthodoxy left, right or centre, and yet it resurfaces again and again in the canon of English literature and art – in the tragedies of Marlowe and Shakespeare, in the Gothic Novel, in the plays of Samuel Beckett and Howard Barker. Indeed, the history of laughter is no laughing matter – or, to say the least, no mere laughing matter!

⁸ *Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.832.

Nor is, incidentally, the theory of laughter: to talk about laughter, to try to conceptualise it, is not immediately or necessarily conducive to laughter! In consequence, our book, which deals with hundreds of laughs and dozens of kinds of laughter, is not funny in itself. That this is not due to any characteristically German or academic lack of humour in the contributors, can be tested against all philosophical discourses on laughter from Aristotle and Cicero to Hobbes, Kant, Bakhtin and Plessner. This becomes particularly apparent in the concluding essays of our book. They take a meta-communicative turn in turning to texts that are in themselves already *about* laughter – Freud on jokes and critics on Freud on jokes; the critical debate about laughter in Henry James – or rather its laughable absence; the critique of politically incorrect, and the celebration of anarchic laughter in plays by Trevor Griffiths and, respectively, Howard Barker. None of these texts discussed here, even when full of jokes and laughter, is actually hilarious. What they achieve instead is a new self-consciousness about laughter and its historical formations.

This collection of essays has grown out of a lecture series, a 'Ringvorlesung' organised by the editor at the English department of the Free University Berlin in 1999/2000. This accounts both for the format and the style of these contributions, in which the traces of oral delivery have not been totally deleted. And, as with the name of our 'Institut für Englische Philologie', we use 'English' here in a – politically far from correct – broad sense of the word, which accommodates the 'mid-Atlantic' Henry James as freely as the Irish James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.

In conclusion, I would like to thank my secretary, Frau Barbara Wohlgemuth, and my two student assistants, Sabine Lucia Müller and Karen Schneeweiß, for their painstaking and unflagging help in forming and proof-reading the following pages. My gratitude also extends to the younger colleagues in the department for the willingness and inventiveness with which they contributed to yet another 'Ringvorlesung', and beyond them to the friends from neighbouring institutions and further away – Ute Berns from the Technical University of Berlin, Renate Brosch and Susanne Kries from Potsdam, Merle Tönnies from Bochum, Werner von Koppenfels from Munich and Jeremy Lane from Sussex – for chiming in so well with our chorus of laughter.