

# Comedy, levity and laughter: parables of agape

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## COMEDY, LEVITY AND LAUGHTER: PARABLES OF AGAPE

At the centre of Umberto Eco's postmodern Gothic thriller, *The Name of the Rose*, is a lost but nonetheless influential work on comedy by Aristotle. Threaded throughout the novel, as the characters play hide and seek with Aristotle's text, there is a series of debates between the Franciscan William of Baskerville, who is investigating a spate of mysterious deaths, and the Benedictine *agelast* Jorge of Bungo, whom we eventually learn is responsible for these deaths (and who eats Aristotle), about the 'licitness of laughter' from a religious perspective.<sup>2</sup> Although obviously caricatured in certain respects, these debates offer us a useful way of introducing some of the principal concerns that have shaped religious attitudes towards levity through the ages.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these debates, which takes place in the scriptorium of a Benedictine abbey and is prompted by the monks' levity at the carnivalesque universe depicted in the margins of an illustrated psalter, turns upon the precepts of the Rule of St Benedict and leads into a discussion of the purpose of laughter. Attempting to silence and rebuke the monks' levity, Jorge quotes a well-known phrase from the Rule ('Verba vana aut risui apta non loqui'), in which the monks are instructed 'not to speak useless words and such as provoke laughter.'<sup>4</sup> Whilst this would appear to settle the matter, there are two important mitigating factors: firstly, the principle with which Jorge admonishes the monks is a partial quotation, which leaves out the subsequent qualifying clause—'risum multum aut excussum non amare'—warning them 'not to love much or boisterous laughter.' In other words, the monks are not forbidden to laugh; what they are instructed to avoid is loud and excessive laughter.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, as Jorge acknowledges to William—whom he later on describes as a 'clown, like the saint who gave birth you all'<sup>6</sup>—there are significant differences with respect to levity between the various monastic orders: 'But

you come from another order, where I am told that merriment, even the most inopportune sort, is viewed with indulgence.<sup>7</sup> And whilst Jorge's comment obviously expresses disdain for this alternative tradition, it highlights the relativity of his own position within the wider religious sphere. Indeed, it helpfully brings into view one of the greatest religious defenders of levity, St Francis of Assisi, who was celebrated as a *jongleur de Dieu* or *joculator Dei*, and who counseled his brethren: 'in tribulations, in the presence of those who torment you, always remain *hilari vultu*.'<sup>8</sup> Thus, as Jacques Le Goff observes, in the teaching and exemplary comportment of St Francis, levity 'becomes a form of spirituality.'<sup>9</sup> The Franciscan William refuses to be bated by Jorge's scornful reference to his order and instead chooses to counter the attack by pointing to the virtuous ends of laughter, which may, he observes, serve a didactic or moral purpose, though it may also function as a sort of catachresis.<sup>10</sup>

The next brief exchange on the subject takes place over an evening meal, at which a chapter of the Rule is read, in response to which, Jorge—who compulsively recurs to a debate he is simultaneously eager to terminate—points out to William that 'John Chrysostom said that Christ never laughed.'<sup>12</sup> This is of course a common observation in religious denunciations of laughter, even though, problematically, it is an argument from silence.<sup>13</sup> William leaves this logical weakness aside, however, and instead retorts that 'Nothing in his human nature forbade it [...] because laughter, as the theologians teach, is proper to man.'<sup>14</sup> He then follows this up by alluding to the legendary levity of St Lawrence, who joked at his roasting ('Turn me over, please; I'm not quite done on the other side') and was able to laugh without impiety even as he was martyred.<sup>15</sup>

After a discussion the following day with Benno of Uppsala, in which William calls attention to Aristotle's defence of wordplay and laughter as instruments of truth,<sup>16</sup> the debate is once again initiated by William, who asks Jorge directly why he is 'so

opposed to the idea that Jesus may have laughed' and reminds the Benedictine of the 'therapeutic' justification of laughter (it is 'a good medicine, like baths, to treat humors and other afflictions of the body').<sup>18</sup> There then follows a scholastic prototype of the game Top Trumps—which understandably didn't make it into the film of the book—in which William and Jorges exchange references to pagan philosophers and theologians, such as Paulinus of Nola and Synesius of Cyrene, who have denounced or spoken in favour of levity.<sup>19</sup>

Two things of relevance to the present chapter emerge from these debates. The first thing they obviously underline is the *diversity* of attitudes towards levity and laughter within the pre-modern religious sphere.<sup>20</sup> It is especially important to bear this in mind, as Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque and popular culture in the Middle Ages seems to have persuaded a large number of people that the church had only one attitude towards laughter, and that was pathologically negative. The second thing that emerges from these debates is the range of positive religious purposes that levity, laughter and comedy may serve: for instance, these may be justified in 'therapeutic' or 'recreational' terms; on a moral or a didactic basis; but also, more boldly, as a means of mediating or luring us towards the divine. Thus, if we consider the totality of the novel's attitudes towards laughter—and not just the *agelast* cheerleading of Jorges—what comes into view is an Augustinian 'adverbial' logic (according to which, the value of a thing depends upon its purpose and effects rather than the class to which it belongs<sup>22</sup>) and an Aristotelian principle of 'measure' or the virtuous mean.<sup>23</sup> Let us consider a literary example conjoining comedy, levity and laughter.

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest theological endorsements of levity in the Middle Ages is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which was completed in 1321, shortly before the events described in *The Name of the Rose*.<sup>26</sup> To be sure, what many readers are most forcibly struck by is the pathos of Purgatory or the dark sublimities of 'la città dolente.'<sup>27</sup>

Even so, it is possible to identify three interrelated aspects to the poem's endorsement of levity. In the first place, most obviously, whilst it is a profoundly moral and religious vision, it is a comedy. Typically, of course, the meaning of Dante's label 'commedia' is explained on the basis of his epistle to Can Grande (c. 1315), in which he identifies its movement from 'some harsh complication' to 'a prosperous end' and the fact that it is written in 'an unstudied and low style' as the reasons for his designation.<sup>28</sup> Yet a further layer of meaning has recently been uncovered by Giorgio Agamben, who draws attention to the theological foundations of Dante's categories for tragedy and comedy, which are related to the notion of 'original sin.' Briefly, the Christian doctrine of original sin is based upon a distinction between 'natural' guilt and 'personal' guilt, where the former is inherited independently of individual responsibility (in the Fall, 'human *nature* itself sinned'<sup>29</sup>), and it is this 'dark "tragic" background that Christ's passion radically alters.'<sup>30</sup> Hence, as Agamben argues, Christ's death 'liberates man from tragedy and makes comedy possible,' since it is upon this event that the 'prosperous ending' of man's fate depends. Dante's poem is therefore a comedy—in a revolutionary sense that he was himself establishing—because it has 'an itinerary from guilt to innocence and not from innocence to guilt.'<sup>31</sup> His designation is of profound importance, since it is at this point that comedy takes on a 'soteriological itinerary.'<sup>32</sup>

This 'ascending' movement from guilt to innocence is also exhibited in the ecstatic journey of the pilgrim, which moves from the physical and spiritual 'gravity' of Hell ('the center / Of the universe, where all weights must converge'<sup>33</sup>) to the physical and spiritual 'levity' of Paradise (where all things 'light in weight and pure [...] rise towards the wheeling stars'<sup>34</sup>). Indeed, as Simon Gilson has shown, in its correlated interweaving of physical and theological principles, the *Commedia* is pervasively structured according to the Aristotelian conceptions of *gravitas* and *levitas*.<sup>35</sup> What's more, however, with extraordinary reflexive symmetry, the ascending movement from 'gravitas' to

'levitas' involves a physical and a spiritual lightening in the pilgrim as well.<sup>36</sup> This wonderfully rich symbolic process is explained in the dialogue between the pilgrim and Virgil in *Purgatorio*:

As we were climbing up the sacred steps,  
I seemed to feel myself much lighter now  
than I had been before on level ground.

'Master', I said, 'tell me, what heavy thing  
has been removed from me? I feel as if  
to keep on climbing would be effortless.'

He answered: 'When the *P*'s that still remain  
(though they have almost faded) on your brow  
shall be erased completely like the first,

then will your feet be light with good desire [...].'<sup>37</sup>

What we see in these lines is a religious allegory that is founded on the dual meaning of *levitas*; for as the pilgrim is purged of his sins, his conscience is lightened and his mood is lifted, though he also physically begins to lose weight, and as a result he ascends or 'levitates' towards Paradise. (In *The Name of the Rose*, Adso speaks similarly of the process of terrestrial absolution as an unloading of 'the weight of sin,' which results in 'a new and airy lightness of soul.'<sup>39</sup>) This will, perhaps, seem rather fanciful to modern readers; yet it should be recalled that the notion of 'absolute' or 'innate' levity was operative at the time, and informed spiritual as well as physical accounts of reality. Thus, we find in Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, an account of 'agapeic' levity, in which he describes the *pondus amoris* or 'weight of love' that, in accord with the Aristotelian notion of innate lightness, draws the soul upwards towards the divine and counteracts the 'gravity' of this-worldly attachments.<sup>40</sup> This spiritual conception of levity, according to which the pilgrim is described as 'light with good desire,' is wonderfully encapsulated in one of the poet's addresses to the reader:

O haughty Christians, wretched, sluggish souls [...]
 putting your trust in things that pull you back,

do you not understand that we are worms,  
 each born to form the angelic butterfly,  
 that flies defenceless to the Final Judge?<sup>41</sup>

Whilst the butterfly is of course a traditional Christian symbol of the resurrection, its religious significance for Dante here appears to consist as much in its other, ordinarily incidental characteristics—namely, the manner of its flight—which recalls the *nulla sollicitudine* of St Francis and the ‘reckless’ levity of the holy fool. (Kierkegaard espouses a similar idea in his devotional discourses *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*, where he argues with reference to the bird’s flight: ‘Dependence on God is the only independence, because God has no gravity; only things of this earth, especially earthly treasure, have that—therefore the person who is completely dependent on him is light.’<sup>42</sup>) The point of importance to our present discussion is that Dante privileges levity as a religious posture—not as a moment of ‘light relief’ or for didactic purposes, but as a bearing that is *in itself* of value and an appropriate way of comporting oneself towards the divine.

In addition to the poem’s ‘comedic’ trajectory and its privileging of levity as a theological posture, there is another way in which lightness is aligned with the religious. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that what the pilgrim moves towards and is contagiously incited by is a sacred levity. Here is his description of what he encounters as, after the harrowing journey through Purgatory and Hell, he finally approaches the celestial sphere: ‘mi semiava un riso de l’universo’—it seemed to me like the laughter of the universe.<sup>44</sup> This is not a rhetorical flourish or an anomalous perception in the poem. Rather, what he describes at this point is an intimation of the ultimate reality that is disclosed to him in the concluding moment of vision—namely, the beatific smile of God:

Eternal light, you sojourn in yourself alone.  
 Alone, you know yourself. Known to yourself,

You, knowing, love and smile on your own being.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the radiant smile of the divine involves a ‘contagious’ communication of levity, which is expressed by various natural phenomena as well as the souls in Paradise,<sup>46</sup> and which in its beneficent self-diffusion chiastically entices things back to Itself. The superlative instance of this is of course Beatrice, who is described by Hans Urs von Balthasar as ‘an abyss of gaiety.’<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as Peter Hawkins has shown in his study of ‘riso’ and ‘sorriso’ in the *Commedia*, ‘Beatrice’s smile *is* the way that Dante journeys toward the beatific vision of God.’<sup>48</sup> It is her ‘sacred smile’ (‘il santo riso’)<sup>49</sup> that awakens his longing and lifts him through the celestial spheres, just as it is smiling in the poem more generally that is ‘the signifier of the beatific vision.’<sup>50</sup> As Hawkins concludes, smiling is ‘the hallmark gesture of Dante’s poem’ and a sign of its underlying teaching that ‘joy is at the heart of reality, even at the heart of God.’<sup>51</sup>

In the face of such evidence, it would seem hard to maintain that levity in the Middle Ages was opposed to the religious. This is not to suggest that the Church did not at times and in certain contexts condemn or seek to prohibit laughter.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that Bakhtin’s account of a humourless religious sphere, which is promoted in Eco’s novel by the *agelast* Jorge but contradicted by the *eutrapelic* William, is not supported by the historical evidence. As Albrecht Classen summarily affirms: ‘We can no longer uphold the traditional viewpoint that all laughter was a profane force against sacrality per se. As art historians, theatre scholars, and literary historians can amply demonstrate, laughter also arose in the middle of the Church in many different contexts and could even lend voice to the *numinosum*.’<sup>53</sup>

## II

Part of the reason why Bakhtin's dichotomous model of medieval culture with its anti-gelastical vision of the religious sphere found such a welcome reception in the West is, I suspect, due to the fact that it correlates with certain post-reformation emphases that were unwittingly inherited by twentieth-century secularism—emphases which, over time, have taken on the character of essential truths. In short: that religion is intrinsically opposed to levity is, I suggest, a commonly taken-for-granted opinion whose cultural and historical contingency has all but disappeared from view. This larger historical shift in attitudes has been summarized by Simon Critchley as follows:

The way in which the history of the comic is often presented is in terms of a decline in toleration for the ludic, subversive folly of the Christian Middle Ages. One finds, for example, Peter Berger writing, 'Modernity did away with much of the enchantment that medieval man still lived with. The counter-world of folly began to recede [...].' In this sense, modern European history can be presented as a dour, Protestant taming of the transgressive comedy of a Catholic world. The transition from a medieval-Renaissance world-view to that of modernity is defined in terms of the gradual disappearance of the ludic, playful element in culture.<sup>54</sup>

It is of course easy to overstate the case and to elide the variety of factors involved; still, we should also be wary of falling off the horse on the opposite side, as one of the most prominent things involved in the reformation was a widespread shift in sensibility, in particular with respect to gravity and levity.<sup>55</sup> We can see something of the nature and scale of this if we compare the theological endorsement of levity exhibited in *The Divine Comedy* with the attitude evinced in a paradigmatic Protestant work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Both *The Divine Comedy* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* contain a feminine figure of levity: Beatrice in the former, Mrs Light-Mind in the latter. However, the parallel ends there, for whilst Dante is led towards the beatific vision by the 'dolce riso' of Beatrice—whose lightness is not only positively conceived, it is a benevolently contagious reflection of the divine—Bunyan's Mrs Light-Mind is a bit-part character who would be more at home in *Coronation Street* than in any of Dante's cantica:

Come put this kind of Talk away. I was Yesterday at Madam *Wantons*, where we were as merry as the Maids. For who do you think should be there, but I, and Mrs. *Love-the-flesh*, and three or four more with Mr. *Lechery*, Mrs. *Filth*, and some others: So there we had Musick and dancing, and what else was meet to fill up the pleasure. And I dare say my Lady her self is an admirably well bred Gentlewoman, and Mr. *Lechery* is as pretty a Fellow.<sup>57</sup>

This effervescent vignette, whose brevity is itself a sign of the diminished significance accorded to lightness, manages to be remarkably disparaging in a very small space. Lightness, Bunyan's portrait suggests, is averse to the religious ('Come put this kind of Talk away') and associated with wantonness, lechery, love of the flesh and filth (most of the synonyms for concupiscence were invited), all of which are in turn associated with—and lend a negative tincture to—music and dancing. In stark contrast to Dante's poem, then, in which lightness is associated with a movement towards the divine—and levity is the soul's *redeemed* condition—in Bunyan's world, lightness indicates a spiritual deficiency and a soul that is distracted from distraction by distraction.

Bunyan's conception of levity as a species of vanity set over against the religious is by no means anomalous, as we can see from Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, which was published, in English, in the same year as *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Here is the opening paragraph of Proposition XV:

Seeing the chief end of all religion is to redeem men from the spirit and vain conversation of this world, and to lead into inward communion with God, before whom, if we fear always, we are accounted happy; therefore all the vain customs and habits thereof, both in word and deed, are to be rejected and forsaken by those who come to this fear [as are] all the foolish and superstitious formalities attending them; [...] as also the unprofitable plays, frivolous recreations, sportings and gamings, which are invented to pass away the precious time, and divert the mind from the witness of God in the heart, and from the living sense of his fear, and from that evangelical spirit wherewith Christians ought to be leavened, and which leads into sobriety, gravity, and godly fear [...].<sup>59</sup>

Barclay's conception of religious propriety exhibits a number of distinctly Protestant emphases: in its repudiation of 'formalities,' its privileging of the 'inward,' its sharpened

opposition between the sacred and the mundane, and its disapproval of ‘unprofitable’ or ‘frivolous’ recreation, which contrasts pointedly with the traditional pre-modern attitude towards popular festivities, which were woven into the liturgical calendar. Perhaps what is most remarkable, though, is the emergence of temperament (sobriety and gravity) as a site of pre-eminent theological significance.

Manifestly, this isn’t the place to explore the matter in any detail, but it may be worth venturing a few reflections on why it is that, during the reformation, religion came to be almost exclusively associated with solemnity, and sensibility was elevated to a *theological* category. Broadly speaking, a form of religion that pivotally emphasizes ‘faith alone’ and concomitantly devalues terrestrial structures of mediation and the soteriological significance of ‘works’ inevitably shifts the burden of efficacy or authentication in spiritual matters onto the individual religious subject. To be more precise: whereas according to the sacramental protocols of Catholicism, piety importantly involves participation in religious ritual (attending mass, taking communion, making confession etc.) whose efficacy is, in a sense, determined ‘outside’ the self (though the participant is obviously expected to inhabit and aspire to appropriate the choreographed spiritual comportment as their own), for the reformation religious subject—who is at once required to perform and reflexively evaluate their performance—the signs of grace are to be sought within the experiencing self.<sup>60</sup> As Alec Ryrie observes, early modern British Protestants ‘regarded their own affections and passions as vital sources of data about God’s work in their lives,’ and the reason why they ‘paid such close attention to their emotions was that they expected to meet God in them. Emotion was a form of revelation.’<sup>61</sup> Thus, in early modern Britain, emotional authenticity comes to assume the status of ‘evidentiary experience’<sup>62</sup> and is, as a consequence, radically elevated as a *religious* criterion. In other words, demeanor comes to be an index of one’s spiritual condition. And the demeanor that was central to this ‘distinctively Protestant logic’<sup>63</sup> was

earnestness. As Barry Sanders summarily observes: ‘High seriousness became synonymous with deep religiosity.’<sup>64</sup> Naturally enough, therefore, levity comes to be associated with irreligion and the ungodly—an association that unfortunately seems to have stuck, in spite of the waning of the intense strain of puritanism that helped to foster it. And yet, as a consideration of pre-reformation attitudes towards levity reveals, the antithesis to puritanical solemnity isn’t necessarily irreverence or unbelief; it may instead be an alternative form of religion.<sup>65</sup>

### III

I have dwelt for some time on changes in religious attitudes towards levity in an effort to highlight the historical and cultural contingency of certain censorious religious views, which are all too often taken to be timeless and universal truths.<sup>66</sup> In this section, I want to call attention to a few religious defences of levity, which I shall illustrate with reference to some literary examples. Most of these defences can, for convenience, be mapped onto the three traditional explanations of humour: the superiority theory, the incongruity theory and the relief theory.

The superiority theory, which is most famously associated with Thomas Hobbes, though versions of it are to be found in Plato and Aristotle, tends to be accorded a ‘Satanic’ character (this is Baudelaire’s description of it in ‘Of the Essence of Laughter’). Yet there is another kind of laughter ‘from above,’ which has a theological warrant—namely, the laughter of *contemptus mundi*. One of the most well known examples of this occurs in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1385-6).

At the end of the poem, after Troilus is slain by Achilles and his innately ‘light spirit’ ascends to the eighth sphere, the poem shifts its perspective to the celestial realm and directs our gaze back to earth below in a celebrated gesture of *contemptus mundi*.

And doun from thens faste he gan avyse  
 This litel spot of erthe that with the se  
 Embraced is, and fully gan despise  
 This wrecched world, and held al vanite  
 To respect of the pleyn felicité  
 That is yn hevене above [...].

And yn hymself he lough right at the wo  
 Of hem that wepten for his deth [...]. (1814-22)<sup>68</sup>

This isn't the kind of laugh that is likely to elicit a sympathetic giggle. Even so, it belongs to an established tradition of laughter—that includes Lucan, Boethius, Dante and Boccaccio—which betokens a privileged moment of cognition, in which a transcendent perspective is attained and terrestrial concerns are relativized from the standpoint of eternity, and which models an exemplary religious comportment towards this-worldly affairs. Since laughter in religious contexts tends now to be associated with impropriety, it is important to register the significance of this: according to Chaucer's poem, the proper religious comportment towards the world is characterized by laughter. Nor is such levity reserved for those who have ascended to the celestial sphere. Indeed, this kind of 'eschatological' detachment is recommended to us a terrestrial comportment in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (7:29-31), whose connection with humour is highlighted by Herman Hesse: "To live in the world as though it were not the world, [...] to have possessions as though "one possessed nothing," to renounce as though it were no renunciation, all these favourite and often formulated propositions of an exalted worldly wisdom, it is in the power of humour alone to make efficacious."<sup>70</sup>

The incongruity theory, whose major proponents include Francis Hutcheson, Kant and Kierkegaard, is the one that tends to be favoured in religious defences of humour. Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, argues that humour is a response to the fundamental incongruities of human existence that is appropriate and consonant with Christian faith.<sup>77</sup> I would like, however, to highlight two other versions of the

‘incongruity’ theory. The first of these is illustrated by the work of Flannery O’Connor, whose disconcerting interlacements of the comedic and the grotesque are a way of shocking the reader into countenancing the possibility of a ‘more’ within nature—something, that is, which without being an overt supernatural intrusion nonetheless troubles a purely materialist outlook, since it ‘cannot be accounted for by any human formula.’<sup>79</sup> So, in ‘A Good Man Is Hard to Find,’ for instance, the grandmother’s sudden, contextually incongruous gesture of love towards the murderous ‘Misfit,’ who in response springs back ‘as if a snake had bitten him’ and shoots her in the chest, seems to have its source in something that exceeds her character, but which involves, acts through and dilates her nature, the conventional theological name for which is grace. Two things in particular appear to lie behind O’Connor’s use of grotesque comedy: on the one hand, it has a ‘realist’ dimension, in that it seeks to represent ‘the divine image at the heart of things, not face to face, but reflected in our broken condition’ and ‘at work in a nature that either resists it or is struggling to comply,’<sup>80</sup> whilst on the other hand it has a ‘catachrestic’ quality, since it employs distortion paradoxically as an instrument of truth, in attempting to figure by means of the finite the ineffable advent of supernatural grace. In O’Connor’s own words, this is ‘not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals.’<sup>81</sup>

The second version of the incongruity theory is conspicuously exemplified in the recent rise of what Slavoj Žižek has referred to as ‘Holocaust comedies’—that is, films such as *Life Is Beautiful*, *Jacob the Liar* and *The Train of Hope*.<sup>82</sup> What we see in such films, according to Žižek, is that laughter serves a disturbing but constructive function, since it is part of an attempt to represent the unspeakable. As Žižek explains:

the stuff of comedy is things which elude our grasp; laughter is one way of coping with the incomprehensible. If no direct realistic staging can be adequate to the horror of the Holocaust, then the only way out of the predicament is to turn to comedy which, at least, accepts its failure to express the horror of the Holocaust

in advance and, moreover, projects this gap between the represented and its failed representation into its very narrative content [...].<sup>83</sup>

Comedy, for Žižek, can thus function as a kind of ‘apophatic’ expedient, which paradoxically communicates by advertising a failure of communication, whose very tastelessness is the index of this linguistic crisis. In this way, by making the medium of vision itself stammer, comedy brings ‘anamorphically’ into view that which eludes direct representation. Whilst this sort of ‘apophatic’ laughter is primarily used in Žižek’s examples as a way of communicating unspeakable horror, it may also be used, as Jacqueline Bussie has shown, as part of a *religious* response to suffering.<sup>84</sup> The central point of relevance for our purposes, which Bussie brings out in her discussion of the fiction of Elie Wiesel, Shūsaku Endō and Toni Morrison, is that in the face of incomprehensible suffering, laughter may paradoxically be the most appropriate—and faithful—response available; for whilst discursive reason seeks to ‘solve’ or explain the problem of evil (which presumptuously supposes that the issue can be reduced to a human measure), laughter by contrast—which can hold together without seeking to resolve the incongruities of existence—may be better able to express a faithful assent to the paradoxes of a religiously conceived world.

Finally, the relief theory, which shades over into defences of recreation and play, has been prominently espoused by the Earl of Shaftesbury, Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, though it is also endorsed by Aquinas, who characteristically countenances ‘The sin of playing too much’ as well as ‘The sin of playing too little,’ and who, like William in *The Name of the Rose*, advocates instead a virtuous mean.<sup>85</sup> One of the most celebrated versions of the ‘relief’ theory, though, is espoused by Bakhtin, in his account of carnival, which is presented as a Saturnalian caesura that is opposed to the ‘icy petrified seriousness’ of the religious sphere.<sup>86</sup> There are, however, some serious problems with Bakhtin’s account. Most obviously, these concern his dichotomized

presentation of medieval culture as a ‘two-world condition,’ which, as Umberto Eco points out, is ‘unfortunately false.’<sup>87</sup> More specifically, as Martha Bayless has shown, Bakhtin’s characterization of the religious sphere as ‘monolithically serious’ is ‘in blatant contradiction to the abundance of parody, satire, and humor’ produced within the ecclesiastical establishment.<sup>88</sup> Rather, as historical research reveals, ‘medieval culture consisted not of two worlds, diametrically opposed, but of a single world, varied and complex, with humor one of its most universal pleasures.’<sup>89</sup> The second, related problem with Bakhtin’s dichotomized account of the carnivalesque is that it obscures the *religious* significance of the festive sphere, for the inversionary levity of which he speaks originates in specific liturgical festivals, which are typically conceived as a commemoration or prefiguration of a ‘holy plenitude’<sup>90</sup>—looking back to Creation or ahead to the celestial feast—and as such are an *affirmation* of the religious order. (In the fifteenth-century prose dialogue known as *Dives and Pauper*, the Franciscan Pauper offers a defence of mirth on holy days, explaining: ‘the rest, the mirth, the ease and the welfare that God hath ordained in the holidays is token of endless rest, joy and mirth and welfare in heaven’s bliss that we hope to have without end.’<sup>91</sup>) What’s more, such festivity is not simply intended as an imitative staging cut off from what it represents; instead, it is supposed to ‘make present’ and participate in the events to which it points. For this reason, according to a traditional conception of festivity, such levity has an intrinsic or ‘ontological’ kinship with the sacred.<sup>92</sup> Thus, whilst carnival festivity is a suspension and inversion of the everyday world, with an occasion of ‘enraptured geniality’ and excess,<sup>93</sup> its antithesis is not the religious order but rather quotidian existence more generally. Indeed, there is something quite preposterous about the attempt to set carnival *over against* the religious, at least within medieval culture; for even where the dethronings and Saturnalian excesses of carnival invert and make fun of the austerities of lent, they are both part of a religious vision and have the potential in their differing ways to mediate or

entice us towards the sacred.<sup>94</sup> Part of the problem with Bakhtin's model is that he equates the religious with the ecclesial sphere, as though the former were exhausted by the latter, so that any transcendence of the official order is therefore seen as intrinsically irreligious. And yet, at its centre, the ecclesial order bears witness to a reality *beyond* itself, intimations of which are available in all sorts of everyday experiences—including levity.<sup>95</sup>

#### IV

One of the things I have attempted to bring out in this chapter is the diversity of ways in which ostensibly secular comedy may nonetheless be of theological significance. To conclude, I would like to call attention to a hugely popular example of comic literature, with no explicit religious concerns, that combines elements of all three of the foregoing theories: namely, the novels of P.G. Wodehouse. The suggestion will of course seem somewhat bizarre, since the novelistic world of Wodehouse—most famously exemplified by ‘the gay insouciant *boulevardier* of Bond Street,’ Bertie Wooster<sup>101</sup>—is a seamlessly self-enclosed realm of camp lightness. And yet it is precisely on account of this quality of ‘unshadowed gaiety’<sup>102</sup> that it is endowed with a peculiar religious significance. How is this so?

One of the most well-attested features of Wodehouse's comic fiction is the idealized universe in which his stories are invariably set. This Edwardian aristocratic idealization, whose bit of ivory is narrower and even more lightly engraved than Jane Austen's, is partly a result of its insulation from all real darkness—or what Bertie would call ‘anything in the nature of real mashed potatoes’<sup>104</sup>—as well as the majority of contemporary reality (*The Code of the Woosters*, for example, was published in 1938, as world war loomed). Thus, the greatest woes of Bertie's world are the nuptial clutches of Florence Craye—who wants him to read books like *Types of Ethical Theory*—and a profusion of despotic aunts, who eat broken bottles and wear barbed wire next to their

skin. It is apparently on account of this evacuation of darkness that Evelyn Waugh identified a ‘prelapsarian’ quality to Wodehouse’s comedies:

For Mr. Wodehouse there has been no Fall of Man; no ‘aboriginal calamity.’ His characters have never tasted the forbidden fruit. They are still in Eden. The gardens of Blandings Castle are that original garden from which we are all exiled.<sup>106</sup>

The ‘edenic’ or idealized character of Wodehouse’s world is also, however, a matter of discourse as well as story, in that the affable insouciance of his narrators characteristically exhibits the ‘alchemic’ chiasmus of camp tonality, treating the serious frivolously and the frivolous seriously. So whilst Bertie can stand by ‘in a purely detached and appreciative spirit’ watching the ‘Wee Nooke’ at Steeple Bumbleigh burn down, even though he thinks it will render the young Edwin, who remains inside, ‘unfit for human consumption,’ he is stricken and spurred to immediate action by the ‘frightful discovery, so ghastly that [he utters] a hoarse cry’ that his Sinbad the Sailor costume, with its distinguished ginger whiskers, is also inside.<sup>107</sup> This ‘camp’ chiasmus, which to some extent constitutes the world it describes, imbues Wodehouse’s comedies with a sort of ‘cartoon ontology,’ in that its violence is transmuted into a slapstick spectacle without lasting effects, whilst descriptions of extreme violence proliferate at the level of metaphor and in the casual fantasies of the narrator (‘as the subject she introduced proved to be the very one I had been planning to ventilate, the desire to beat her brains out with a brick was not so pronounced as it would otherwise have been’<sup>109</sup>). This ‘cartoonification’ of violence, which distances Wodehouse’s characters—and readers—from the sufferings to which the flesh is heir, is accompanied by a correlative detachment from the experience of rapture or sublime elation; for although we can typically discern in Wodehouse’s comedies an arch preservation of Romantic topoi—such as the

epiphanic vision of nature—it is invariably an insouciant, *parodic* shadowing of Romantic preferences, as seen for example in the following lines:

What with all this daylight-saving stuff, we had hit the great open spaces at a moment when the twilight had not yet begun to cheese it in favour of the shades of night. There was a fag-end of sunset still functioning. Stars were beginning to peep out, bats were fooling round, the garden was full of the aroma of those niffy white flowers which only start to put in their heavy work at the end of the day [...].<sup>111</sup>

Bertie's debonair disparagement of the Romantic moment makes available even as it smirks at the epiphany, so that the reader may at once smile with and yet also experience the moment as it were behind him.

A related feature of Wodehouse's camp idyll is the delightful cartoon mutability of his characters, who 'seep,' 'ooze,' or 'oil' into rooms, are 'decanted' from cars and 'flicker' or 'shimmer' in and out of view, in a manner that gaily announces an ontological insubstantiality. Finally, this idealized 'cartoon' quality is further enhanced by what Bede Scott has described as the 'utopian atemporality' of Wodehouse's world—that is, the 'eternal' present its characters inhabit, serenely and supernaturally unscathed by time (as Scott observes, in this world, 'Bertie will always be in his twenties, unmarried and carefree').<sup>112</sup>

While none of these features is, in itself, explicitly theological, their cumulative effect does, I suggest, make available and perhaps even encourage us towards the sort of religious readings that Waugh and Auden have proposed.<sup>115</sup> More specifically, in terms of the foregoing theological models, Wodehouse's adoption of a ludic perspective of 'camp' detachment, as witnessed by his penchant for cartoon violence and comedic epiphanies, converges towards the religious version of the 'superiority' theory, in that it encourages the sort of 'eschatological' levity advocated by Karl Barth.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, the sublime lightness of Wodehouse's vision might be seen as a literary equivalent of the Mozartian

gaiety to which Barth accords profound theological significance in spite of its ostensibly secular cast.<sup>118</sup> In short, what Barth's 'eschatological' endorsement of levity suggests is that, from the standpoint of eternity, our life in this world is 'truly only a game.'<sup>119</sup> It is therefore wrong, such a perspective teaches us, to treat this-worldly affairs—whether sufferings or raptures—with ultimate seriousness, since full seriousness is due to God alone.<sup>120</sup> (In Wodehouse's comic vision, his characters are typically 'in the soup' or else the world is 'all gas and gaiters'; either way, tempered by the narrator's affable urbanity—which suffuses his work with a Mozartian lightness—this-worldly concerns do not impinge on his protagonists with ultimate seriousness.) Similarly, in a manner that resembles the religious variant of the 'relief' theory, the 'prelapsarian' world envisioned by Wodehouse—in which evil has no foothold and whose protagonists are spared the ravages of time—offers us a foretaste or analogical reflection of the eternal felicity of the celestial kingdom. Somewhat jokily of course, Wodehouse makes this connection himself, in having Bertie allude in his lovably bumbling fashion to the Psalms as a way of expressing his sense that everything has turned out 'all booms-a-daisy.'<sup>121</sup> What's more, in beginning the novel proleptically with Bertie's sense that 'happy endings [have] been distributed in heaping handfuls,' ahead of the narrative it also concludes, Wodehouse establishes a sort of joyful parenthesis, such that the whole of the ensuing vision is 'enveloped with light.'<sup>122</sup>

All of this, obviously, stands in need of qualification. The levity of Bertie and Wodehouse's other urbanely insouciant narrators is manifestly at times uncomfortably close to callousness ('we are all sorry that the Reverent What-ever-he-was-called should be dying of adenoids, but after all, here today, gone tomorrow, and all flesh is grass, and what not'<sup>123</sup>). Wodehouse's 'idealization' of this-worldly being is also, conspicuously, a white, male, aristocratic preserve, which, needless to say, is not everyone's vision of Eden (and half bores those who inhabit its world). However, this is where the 'incongruity'

theory comes in; for these are all *analogies*, which clearly involve an ‘is not like’ as well as an ‘is like,’ but which in spite of their decadent and constricted cast may nonetheless entice us into entertaining intimations of the religious perspectives to which they—perhaps inadvertently—point. Moreover, as William of Baskerville reminds us, comedy offers us a form of analogy, which may, paradoxically *on account of* its distortions, be a particularly appropriate way of gesturing towards the divine. Which is precisely what Auden argues with reference to Wodehouse, whose comic vision involves what he describes as ‘a parable of agape.’<sup>124</sup> Here is Auden’s underlying contention:

The man who takes seriously the command of Christ to take up his cross and follow Him must, if he is serious, see himself as a comic figure, for he is not the Christ, only an ordinary man, yet he believes that the command, ‘Be ye perfect,’ is seriously addressed to himself. [...] in proportion as he takes the command seriously [...] he will see himself as a comic figure.<sup>125</sup>

The logic of this argument is reversible for Auden, who sees Christ figures in an unlikely array of comic characters, such as Don Quixote, Falstaff and Jeeves. In these circumstances, comedy serves an ‘apophatic’ purpose, in advertising the shortfall involved in our absurd attempts to approximate the divine, and may thus be seen as a paradoxical form of reverence. If this is the case, it might make sense to speak somewhat oxymoronically of a ‘bathetic sublime,’ in that comedy—like Ruskin’s model of the ‘noble’ grotesque—may obliquely evoke things that *by their very nature* exceed direct representation. As Auden writes of the ‘blessed’ Bertie and the ‘godlike’ Jeeves: ‘So speaks comically—and in what other mode than the comic could it on earth truthfully speak?—the voice of Agape, of Holy Love.’<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver ([1980] London: Vintage, 1998), 76; hereafter *TNR*.

<sup>3</sup> Although I shall in places speak distinctly about comedy, levity and laughter, I shall for convenience also use levity as a superordinate term.

<sup>4</sup> *The Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), 184-5.

<sup>5</sup> As Ernst Robert Curtius notes, what this meant in practice was that the Rule ‘tacitly permitted moderate laughter’ (*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. William Trask (London: Routledge, 1953), 421).

<sup>6</sup> TNR, 478.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Le Goff, in *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Of course, St Francis wasn't an isolated case; for a good discussion of the holy fool, see John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> Based on the teaching of the church fathers, William explains that 'God can only be named through the most distorted things' and that 'the more the simile becomes dissimilar, the more the truth is revealed under the guise of horrible and indecorous figures' (TNR, 80).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>13</sup> When Adso recurs to the subject, William expresses disinterest in it, explaining that it is not a moral or even a temperamental matter but rather a function of divine foreknowledge (161).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 95-6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 111-12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>20</sup> Eco's portrayal of a diversity of views is a more or less accurate historical portrayal; as V.A. Kolve sums up the matter: with regard to laughter, there was in the Middle Ages an awareness of 'its peril, its necessity, [and] its usefulness' (*The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 131).

<sup>22</sup> This kind of 'adverbial' logic is evinced, for example, in Augustine's distinction between 'frui' and 'uti,' but is also more pervasively apparent in *The City of God*, in which he argues that the city to which we ultimately belong is determined not according to *what* we love—since the two cities are entangled together in this world—but according to the *kind* of love we exhibit.

<sup>23</sup> The principle of 'measure' is reinforced by a number of parallel discussions of such things as loquacity and reticence or the use of herbs (TNR, 107; 89).

<sup>26</sup> The novel's narrator, Adso, refers to the *Commedia* and the recent death of Dante (ibid., 48-9).

<sup>27</sup> *Inferno*, III, 1.

<sup>28</sup> *A Translation of the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Alan Ferrers Howell and Philip Wicksteed (London: Dent, 1929), 349.

<sup>29</sup> Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Inferno*, XXXII, 71-2 (Musa).

<sup>34</sup> *Purgatorio*, II 35-6 (Kirkpatrick).

<sup>35</sup> 'Rimaneggiamenti danteschi di Aristotele: *Gravitas e levitas nella Commedia*,' in *Le culture di Dante*, ed. Michelangelo Picone et al (Florence: Cesati, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> See Daniel Gabelman, *George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairytale Levity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 10ff., to which my reading of this lightening is indebted.

<sup>37</sup> *Purgatorio*, XII 115-26.

<sup>39</sup> TNR, 277.

<sup>40</sup> *Confessions*, XIII, 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Purgatorio*, X, 121-6.

<sup>42</sup> *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 15 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 181.

<sup>44</sup> *Paradiso*, XXVII, 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> *Paradiso*, XXX, 124-6.

<sup>46</sup> In Canto V, the planet Mercury 'changed its form and laughed' (97), in Canto XXVIII 'the whole sky laughs' (83), and in Canto XXX, we are told of 'the smile of grass' (77), which makes Wordsworth's 'splendour' seem rather prosaic.

<sup>47</sup> *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth et al (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 63.

<sup>48</sup> 'All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante,' in *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 2 (2006), 378.

<sup>49</sup> *Paradiso*, XXIII, 59.

<sup>50</sup> 'All Smiles,' 380.

<sup>51</sup> *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 123.

<sup>52</sup> See Neil Adkin, 'The Fathers on Laughter' *Orpheus*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1985); and Irven Resnick, "'Risus Monasticus': Laughter and Medieval Monastic Culture,' in *Revue Bénédictine*, vol. 97 (1987).

- <sup>53</sup> *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 44.
- <sup>54</sup> *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 83.
- <sup>55</sup> See Keith Thomas, 'The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England,' in *TLS*, January 21, 1977.
- <sup>57</sup> *The Pilgrim's Progress* ([1678] New York: Norton, 2009), 145.
- <sup>59</sup> *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* ([1678] Dublin: Robert Napper, 1800), 13-14.
- <sup>60</sup> See Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity: Sentiment and Secularism from Free Prayer to Wordsworth* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), chapter 1.
- <sup>61</sup> *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 40-1.
- <sup>62</sup> *Rituals of Spontaneity*, chapter 1, *passim*.
- <sup>63</sup> *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*, 56.
- <sup>64</sup> *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 197.
- <sup>65</sup> Obviously, things weren't as black and white as this summary implies. As Peter Burke makes clear, there were reformers who supported traditional festive culture and Catholics who advocated reform. There were also differences *within* Protestantism (Lutherans, for example, were more tolerant of popular traditions than Calvinists or Zwinglians) as well as differences between the categorical pronouncements of doctrinal Protestantism and the inconsistent ways they were adopted by the populace (see *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Harper Torch, 1978), chapter 8). There were, in addition, other non-religious factors that contributed to the decline of popular festivity and significantly affected attitudes towards levity, the most prominent of which is what tends to be referred to as the 'reformation of manners'.
- <sup>66</sup> In what is considered to be a classic twentieth-century account of religious experience, William James defines his topic as follows: 'For common men, "religion," whatever more special meanings it may have, signifies always a *serious* state of mind. [...] There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious. [...] The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond solemnly and gravely [...].'*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* ([1902] New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 44-5.
- <sup>68</sup> *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1953).
- <sup>70</sup> *Steppenwolf*, trans. Basil Creighton ([1927] London: Penguin, 2011), 67.
- <sup>71</sup> *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946).
- <sup>79</sup> O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974), 153.
- <sup>80</sup> Peter Hawkins, *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch* (New York: Seabury Classics, 2004), 21; 28.
- <sup>81</sup> *Mystery and Manners*, 162.
- <sup>82</sup> *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001).
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.
- <sup>84</sup> *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 4.
- <sup>85</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Q. 168, Article 2.
- <sup>86</sup> *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 73.
- <sup>87</sup> Eco, 'Frames of Comic Freedom,' in *Carnival!* ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), 3.
- <sup>88</sup> *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 180.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>90</sup> Walter F. Otto, *Die Gestalt und das Sein* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1959), 255.
- <sup>91</sup> *Dives and Pauper*, ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), Part I, III, xvii; spelling modernized.
- <sup>92</sup> This conception of festivity as an anticipation of 'endless rest, joy and mirth [...] in heaven's bliss' has been lucidly elaborated by Josef Pieper (*In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965)).
- <sup>93</sup> *Die Gestalt und das Sein*, 255.
- <sup>94</sup> As Aron Gurevich observes: 'The synthesis of extreme seriousness and tragedy, on the one hand, and of the tendency to maximum lowering, on the other, was in essence part of Christian dogma.'*Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. János Bak and Paul Hollingworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 181.
- <sup>95</sup> For an excellent discussion of levity as a religious posture that may vouchsafe an analogical disclosure of the divine, see Hugo Rahner, S.J., *Man at Play* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967).
- <sup>101</sup> *Right Ho, Jeeves* ([1934] London: Arrow Books, 2008), 247.
- <sup>102</sup> C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 183.
- <sup>104</sup> *Right Ho, Jeeves*, 95.

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<sup>106</sup> *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Donat Gallagher (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 567-8.

<sup>107</sup> *Joy in the Morning* ([1947] London: Arrow Books, 2008), 86; 89.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>111</sup> *Right Ho, Jeeves*, 109.

<sup>112</sup> *On Lightness in World Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 112.

<sup>115</sup> It is worth noting that Wodehouse frequently refers to Scripture in his comic fiction; so frequently in fact that he feels the need to account for this surprising tendency in Bertie's lackadaisical narration by explaining that he won a prize for 'Scriptural Knowledge' at preparatory school.

<sup>117</sup> *Ethics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981).

<sup>118</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, III/3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 297-9.

<sup>119</sup> *Ethics*, 504.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

<sup>121</sup> *Joy in the Morning*, 9.

<sup>122</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, 298.

<sup>123</sup> *Right Ho, Jeeves*, 202.

<sup>124</sup> 'Balaam and His Ass,' in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1963), 139.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.