

# The sound of laughter in Romantic poetry

Matthew Ward

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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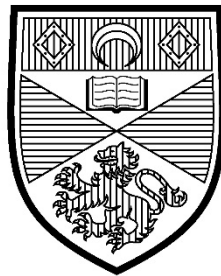
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# ABSTRACT

This thesis offers the first critical examination of the sound of laughter in Romantic poetry. Part one locates laughter in the history of ideas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and explores the interplay between laughter and key intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, and social issues in the Romantic period. I chart a development in thinking about laughter from its primary association with ridicule and the passions up to the early decades of the eighteenth century, to its emerging symbiosis with politeness and aesthetic judgement, before a reassertion of laughter's signification of passion and naturalness by the end of the eighteenth century. Laughter provides an innovative means of mapping cultural markers, and I argue that it highlights shifts in standards and questions of taste. Informed by this analysis, part two offers a series of historically aware close readings of Romantic poetry that identify both an indebtedness to, and refutation of, earlier and contemporaneous ideas about laughter. Rather than having humour or comedy as its central concerns, this thesis identifies the pervasive and capricious influence of the sound of the laugh in the writing of Robert Burns, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Leigh Hunt, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and John Keats. I detect the heterogeneous representations of laughter in their work that runs across a diverse range of genres, poetic forms, themes, and contexts. As such, I argue against the serious versus the humorous binary which prevails in literary criticism of Romanticism, and suggest that laughter articulates the interplay between the elegiac and the comic, the sublime and the ridiculous, the solitary and the communal. Moreover, I detect a double-naturedness to the sound of laughter in Romantic poetry that registers the subject's capacity to signify both consensus and dispute. This inherent polarity creates a tension in the poems as laughter ironically challenges what it also affirms. Never singularly fixed, the sound of laughter reveals the protean nature of Romantic verse.

# DECLARATIONS

I, Matthew Ward, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 75, 000 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree. I was admitted as a research student in September 2011, and as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in September 2012, the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2011 and 2015.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father. Their care, encouragement, and faith have been the bedrock of my life. Though the subject of this thesis would probably have given my father plenty to laugh about, I like to think that his laughter would have been filled with a small measure of pride.

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# INTRODUCTION

In ‘To Joanna’, published as part of the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth’s quiet contemplation of nature is shattered by the sound of laughter:

such delight I found

To note in shrub and tree, in stone and flower,  
 That intermixture of delicious hues,  
 Along so vast a surface, all at once,  
 In one impression, by connecting force  
 Of their own beauty, imag’d in the heart.  
 – When I had gaz’d perhaps two minutes’ space,  
 Joanna, looking in my eyes, beheld  
 That ravishment of mine, and laugh’d aloud.  
 The rock, like something starting from a sleep,  
 Took up the Lady’s voice, and laugh’d again:  
 That ancient Woman seated on Helm-crag  
 Was ready with her cavern; Hammer-Scar,  
 And the tall Steep of Silver-How sent forth  
 A noise of laughter; southern Loughrigg heard,  
 And Fairfield answer’d with a mountain tone:  
 Helvellyn far into the clear blue sky  
 Carried the Lady’s voice; - old Skiddaw blew  
 His speaking trumpet; - back out of the clouds  
 Of Glaramara southward came the voice;

And Kirkstone toss'd it from his misty head.<sup>1</sup>

On first hearing, there is an immediate disjunction between the serenity of the first ocular impression, and the chaotic pulse of sound in the second. At the start of the poem Wordsworth fictionalises Joanna's "early youth" as one spent "Amid the smoke of cities" (1-2). But her derision of Wordsworth's rapture not only confirms her failure to "make dear friendships with the streams and groves" (8). As sound, it also rebukes the sensibility of a poet in silent sympathy with his surroundings. "A noise" is often felt to be "out of place",<sup>2</sup> and here it initially seems as alien to the natural and poetic landscape as the figure of Joanna herself. The belief that Wordsworth is most himself when speaking to and through stillness is conveyed by Susan Wolfson, when she assumes that he preferred "the far registers of the strong silent type...most iconic in the lilting seduction of 'the silence and the calm / Of mute insensate things'".<sup>3</sup> The silence and calm of mute insensate things to which Wolfson refers is unveiled in the "connecting force" as it ghosts noiselessly through the earth.

Yet Wordsworth is spellbound by sounds. They are fundamental to his poetic thought and understanding of the world. If in 1798 he affirms, "I saw one life" he also perceives that "it was audible", not only "when the fleshly ear...slept undisturbed" but also in the tumult of "sounding cataracts".<sup>4</sup> The 'One Life' is not found solely through silence but as often via an intense process of listening. After all, it is through "the power / Of harmony" that "We see into the life of things", while Wordsworth also recalls how "The Sounding cataract / Haunted me like a passion"

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 245. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers. Compare Dorothy's description from July 27<sup>th</sup> 1800 of a "strange sound in the Bainriggs wood" produced by a raven high above and the reciprocity of sounds in the air: "it called out & the Dome of the sky seemed to echo the sound – it called again & again as it flew onwards, & the mountains gave back the sound, seeming as if from their centre a musical bell-like answering to the birds hoarse voice". In *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. by Pamela Woof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 14. The following month William will read aloud from 'To Joanna' "beside the Rothay by the roadside", *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> In this case the phrase is the British physicist's G. W. C. Kaye. Quoted in Karin Bijsterveld, *Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2008), p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Wolfson, 'Romantic Measures: Stressing the Sound of Sound', in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 53-77 (55).

<sup>4</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798-1799*, ed. by Stephen Parrish (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 65-66.

when a boy.<sup>5</sup> In 1802 he projects a more Christian note onto nature as he listens to “the mighty Being” that rises and “doth with his eternal motion make / A sound like thunder – Everlastingly”.<sup>6</sup> Both the 1805 and 1850 versions of *The Prelude* locate the source of “the stream” of the “Imagination” to a “blind cavern, whence is faintly heard / The sound of waters”.<sup>7</sup> Imagination’s intricate path as it flows through the world and plots the progress of the poet’s mind is sonic at least as much as visual. The laughter in ‘To Joanna’ can be heard within this tradition of Wordsworth’s creativity being inspired by and through sound. If he speaks of his “ravishment” at the calm of nature, the episode that follows is also a moment of rapture. And whilst beauty nurtures sympathetic thoughts, the mock-terror of the “uproar in the hills” (73) is the stirring of his imagination.

As M. H. Abrams observed, Wordsworth’s writing “speaks with two distinct voices”.<sup>8</sup> One of these is heard in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, relaying the “great and simple affections” and the “beautiful and permanent forms of nature”; the other tells of “strangeness, paradox, equivocality, and dark sublimities”.<sup>9</sup> Of course, no one was more aware of this than Wordsworth, who felt “Fostered alike by beauty and by fear”, and sought speech that might communicate both.<sup>10</sup> Abrams pointed out that the tensions in the writing have led inexorably toward two critical roads to Wordsworth. As useful as this reduction of Wordsworth criticism may be, the bifurcation belies the intersections between these apparently contradictory features of the poet’s work.<sup>11</sup> ‘To Joanna’ appears to distinguish between the affirmative beauty that gives Wordsworth such pleasure at the start of the passage, and the fright that makes “fair Joanna” draw toward the

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<sup>5</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’, in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘It is a beauteous Evening, calm and free’, in *Poems in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. by Jared R. Curtis (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. by Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), I, p. 317.

<sup>8</sup> M. H. Abrams, ‘Two Roads to Wordsworth’, in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (London: Norton, 1984), pp. 145–157 (145).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, I, p. 114.

<sup>11</sup> In the 1950s, F. W. Bateson observed that whilst “there are Two Voices...the contradiction is not total”. See *Wordsworth: A Re-Interpretation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Longman, 1956), p. 4.

poet, “as if she wish’d / To shelter from some object of her fear” (73-76).<sup>12</sup> However, there is a curious relatedness at play here; rather than being incongruous, there is an “intermixture of delicious hues”, with reciprocity between the quiet of nature and the noise of laughter. The dash on line 51, which remains a constant in every edition of the poem, acts as Wordsworth’s textual “connecting force”, creating a bridge between the experiences.<sup>13</sup> The “delight”, and “beauty”, in Wordsworth’s initial perception of nature is nuanced by the immensity and violence of “vast” and “force”, which share affinity with the auditory amplification in the hills. Offering itself as if “all at once” in “one impression”, and “Along so vast a surface”, the laughter performs a noisy rendition of the “connecting force” Wordsworth identified moving imperceptibly through the world. The mention of “hues” refers in the first instance to the beautiful forms around him. But the phrase is also haunted by its earlier meaning of ‘apparition’ and thus prefigures the ghostly apparition to come. There is a further dormant allusion at play in the etymology of “hues”, linking it to the shouts and outcries that follow.<sup>14</sup> It is as though the laughter in the hills is a daemonic echo of the earlier tranquillity.

‘To Joanna’ is both a form of reflection on a sound and the recreation of an episode rich with echoes. This is most obviously felt in the way the hills “Took up” Joanna’s laugh and “laugh’d again”, transforming her mockery into a whimsical yet strangely sublime affirmation of nature’s communicative power. Walter Benjamin imagined “speechlessness” to be the “great sorrow of nature”.<sup>15</sup> Wordsworth’s hills are articulate, “speaking” with a “voice”, even if, as echo, that voice is always “disembodied”.<sup>16</sup> In place of the solitary laugh, the hills offer an ensemble, orchestrating the laughter till it becomes a “mountain tone” with “speaking trumpet”. Their

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<sup>12</sup> In her gendered reading of the poem, Susan Wolfson proposes that Joanna’s implicit critique of Wordsworth’s imagination is conquered by chivalry, as Wordsworth “reduces Joanna to, and silences her within, an image of female fear seeking male protection”. In *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), p. 149.

<sup>13</sup> In *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, p. 245.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Hues’, n.1b and v.2, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*,

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/89131?rskey=6TLwpO&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid>>,

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/89132?rskey=6TLwpO&result=4&isAdvanced=false#eid>>, [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> February 2015].

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), I, p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), p. 22.

performance reflects the effects of echo, as it uproots, multiplies, and translocates the initial sound until it is compellingly unfamiliar. Of course, any transmission of sound requires physical space, and the poem itself acts as a soundstage as the laughter moves across the topography of a landscape and the lines on a page. Each dash enacts the rebounding of sound, as the laughter leaps from peak to peak. Every “and” implies the repetitious and ricocheting laughter from one hill to another. The “laugh’d aloud” echoes into “clouds”, and resurfaces visually and aurally in “a loud uproar in the hills” (73). Mountain tremors register, and are registered by, poetic vibrations as there is a trace of the final syllable of “laugh’d again” filtering into “cavern”. The half-rhyme does more than keep the sound of laughter within earshot. The sonic play links the chamber of the ear with the path of sound in the air, since ‘cavern’ had been associated with the cavity or middle ear from the early seventeenth to the late eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> It is a subtle aural indication of the way laughter flows deep within the subterranean chambers of mountain, poem, and poet – “my ear was touch’d”, Wordsworth tells us (70).

The Ovidian myth of Echo recounts her association with Narcissus. But another classical myth of Echo concerns her relation to the figure of Pan, known for his wildness, playing of the pipes, and love of merry noise. In the tale as it is related by Longus in *Daphnis and Chloë*, Echo rejects Pan’s advances, and as revenge he sends a mania amongst the shepherds and goatherds until they tear Echo to pieces and fling across the globe “her yet singing limbs”.<sup>18</sup> This account stresses the ubiquity of echo, something that comes to the fore toward the end of Ovid’s account when Echo, rejected by Narcissus, retreats to lonely caves and becomes nothing more than a voice amongst the hills. The voice of Echo is pervasive in “To Joanna” (not least as an “ancient Woman seated on Helm-crag...ready with her cavern”) and this thesis argues that the sound of laughter pervades Romantic poetry. Like the scene in “To Joanna”, the sound of laughter recasts a familiar environment into something rich and strange, yet recognisable.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Cavern’, n. 2, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29269>>, [accessed 10 February 2012].

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Hillel Schwartz, *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang & Beyond* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2011), p. 53. See also Hollander, *The Figure of Echo*.

Laughter does not rupture Romanticism. It has always been there, a latent presence echoing through the verse. But hearing it alters the landscape of literary criticism. While we are accustomed to hearing laughter on a daily basis, we remain unaccustomed to hearing it in Romanticism. Significantly, Romantic representations of laughter register a sense of the subject's volatile association with both positive and pleasurable attributes (amiableness, cooperation, play) and negative and painful ones (hostility, discord). Since these polarities intersect, there is an ironic unsettledness to the sound of laughter in Romantic poetry as it questions what is also being endorsed. As such, laughter offers a corrective to any one-sided model of Romanticism. It acts as counterpoint to the solitude and solemnity that still retains its hold on discussions of the Romantic period, revealing the jests as well as the uncertainties exhibited in ludic poetics. As we will see in part two, laughter "has a rainbow of meanings"; by paying attention to how writers creatively register its influence we discover a rainbow of meanings within Romantic poetry as well.<sup>19</sup>

Despite its pervasiveness, the sound of laughter in Romantic poetry has largely gone unheard by critics. When laughter is mentioned, it is only in relation to, or as a signifier of, various senses of humour. Perhaps this is understandable, and certainly recent scholarship has done much to reveal the importance of the comic to Romanticism. For instance, studies of satire have not only revealed the interplay between high and low culture, but also added to our understanding of the complex political resonances of the genre at the time.<sup>20</sup> In 1979, Mark Storey assumed that satire was a mere sub-culture, one at the "fag-end...of the great age of

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<sup>19</sup> During one of his Cambridge lectures in the 1930s, Ludwig Wittgenstein apparently alluded to the way in which a joke "has a rainbow of meanings". See G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1959), p. 317. This has been used by Stephen Halliwell to reject the triad of humour theories (superiority, incongruity, release) as the only explanations for why we laugh. See *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> For criticism on individual authors see, for instance, Claude Moore Fuess, *Lord Byron as a Satirist in Verse* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964); Marilyn Butler, *Peacock Displayed: A Satirist in His Context* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Frederick L. Beaty, *Byron the Satirist* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985); Steven E. Jones, *Shelley's Satire: Violence, Exhortation, and Authority* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994). For broader accounts, see Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790-1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Gary Dyer, *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Steven E. Jones, *Satire and Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000); *The Satiric Eye: Forms of Satire in the Romantic Period*, ed. by Steven E. Jones (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Augustan satire, but still with some life in it”.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, the work produced on Romantic satire over the past thirty years has revealed its central place within the period, shifting the critical ground to such an extent that guides to Romanticism now generally include a section on the subject.

A number of critics have explored diverse forms of humour in canonical writers. To take just Wordsworth as an example, whilst for many the assumption persists that the “most important mark which Wordsworth left on the world of humour came from his being so solemn and unhumorous”,<sup>22</sup> others have eagerly identified a “feeling for comedy”, which, Matthew Bevis argues, “while not central to his style, is not exactly peripheral to it either”.<sup>23</sup> Such a remark is characteristic of critical approaches to humour in Romanticism – at once eager to justify its significance, even as the phrasing re-marginalises the topic. But in this case at least the suggestiveness is all the more effective for subtly drawing out the relevance of ‘play’ to Wordsworth’s verse. Moreover, the equivocation displayed by Bevis is typical of how other critics tend to approach Wordsworth’s sense of humour. Many years ago, Thomas Helmstadter gingerly described a “quiet humor” in many of the poems containing “surprising sensibilities”.<sup>24</sup> Even earlier, John Danby dealt with our temptation to laugh at various moments in Wordsworth’s writing by proposing that the “ludicrous, if we like, is brought teasingly near the surface” so that we are often asked to “struggle with our frivolousness”.<sup>25</sup> Less tentatively, Jonathan Wordsworth was pleased to notice his ancestor’s levity, the “playful moments and delicately shifting tones” of *The Prelude*, and placed the poet’s comic hey-day to the last years of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth.<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth links the humour to the poet’s political radicalism, and, like Danby, interprets it as intended to ask

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Storey, *Poetry and Humour from Cowper to Clough* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Don Nilsen, *Humor in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Literature: A Reference Guide* (London: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew Bevis, 'Wordsworth at Play', *Essays in Criticism*, 61:1 (2011), 54-78 (p. 55). See also 'Wordsworth's Folly', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 43:3 (2012), 146–151.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Helmstadter, 'Wayward Wisdom: Wordsworth's Humor in the *Lyrical Ballads*', *Mosaic* (Summer, 1976), 91-106 (p. 106).

<sup>25</sup> John F. Danby, *The Simple Wordsworth: Studies in the Poems, 1797-1807* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, 'Wordsworthian Comedy', in *English Comedy*, ed. by Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 197-220 (197).



questions of the reader. Though I demonstrate that Wordsworth's ludic poetry extends beyond the *Lyrical Ballads* and certain moments of *The Prelude*, my readings support Jonathan Wordsworth's position: hearing a poem like 'The Idiot Boy' playfully probing audience ethics. Michael O'Neill's exploration of the self-consciousness of poems, meanwhile, has led him to the "donkey kicks of irony" in the *Lyrical Ballads* and how, at times the "show of sympathy contends with restrained mockery".<sup>27</sup> There is undoubtedly a lot of subtle humour and silliness in the collection as well, when Wordsworth is being "impishly poker-faced".<sup>28</sup> But O'Neill's phrasing also reflects the incongruities at the heart of the collection, the way, in Jane Stabler's terms "sentiment and satire inflect each other", something she associates with the "problem of reading" itself, which, "since the mid 1790s had been energized by the argumentative voices of the satirists".<sup>29</sup>

Of course, laughter does have strong links to genres like satire, and a device like wit; it is felt in the light touch of levity, or the slapstick of farce. Throughout this thesis, I am attentive to theories of humour, as well as the sportiveness on display through wordplay, metrical jokes, and amused, ironic tones. But the subject of this thesis is very much laughter, not 'the funny', and it therefore differs in a crucial respect from previous works. One of the potential consequences of attending to humour in Romanticism is that it risks exaggerating the opposition between the 'serious' and the 'comic'. The complete separation of them is famously articulated by M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* when he excludes Byron from his formulation of Romanticism because he hears in him an "ironic counter-voice" opening up "satirical perspectives on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries".<sup>30</sup> Jerome McGann used Byron to attack Abrams's selective vision of Romanticism. Yet McGann's situating of Byron within his historical moment

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<sup>27</sup> Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. xxv.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Stabler, 'Guardians and Watchful Powers: Literary Satire and *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798', in *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Richard Cronin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), pp. 203-30, (204).

<sup>30</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 13.

has also consistently segregated the poet from writers like Wordsworth, celebrating Byron's comic achievements precisely because they are assumed to oppose Romantic ideology.<sup>31</sup>

In 2006, Jeffrey Robinson's *Unfettering Poetry* provided an important account of Romantic poetry's whimsicality and frivolousness, features he links to the fancy, which for Robinson is always radical – in contrast to the conservative tendencies of the imagination.<sup>32</sup> But his dualistic approach ignores that these apparent oppositions are actually at play together. My central argument is that laughter in Romantic poetry cannot be accurately understood as some marginal humorous 'other', but is a "connecting force" that mediates between the melancholic and the comic, the sublime and the ridiculous, the fancy and the imagination. Rather than a serious versus humorous binary that frequently pervades the discourse of Romanticism, laughter is a way of undoing such binaries. Laughter is not a case of 'either / or', but 'both / &', and thus more aptly reflects the protean nature of Romantic verse and admits the contradictions in our notion of 'Romanticism'.<sup>33</sup> Laughter emerges from a wide range of poems, springing up in surprising places. It makes itself heard in the supernaturalism of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and the sociability of 'The Nightingale', both farcical and poignant moments of Byron's *Don Juan*, in the sexual suggestiveness of *Beppo*, and the biblical *Cain*. Laughter emerges in the playful lyrics of Wordsworth's *Poems, in Two Volumes*, but also plays a valuable role in the growth of the poet's mind in *The Prelude*. It rebounds in works of 'high seriousness' like Shelley's 'To a Skylark' and *Prometheus Unbound*, but appears also in the conversations of 'Julian and Maddalo' and the impish figure of Mercury. Keats anxiously wrestles with 'Why did I laugh tonight', yet he laughs as blithely as a schoolboy in 'Sleep and Poetry'.

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<sup>31</sup> See especially, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1985); *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> My understanding of the interweaving of oppositions, and indeed my approach to the subject of laughter more generally is indebted to Seamus Perry's exploration of Coleridge's "double-mindedness" in *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 3.

In an essay on Tennyson's humour published in 2009, Matthew Bevis claims that, "unlike the laugh – but like the smile – print is seen but not quite heard".<sup>34</sup> This remark is at odds with Bevis's usual attentiveness to the audible qualities of verse.<sup>35</sup> I argue throughout that the printed page is both seen and heard. We sound poems out, through our vocal cords and our inner voice; listen as prosodic features come alive through the process of reading. As Coleridge knew, poetry is "the path of sound through the air", and its propulsive force carries the reader ever forward (as well as backward) in its pleasurable rhythms.<sup>36</sup> A year after making this statement (1818), Coleridge announced in a lecture the assimilation of sound and sight on the printed page: "Man communicates by articulation of Sounds, and paramountly by the memory in the Ear – Nature by the impression of Surfaces and Bounds on the Eye". It is art that mediates between them, "the reconciliator of Man and Nature", and the "The primary Art is writing".<sup>37</sup> Susan Wolfson recognises that in the lecture theatre and the auditorium of the page, "Sound" is caught in the memory of the ear when we hear "Bound", and (perhaps) "paramountly".<sup>38</sup>

Too often in her essay Wolfson insists upon the significance of silence in Romantic poetry. Admittedly, such an assumption takes its cue from the writers themselves, so attuned to the way the sound of silence alerts them to the deeper harmonies beyond any phenomenological experience. The method is certainly endorsed by some of the sounds in this thesis, where laughter intimates presences felt through the absence of sound. But laughter in Romantic poetry is also noise, that is, something audible. The reference to 'sound' in my title indicates the full range of noisy tonality as laughter joins with music and conversation, church bells, children at play, and the singing of birds, but also the braying of animals, the boisterousness of publicans, the rumbling of thunder, and the roars of murderers. In other words, just as laughter can suggest

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew Bevis, 'Tennyson's Humour', in *Tennyson among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 231-58 (238).

<sup>35</sup> See *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); 'Byron's Feet', in *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Jason David Hall (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp. 78-104.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. by James Engell, and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), II, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> In *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), II, p. 217.

<sup>38</sup> Wolfson, 'Romantic Measures: Stressing the Sound of Sound', p. 54.

hostility and agreement, so the sound of it can be disturbing as well as pleasing. As a result, my discussion differs from Fiona Stafford's recent essay on sound in Romantic poetry. Though she starts by admitting that "the world was full of noises, sounds and sweet airs" for poets of the period, the quick shift from "noises" to "sweet airs" is less inclusive than it appears, and captures instead the movement of her essay as she finds poets to be more interested in relaying and creating harmonious sounds.<sup>39</sup> For instance, the fascination Keats displays toward sound means, for Stafford, "that even his gloomiest sentiments offer a strange satisfaction to readers".<sup>40</sup> Where she hears pleasing melodies, I discern a more various world of sound that matches the plurality of laughter: combining pleasure and pain, accord and discord, and plenty in between.

The sound of laughter is best heard by attending to the particular details of poetic form, and my methodological approach is based around close readings. I have benefitted from the ideas of Simon Jarvis and his insistence that we give attention to the process of a poem in order to perceive how writers are 'thinking in verse'.<sup>41</sup> Another clear influence is Michael O'Neill who, with different emphases, is also concerned with the distinct "way of knowing" that poetic form provides.<sup>42</sup> O'Neill's fine ear for the "imaginative and aesthetic experience of the poetry itself", draws us back to the strenuous experience at the heart of reading.<sup>43</sup>

Nonetheless, I am also mindful that a poem's style – its genre, grammar, accent, tone, allusions, rhymes and rhythms – is not ahistorical. Couplets and the mock-epic, for instance, are always inflected with certain culturally determined significances. Poetic form is fashioned partly out of the atmosphere in which it exists, just as it too contributes to that atmosphere. History and form are not separable, but mutual influences. I agree with the thought advanced in Richard Cronin's *The Politics of Romantic Poetry* that the imperative for writing on Romantic poetry is not to

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<sup>39</sup> Fiona J. Stafford, *Reading Romantic Poetry* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 162.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 172.

<sup>41</sup> See Simon Jarvis, 'Prosody as Cognition', *Critical Quarterly*, 40: 4 (1998), 1-15; *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); 'Thinking in Verse', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. by James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 98-116; 'For a Poetics of Verse', *PMLA*, 125: 4 (2010), 931-35.

<sup>42</sup> O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. xxiii.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. xxxvii.

choose between the historical and formalist traditions that have dominated criticism of the past thirty years. Rather, it is to reflect the reciprocity of the two approaches. After all, at their most constituent level, “it is through their language that poems most fully engage with their historical moment”.<sup>44</sup>

The laughter of Romantic poetry is individual and of the moment, but the subject also has a history, and so I argue that the use of laughter by poets registers the many interpretations of laughter up to and including their own time. This leads me to the structure of my thesis. The divisional arrangement is not intended as a separation of history and form that I have just argued against. Rather, the organisation of this thesis reflects my view that the close connection of form and history should inform our reading of poetry. My structure allows me to lay out the various perceptions of laughter leading up to and including the Romantic period. Though laughter is a universal human activity, it is also culturally determined, in fundamental yet oblique ways. I have more to say on this duality at the heart of laughter in chapters one and two. Here I will limit myself to saying that any appreciation of the sound of laughter in Romantic poems is best served by understanding the historical context in which it exists. By appreciating something of its complicated past, we more easily discern the fruitful confluence of tradition and originality in the poetic register.

Chapter one provides an overview of the perception of laughter from the seventeenth century to the socially conservative ideas of James Beattie in the 1770s. I discern a clear but far from unambiguous series of explanations for laughter that moves from the superiority theory prevalent in the seventeenth century, which is closely aligned to ridicule, toward an increasing desire to associate laughter with benevolence witnessed during the eighteenth century. Moreover, discourses on the subject shift from considering laughter as primarily a physical and emotive experience, to something identified with reason and politeness. Chapter two deals with the

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 14. Susan Wolfson’s work also often argues for the need to combine form and history. See especially, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

Romantic approach to laughter. It explores accounts of laughter at Thomas Beddoes's Pneumatic Institute, and the essays of William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Charles Lamb, and Thomas Carlyle to illustrate the importance of laughter to Romantic responses to the sublime, sympathy, the imagination, and attitudes to contemporary arts, and the state of the nation. Both of these chapters locate laughter within the history of ideas, reflecting on its interaction with the various ethical, political, social, and aesthetic debates of the time.

Part two turns to Romantic poetry, and aims to offer fresh readings of works by Robert Burns, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Leigh Hunt, and John Keats. Chapter three suggests that laughter can be heard as sympathy, an articulation of warm fellow-feeling as well as transport for a range of feelings and ideas. I explore how poets embrace the laugh as an agent of sympathy, despite its historical associations with ridicule. But I also reveal the way laughter allows poets to playfully call into question the very idea of sympathy. Chapter four is more meditative in form. It takes as its subject the historically informed idea that laughter is unruly (physically and socially) and considers how this is appropriated as a political tool in Romantic poems and more modern and contemporary theories of laughter. Set within this meditation is a close reading of Percy Shelley's 'To Laughter', in which I suggest that the unruliness he identifies with laughter expresses tensions at the heart of Shelley's poetics. After the attention to forms of rupture in chapter four, my last chapter turns to the sportiveness of Romantic poems by delving into gleeful laughter, which I hear as both nostalgic and utopian in its recuperation of the sounds of childhood, and in its evocation of the gladness of nature.

Throughout part two, I suggest links between laughter and verse, arguing that this interplay is a cypher for ideas of poetry. The way laughter acts as a vehicle for sympathy has connections to the sympathetic movements of verse, as well as intriguing consequences for the aim of eliciting empathy in the readership evinced by, for instance, Wordsworth and Shelley. Laughter and poetry are also conceived in the Romantic period as powerful forces that can subvert and overwhelm the individual and the state, something that my fourth chapter draws out. Chapter

five explores the idea that poetry and laughter operate as a form of play that is both imaginative escape from reality and a way of critiquing contemporary society. Romantic laughter and poetry are both powerful expressions of the self, articulating a complex interaction between individuality and community. To return to the echoing laughter in the hills in ‘To Joanna’: we can hear the way in which laughter gets picked up and re-orchestrated by a series of performers, as a correlation to the way writers operate on a social plane, taking up other poetic voices and sending forth their own in a complex landscape of meaning that lets us hear the allusiveness of the works.

Lastly, I want to offer a brief note concerning the decision to delimit my field to well-established male poets of the period. In recent years, attention to labouring-class poets, popular culture, and women writers has brought to light work that for too long lay buried beneath the hefty canon.<sup>45</sup> This has necessarily reformulated our sense of the time, offering us a truer picture of its multifariousness, and how myriad voices shaped the poetry of the period. Gender studies provided a much-needed disturbance to the men’s club that had been the domain of not just the study of Romanticism but the makeup of academic schools as well. Some critics have begun to reflect on the confluence between male and female writers: Wolfson and Lucy Newlyn have both revisited their earlier work on canonical males and have detected a dialogue with contemporary women writers.<sup>46</sup> As I illustrate at the start of chapter four, however, laughter is presented as a subtly different matter for women in the Romantic period, bound up with concerns over propriety, and as such the sociability I discuss is slanted towards a masculine economy. The testing of the boundaries of decorum that Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet’s love of laughter exhibits is a fictional example of the different (but undoubtedly intriguing) circumstances facing

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<sup>45</sup> Examples include anthologies and criticism; those listed below are a very small sample. *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750-1900*, ed. by Kirstie Blair, and Mina Gorji (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Philip Connell, and Nigel Leask (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman, and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995); *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s: Romantic Belongings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Women, Writing and Public Sphere, 1700-1830*, ed. by Elizabeth Eger, Penny Warburton and Markman Ellis, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>46</sup> For instance, Susan J. Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action*; Lucy Newlyn, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: ‘All in Each Other’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

women at the time. In any event, it has often been the case that the urgency with which Romanticism has been redrawn has sometimes left unchallenged traditional assumptions concerning male canonical poets. That is, in the attempt to reveal the originality and significance of other writers, we might at times have overlooked the idiosyncrasies and complexities of, say, William Wordsworth, or Percy Shelley. Just as the monumentalising process of canon formation has often cast them as solitary, solemn, and sublime, so the attempt to bring others into our reading habits has at times propped up these very notions in order to offer a revisionary contrast. With the exceptions of Byron, and perhaps Charles Lamb, none of the ‘white males’ in this study are likely to be high on the list of writers associated with laughter. But by attending to the intermingling of the solitary and the communal, and the sublime and the ridiculous in the sound of laughter, the aim is to hear new things in writers we think we know well. The hope is that by revealing their laughter, we bring a more human, and therefore a necessarily more indeterminate and lively set of features, out of the alabaster of the canon.



# PART ONE

## CHAPTER I

# A Brief History of Laughter from Hobbes to Beattie

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*"The laughers are so much the majority" (Alexander Pope,*

*Letter to Congreve, 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1714/1715)*

In his analysis of the seventeenth-century poet, Abraham Cowley, Samuel Johnson aphoristically remarks that people "have been wise in very different modes; but they have always laughed the same way".<sup>1</sup> Whilst there is a noticeable difference between a mere chortle, a cackle, or a full-on belly laugh, or, in fact, Johnson's own guffaw; described as "like a rhinoceros", a "kind of good-humoured growl", there are universal features of laughter.<sup>2</sup> As the philosopher John Morreall points out when he distinguishes between humour and laughter, the latter exhibits itself as "a combination of bodily events, including the spasmodic expulsion of air from the lungs, accompanying sounds, characteristic facial distortions, and in heavy laughter the shaking of the whole body".<sup>3</sup> There are common causes or stimuli for laughter: certain jokes, incidents, and behaviour that are trans-historical, and make us laugh just as they tickled people in the past. Johnson's own reasoning behind the continuing appeal of Cowley and others is that "the sentiments" of the seventeenth century "are at no great distance from our present habitudes of thought".<sup>4</sup> But this explanation also implies that the reasons why people laugh, and judgements concerning how they should laugh, are more often socially constructed and culturally determined. That is to say, the explanations are contingent productions of a time. Thus we might easily explain the physiological process by which people laugh, but the cause of it (the why of it) is far less determinate, intersecting with a host of socio-cultural expectations or pressures. The anthropologist Mary Douglas has suggested that laughter is part of a "universal language of

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, ed. by John H. Middelndorf (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 4 vols (London, 1826), II, p. 351.

<sup>3</sup> *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets*, p. 53.

bodily interruptions”, but that these are themselves subject to cultural reception and acceptance.<sup>5</sup> This conveys the double-sided nature of laughter. Being non-linguistic, it is by definition inarticulate; yet it is also a compelling means of communication. One of the things Douglas draws attention to is the relation between our automatic bodily response and outside influences upon it. Operating somewhere between instinct and intention, laughter relays how expressions of the self are continuously moderated by the expectations of a group. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear Susanne Langer suggest that “Laughter is not a simple overt act, as the single word suggests; it is the spectacular end of a complex process”.<sup>6</sup> Any interpretation of laughter requires an acceptance that it does not spring from any single source, but is subject to and evocative of a range of intersecting psychological and social factors. Laughter is both a general feature of humanity – what the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1797 calls “an affectation peculiar to mankind, occasioned by something that tickles the fancy”<sup>7</sup> – and subject to different ideological interpretation in specific cultures and times, which come to light in a comparative chronological account.

This chapter traces the various characterisations of laughter in intellectual history in the second half of the seventeenth century to 1776, when James Beattie publishes ‘On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition’. As such, it is less concerned with discovering how people might actually have laughed, and instead focuses on theories of laughter. It will become apparent that there is no universal or definitive explanation for laughter in the period. But I argue that there are two clearly discernible and overlapping developments during these years. Firstly, that there is a gradual turn from laughter denoting ridicule toward laughter being proposed as a sign of benevolence and the sentimental. Secondly, that laughter is slowly disassociated from the convulsions of the body, and associated instead with reason, superior discernment, and bound by manners. Consequently there is a tension in much of the discourse on laughter between the

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 86-88.

<sup>6</sup> Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 340.

<sup>7</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. by Colin Macfarquhar and George Gleig, 18 vols (Edinburgh, 1797), IX, pp. 593-596.

belief that it is natural and a reflection of human goodness, and a need to moderate its usage in polite society.

The chapter is broadly chronological. I begin with a brief discussion of what eighteenth-century thinkers inherit as the dominant understanding of laughter, focusing particularly on Thomas Hobbes's 'superiority' theory. I then assess the role the Third Earl of Shaftesbury plays in endorsing laughter as socially and morally agreeable. In the third section, I outline the shift toward aesthetic judgement as the cause of laughter, and the popularity of the 'incongruity' theory: deriving from the observation of contrary ideas or objects that are brought into humorous relation. The fourth section details the sentimental laughter attached to characters and incidents that might previously have been ripe for ridicule. In the last section of the chapter, I look at Beattie's conservative attempt to continue laughter's association with good-manners and sentimental feeling.

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### Thomas Hobbes and the Superiority Theory of Laughter

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As far as many thinkers in the eighteenth century are concerned, the predominant perception of laughter up till their own time was that it derived from a feeling of superiority. Though comic theory had always been heterodox and complex, when people laughed, they were generally said to be laughing at others. Theories of comedy equated laughter with satire and ridicule. The pleasure of laughter was thought to come from a perception of another person's immorality, or misfortune. Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetoric* (1553) argues that we feel contempt whenever we become aware of another's physical or moral 'deformity', and the result is that we "laugh him to skorne out right", whilst in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) Robert Burton observes that through laughter we "contemne others, condemne the world of folly".<sup>8</sup> As both remarks show,

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric* (London: 1553), folios 74v-75r; Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989-2000), I, p. 57.

superiority theories view laughter as aggressive. Samuel Butler will later encapsulate this confrontational aspect when he writes in his notebooks that, “Men cannot laugh heartily without showing their teeth”.<sup>9</sup> Today, evolutionary biology suggests that the origins of the laugh are found in the aggressive baring of teeth, linking it to animal behaviour.<sup>10</sup> Hostile laughter has long been championed as a moral and social corrective acting to curb folly and vice, the standard formula for the targets of satire. These attitudes are heard most frequently from supporters of the theatre against attacks over its efficacy, or criticism of its antipathetic portrayal of human nature. Time and again John Dennis argues that, “Ridicule...distinguishes Comedy from every other kind of Poetry”.<sup>11</sup> “Without the *Ridiculum* Comedy cannot subsist”, he says, while its purpose “is to amend the follies of Mankind, by exposing them”.<sup>12</sup> He describes comedy as imitating the folly and vice of the world because “’tis the Business of the Copies to expose, and satyryze, and ridicule those foolish and those vicious Originals...in order to expose and reform them”.<sup>13</sup> Comedy wins applause for its scorn toward its characters, with the reflection of moral weakness on stage defended as a means of revealing to the audience their own faults: “in every good Comedy, at the same Time that we are diverted with the *Ridiculum*, we are entertained with Discoveries, which is very delightful”, however the “chief Design of Comedy [is] to instruct”.<sup>14</sup> In the eighteenth century, Charles Churchill cherished Ben Jonson because he symbolised a time when “comic humour kept the world in awe, / And Laughter frighten’d Folly more than Law”.<sup>15</sup>

Thomas Hobbes is a key figure in the history of the superiority theory; he is especially important to eighteenth-century discussions of laughter. Analysing laughter fits with Hobbes’s focus on the mechanistic motions of the body (rather than language) as the best indicator of

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel Butler, *Characters and Passages from Note-Books*, ed. by A. R. Waller (Cambridge: University Press, 1908), p. 409.

<sup>10</sup> For a useful summary of the scientific ideas see Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), esp. pp. 153-190.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Remarks on The Conscious Lovers’ (1723) in *The Critical Works of John Dennis* ed. by Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939-1943), II, p. 261.

<sup>12</sup> ‘A Large Account of the Taste in Poetry’ (1702), *Critical Works*, I, p. 284.

<sup>13</sup> *The Stage Defended* (1726), *Critical Works*, II, p. 313.

<sup>14</sup> ‘The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry’ (1701), *Critical Works*, I, p. 225.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Churchill, *The Rosciad* (London, 1765), p. 14.

human nature. And his conclusions support his broad belief that the “miserable condition of war” is the principle that guides the “natural passions of men”: people “naturally love liberty, and dominion over others”, as a man finds “joy consisteth in comparing himself with other men”, while we “can relish nothing but what is eminent”.<sup>16</sup> In *Leviathan* (1651) Hobbes writes:

*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.<sup>17</sup>

In keeping with Hobbes’s belief that self-love drives conduct, laughter is proposed as originating either from an awareness of an act of our own that pleases us, or from the comparison of ourselves with another which shows us to some satisfying advantage. In *Treatise on Human Nature* (1650) Hobbes outlines a similar position: “The passion of laughter is nothing else but a *sudden glory*” he says, “arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others”.<sup>18</sup> The abrupt shock of surprise Hobbes identifies had been a common enough explanation for laughter.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, it is this interpretation of laughter as a “sudden glory” of oneself and a sign of triumph over others that gained such notoriety in the eighteenth century, and with which Hobbes remains chiefly associated.

Yet Hobbes’s view of laughter is not as clear-cut as his detractors in subsequent decades suggest, nor as one-dimensional as potted histories of laughter are sometimes in danger of implying. For one thing, Hobbes believes laughter to be a sign of contempt toward ourselves as

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, in *The Collected English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. by Sir William Molesworth, 11 vols (Routledge: London, 1997), III, p. 153, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> *The Collected English Works*, IV, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> In earlier Renaissance discussions the concept is often referred to as *admiratio* or wonderment. Girolamo Fracastoro’s *De sympathia* (1546) notes “The things that generally move us to laughter...must have a certain novelty about them” appearing “suddenly” and “unexpectedly”. See Quentin Skinner, ‘Why Laughing Mattered in the Renaissance’, *History of Political Thought*, 22 (2001), 418-47 (pp. 429-430).

well as others, “for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance”.<sup>20</sup> Here laughter still resides in a sense of superiority, but one that includes self-mockery and self-examination. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes suggests that laughter can draw attention to the insecurities of the laugher:

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. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity.<sup>21</sup>

The sense of superiority being expressed through laughter is a sign of suppressed feelings of inadequacy. Hobbes considers laughter to be a reflection of moral weakness. As he explains in *Human Nature*, “it is vain glory, and an argument of little worth, to think the infirmity of another, sufficient matter for...triumph”.<sup>22</sup> This view is in accordance with the theories of benevolent laughter that will be put forward in the eighteenth century. But, writing as they generally were in opposition to his egoistic “Sudden Glory”, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Beattie and numerous others seldom acknowledge Hobbes’s own misgivings. “Laughter *without offence*” is only possible, Hobbes concludes, when it is directed at “*absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons...when all the company may laugh together*”.<sup>23</sup> Believing laughter to be socially divisive, Hobbes attaches little moral benefit to it. Instead it should be the work of “great minds to help and free others from scorn”.<sup>24</sup> Though larger ideological differences mean they rarely acknowledge any similarity with Hobbes, in this idea, too, he shares much with later moralists

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<sup>20</sup> *Treatise on Human Nature*, in *The Collected English Works*, IV, p. 46.

<sup>21</sup> *The Collected English Works*, III, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> *The Collected English Works*, IV, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 46-47.

<sup>24</sup> *Leviathan*, in *The Collected English Works*, III, p. 46.

who try to codify laughter as something that should be used judiciously by those of power and privilege to institute a social corrective.

## A Culture of Benevolence

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Throughout the eighteenth century, discourses on laughter are embroiled in the competing ethical explanations for human nature of egoism and benevolence. Hobbism finds approval in many intellectual quarters, particularly influencing Bernard Mandeville's belief that private vices provide public benefit, and recognisable in the self-interest underpinning the political economy of Adam Smith. But the view that laughter springs from superiority runs counter to the culture of charitable feeling increasingly being advanced by *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* and by philosophers such as Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury.<sup>25</sup> Toward the end of the century, James Beattie blames Addison's "appropriation" of Hobbes's theory of laughter for maintaining public awareness of it.<sup>26</sup> Addison is typical of the heterogeneity of views on laughter throughout the period: he is troubled by Hobbes's "Sudden Glory", but unable to dismiss it entirely.<sup>27</sup> "Every one laughs", Addison admits, "at some Body that is in an inferior State of Folly to himself".<sup>28</sup> Yet Addison aims to correct this instinct, which is the mark of "gross Taste".<sup>29</sup> What we should learn from "Mr Hobbs" is that "When we hear a man laugh

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<sup>25</sup> Mandeville's theories develop out of the negative perspective of Hobbesian self-love (which assumed people are primarily motivated by avoiding pain) into a belief that people pursue selfish pleasure even as they hypocritically deny it. Many of the most prominent theories of Adam Smith work via the belief that man is driven by selfish motives. For excellent surveys of the conflict between egoism and benevolence see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); John Andrew Bernstein, 'Shaftesbury's Optimism and Eighteenth-Century Social Thought', in *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France and Germany*, ed. by A. C. Kors, and Paul, J. Korshin (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1987), pp. 86-101; J. W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Michael B. Gill, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> The offending article appears in No. 47 of *The Spectator*. See James Beattie, 'On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', in *Essays: On the Nature and Mutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism; on Poetry and Music, as They Affect the Mind; on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition; and on the Utility of Classical Learning* (Edinburgh, 1776), p. 591.

<sup>27</sup> In his brilliant survey of satire in the eighteenth century, Vic Gatrell reads No. 47 as a straightforward parody of Hobbes. This seems to me to simplify the equivocal position Addison adopts in his writing on laughter. See *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic, 2006), p. 168.

<sup>28</sup> No. 47, *The Spectator*, ed. by Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, p. 200.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 201.



excessively, instead of saying he is very merry, we ought to tell him he is very proud”.<sup>30</sup> Returning to the subject in No. 249 (1711), Addison accepts the Hobbesian position that the “Motive of Laughter” is “in most cases” the “satisfaction which we receive from the Opinion of some pre-eminence in our selves, when we see the Absurdities of another, or when we reflect on any past Absurdities of our own”.<sup>31</sup> But he also makes sure to point out that this method is the “Qualification of little ungenerous minds”, and any “young Man with this Cast of Mind cuts himself off from all manner of Improvement”.<sup>32</sup> It is “the vainest Part of Mankind” that is the “most addicted to this Passion” of ridicule.<sup>33</sup>

Richard Steele identifies more benign causes of laughter beyond the sudden glory of Hobbes. In 1709, in No. 63 and No. 68 of *The Tatler*, he alludes to the laughter of the Trubys that is formed “out of a certain Benevolence in their Temper, and not out of the ordinary Motive, *viz.* Contempt and Triumph over the Imperfections of others”.<sup>34</sup> They “are a well-natur’d Family”, he explains, “whose particular Make is such, that they have the same Pleasure out of good Will, which other People have in that Scorn which is the Cause of Laughter”, their “bursting into...laughing, proceeds only from a general Benevolence they are born with”.<sup>35</sup> “I know *Sowerly* frets inwardly when *Will Truby* laughs at him”, Steele explains, “but when I meet him, and he bursts out, I know ’tis out of his abundant Joy to see me, which he expresses by that Vociferation, which is in others Laughter”.<sup>36</sup> Humoral theories of early medical discourse explained personality as originating in the combination and movement of biological substances (yellow bile, blood, phlegm, and black bile).<sup>37</sup> Steele draws on this tradition when he locates the Truby family’s laughter in a certain “Temper” and “Make...they are born with”, identifying their

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 200.

<sup>31</sup> No. 249, *The Spectator*, II, p. 466.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> No. 68, *The Tatler*, ed. by Donald F. Bond 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), I, p. 471.

<sup>35</sup> No. 63, Ibid. p. 438.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> For an overview of humoral theories from antiquity to the present, see Noga Arikha, *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).

benevolence with bodily humours that “bursts out”, which contrasts with Hobbes’s heartless “sudden glory”.<sup>38</sup>

But if Steele might be comfortable with locating benevolent laughter with the body, Lord Shaftesbury is eager to identify laughter with reason when disproving Hobbes’s self-love. He asks whether or not Hobbes’s analysis of human nature and the operations of society forgets “Kindness, Friendship, Sociableness, Love of Company and Converse, Natural affection, or anything else of this kind”?<sup>39</sup> Then, throughout the collected essays published as *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) Shaftesbury challenges Hobbes’s theory of self-interest, arguing that natural social affections are the guiding principles of human nature, which preserve the welfare of humanity as a whole, and are witnessed in the innate benevolence frequently displayed in a morally just society. Shaftesbury also confronts the Puritanical hellfire preachers whom he regards as maligning humanity and the Christian narrative by their declaring human nature to be inherently evil.<sup>40</sup> Thus Shaftesbury rejects misanthropy as being at the heart of human nature, and the ‘negative answer’ at the centre of religious worship. Influenced by the Cambridge Platonists, he assumes people are made in the image of an essentially benevolent deity whose tolerance and good humour are evident throughout the Bible, where “the beginning of things and origin of [the] human race are represented to us”.<sup>41</sup> God’s treatment of Jonah, for instance, is like that of “a kind tutor...pleased to humour him...and show him to himself”.<sup>42</sup> Whilst “our Saviour’s style” and the “pleasant images under which he often couches his moral and prudential rules, even his miracles themselves” contain a “certain festivity, alacrity, and good

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<sup>38</sup> No. 63, *The Tatler*, I, p. 438.

<sup>39</sup> Lord Shaftesbury’s Preface to *Selected Sermons of Dr Whichcot* (London, 1698), A4<sup>v</sup>-[A5].

<sup>40</sup> For the religious debates surrounding Shaftesbury’s writing see Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. by Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 390.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 388-389.

humour” that it is “impossible not to be moved in a pleasant manner at their recital”.<sup>43</sup> It is the founding principle of the “original founders” of the Christian faith to “correct that melancholy and gloominess” to which the topic is too often subject and which is particularly prevalent in his own time, Shaftesbury believes.<sup>44</sup> The *Psalms*, *Job*, *Proverbs*, and *Canticles* are “full of humorous images and jocular wit” and show how the “inspired authors” of the “sacred collection...had recourse to humour and diversion as a proper means to promote religion and strengthen the established faith”.<sup>45</sup>

Made in God’s own image, “our humours...incline us not to melancholy reflections” and the “solemn” reproving of “vice”; so Shaftesbury intends to “ridicule folly and recommend wisdom and virtue...in a way of pleasantry and mirth.”<sup>46</sup> In his philosophy, the destructiveness of laughter has constructive consequences when tempered by politeness. Shaftesbury carries laughter into morally acceptable play, acknowledging its use for ethical instruction. Instead of the caustic wit of the libertine, or the rowdy laughter of the crowd, the raillery Shaftesbury explores foregrounds genial sociability and aims to advance civility. As he makes abundantly clear, the laughter he endorses is not that of the plebeian class, which he considers puerile and gross. Referring only to his own aristocratic social sphere, he writes, “in defence only of the Club and of that sort of freedom which is taken among gentlemen and friends who know one another perfectly well”.<sup>47</sup>

Laughter is evidently an important component of the ‘sensus communis’. He concludes the essay *Sensus Communis*, for instance, by explaining,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 390. By stressing the humour of Christ, Shaftesbury writes in opposition to the orthodox position that Christ’s life is symbolised by tears, and that he never laughed. For more on laughter in Christian thought see M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Allen Lane, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> *Characteristics*, p. 390.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 388.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 36.

I have taken the liberty...to laugh upon some occasions...if I have either laughed wrong or been impertinently serious, I can be content to be laughed at in my turn. If contrariwise I am railed at, I can laugh still, as before, and with fresh advantage to my cause.<sup>48</sup>

However, Shaftesbury generally resists categoric definitions of terms. Frequently he employs ‘laughter’, ‘ridicule’, ‘raillery’, ‘wit’ and ‘humour’ interchangeably or at least non-specifically. Whilst we might infer some distinction between being “laughed at” and “railed at” (something to do with the degree of hostility involved) what is essential for Shaftesbury is that laughter plays a leading part in open dialogue and heuristic debate. He justifies laughter on the grounds of its role in the economy of free and rational thought, and congenial conversation that leads to greater individual integrity and reformation of personal conduct. In *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm* he asks why are we “so afraid to stand the test of ridicule”, when it is so useful in rooting out “imposture” and helps distinguish “true gravity from the false”:

What Rule or Measure is there in the World, except in the considering of the real Temper of Things, to find which are truly serious, and which ridiculous? And how can this be done, unless by applying the ridicule, to see whether it will bear?<sup>49</sup>

In *Sensus Communis*, he suggests ridicule offers a more general way of interrogating claims of truth. “It is supposed”, he says, that “Truth...may bear *all* lights, and one of those principal lights, or natural mediums, by which things are to be viewed, in order to a thorough recognition, is ridicule

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 8. Remarks like these lead to Shaftesbury being accused of promoting ridicule as a ‘test of truth’, though he never explicitly states this. For more on the background of the debate, and the key players involved see Alfred Owen Aldridge, ‘Shaftesbury and the Test of Truth’, *PMLA*, 60 (March, 1945), 129–156.

itself”.<sup>50</sup> Ridicule does not reveal truth by itself, but rather offers the opportunity for frank and honest analysis of it. This “freedom of raillery”, what he calls the “liberty in decent language to question everything, and an allowance of unravelling or refuting any argument without offence to the arguer”, is much more suited to the sociability and open-mindedness of his age, than any dogmatic method.<sup>51</sup> Hobbes and Shaftesbury are antagonists on one front, but they share a similarity in both being threats to religious authority. Shaftesbury’s free-thinking attitude offends conservative religious sensibilities, while Hobbes’s writing is labelled blasphemous by his critics, with his materialism undermining Christian values, and his wit imagined as an antecedent to his atheism.<sup>52</sup>

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### The Incongruity Theory

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I have described how the sociable laughter sanctioned by a culture of politeness tries to discard the sudden glory in triumph over others’ inferiorities. In this section I will show how eighteenth-century moralists promoted the idea that laughter derives not primarily out of meanness or malice, but because of an awareness of amusing contrasts. The idea that laughter occurs when people notice an incongruity in the world is not unique to the eighteenth century: it stretches back at least as far as Aristotle’s thoughts on humour and the comic mask. It is evident in English writing on comedy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well, and in Locke’s definition of wit as “the assemblage” of differing ideas “wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity”.<sup>53</sup> But whereas Locke demotes wit in favour of reasoned judgement, and wit comes to hold an ambiguous position in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, writers frequently champion incongruity as an alternative to the superiority theory of laughter.

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<sup>50</sup> *Characteristics*, p. 30.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33.

<sup>52</sup> For more on the political and theological debates surrounding their writing, see Roger Lund, *Ridicule, Religion and the Politics of Wit in Augustan England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 156.

Of course, in some sense superiority is simply another form of incongruity, derived from the perceived disparity of human life. Discussion of incongruity in the eighteenth century, however, placed moral value upon laughter by shifting it away from an attribution of character and the passions, toward an analytic observation of objects or ideas. As a result laughter was located within the realm of aesthetic judgement.

One of the earliest and most significant figures in this development is Francis Hutcheson, whose common sense philosophy owes much to Shaftesbury, and whose “accounting for Laughter, in a different way from Mr Hobbs”, it is later said, is “more honourable to human nature”.<sup>54</sup> In *Reflections Upon Laughter*, first published as three essays in the *Dublin Journal* in 1725, Hutcheson sets out to refute Hobbes, whose “grand view was to deduce all human actions from Self-Love” and “over-looked every thing which is generous or kind in mankind”.<sup>55</sup> During the first essay, Hutcheson distinguishes between laughter and ridicule, noting that too often they are used interchangeably. He accepts that “when we are laughing at the follies of others...there may be some pretence to allege that some imagined superiority may occasion it”, “but”, he hastily adds, “then there are innumerable instances of Laughter, where no person is ridiculed; nor does he who laughs compare himself to any thing whatsoever”.<sup>56</sup> There is a “kind instinct of nature, a secret bond between us and our fellow-creatures”, and so there must be something more fundamental than a felt superiority that causes laughter, even, he believes, in the case of ridicule.<sup>57</sup> Hutcheson suggests that instead of our triumph over others, the principle cause of laughter is, “the bringing together of Images which have *contrary* additional Ideas, as well as some Resemblance in the principle Idea”.<sup>58</sup> Hutcheson’s suggestion that laughter is an intellectual response, “some perception in the mind of something ludicrous”, is largely focused on the juxtaposition of “Ideas of *Grandeur, Dignity, Sanctity, Perfection*, and Ideas of *Meanness, Baseness*,

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<sup>54</sup> Preface to Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, ed. by William Leechman, 2 vols (Glasgow, 1755), I, pp. ix-x.

<sup>55</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon Laughter; and Remarks upon Fable of the Bees* (R. Urie: Glasgow, 1750), p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

*Profanity*”, with the occasion for laughter being the incongruous bringing together of ideas of “dignity and meanness”.<sup>59</sup> This is similar to the juxtaposition espoused in Hobbes’s superiority theory. Significantly, though, by putting the cause into the realms of abstraction, Hutcheson depersonalises laughter. Alluding to Addison’s papers on the pleasures of the imagination in *The Spectator*, and its assumption that some objects carry with them discernable meanings, Hutcheson turns the reflex of laughter into a sign of discriminating judgement, something that may be acquired through education and social pressure.

Hutcheson’s essays were published again in 1750, bringing them further into the public consciousness. Subsequent editions in 1758 and 1772 suggest that his explanation harmonised with contemporary taste. Though Hutcheson limited his examples to those principles laid out by Addison, in time the incongruity theory came to be used more broadly. Mark Akenside’s popular *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, for instance, comfortably aligns ridicule with incongruity:

Where’er the power of ridicule displays  
Her quaint-ey’d visage, some incongruous form,  
Some stubborn dissonance of things combin’d  
Strikes on the quick observer.<sup>60</sup>

Hogarth knows that “improper, or *incompatible* excesses”, the “joining of opposite ideas...makes us laugh”.<sup>61</sup> While Alexander Gerard, in the *Essay on Taste* (1759), remarks upon “that sense, which perceives, and is gratified by the odd, the ridiculous, the humorous, the witty...whose gratification...always tends to mirth, laughter, and amusement” and whose “object is in general *incongruity*, or a surprising and uncommon mixture of *relation* and *contrariety* in things”.<sup>62</sup> Interest in

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 26, p. 12, and p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> Mark Akenside, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London, 1754), p. 113.

<sup>61</sup> William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) ed. by Joseph Burke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 48-49.

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste* (London, 1759), p. 66.

incongruity continued well into the nineteenth century. In the next chapter I will illustrate its importance to the Romantic imagination, as William Hazlitt finds the same root for the “laughable, the ludicrous, the ridiculous” in the “principle of contrast”,<sup>63</sup> and Charles Lamb assumes that “incongruous objects” are “the very essence of laughter”.<sup>64</sup>

## Sentimental Laughter

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A more sentimental approach to laughter emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, partly as a response to the taste for incongruity, and the influence and aspirations of a commercial middle-class that (officially at least) prided itself on politeness and kindness.<sup>65</sup> In the theatre, many works foregrounded feeling in their use of humour, whilst a new dramatic genre of sentimental comedy developed in response to the audience’s more ‘refined’ sensibility.<sup>66</sup> Rather than ridiculing people’s folly and vice, there was sympathy, and joyous delight in their eccentricities or ‘incongruities’. Corbyn Morris portrays it as a move away from Ben Jonson’s comic intention – which was “to hunt down and demolish his own Characters” exposing them “to your Hatred” – toward Shakespeare’s, who “always supports his Characters in your Favour” so that you still desire their amiable company.<sup>67</sup> The elevation of sentiment is discernable in the increased affection toward the knight of La Mancha, whom Tristram Shandy gleefully admits, “with all his follies, I love more, and would actually have gone further to have paid a visit to, than the greatest hero of antiquity”.<sup>68</sup> The more established reading of *Don Quixote* had been that it offered a satire

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<sup>63</sup> 'On Wit and Humour', in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), VI, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Lamb, 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth', in *Selected Prose*, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> As Lisa Freeman has discussed, “the very definition of what it meant to be ‘gentle’, or in more particular terms, what it meant to be a ‘gentleman’, underwent considerable change, moving away from a reliance on birth and inheritance to a new emphasis on merit and the acquisition of manners”. See 'The Social Life of Eighteenth-Century Comedy', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, ed. by Jane Moody, and Daniel O’Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 73-86 (74).

<sup>66</sup> For the debates surrounding ‘laughing comedy’ and ‘sentimental comedy’ see Robert D. Hume, 'Goldsmith and Sheridan and the Supposed Revolution in "Laughing" Against "Sentimental" Comedy', in *Studies in Change and Revolution: Aspects of English Intellectual History*, ed. by Paul J. Korshin (London: Scholar Press, 1972), pp. 237-276, and *The Rakish Stage: Studies in English Drama, 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).

<sup>67</sup> Corbyn Morris, *An Essay on Wit, Humour, and Raillery* (London, 1744), p. 34.

<sup>68</sup> Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, ed. by Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 19.



against foolishness, and the limits of the imagination in the face of empirical reality.<sup>69</sup> But Sterne reflects the greater sympathy expected in response to comic characters in the mid century, as well as offering a wink to one of the many influences upon his own quixotic work. This revolution in taste takes firm root by the end of the century (as I will discuss in the next chapter), reflected in Joseph Warton's comments of 1782 that the "great art of Cervantes consists in having painted his mad hero with such a quantity of amiable qualities, as to make it impossible for us to totally despise him".<sup>70</sup> Samuel Johnson sees Quixote as a tender representation of everyman: "When we pity him, we reflect on our own disappointments; and when we laugh, our hearts inform us that he is not more ridiculous than ourselves, except that he tells what we have only thought".<sup>71</sup> Thus Quixote becomes not simply a character to sympathise with, but also a symbol of integrity and insight that might provide an exemplum for human nature.

Henry Fielding proposed that Parson Adams "is not to be found in any Book now extant".<sup>72</sup> This is a bit of a joke on Fielding's part: the title page of *Joseph Andrews* admits that the novel will be in "The Manner of Cervantes", and Fielding evidently models the Parson partly on Quixote. Adams illustrates the way eighteenth-century writers were not simply reflecting a cultural preference for amiable humour, but eagerly constructed the taste for it in the face of engrained traditions of ridicule. Fielding's plays were not exactly renowned for their sentimentality. It is noticeable, therefore, that his turn to a different genre coincides with debates surrounding biting satire, and the gradual shift toward sentimental comedy. By establishing in *Joseph Andrews* a figure "entirely ignorant of the Ways of this World", "a Character of perfect Simplicity", Fielding hopes that "the Goodness of his [Adams's] Heart will recommend him to the Good-natur'd".<sup>73</sup> Sarah Fielding praises the "noble simplicity of his mind" which mingles

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<sup>69</sup> For more on the importance of *Don Quixote* and the development of sentimental comedy, see Ronald Paulson, *Don Quixote in England: The Aesthetics of Laughter* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 2 vols (London, 1782), II, pp. 473-474n.

<sup>71</sup> *The Rambler*, ed. by W. J. Bate and A. B. Strauss (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969) p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> In *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, ed. by Judith Hawley (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 54.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65, p. 54.

with “other innumerable beauties of his character” in *The Cry* (1754).<sup>74</sup> And in the succeeding decades the gentle Parson is seen as laughable without necessarily being an object of derision. Writing his essays on Fielding’s life and works in 1762, Arthur Murphy notes that the Parson’s “simplicity and innocence in the ways of men...conduce to make him in the highest manner the object of mirth, without degrading him in our estimation”.<sup>75</sup> In time, he becomes a common symbol of amiability, and a reflection of kindly feeling toward others. William Cowper informs Joseph Hill of some new acquaintances, the Unwin family, who are the “most agreeable People imaginable”, with the Reverend Morley Unwin a “man of learning and good sense, as simple as Parson Adams”.<sup>76</sup>

Yet reaction to the good-natured clergyman was initially mixed, ranging from bemusement to outright mockery. Arthur Murphy provides a useful barometer of the changing responses. As we just heard, he praises the Parson in 1762. But in the 1750s Murphy believed “an Emotion of Laughter [is] attended...with a Contempt for *Adams’s* Want of Knowledge of the World”.<sup>77</sup> Allan Ramsay sees only “strokes of the *argumentative Ridicule* in the character”.<sup>78</sup> The special pleading in *The Cry* for readers to show compassion for the Parson is, therefore, a direct result of the scorn poured upon the character by critics. According to Sarah Fielding, her brother’s creation is not intended to be contemptuous. Rather, “the ridiculers of Parson Adams are designed to be the proper objects of ridicule (and not that innocent man himself)”; this is a “truth which the author hath in many places set in the most glaring light”.<sup>79</sup> The famous ‘roasting’ scene in Book III, for instance, comes immediately after Joseph’s speech on charity, with the intention of demonstrating human cruelty. *Joseph Andrews* is an attempt at inviting society to question its

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<sup>74</sup> Sarah Fielding, *The Cry*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1754), II, p. 169.

<sup>75</sup> Arthur Murphy, ‘An Essay on the Life and Genius of Henry Fielding, Esq’, 4 vols (London, 1762), I, p. 36.

<sup>76</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> October 1765, in *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. by James King and Charles Ryskamp, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-1986), I, p. 121.

<sup>77</sup> Arthur Murphy, *Gray’s-Inn Journal* (London, 1754), Nos. 96 and 97.

<sup>78</sup> Allan Ramsay, *An Essay on Ridicule* (London, 1753), p. 78.

<sup>79</sup> *The Cry*, II, p. 169.

callous pleasure in the suffering of others, but it appears to have been a failure in that regard when originally published.

In the Preface, Fielding argues that only “a very ill-framed Mind” would “look on Ugliness, Infirmary, or Poverty, as ridiculous in themselves”.<sup>80</sup> In terms reminiscent of Shaftesbury’s defence of raillery, Fielding distinguishes between a necessary corrective laughter, and malicious glory: “The only Source of the true Ridiculous...is Affectation” which “proceeds from...Vanity, or Hypocrisy”.<sup>81</sup> That readers and critics alike laugh along with the characters that abuse the gullible Parson reflects that for all the official talk of sympathetic humour, this is a time (like all others) where sudden glory at the misfortune of others continues to flourish. Simon Dickie, amongst others, has detailed the delight in human misery that pervades every class in the mid-eighteenth century, and, as David Fairer rightly points out, this was in many ways “an impolite world that talked much about politeness”.<sup>82</sup> While new forms of wealth created new social identities, with developments in behaviour and taste following behind, laughter continued to symbolise the malice it had long been associated with. Habits and perceptions are often slow to change. Automatic reflexes like laughter are likely to be more languid than most, remaining stubbornly resistant to wider shifts in sensibility. Of course the very existence of so many attempts to decontaminate laughter from ridicule is evidence that it continued to be associated with meanness.

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### James Beattie and the Refinement of Laughter

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One of the ironies concerning the discourse of laughter in the eighteenth century, and observable throughout the examples in this chapter, is how frequently it seeks to contain or

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<sup>80</sup> The Preface, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, p. 53.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

<sup>82</sup> Simon Dickie, 'Hilarity and Pitilessness in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: English Jestbook Humor', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37:1 (2003), 1–22, and *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2011); *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1789*, ed. by David Fairer (London: Longman, 2003), p. 2.

control its practice. If discussion in the period characterises laughter as a reflection of good-naturedness, then it does so more often than not only by ratifying laughter that is well-mannered and conducive to a cult of politeness. As a result, whilst encouraging laughter to be seen as a mark of natural benevolence, commentary recommends that it be artfully used to meet expectations. This art of pleasing is portrayed by Samuel Johnson in no. 64 of *The Idler*. Tim Ranger has recently come in to some money, and is doing his best to become a “fine gentleman”. What he quickly discovers is that the key to getting on in society is to possess the right sort of laugh. Painstakingly, he puts his mind toward perfecting this critical social skill:

In this new scene of life my great labour was to learn to laugh. I had been used to consider laughter as the effect of merriment, but I soon learned that it is one of the arts of adulation, and from laughing only to show that I was pleased, I now began to laugh when I wished to please. This was at first very difficult. I sometimes heard the story with dull indifference, and not exalting myself to merriment by due gradations, burst out suddenly into an awkward noise which was not always favourably interpreted. Sometimes I was behind the rest of the company, and lost the grace of laughing by delay, and sometimes when I began at the right time was deficient in loudness or in length. But by diligent imitation of the best models, I attained at last such flexibility of muscles, that I was always a welcome auditor of a story, and got the reputation of a good-natured fellow.<sup>83</sup>

Johnson captures the social nuances of laughing in company, with Tim labouring so that he might be loved, repressing his natural instinct, employing his laugh as a commodity. Laughter acts not just as an “auditor” but is also being audited here. Tim’s difficulty lies in discovering not

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<sup>83</sup> In *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. by J. M. Bullitt, W. J. Bate, and L. F. Powell (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 199.

simply the right timing for his laugh, but the correct pitch and loudness too. Bursting out “suddenly into an awkward noise” is rarely “favourably interpreted”. It is only through his “diligent imitation of the best models” that he gains a “reputation” in refined society as “a good-natured fellow”.

Raucous laughter was interpreted by many as a sign of crude and low manners, something that also contorts the face into vulgar expressions, and was consequently frowned upon in polite circles. The most infamous example of cautioning against loud laughter in public because of its class stigma, is Lord Chesterfield’s hope that his son

may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh...Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manner: it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry...In my mind there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter.<sup>84</sup>

Chesterfield is not alone; the elder Pitt advises his nephew that “it is rare to see in any one a graceful laughter; it is generally better to smile than laugh out”.<sup>85</sup> Conduct books and private correspondence regularly warn women of the dangers of laughing in public, advising them to see it as a threat to their ‘refinement’. One possible explanation for all this advice (beyond the obvious class and gendered ideology) is practical. The importation of sugar to England and its use as a luxury item in the middle and upper classes led to carious teeth. Though revealing one’s rotten teeth by laughing might reflect financial strength, the physical decay might also be interpreted as moral weakness.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Lord Chesterfield’s Letters to his Son, and Others* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1929), p. 49.

<sup>85</sup> *Correspondence of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham*, ed. by William Stanhope Taylor and John Henry Pringle, 4 vols (London: John Murray, 1838-1840), I, p. 79.

<sup>86</sup> Colin Jones has recently discussed the socio-political significance of the smile in France. See *The Smile Revolution in Eighteenth Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

It is with the intention of strengthening laughter's propriety by tying it to the art of pleasing and sentimental feeling that James Beattie publishes *On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition* in 1776. Beattie's detailed exploration of how and why people laugh is widely circulated throughout Britain and is culturally influential, republished in five separate Edinburgh and London editions between 1776-1779. The majority of the entry for laughter in the 1797 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* derives from Beattie's writing, and continues to be until the seventh edition in 1842. But despite being used as a key reference-point for several decades after it is published, Beattie's ideas are firmly rooted in the conservative sensibility of the eighteenth century. At the outset, he is at pains to associate laughter with reason and benevolence, and does so partly by making a distinction between the "ridiculous" and the "ludicrous".<sup>87</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* points out that the two become synonyms in the 1780s, when 'ludicrous' is no longer simply frivolous jesting and playfulness, but also contempt: 'derisive laughter; ridiculous, laughably absurd'.<sup>88</sup> Yet the fact that Samuel Johnson's dictionary refers to ludicrousness as 'burlesque; sportiveness; merry cast or manner; ridiculousness', suggests that the two are conflated from at least the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>89</sup> Given Beattie's intentions, his attempt to differentiate between them is crucial. Both the ludicrous and ridiculous excite laughter. But the ridiculous is born of "malevolence or envy" and Beattie's belief in the divinely ordained fundamental goodness of human nature means that it must be "unnatural".<sup>90</sup> The laughter of the ridiculous is morally and aesthetically deforming:

The sound of it offends the ear; the features distorted by it seem horrible to the eye.

A mixture of hypocrisy, malice, and cruel joy, thus displayed on the countenance, is

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<sup>87</sup> Beattie, *Essays...on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition*, p. 585.

<sup>88</sup> 'Ludicrous', adj. 3, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/110945?redirectedFrom=ludicrous#eid>>, [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2015].

<sup>89</sup> 'Ludicrous', in Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols (London, 1755), II.

<sup>90</sup> Beattie, *Essays...on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition*, p. 588.

one of the most hateful sights in natures, and transforms the ‘human face divine’ into the visage of a fiend.<sup>91</sup>

The laughter of the ludicrous, in contrast, is “at once natural and innocent”.<sup>92</sup> Within this “species” there is “Animal laughter”, which is “often excessive” and brought on by “bodily feeling, or sudden impulse...proceeding...from the operation of causes purely material”.<sup>93</sup> But there is also what he calls “*Sentimental*” laughter, which “renders a countenance amiable” and is “the effect of good humour...and tender affection”.<sup>94</sup> This laughter “always proceeds from a sentiment or emotion, excited in the mind, in consequence of certain objects or ideas being presented to it”.<sup>95</sup> It is this form of laughter that Beattie makes the standard of taste, and which he highlights for discussion. Given this, it is no surprise that Beattie draws on a plethora of sources (including Hutcheson and Akenside) all of whom espouse the familiar theory of incongruity to explain the perception of the humorous.

Beattie emphasises the importance of sympathy in human affairs, stressing that pity overrules our laughable inclinations. In the next chapter I will show how this tension between sympathy and laughter evolves in the Romantic period, with the more restrained smile assumed by critics to be used at the time as a safer indicator of sympathetic feeling. There has always been a debate over laughter’s ability to overwhelm compassion for others. But Beattie’s remarks regarding sympathy and laughter reflect his belief in the inherent goodness of human nature; his conception of the primacy of sympathy in humanity is theological. It does not originate through empirical erudition or inhabit a social space (as it does in Hume and Smith), but is closer in this instance to a Christian conscience implanted by God to distinguish between right and wrong. Beattie assumes that morally weaker feelings, like a desire to laugh, are trumped by more virtuous

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. pp. 588-589.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 588.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 589.

ones, like sympathy. The idea of a man with a wooden leg had become a master trope for testing the limits of sympathy by the last quarter of the century.<sup>96</sup> Beattie agrees that the image could be considered risible because of its incongruity. But he reminds the reader that

he who forgets humanity so far, as to smile at such a memorial of misfortune in a living person, will be blamed by every good man. We expect, because from experience we know it is natural, that pity should prevail over the ludicrous emotion.<sup>97</sup>

Beattie supposes there is a natural appeal to sympathy, but just in case it falls short social censure curtails “unnatural” feelings like the temptation to “smile” at misfortune.

Throughout the essay Beattie prioritises social order ahead of individual liberty as a condition of civil order, advancing self-control over any instinct we might possess: “to be master of one’s own temper, is a most desirable thing”, while it is “much more pleasant...to live with such as are so, than among those who, without caution or disguise, speak, and look, and act, according to the impulse of passion”.<sup>98</sup> David Hume had previously declared that, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions”.<sup>99</sup> Humean faith in the emotions as the proper motivation behind action is well established by the 1770s. Writing against the grain, then, Beattie’s intention in ‘On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition’ is precisely to restrain the genuine passion that laughter can express. Beattie unwittingly registers a tension between his insistence on studying laughter as “a real and a natural expression of a certain human emotion, or inward feeling”, and the artificiality or civilising of both laughter and society he recommends.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> For a longer discussion of this figure see chapter 2, ‘Cripples, Hunchbacks, and the Limits of Sympathy’ in Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter*.

<sup>97</sup> Beattie, *Essays...on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition*, p. 665.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p. 667.

<sup>99</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn rev. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 415.

<sup>100</sup> Beattie, *Essays...on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition*, p. 667.



Toward the end of the essay Beattie suggests it would be better to judge laughter from the perspective of “its unrestrained energies, than from the appearances it may assume under the control of affectation or delicacy”.<sup>101</sup> Adam Ferguson acknowledged that “art itself is natural to man” who is “in some measure the artificer of his own frame...and is destined, from the first age of his being, to invent and contrive”.<sup>102</sup> But Beattie consistently separates our natural state from modern refinement, at one point offering this analogy: “The foot of a Chinese beauty is whiter, no doubt, and prettier, than that of a Scotch highlander; yet I would advise those who are curious to know the parts and proportions of that limb, to contemplate the clown rather than the lady”.<sup>103</sup> Here Beattie performs a typical enlightenment move, turning to the ‘savage’ as the archetype, assuming origins (be they of laughter or language) to be more clearly evident in a ‘primitive’ state. Nevertheless, Beattie rejects the passionate nature of the ‘savage’, and insists upon the need to regulate laughter so as to maintain the social contract. One of his conclusions is noticeably similar to Tim Ranger’s comical realisation two decades before:

Good-breeding is the art of pleasing those with whom we converse. Now we cannot please others, if we either show them what is displeasing in ourselves, or give them reason to think that we perceive what is displeasing in them. Every emotion, therefore, that would naturally arise from bad qualities in us, or from the view of them in others, and all those emotions in general which our company may think too violent, and cannot sympathise with, nor partake in, good-breeding requires that we suppress. Laughter, which is either too profuse or too obstreperous, is an emotion of this kind: and therefore, a man of breeding will be careful not to laugh much longer, or much oftener than others; nor to laugh at all, except where it is probable, that the jest may be equally relished by the company...the restraints of good-breeding render society comfortable,

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. by Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 12.

<sup>103</sup> Beattie, *Essays...on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition*, p. 667.

and, by suppressing the outward energy of intemperate passions, tend not a little to suppress those passions themselves: while the unbridled liberty of savage life gives full play to every turbulent emotion, keeps the mind in continual uproar, and disqualifies it for those improvements and calm delights, that result from the exercise of the rational and moral faculties.<sup>104</sup>

In order for society to function effectively “good-breeding” must act to suppress anything deemed offensive. Conformity to the societal norm regulates feelings. Laughter that is too loud or long displays “intemperate passions” that threaten the comfort of the community, but by curtailing these outward energies the emotions are themselves gradually suppressed. Thus the “art of pleasing” advances society toward refinement, and the progress of the rational mind over the passions.

‘On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition’ highlights the shifts of the previous decades, which brought the gradual dissociation with ridicule to the advancement of a theory of laughter rooted in benevolence. But it also reflects that laughter continued to be associated with ridicule. Beattie persists with the promotion of laughter as an outcome of reason and propriety witnessed earlier, and attempts to divorce it from the unstable passions of the body. His essay illustrates the tension I outlined at the start of this chapter between laughter as an instinctive response and laughter as an artful mode of pleasing that helps to maintain social relations. Yet Beattie’s acknowledgement of the “unrestrained energies” of laughter, and his acknowledgement of the link between laughter and authentic passions, can be seen in retrospect as part of the move away from politeness toward the spontaneous and overflowing laughter that gains popularity in the Romantic period. In the next chapter I explore the rise of readings of laughter as ebullient and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p. 669.

forceful, as well as the importance of sympathy and incongruity to Romantic perceptions of laughter.

## CHAPTER II

# The Importance of Laughter to the Romantic Period

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*"The art of being miserable for misery's sake has been  
brought to great perfection in our days" (Thomas Love  
Peacock, Nightmare Abbey)*

The last chapter offered an overview of some of the changing contours of laughter during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As well as illustrating the way in which laughter is assimilated into a culture of benevolence and politeness, it provided an account of two fundamental explanations for why people laugh (superiority, incongruity), explored laughter's links to comic theory, and its complicated association with sympathetic feeling. With the fundamental conception of laughter now laid out, this chapter explores accounts of laughter, and how the subject interweaves with the aesthetics, ideas, and socio-political environment of the Romantic period – which I classify as 1780-1840. The periodization of Romanticism has always been unsettled and open to question. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I understand James Beattie's comments on laughter in 1776 to be largely a reflection of eighteenth-century priorities of decorum. At the same time, the fact that he feels the need to insist upon moderation and manners reflects a growing appreciation of spontaneity, authenticity, and the unruly in laughing matters, something that only intensifies in subsequent decades. Thomas Carlyle's writing on laughter up to the 1840s, meanwhile, particularly his discussion of sympathy, registers a conception of laughter that is consistently heard in Romantic poetry. As we will see, there are particular appreciations and uses of laughter between 1780-1840 that provides a revision of eighteenth-century attitudes to the subject, and that we might label 'Romantic'.

The sound of laughter carries the timbre of Romantic literary criticism. For instance, in the 1780-1840 period, laughter resounds with a particular appreciation of the sublime that is

informed by Burkean aesthetics, and relates to descriptions in Romantic poetry of being overwhelmed by sensory experience and natural phenomena. The relation between laughter and geniality touches on recent critical debates surrounding Romantic sociability compared with solitude and solemnity. Laughter's appearance in rustic traditions and modes of behaviour, meanwhile, can be perceived as part of the reformist politics informing urban writers' opposition to a newly mechanised and increasingly atomised society, and the constricting consequences of an authoritarian state. The rupturing effects of laughter can, therefore, be interpreted as analogical to the radical break commonly ascribed to this period. Yet, as the influence of Burke and others makes plain, there is also continuity with eighteenth-century perceptions of laughter. Incongruity is accepted as the key explanation for the risible during the Romantic age, pervading a large portion of theories of humour in one form or another. To some degree as well, discussion of sympathy in relation to laughter carries the influence of the sentimentalising of figures like Parson Adams and Don Quixote that I outlined in chapter one. The sentimental approach to comedy and a culture of refinement holds an important position during these decades, and the use of laughter by many to try to counteract and disrupt such developments is one of the most significant sounds of the period. Fascination with the overflow of laughter's "unrestrained energies" (as Beattie called them) is highly appreciated. Yet its unruliness and uproar also threaten the repose and contemplation attributed to pathetic poetry. In other words, the imbrication of laughter within a Romantic discourse is as variable, protean, and contradictory as Romanticism itself.<sup>1</sup> As will become more apparent in part two, laughter encompasses the oppositions and incongruities inherent to the period.

In the first section of this chapter, I consider the effects of nitrous oxide at Thomas Beddoes's Pneumatic Institute in order to discuss conviviality within Romanticism. Following on from this, the second section discusses how wild laughter at the Institute is drawn into a

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<sup>1</sup> This contrariety is one reason why Stuart Curran assumes the oxymoron is "the abiding figure of British Romanticism". See 'Romantic Poetry: Why and Wherefore?', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 209-228 (225).

language of the sublime, something that is audible in Romantic poetry as well. Sections three and four turn to the importance of sympathy in Romantic discussions of humour, and the link between sympathy and laughter. The fifth and sixth sections highlight how laughter is portrayed as rebellious, and how its subversiveness is employed to critique social manners and cultural conformity, whilst remaining aware of the role of satire in policing cultural hegemony. The final section describes how ideas of innocence and childishness, and of wildness and the barbarous, attach themselves to laughter and are lauded as an essential characteristic of English sensibility.

### **Nitrous Oxide and a Community of Laughers**

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By any measure, those involved in the nitrous oxide experiments conducted by Humphry Davy in Bristol in 1799 were a close-knit community. They talked enthusiastically about chemistry, literature, and political reform, and had firm faith in the socially liberating potential of science and poetry. They shared antipathy toward the increasingly draconian measures of the Tory administration, and united in an egalitarian belief in the need for radical political change. One reason the Pneumatic Institute was set up in Bristol rather than the metropolis was because of Thomas Beddoes's position as a 'marked man', and the relative freedom that the West Country offered to non-conformist figures.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in a potentially beleaguered situation, they also enjoyed a laugh. Accounts of the experiments reveal countless moments when (as Joseph Cottle remarks) the community "quite exorcised philosophical gravity, and converted the laboratory into the region of hilarity".<sup>3</sup> Their uproarious fits, and their clowning around during the scientific and philosophic research highlight the conviviality and sociability of this community. The image of those under the influence of nitrous oxide laughing together gleefully is attractive. For one thing, it provides a cheerfulness and collectivism to contrast with the melancholic and solitary

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<sup>2</sup> For the opportunity that the West Country offered radicals, see *English Romantic Writers and the West Country*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> In Thomas Beddoes, *Notice of Some Observation Made at the Medical Pneumatic Institution* (Bristol, 1799), p. 13.

associations of opium-use. For a number of years, critics have focused on the creative community that emerged in the West Country as exemplum for the interplay between science and poetry in the period.<sup>4</sup> While this has sometimes taken the form of imagining a brand of Romantic individual genius within science (typified by Davy), criticism has also uncovered the collective enterprise, and mutual influence, that inform creativity. As part of this, attention to the nitrous oxide experiments reveals how important levity and whimsy are to the formation of any friendship or collaboration, not least at a time of political turmoil and “philosophical gravity”.

Yet, ironically, the laughter that erupts is sometimes freighted with a rupturing of the alliances and empathy it at other times implies. If you took nitrous oxide at the Pneumatic Institute – whether during the scientific experimentation conducted during the day, or at one of the many nitrous oxide parties held at night – you accepted the possibility that you would not only laugh yourself, but that your antics would also provoke the laughter of others. Of course, people sometimes feel closer after such an experience, if not necessarily during it, and we might imagine that this is more likely to be possible amongst friends. Nonetheless, the reality for many is that the laughter distances rather than unites the party. Awareness of nitrous oxide as a dissociative agent is apparent in a few of the accounts. During one experiment, for instance, Davy records his psychological detachment: “I walked round the room perfectly regardless of what was said to me”.<sup>5</sup> Laughter is also a dissociative. Either the subject intoxicated by nitrous oxide erupts into hysterical giggles, or the laughter bursts out from those watching on with a combination of awe and amusement. In each case, the laughter serves to separate those involved.

One of Davy’s test subjects is a Dr Blake who quickly becomes comic entertainment for spectators. Davy documents that whilst under the influence of the gas Blake “had a great

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<sup>4</sup> Early examples include Kathleen Coburn, 'Coleridge: A Bridge between Science and Poetry', in *Coleridge's Variety: Bicentenary Studies*, ed. by John Beer (London: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 81–100; Molly Lefebure, 'Humphry Davy: Philosophic Alchemist', in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. by Richard Gravil, and Molly Lefebure (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 83–110; Nicholas Roe, '"Atmospheric Air Itself": Medical Science, Politics and Poetry in Thelwall, Coleridge and Wordsworth', in *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Richard Cronin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), pp. 185–202. For more recent examples see Nicholas Roe, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: Harper Press, 2008); Maurice Hindle, 'Humphry Davy and William Wordsworth: A Mutual Influence', *Romanticism*, 18:1 (2012), 16–29; Sharon Ruston, *Creating Romanticism: Case Studies in the Literature, Science and Medicine of the 1790s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Humphry Davy, *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical, Chiefly Concerning Nitrous Oxide* (Bristol, 1800), p. 488.

propensity to laugh”, and is conscious that this behaviour “in some measure appeared ludicrous to those around him”.<sup>6</sup> Given the various meanings of ‘ludicrous’ that I noted in the last chapter, this description locates him somewhere between the laughably absurd, and a figure of ridicule. Davy documents his own farcical attempts at making his feelings understood. At one point he describes his oddly Swiftian behaviour as he tries to communicate by “laughing and stamping”.<sup>7</sup> The overexcited Davy merely discovers his alienation as his laughable antics fail to make the passer-by appreciate his feelings. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, freshly returned from Germany, tried the gas at least four times before heading North to the Lake District and to Wordsworth. His description of an “unmingled pleasure” on the third try has been compared to that “unmingled measure” of ‘Kubla Khan’.<sup>8</sup> His first feelings toward the gas are notable, however, for underlining his sense of distance from his friends: the “only motion which I felt inclined to make, was that of laughing at those who were looking at me”.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, it is unclear whether Coleridge’s laughter derives from a feeling of superiority, as he experiences sensations he believes elevate him above those around him, or whether it derives more from self-consciousness, acting as a spontaneous defence mechanism warding off the judgement of others. In the first case his laughter performs an amusing parody of the uniquely elevated position of the Romantic genius. But either way, his laughter serves to isolate rather than unite him from the group. Bringing an intense consciousness of individuality, the laughter briefly calls attention to the fact that no two subjective experiences are necessarily alike.

### The Sublimity of Laughter

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Regularly cast into the realms of the unfathomable, laughter at the Pneumatic Institute takes on characteristics of the sublime. While nitrous oxide and Davy have been linked to the sublime, no

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 524.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 492.

<sup>8</sup> Holmes, *Age of Wonder*, p. 267.

<sup>9</sup> Davy, *Researches*, p. 516.



attention has been given to the way laughter might be associated with it as well.<sup>10</sup> There are understandable reasons why laughter is not traditionally considered sublime, not the least of which is that the “essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human”.<sup>11</sup> Laughter, in contrast, is throughout history conceived as a defining characteristic of what it is to be human: not something that transcends our humanity but confers and confirms it. Friedrich Schiller’s linking of sublimity with tragedy and the feminised beautiful with comedy in ‘On Pathos’ (1793) continues the aesthetic tradition set out by Immanuel Kant in ‘Observations on the Feelings of the Sublime and the Beautiful’ (1764). Famously, the sublime is unsettling and can be frightening. Edmund Burke declares that “terror is in all cases, whatsoever...either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime”.<sup>12</sup> But as Coleridge is meant to have observed, “Laughter is equally the expression of extreme anguish and horror as of joy”, before projecting it further into the realms of sublime experience: as there is a “laugh of merriment”, “so is there a laugh of terror”.<sup>13</sup>

As Nicola Trott reminds us, treatises on the sublime are frequently contradictory. The sublime is said to invoke unity or refute closure, to be inherent to the object or in the perceiver’s mind, as God-dependent, or God-denying, or as signifying the rhetorical or the natural, the empiricist or idealist, the physiological or transcendent.<sup>14</sup> Reading Thomas Weiskel and Frances Ferguson might lead us to assume that the Romantic era psychologises and internalises the sublime.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, Alan Richardson’s recent work, and that of Vanessa Ryan, and Sharon Ruston, locates the sublime in the physiological and material.<sup>16</sup> What is generally agreed on, as

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<sup>10</sup> At various times in Davy’s *Researches* nitrous oxide is imagined to be sublime. Following this lead, Holmes, and Ruston raise Davy to a sublime position, comparable in imagination and insight to other ‘Romantics’.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Notes on *Hamlet*’, From the report of Lecture 3 in the *Bristol Gazette*, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1813, in *Lectures 1808-1819, On Literature*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), I, p. 545.

<sup>14</sup> Nicola Trott, ‘The Picturesque, the Beautiful, and the Sublime’, in *A Companion to Romanticism*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 72-90 (79).

<sup>15</sup> Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*; Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Vanessa L. Ryan, ‘The Physiological Sublime: Burke’s Critique of Reason’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 62 (2001), 265–279; Ruston, *Creating Romanticism*.

Trott again helpfully explains, is that the sublime is an aesthetic of excess that escapes the limits of representation. And other than the exalted, superior self that Kant's formulation of the sublime mind ultimately invokes, it is generally conceived as a power that overwhelms the individual. In Longinus (whose *Peri Hypsous* reintroduces the sublime as a concept for eighteenth-century aesthetics) it is rhetoric's power to overcome a rational audience and persuade them of ideas through sheer bombast, its "invincible power and force" that gets "the better of every hearer".<sup>17</sup> More recent conceptions of sublimity maintain the essentially overwhelming power of the sublime over reason.<sup>18</sup>

Accounts from the Pneumatic Institute carry something of that terror of being overcome by the irresistible, and imply an overriding of reason by the rhythms of bodily experience. Thomas Beddoes's father-in-law, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, tries the gas and finds "a strong propensity to laugh", explaining that "[I] burst into a violent fit of laughter, and capered about the room without having the power of restraining myself".<sup>19</sup> "The principal feeling through the whole time", Edgeworth concludes "was the total difficulty of restraining my feelings...in other words, not having any command of one's self".<sup>20</sup> On some level, Edgeworth is aware of the need to master the contortions of his body, but finds himself unable to overpower the irrational laughter that has taken hold of him. His body seems strangely removed from his thinking mind, as he realises he is incapable of enforcing his will over the laughter that ruptures rational control.

Others have similar experiences. Mr H. Cardwell is "almost convulsed with laughter", and finds his thoughts engulfed by it: "for a long time [I] could not think of the feeling without laughing".<sup>21</sup> M. M. Coates is initially sceptical of the effects of nitrous oxide, believing them to be the "predisposing agency of the imagination". Yet he also finds in just a few seconds of inhaling it "an irresistible propensity to violent laughter...which", he explains, "being fully conscious of

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<sup>17</sup> Longinus, 'On Sublimity', in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Vincent Leitch (London: Norton, 2001), p. 138.

<sup>18</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities/University of Washington, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Davy, *Researches*, p. 527.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp. 527-528.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 534.

the violence of my feelings, and of their irrational exhibition, I made great but ineffectual efforts to restrain”.<sup>22</sup> This enthralling laughter embodies the independent spirit Burke identifies as a necessary constituent of sublimity: asserting that what is in conformity to our will is “never sublime”.<sup>23</sup> In a particularly Humean formulation of the overpowering of reason by the passions, Burke assumes the pleasure of the sublime is inimical to thought since it violently robs the mind of its power to think. Sharon Ruston argues convincingly that Davy’s conception of the sublime nitrous oxide is more Kantian than Burkean because it ultimately asserts the mind’s capacity to transcend the experience through reason. But many of the accounts of laughter at the Pneumatic Institute point toward Burke’s theory that our physiological experiences of the sublime entirely absorb the mind, leaving it incapable of reasoning – that is, of making rational sense of the laughing experience:

In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.<sup>24</sup>

Yet if the laughter displays features of the sublime, it is also anti-sublime in the way it punctures pomposity. Operating on the boundary between conscious thought and bodily impulse, laughter sounds out an embarrassed and confused moment of self-realisation, as the subject recognises the farcical gulf between his or her exalted feelings and the bathos of reality. Descriptions call to mind what Kant identifies as the incongruity experienced in the moment of laughing, that “something absurd” which must be present to “raise a hearty convulsive laugh”,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 531.

<sup>23</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 57.

which is the result of a “sudden evaporation of expectation into nothing”.<sup>25</sup> Thus the laughter at the Pneumatic Institute foreshadows Romantic irony within discourses of the sublime. As Schlegel explains in *Critical Fragments*, “the need to raise itself above humanity is humanity’s prime characteristic”.<sup>26</sup> Participants house the incongruous feeling that they may transcend the limitations of reality, and awareness of the absurd borders of their knowledge, as the sublimity of the laughter continuously informs them of their own ridiculousness. As we will discover in part two, laughter in Romantic poetry often draws attention to this incongruous predicament. Laughter offers tacit appreciation of the essentially bifurcated human condition: between what we imagine ourselves to be, and the comedy of what we really are. William Hazlitt opens the first in his series of ‘Lectures on the Comic Writers’ (given between November 1818 and January 1819) by announcing this very Romantic irony: “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be”.<sup>27</sup> By arguing that man is the only animal that laughs, Hazlitt echoes Aristotle’s assertion in ‘On the Parts of Animals’. But Hazlitt transforms an Aristotelian appreciation of a physiological response to being tickled, into a model of the Romantic imagination, articulating the continual endeavour to reconcile human limits with instinctive flashes of infinite possibilities. Hazlitt’s remarks show how a sense of humour becomes aligned with the imagination in the early nineteenth century. The next section considers this development in more detail and the position of laughter within it.

## Humour and Sympathy

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In the last chapter I outlined the ways in which humour becomes associated with the man of feeling, and that by the end of the eighteenth century humour is an essential part of the ethical

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<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. by Nicholas Walker, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 161.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 48.

<sup>27</sup> ‘On Wit and Humour’, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), VI, p. 5

and aesthetic force of sympathy. This alignment intensifies in the first decades of the nineteenth century. By 1827 Thomas Carlyle is declaring that humour is less likely to reside in “a mind that is coarse or callous”; instead, “The essence of humour is sensibility; warm, tender fellow-feeling”.<sup>28</sup> Carlyle’s early appreciation of humour is informed by the dismissive irony of Voltaire, and Molière. But before long he is enchanted by “the humour of Cervantes and Sterne, the product not of Contempt but of Love”.<sup>29</sup> An earlier letter by John Keats in December 1817 also links the pervasiveness of humour with sympathetic feeling. Writing to his brothers about a recent evening spent in the company of Horace Smith and others, Keats observes that it “only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment – These men say things which make one start, without making one feel”.<sup>30</sup> Much of Keats’s writing reflects his fascination with wit (not least his inventive wordplay) but this remark in a letter implies at least the theoretical prioritisation of humour above wit in the Romantic period.

Comparisons between wit and humour are pervasive in the eighteenth century, and come to play a significant part in the linking of humour with Romantic sympathy. Of course, many in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were dismissive of wit, viewing it as an inferior way of connecting ideas. As I showed in the last chapter, however, those writing about laughter also see in wit a means of tying the ludicrous to reason as an alternative to Hobbesian superiority. Evolving from their respective etymologies, humour is said to spring from personality, instinct, feeling, where wit is artificial and impersonal. Reviewing Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* in 1755, Adam Smith proposes that

Wit expresses something that is more designed, concerted, regular, and artificial; humour, something that is more wild, loose, extravagant, and fantastical; something

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<sup>28</sup> Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by H. D. Traill, 30 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896–1899), XXVI, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, in *Works of Thomas Carlyle*, XXII, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, p. 193.

which comes upon man by fits, which he can neither command nor restrain, and which is not perfectly consistent with true politeness.<sup>31</sup>

With the turn away from a culture of politeness, however, the characteristics Smith points to as being problematic in humour are praised by the Romantics as demonstrative of natural emotion. Playing on its roots in organic science, Samuel Taylor Coleridge heralds humour as a “growth from within”.<sup>32</sup> Essays seeking to differentiate and demarcate wit and humour recur frequently in nineteenth-century periodicals, indicating that the distinction mattered to many at the time, though the apparent need to keep reaffirming their differences might also imply that in practice their borders blurred.

In Romantic thought, wit becomes associated with the production of the fancy, while humour marks the expansive power and limitless capabilities of the imagination. Leigh Hunt confirms the almost synonymous relation existing between wit and fancy when he declares that, “the soul of wit is fancy”.<sup>33</sup> In 1818 Hazlitt remarks that, “wit is the product of art and fancy”,<sup>34</sup> while humour announces the creativity and infinite insight of the imagination:

This intuitive perception of the hidden analogies of things...this instinct of the imagination, is, perhaps, what stamps the character of genius on the productions of art more than any other circumstance: for it works unconsciously, like nature, and receives its impressions from a kind of inspiration. There is as much of this indistinct keeping and involuntary unity of purpose in Cervantes, as in any author

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<sup>31</sup> Originally published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1755, reproduced as *Adam Smith Reviews Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. by Robert DeMaria, Jr. (The Samuel Johnson Society of Southern California, 2005), p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> 'Wit and Humour', in *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. by Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Constable, 1936), p. 443.

<sup>33</sup> 'On Wit and Humour', in *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, gen eds. Robert Morrison and Michael Eberle-Sinatra, 6 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), IV, p. 137.

<sup>34</sup> 'On Wit and Humour', in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, VI, p. 15.

whatever. Something of the same unsettled, rambling humour extends itself to all the subordinate parts and characters of the work.<sup>35</sup>

Because of this, humour belongs with the fervour of verse, engaged in “producing a more intense admiration and exalted passion”.<sup>36</sup> For Thomas Carlyle its imaginative capacity means that, “Humour has justly been regarded as the finest perfection of poetic genius”.<sup>37</sup> Carlyle’s comments derive partly from the gradual shift in thought outlined in the previous chapter. Perhaps most of all, though, it originates in the example of Jean Paul Richter.<sup>38</sup> Carlyle portrays Richter as a high Romantic, whose sympathetic power extends well beyond empathy, traversing the normal boundaries of space-time, evocative of poetic imagination. He is “an intellectual Colossus...piercing into the most hidden combinations of things, and grasping the most distant: an imagination...brooding over the abysses of Being; wandering through Infinitude”.<sup>39</sup> Yet he is a “humorist from his inmost soul”: humour is “the ruling quality with Richter”, through which “he feels, imagines, acts”.<sup>40</sup> “Richter is a man of mirth”, and it is this that fashions and fosters his sympathetic imagination:

He is a man of feeling, in the noblest sense of that word; for he loves all living with the heart of a brother; his soul rushes forth, in sympathy with all gladness and sorrow, with goodness or grandeur, over all Creation...His is the spirit which gives life and beauty to whatever it embraces. Inanimate Nature itself is no longer an

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<sup>35</sup> ‘On the English Novelists’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, VI, p. 109.

<sup>36</sup> ‘On Wit and Humour’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, VI, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Schiller’, in *Works of Carlyle*, XXVII, p. 200. For an overview of the association of humour with poetry in the Romantic period see Donald J. Gray, ‘Humor as Poetry in Nineteenth-Century English Criticism’, *The Journal of English and German Philology*, 61 (1962), 249–257.

<sup>38</sup> Richter’s writing also influences Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey and their interpretation of wit, humour, and sympathy. See *Coleridge’s Miscellaneous Criticism*, pp. 111–130, and pp. 440–446; Thomas De Quincey, ‘Jean Paul Frederick Richter’, first published in *London Magazine*, IV, December 1821, pp. 606–620, see *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, gen ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000–2003), III, pp. 17–26.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Jean Paul Friedrich Richter’, in *Works of Carlyle*, XXVI, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

insensible assemblage of colours and perfumes, but a mysterious Presence, with which he communes in unutterable sympathies.<sup>41</sup>

Carlyle's description reflects the extension of the parameters of sympathy in the Romantic period beyond the social paradigms of Hume and Smith. It is not just a response illustrating our inclination for sympathy with others as part of a dynamic process of socialisation; nor is it simply an act moderated out of concern for how others perceive us. Carlyle's sympathetic humour is closer to the etymology of the word from the Greek 'sympatheia', implying awareness of an organic whole and the mutual interdependence of all things. This is a rendering of sympathy that has clear resonance with the interests of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Percy Shelley.

### Laughter as Sympathy

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Laughter has a complicated place in the link between humour and sympathy. Throughout the eighteenth century laughter is described as being infectious and transmissible. For instance, Francis Hutcheson remarks that "laughter moves to laugh" because it is "naturally contagious".<sup>42</sup> David Hartley puts the development of children's laughter beyond a "nascent cry" down to their attempts at imitating the behaviour of adults: "they learn to laugh, as they learn to talk and walk...when they see others laugh", which shows "one of the Sources of the sympathetic Affections".<sup>43</sup> Adam Smith uses the example of laughter to underline the judgement of individual action inherent in the sympathetic social contract:

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. pp. 15-16.

<sup>42</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, 2 vols (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 20-21.

<sup>43</sup> David Hartley, *Observations On Man*, 2 vols (London, 1791), I, p. 437.



He who laughs at the same joke, and laughs along with me, cannot well deny the propriety of my laughter...If I laugh loud and heartily when he only smiles, or, on the contrary, only smile when he laughs loud and heartily; in all these cases, as soon as he comes from considering the object, to observe how I am affected by it, according as there is more or less disproportion between his sentiments and mine, I must incur a greater or less degree of his disapprobation.<sup>44</sup>

But the fact that some people laugh at distress instead of showing compassion means that laughter is also assumed to be antithetical to the ethical demands of sympathy. Richard Payne Knight highlights how these long held assumptions continue in the Romantic period when, in 1805, he argues that laughter is “Diametrically opposite” to the pathetic in poetry because it is “an expression of joy and exultation; which arises not from sympathy but triumph and which seems therefore to have its principle in malignity”.<sup>45</sup> Hazlitt acknowledges as much when he differentiates between tears of pity and the laughter of derision:

We shed tears from sympathy with real and necessary distress; as we burst into laughter from want of sympathy with that which is unreasonable and unnecessary, the absurdity of which provokes our spleen or mirth, rather than any serious reflections on it.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst laughter helps us distinguish “false claims upon our sympathy”, our capacity to laugh shows “our satisfaction with ourselves, or our contempt for those about us...because our self-love is stronger than our sympathy”.<sup>47</sup> In this instance laughter acts against Hazlitt’s hope that

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<sup>44</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D. D. Raphael, and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 16-17.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London, 1805), p. 410.

<sup>46</sup> ‘On Wit and Humour’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, VI, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 5, p. 9.

the capacity of sympathy might enable people to rise above individualism and embrace a community of feeling.

Consequently, a number of critics have suggested that writers in the Romantic period move away from laughter and toward the smile as the performative gesture of sympathy, which becomes only more pronounced in the Victorian age.<sup>48</sup> As proof, they generally cite Thomas Carlyle's comment that "True humour...is not contempt, its essence is love; it issues not in laughter, but in still smiles, which lie far deeper".<sup>49</sup> Focusing on the smile, Carlyle bypasses not only the synonymous relation between laughter and ridicule, but also the frivolity and foolishness that is historically attributed to laughers. By alluding to Wordsworth's concluding lines of the 'Immortality Ode', meanwhile, he associates the smile with pathos, lending credibility to the belief that a humorous smile reflects a sympathetic heart.

Yet there is little doubt that the transition toward sympathetic humour in the Romantic period includes laughter. Carlyle himself is a key figure in defence of laughter as sympathy, whilst believing the smile to be "a cold glitter as of ice".<sup>50</sup> He associates laughter with those archetypes of the Romantic sympathetic imagination: Richter and Shakespeare. In sentiments reminiscent of the benevolence witnessed in the eighteenth century toward Quixote, Falstaff, Parson Adams, and others, Carlyle reads Richter as a figure "to be forever laughed at and forever loved".<sup>51</sup> Carlyle's appreciation of the fact that one may laugh at a person and still feel warmly toward them is perceptive and important. Others feel similarly. Charles Lamb, aware that there is a world of difference between "the petrifying sneer of a demon which excludes and kills Love", and "cordial laughter...which implies and cherishes it", also wonders, "What heart was ever made the worse by joining in a hearty laugh at the simplicities of Sir Hugh Evans or Parson

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<sup>48</sup> See Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Gray, 'Humor as Poetry in Nineteenth Century English Criticism'; Robert Bernard Martin, *The Triumph of Wit: A Study of Victorian Comic Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Matthew Bevis, 'Tennyson's Humour', in *Tennyson among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 231-58.

<sup>49</sup> 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter', in *Works of Carlyle*, XXVI, p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> *Sartor Resartus*, in *Works of Carlyle*, I, p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter', in *Works of Carlyle*, XXVI, p. 17.

Adams, where a sense of the ridiculous mutually kindles and is kindled by a perception of the amiable”.<sup>52</sup> Anna Laetitia Barbauld stresses the ethical foundations of laughter when considering Parson Adams. She argues that Fielding “has shown great skill in making us laugh so heartily at a character, and yet keeping it above contempt”; the Parson’s “foibles and eccentricities” mean that, “we love and laugh at him at the same time”.<sup>53</sup>

Identifying the source of Shakespeare’s sympathetic power, Carlyle notices his “genuine overflowing love of laughter...his laughter seems to pour from him in floods”.<sup>54</sup> Though Shakespeare “heaps all manner of ridiculous nicknames on the butt he is bantering, tumbles and tosses him in all sorts of horse-play...with his whole heart laughs”, yet “it is always a genial laughter”, for “Laughter means sympathy”.<sup>55</sup> Carlyle’s imagery is in sharp contrast to the moderation frequently prescribed in the previous century. Now laughter is an outburst of sympathetic feeling, for “we like the poor fellows only the better for our laughing; and hope they will get on well...Such laughter, like sunshine on the deep sea, is very beautiful to me.”<sup>56</sup> Carlyle believes that Shakespeare’s characters “tickle our very hearts; and we dismiss them covered with explosions of laughter”.<sup>57</sup> The combination of tenderness (tickling our hearts) and violence (explosions of laughter) is striking and significant: it evokes the grouping of feeling and force that the Romantic period frequently attributes to laughter. Lexical variations on ‘force’ occur in particular, with ‘explosions’ and ‘bursts’ of laughter enthusiastically described.

Laughter is also aligned with the profound insight of the poetic imagination. In *Sartor Resartus*, the narrator explains that the only time he saw the metaphysician Teufelsdröckh laugh was during a conversation with Richter. Teufelsdröckh is a figure of contrariety: “Gleams of an ethereal love burst forth from him, soft wailings of infinite pity” and yet “he is so sly and still, so imperturbably saturnine; shows such indifference, malign coolness towards all that men strive

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<sup>52</sup> Charles Lamb, ‘On the Genius and Character of Hogarth’, in *Selected Prose*, Adam Phillips (Penguin: London, 2013), p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *The British Novelists*, 50 vols (London, 1810), XVIII, p. xiv.

<sup>54</sup> ‘The Hero as Poet’, in *Works of Carlyle*, V, p. 109.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

after”.<sup>58</sup> The influence of Richter’s sympathetic humour, however, and its “heaven-kissing coruscations”, produces from Teufelsdröckh an explosive release, “such a peal of laughter, enough to have awakened the Seven Sleepers”.<sup>59</sup> ‘Teufelsdröckh’ translates as ‘devil-excrement’. In this instance Carlyle’s scatological humour transposes into an appreciation of an outburst of laughter from the body and its metaphysical import. Richter seems to provide Teufelsdröckh with what Carlyle imagines in ‘The Hero as Poet’ to be the province of philosophy and poetry, penetrating the “sacred mystery of the Universe; what Goethe calls ‘the open secret’ – open to all, seen by almost none! That divine mystery, which lies everywhere in all Beings”.<sup>60</sup> For something of this kind alights upon him:

gradually, a light kindled in our Professor’s eyes and face, a beaming, mantling, loveliest light; through those murky features, a radiant, ever-young Apollo looked; and he burst forth like the neighing of all Tattersall’s, - tears streaming down his cheeks, pipe held aloft, foot clutched into the air, - loud, long-continuing, uncontrollable; a laugh not of the face and diaphragm only, but of the whole man from head to heel.<sup>61</sup>

The passage reflects the physiognomical theories of Lavater in assuming a person’s interior self is sketched on the face. But, more importantly, the description of the total engagement of the self as Teufelsdröckh laughs “from head to heel” implies the combination of the intellect and emotion that is the hallmark of Romantic theories of imagination, while the imagery ties laughter to an aesthetic of powerful feelings. The overflow of laughter channels poetic insight and whimsy: awakening the spirit of the classical Apollo, and absurd Swiftian whinnying. Carlyle has little time for buffoonish japery, or the laughter of fools – he says at one point that the laughter

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<sup>58</sup> *Sartor Resartus*, in *Works of Carlyle*, I, p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> ‘The Hero as Poet’, in *Works of Carlyle*, V, p. 80.

<sup>61</sup> *Sartor Resartus*, in *Works of Carlyle*, I, p. 26.

of sympathy is not “the crackling of thorns under the pot”.<sup>62</sup> But he does appreciate laughter that spontaneously erupts from the body, even as it suggests transcendence of it. “Laughter”, he writes later, “if it comes from the heart, is a heavenly thing”.<sup>63</sup>

### Recalcitrant Laughter

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So far, I have considered the laughter of a Romantic community, and how laughter becomes interwoven with the language of the sublime, whilst always threatening to undermine it. I have described the prioritisation of humour over wit because of its close association with natural emotion, and how, within this discourse, laughter is hailed as a genuine overflow of feeling, and illustrative of the sympathetic imagination. In this section, I highlight the ways in which understandings of laughter as something natural and forceful leads to an association with the rebellious. I relate this to the radical politics of Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and Lord Byron in their critique of modern society as characterless and conformist, and politically and aesthetically quiescent.

In ‘On Wit and Humour’ Hazlitt observes:

You cannot force people to laugh: you cannot give a reason why they should laugh: they must laugh of themselves, or not at all. As we laugh from a spontaneous impulse, we laugh the more at any restraint upon this impulse. We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not. If we think we must not laugh, this perverse impediment makes our temptation to laugh the greater.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> ‘The Hero as Poet’, in *Works of Carlyle*, V, p. 109. The allusion is to *Ecclesiastes* 7:6, “For as the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is laughter of the fool; this also is vanity”.

<sup>63</sup> ‘The Opera’, in *Works of Carlyle*, XXIX, p. 403.

<sup>64</sup> ‘On Wit and Humour’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, VI, p. 9.

By rooting laughter in temperament and idiosyncrasy, Hazlitt echoes humoral theory, asserting that laughter derives from our natural disposition. His imagery is evocative of an aesthetic of excess long associated with Romanticism, and which we heard during the nitrous oxide experiments and the laughter of sympathy as well. Whereas James Beattie worried about laughter's "unrestrained energies", Hazlitt identifies this as a crucial feature of personal liberty, acting as a unique signifier of individualism. Through the language of masculine power and the lexis of deviance (which is suggestively, if vaguely, sexual) laughter is expressive of our resistance to social compliance. Reconfiguring the traditional 'natural' versus 'artificial' debate, to laugh becomes an instinctive means of retaining autonomy, and of resisting socio-cultural restraints. Stubbornly opposed to conformity, it meets powerful influences with its own triumphant show of strength, breaking "out the more violently in peals of laughter".<sup>65</sup> Though extrapolating his remarks to the function of Romantic satire would be easy enough, it is not genre Hazlitt has in mind here but the fact that laughter articulates our gleeful inclination toward disobedience:

The consciousness, however it may arise, that there is something that we ought to look grave at, is almost always a signal for laughing outright: we can hardly keep our countenance at a sermon, a funeral, or a wedding...It is not an easy matter to preserve decorum in courts of justice. The smallest circumstance that interferes with the solemnity of the proceedings, throws the whole place into an uproar of laughter.<sup>66</sup>

Hazlitt assumes that our predisposition is to laugh whenever there is a culturally ingrained expectation toward earnestness. This "uproar of laughter" is rude in a number of senses of the term ubiquitous to Hazlitt's time. It is uncivil, and impolite, wild, boisterous, and robust. This makes it free.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

The rebellious and robust laughter is aligned with radical politics in ‘The Fight’ (first published by Hazlitt under the pseudonym ‘Phantastes’ in *New Monthly Magazine* 1822), embodied by the pugnacious English yeoman Hazlitt meets at The Crown coaching inn at Newbury. The comparison of the man to Shakespeare’s Falstaff is significant. Elsewhere, Hazlitt links Falstaff’s boisterous humour with liberty, as one who “shakes his fat sides with laughter...plays about the lungs and diaphragm with all the force of animal enjoyment” and is forcefully “opposed to the received rules and necessary restraints of society”.<sup>67</sup> The yeoman, in turn, is a “laughing prosecutor”, with “spirit, a hearty body and a joyous mind, free-spoken, frank”, yet “convivial”; he stoutly and with “prodigious noise” rails against “rent and taxes, and the price of corn now and formerly”.<sup>68</sup> He thus exemplifies what visitors to the country in the nineteenth century identify as a brand of English humour that “feels, and forcibly censures, the inequalities of life”.<sup>69</sup> Passionately moved by the troubled realities of country life, the yeoman jests, teases and torments the other patrons who are frustratingly content to be “insipid” – one of Hazlitt’s favourite phrases to denote political inertia and social conformity.<sup>70</sup> His “loud and furious fun” is a rejection of the centrist, conformist positions of others, and articulates a brand of English liberty opposing the restrictions imposed by the state upon the people.<sup>71</sup> He may call to mind “that true English breed that went with Harry the Fifth to the siege of Harfleur”.<sup>72</sup> But rather than unswerving loyalty to the crown and state, the yeoman’s firebrand speech and bullish manner remind Hazlitt of the reformist politics of William Cobbett, whom Hazlitt portrays elsewhere as an image of opposition: “wherever power is, there is he against it”.<sup>73</sup> The yeoman combines agrarian political radicalism with firm aesthetic beliefs. Hazlitt is excited to hear the man exclaim the merits of Hogarth and Shakespeare, “our two best men at copying life”.<sup>74</sup> Both

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<sup>67</sup> ‘Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, IV, pp. 278-279.

<sup>68</sup> ‘The Fight’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XVII, pp. 77-78.

<sup>69</sup> Hippolyte Taine, *Notes on England*, quoted in Harold Nicolson, *The English Sense of Humour* (London: Constable, 1956), p. 21.

<sup>70</sup> ‘The Fight’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XVII, p. 77.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* p. 77.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Character of Cobbett’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, VIII, p. 54.

<sup>74</sup> ‘The Fight’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XVII, p. 78.

his political perspective and his aesthetic taste are imbued with the empiricism Hazlitt (like Cobbett) identifies with Englishness – as opposed to the systemising he aligns with the French, and the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>75</sup>

### Modern Manners and Cultural Conformity

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A combination of abstraction and conformity has turned English culture into “one polished horde, / Formed of two mighty tribes, the Bores and Bored”.<sup>76</sup> Byron’s sense that the “days of Comedy are gone” derives from a change in public morality, and the modern taste for smooth refinement that sees the arts progress toward docile conformism.<sup>77</sup> This shift rankles Byron who views it as another instance of the cant of the age. In the theatre the rakish comedies Byron admires from the Restoration have been replaced by sentimental comedy influenced by an eighteenth-century culture of politeness. On 7<sup>th</sup> March 1820, John Murray tries to explain to Byron that, “Manners...have changed...The comedies of Charles<s> Seconds days are not tolerated now...it is not affectation of moralities but the real progress and result of refinement”.<sup>78</sup> Byron’s retort, “it is not decency but Stupidity that does all this”,<sup>79</sup> privately echoes the exasperation we hear from Hazlitt and Lamb in their published accounts of the manners and morality of modern comedy. All three frequently use ‘insipid’ as a term of abuse to characterise contemporary ‘refined’ culture. In 1814, Byron goes to see Sheridan’s *Trip to Scarborough* – a reworking of John Vanbrugh’s bawdy *The Relapse* (1696) – and writes in his journal: “Congreve and Vanbrugh are your only comedy. Our society is too insipid now for the like

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<sup>75</sup> See Antony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 62. More recently David Higgins has explored the relation between England and Scotland via their respective review culture, see ‘Romantic Englishness: Periodical Writing and National Identity After the Napoleonic Wars’, in *Literature of an Independent England*, ed. by Claire Westall and Michael Gardiner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 63–76.

<sup>76</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), V, p. 553.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 552.

<sup>78</sup> *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 310.

<sup>79</sup> *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–1994), VII, p. 61.



copy”.<sup>80</sup> Lamb’s *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets* (1808) decries the “insipid levelling morality to which the modern stage is tied down...With us all is hypocritical meekness”. This sentimentality means “audiences come to the theatre to be complimented on their goodness” instead of being shown the “vigorous passions...clad in flesh and blood, with which the old dramatists present us”.<sup>81</sup>

In his essay ‘On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century’ (published in the *London Magazine* in 1822) Lamb complains of the “moral test” taken by his contemporaries to the theatre which “We screw everything up to”.<sup>82</sup> Far from depicting the world as it is, modern sentimental comedy has a “common stock of dramatic morality out of which a writer may be supplied without the trouble of copying it from originals within his own breast”.<sup>83</sup> Lamb’s wish is for the morality of art to derive from actual lived experience, and be principally formed from natural feeling rather than stock characters and supposedly universal feelings. A few comments in his essay on Shakespearean tragedy and some others in ‘On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century’ might imply that Lamb views the medium of performance as inadequate in comparison to the imagination, or, perhaps that he would prefer art to exist at a distance from both the stage and real life. But these remarks are uncharacteristic of Lamb.<sup>84</sup> More often his thoughts on the theatre display his desire for art that engages with those “flesh and blood” realities. This preference rests in the opportunity to ward off “insipid” sameness in the representation of people as they are in all their variety of humours.

Hazlitt decries the millenarian and sentimental optimism of the age that, in its “progression from grossness to refinement”, leads to tedium in the theatre and dreariness on the street:

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<sup>80</sup> *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, III, p. 249.

<sup>81</sup> Lamb, ‘Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets’, in *Selected Prose*, p. 440.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p. 139.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p. 440

<sup>84</sup> Roy Park, ‘Lamb and Restoration Comedy’, *Essays in Criticism*, 29:3 (1979), 225–243.

though I think the quantity of dull, dry, serious, incorrigible folly in the world is in no danger of being diminished, yet I think the stock of lively, dramatic, entertaining, laughable folly is, and necessarily must be, diminished by the progress of that *mechanical* refinement which consists in throwing our follies...into a common stock, and moulding them in the same general form. Our peculiarities have become insipid sameness; our eccentricity servile imitation; our wit, wisdom at second-hand; our prejudices indifference; our feelings not our own; our distinguishing characteristic the want of all character...[it is] a kind of intellectual *hermaphroditism*.<sup>85</sup>

Via a series of oppositional lexical groupings, “laughable folly” is categorised as natural, vigorous, and fun, and as idiosyncratic or incongruous in comparison to the solemn, unoriginal and mechanised world born of “refinement” that creates one homogenous “common stock”. Like his comparisons in ‘The Fight’, the critique reveals Hazlitt’s concern over the state of the English nation. In ‘The Spirit of the Age’ (first published in 1825 as a series in the *New Monthly Magazine*) the Scottish Enlightenment is said to be obsessed with “mechanism” where “the living bursts of passion are reduced to a defunct common-place; and all true imagination is buried under the dust and rubbish of learned models and imposing authorities”.<sup>86</sup> The Scottish philosophic tradition puts systems ahead of sympathetic understanding, closing people off to strong “bursts” of feeling and appreciation of difference. Moreover, Hazlitt’s association of the Scottish Enlightenment with whiggish progressivism, and the modernising discourse of homogenous ‘improvement’ upon national cultures, serves as another factor in this essay – influencing his opinion that English “eccentricity” has become “servile imitation”, the result of which is “intellectual hermaphroditism”. The systematising and standardising of art and culture endorsed by the Scottish Enlightenment is in sharp contrast to the eclecticism that Hazlitt associates with the English and which, with its insistence upon the observation of nature, empirically celebrates

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<sup>85</sup> ‘On Modern Comedy’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XX, p. 4.

<sup>86</sup> ‘The Spirit of the Age’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XI, pp. 134-135.

“laughing folly”. This is something that English comic writers of the past were so skilled at, Hazlitt suggests, but which modern sentimental comedy polishes away through abstract systemisation:

They were true to nature... Their coarseness was not mere vulgarity, their refinement was not a mere negation of precision. They refined *upon* characters, instead of refining them *away*. Their refinement consisted in working out the parts, not in leaving a vague outline. They painted human nature as it was, and as they saw it with individual character and circumstances, not human nature in general, abstracted from time, place, and circumstance... There is a strength without refinement, which is grossness, as there is a refinement without strength or effect, which is insipidity... There can be no great refinement of character where there is no distinction of persons.<sup>87</sup>

Lamb and Hazlitt offer Hogarth’s rude art as the epitome of English empiricism, observing and comically illustrating incongruity, presenting “human nature not in its elementary principles or by general reflections” but “its essential quality in all their variety of combination”.<sup>88</sup> Hogarth draws on real life, and so his comedies offer sympathetic communion between audience and character which (at least in Hazlitt and Lamb’s reading) the dull abstractions of refinement preclude. Employing again the imagery of violent excess (which in ‘The Fight’ is “reduced to a defunct common-place” by the Scottish Enlightenment), Hazlitt explains that, “In looking at Hogarth, you are ready to burst your sides with laughing at the unaccountable jumble of odd things which are brought together”.<sup>89</sup> “It is easy to laugh at such incongruities” found in

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<sup>87</sup> ‘On Modern Comedy’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XX, p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>89</sup> ‘On the Works of Hogarth’, in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, VI, p. 140.

Hogarth's paintings, Lamb notes, because incongruity is "the very essence of laughter".<sup>90</sup> Like Shakespeare's weaving of tragedy with comedy, Hogarth dizzyingly sketches "disagreeing complexions of one inter-mixture, [that] perpetually unite to shew forth motley spectacles to the world".<sup>91</sup> Lamb's allusion to "motley spectacles" calls forth the incongruous costume of the rambunctious fool, and his noisy swagger upon the stage. In 'All Fool's Day', Lamb's celebration of a traditional English holiday, he extends the garb of the fool to all his readers, when he declares that "We have all a touch of that same – you understand me – a speck of the motley".<sup>92</sup> Much of Lamb's and Hazlitt's writing associates this "speck of the motley" with a particular kind of Englishness – one embedded in incongruity and eccentricity, the natural humour of "laughable folly".

### The Laughter of Merry England

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While Hogarth's incongruous representation of the city offered one example of a laughable English life, the fight to retain a sense of the nation also finds urban writers commemorating the traditions and temperament, the games, and the laughter, of the countryside. Liberal metropolitan magazines like the *Examiner*, *London Magazine*, and the *New Monthly Magazine* help fuel an urban taste for simplicity and wildness to contrast with the commercial and mechanised modernity.<sup>93</sup> Though they may differ in the degree to which they allow party politics to drive content, their revolt against modernity is closely connected to resistance to the state and is bound up with concerns over the nation.<sup>94</sup> In the periodicals, the laughter and tomfoolery of rustic merry England are not pejoratively labelled as defects, or the sign of the depraved, as they frequently were in the official discourse of the past. Instead of being mocked in the tradition of

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<sup>90</sup> Lamb, 'On the Genius and Character of Hogarth', in *Selected Prose*, p. 8.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> 'All Fool's Day', in *Charles Lamb: Elia* (Menston, England: Scolar Press, 1969), p. 95.

<sup>93</sup> See Mina Gorji, 'Clare's "Merry England"', *John Clare Society Journal*, 25 (2005), 5–24. For the significance of the tradition to the radical green politics of Leigh Hunt and John Keats, see Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

<sup>94</sup> In contrast, Krishan Kumar assumes that the turn to the past during this time had nothing to do with English nationalism, see *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 178.

clowns and fools for their folly and vice, then, the behaviour is celebrated as virtuous and honest, and envisaged as an essential part of an ideal English character. The significance of this natural Romantic sociability, meanwhile, counters the motifs of solitude and egoism long associated with the period.

In 1825 Hazlitt publishes 'Merry England' in *New Monthly Magazine*, commending an English hearty "laugh" rooted "very much in a state of nature" for "Their mirth is not the mirth of vice or desperation, but of innocence and a native wildness".<sup>95</sup> Hazlitt asserts that English tastes are not naturally inclined toward the "mawkish, sentimental, affected designs" of classical and neoclassical art; they are not drawn to "epic", nor are their "pretensions lofty" (155). Rather, English tastes "are simple and our own", and thus "we may possibly enjoy our native rural sports, and the rude remembrances of them, with the truer relish on this account, that they are suited to us and we to them" (155). Englishness finds itself best represented in playfulness and whimsy: "No people are fonder of field-sports, Christmas gambols or practical jests", he explains; they love "English games" which are "full of laughable surprises" (153). English theatres, when full of the spirit of holidays, erupt with "undisguised, tumultuous, inextinguishable laughter" (153). Though Hazlitt admits that Punch may not be of English origin, there is no place where he "meets a more joyous welcome", and his rude antics more universally applauded: the "uncouth gestures, ridiculous anger and screaming voice of the chief performer excite more boundless merriment or louder bursts of laughter among all ranks and sorts of people" (153). This lack of affectation is what fuels the "humour of English writing" which "flows from the same source as the merry *traits* of our character. A degree of barbarism and rusticity seems necessary to the perfection of humour" Hazlitt believes, while the "droll and laughable depend on peculiarity and incongruity of character" (157). But the "progress of refinement" (157) rubs these peculiarities away, and thus it is not just English character that has been occluded by the importation of foreign tastes, but English literature is increasingly being threatened as well.

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<sup>95</sup> 'Merry England', in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XVII, p. 160. Subsequent references to the essay are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as page numbers.

Time and again in his rural imaginary Hazlitt distances the barbarous and naïve hilarity of old ‘merry England’ from the more sophisticated customs of continental Europe. It is their true appreciation of “natural and striking humour” that sets the English apart, so that, unlike the French and Italians, “the ludicrous takes hold of the English imagination, and clings to it with all its ramifications” (158). This comparison leads Hazlitt to compare the ‘common’ rustic English to grown children or clowns, and they are said to exhibit the wildness of “a school-boy let loose from school”, or a “dog that has slipped his collar” (152). They are not “gay like the French, who are one eternal smile of self-complacency, tortured into affectation, or spun into languid indifference”, but neither do they immerse themselves in “sensual indolence like the Italians” (152). The sporadic rowdiness of the English is not “worn out by habit” (like the French) nor “deadened by passion” (as with Italians) but “sought with avidity as it takes the mind by surprise, is startled by a sense of oddity and incongruity, [and] indulges its wayward humours or lively impulses, with perfect freedom and lightness of heart” (153). The same year Hazlitt publishes ‘Merry England’, Leigh Hunt produces ‘Old May-Day, New May-Day’, which looks wistfully at the loss of ‘merry England’ and blames the abandonment of its principles partly on the spread of French manners and rational philosophy.<sup>96</sup> It was the “conquest of this island by the pretended politeness and reasoning spirit of the French...[that] rendered us unpoetical and effeminate”, Hunt suggests; which left the English deserting one type of enjoyable folly for another far more tedious kind – keen to show their “refinement by being superior to every rustic impulse”.<sup>97</sup>

The metropolitan mythologizing of the rural past is significant in understanding the history of laughter at this time. For one thing, it identifies the native laughter of England with emotions rather than reason, and is as comfortable with cruelty as compassion. At one point, for instance, Hazlitt wonders whether “without a portion of hardness and repulsiveness of feeling the ludicrous cannot exist” (157). Mingled with the celebration of incongruity is also an acceptance

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<sup>96</sup> In the *Examiner* in December 1817 Hunt also mourns the decline of “the real treasure” of ‘merry England’ which now lies “buried”. See Roe, *The Culture of Dissent*, p. 151.

<sup>97</sup> ‘New May-Day and Old May-Day’, in *Leigh Hunt’s Literary Criticism*, ed. by Lawrence Huston Houtchens and Carolyn Washburn Houtchens (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 215-229 (219-220).

of Hobbesian superiority. What matters to writers like Hazlitt and Hunt is that laughter originates in passion, in true and honest feelings, that are openly and enthusiastically displayed. The call for “barbarism” is a rejoinder to the demand for decorum of the official discourse of the eighteenth century. Moreover, the portrayal of the laughter of ‘merry England’ fizzles with the democratic impulse declared by notable figures in the Romantic period. This laughter is more likely to be shared by the many rather than the few because it is less dependent on acquired manners or learning, relying merely on instinct; it revels too in a range of humours.<sup>98</sup> As a result, the laughter suggests itself as egalitarian (implied by the universal laughter of the theatre during holidays, or the way Punch appeals to every class in Hazlitt’s ‘Merry England’) as well as being sociable.

We have heard throughout the first part of this thesis that laughter is adapted to suit the socio-political, moral, and cultural requirements of each age. Whilst general or universal theories clearly emerge, what is intriguing is the way laughter becomes a receptacle for the preoccupations of contemporary life, which in turn make new meanings for laughter. In part two, I consider how poets fashion the sound of laughter to register their own preoccupations, and the how this range of meanings alters how we hear Romantic verse.

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<sup>98</sup> Of course that is not to say it is any less prescriptive than other models.

# PART TWO



## CHAPTER III

### The Sound of Sympathy

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*"There is in souls a sympathy with sounds..."*

*(William Cowper, The Task)*

Part one of this thesis discussed laughter in relation to sympathy in the eighteenth century and Romantic period. It established that the dominant discourses of laughter prior to the eighteenth century were ones of ridicule, and that one of the consequences of superiority theories of humour was that laughter was perceived as anti-sympathetic. During the eighteenth century, however, and largely born of resistance to Hobbism, moralists encouraged a view of laughter that better suited their vision of human nature as benevolent. Partly as a consequence of this, laughter became associated with sociability, uniting rather than dividing people, and proof of our mutual sensibility. As I illustrated, the cumulative weight given to the imagination toward the end of the eighteenth century, combined with increased enthusiasm for the spontaneous and the natural, meant that Romantic writers connected laughter with the communication of sympathetic feeling.

Thus there is a need to modify our understanding of sentiment and sensibility in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century in order to accommodate laughter along with the common arbiters of a performance of sympathy like crying, sighing or swooning. There is also a case for acknowledging laughter's place within the Romantic imagination. This chapter develops the argument from the history of ideas into an analysis of the laughter of sympathy in Romantic poetry. It will consider the verse of Robert Burns, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Shelley; detailing the various ways they communicate sympathy through laughter. Beginning with Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter' as a bridge between the eighteenth century and Romanticism, I situate the poem's laughter largely within a Smithian framework concerning

social and ethical economies. The laughter in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ also articulates an important theme throughout this chapter: the role of the poet as a possible facilitator of sympathy. Turning next to ‘The Idiot Boy’, I consider Wordsworth’s comic exploration of the limits of sympathy. Wordsworth’s verse, particularly during the period of *Lyrical Ballads*, often offers an intense focus upon desolate places and isolated, tragic figures, with the speaker exhibiting pity toward the experience of suffering. But ‘The Idiot Boy’ highlights Wordsworth’s interest in comedy as both a vehicle for sympathy and a way of calling sympathetic understanding into question. In the third section, I explore laughter’s role in the Romantic period’s affinity with nature, extending the largely societal significance of sympathy of the previous generation. When Wordsworth and Coleridge converse with the natural world, they also find a natural flow of sympathy through laughter. As I will show, though, whilst their use of laughter implies coalescence, it also voices the unique position of the poet, and carries subtle questions concerning the possibility of sympathetic feeling. The final section of the chapter will consider Shelley’s laughter in ‘Hymn to Mercury’ and ‘Julian and Maddalo’. Partly as a consequence of his own linking of sympathy to his suffering, Shelley’s approach to the subject is commonly imagined to be entirely earnest and humourless. But Shelley’s use of laughter also frequently displays a more mischievous side that is equivocal toward sympathy. By focusing on the playful and social laughter of male canonical poets traditionally associated with solemn reflections of sympathy (excluding Burns), I hope to contribute in a small way to the re-evaluation of laughter within Romanticism.

In Book III of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth tells us that in his undergraduate days he “laugh’d with Chaucer”.<sup>1</sup> Amidst the meadows of “Trompington” and around four hundred years after *The Canterbury Tales* were written, Wordsworth can laugh along with Chaucer because, in reading we are both “Alone, and yet in company: that is the paradoxical position of the reader”.<sup>2</sup> To read is to share the company of others, if only in imagination, and as such reading closes the gap

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. by Mark L. Reed, 2 vols (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), I, p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Barnes, *Through the Window: Seventeen Essays (and one short story)* (London: Vintage, 2012), p. ix.

between one self and another by providing a place where minds may meet. As with the pleasing possibility of sharing oneself with another through laughter, poetry holds the tantalising prospect of feeling ourselves connected to others. Like laughter, poetry can be what Seamus Heaney calls a “dissolver of differences”.<sup>3</sup> The very form of verse accommodating sounds of laughter seeks out (by sounding out) connections through its teasing rhyme and rhythm, its grammar, alliteration and assonance, and in its intimately suggestive allusion and echo. Thus, in addition to the thematic implications of focussing on the laughter of sympathy in Romantic poetry we find the value of attending to its local formal details. Any attempt to engage critically with a literary work requires sensitivity to the tactile and sonic impulses of a text.<sup>4</sup> It is through close attention to the specifics of verse that a reader identifies a poem, but is also most likely to feel intimately acquainted with it. As such, reading poetry mirrors the hope that we might empathise with others through greater familiarity and attention. But interpretation (whether of poems or other selves) is likewise touched by a constant awareness of the limitations of our understanding, our inability fully to immerse ourselves within some other subject, even as we feel ourselves being influenced, seduced, at times overwhelmed, by that other. As we will see, laughter of sympathy within poetry continually asks questions of our reading process. Even the solitary approach of critical analysis encourages a sociable outlook, where one’s own ego encounters others, and accommodates as well as challenges these other selves. This includes not only the poems, and poets, but also, of course, the words and character of other critics. In this way, reading critically resembles the perspective of the Romantics discussed in this chapter, as they seek out ways of retaining their individuality, whilst employing laughter as a mode of communication that announces sympathy for the other.

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<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Sounding Auden’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 194. Compare George Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’: “The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies”, in *George Eliot: Selected Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> Valentine Cunningham discusses the “sensitivity of critical touch” required in any analysis of literature. In ‘Fact and Tact’, *Essays in Criticism*, 51:1 (2001), 119–138 (pp. 132-133). See also Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), especially pp. 1-5.

## ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ and Burns’s Ready Chorus

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Commentary on Burns’s ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ (1791) has pivoted upon three areas: the attitude or position of the narrator; whether or not any moral might be gleaned from the conclusion, and the poem’s representation of, and approach to, gender. Criticism of the poem has yet to show any real interest in the laughter in the tavern at the start of the poem. Yet it provides a notable case study of the aesthetics of sensibility Burns inspects throughout his writing. One infamous example is the “Ha!” that opens ‘To a Louse’, which heralds the incongruous sense of wonder and loathing crawling through the mock-epic’s dissection of the modifying of social behaviour via Smithian spectatorship.<sup>5</sup> As a grotesque embodiment of the upward mobility witnessed within the community, the louse draws a startled outburst conveying the speaker’s ambivalent imaginative engagement with the creature – at once admiring of its physical proximity to “Sae fine a Lady” (10) and her fashionable attire, even as he mocks the beastie’s pursuit of “Miss’s fine *Lunard*” (35) bonnet.

In contrast, the sociable laughter in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ suggests fellow-feeling, as the landlord offers jovial affirmation to his customers:

The night drave on wi’ sangs and clatter  
 And ay the ale was growing better:  
 The landlady and *Tam* grew gracious,  
 Wi’ favours, secret, sweet and precious:  
 The Souter tauld his queerest stories;  
 The landlord’s laugh was ready chorus:  
 The storm without might rair and rustle,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), I, p. 193. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers. There have been many readings of ‘To a Louse’ in the context of Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. I found Nigel Leask’s discussion of the “crawlin ferlie” especially illuminating. See *Burns and Pastoral* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 168-178.

*Tam* did na mind the storm a whistle.<sup>6</sup>

Burns juxtaposes the hostile environment outside with the hospitable atmosphere inside. The landlord's laugh is satisfying, a dulcet "ready chorus", which responds to the Souter's "queerest stories", and contrasts with the "rair" of the storm. Further sonic imagery implies *Tam*'s accord with the laughing chorus as well, for he "did na mind the storm a whistle". Hospitable, and full of kindred spirit, the sound of laughter carries the mutuality of the group's affections as they derive pleasure from their natural affinity toward, and apparent understanding of, each other. Though Shaftesbury's comments on sympathy are explicitly concerned with the aristocracy, the plebeian context of "*Tam o' Shanter*" performs the "delight" he assumes we find in the company of others, "gathering it...from the pleased and happy states of those around us...from the very countenances, gestures, voices and sounds, even of creatures foreign to ourselves, whose signs of joy and contentment we can anyway discern".<sup>7</sup>

The sympathy *within* the poem is echoed by the sounds *of* the poem. This is felt in the plethora of alliteration and assonance in the passage, and heard in the anaphora, which creates an air of incantation. Specifically, it is suggested through the "I" strikes of the three beats of "landlord's laugh" that acts like contagion, and the manner in which the sound of the first syllable of "stories" drifts into "chorus", as "stor" is then received into the repeated "storm". The alliteration and assonance of "secret, sweet, and precious" gather into "queerest stories", extending a satisfying aural harmony that climaxes in the laughing "ready chorus". Throughout, the verse performs its own form of the refrain, sympathetically responding to, transmitting, and amplifying sounds of sociability.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, II, p. 558. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury, 'An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit', Book II, Part II, Section I, in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. by Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 204. Jon Mee argues that the principal lesson poets of the 1790s take from Lord Shaftesbury's conception of sympathy is the need to regulate or control its overflow. Chris Jones, however, suggests that the key idea transmitted from Shaftesbury's writing into the 1780s and 1790s is not regulation but communal acts of shared feeling. See Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Early in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) – which, according to Burns’s entries in his commonplace book he had read by 1783<sup>8</sup> – Adam Smith proposes that

whatever may be the cause of sympathy, or however it may be excited, nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary.<sup>9</sup>

In the specific case of laughter, Smith explains that a “man is mortified when, after having endeavoured to divert the company, he looks round and sees that nobody laughs at his jests but himself”, while, conversely, “the mirth of the company is highly agreeable to him, and he regards this correspondence of their sentiments with his own as the greatest applause”.<sup>10</sup> Smith’s focus on self-assessment here can be applied to the landlord’s laughter and its apparent endorsement of the Souter’s stories, which also acts as validation of the Souter as an individual. For Smith, the concern we have for how others perceive us, disclosed by our apparent desire for approval, is an essential part of sympathy: helping to regulate social interaction and maintain civil order. Self-regard directs our vision outward to the expectations of a wider society, and thus moderates our individual behaviour according to the values of that larger community. The landlord, therefore, calculates his position in relation to his clientele, conscious that he is both subject to and object of the expectations of others. Part of the landlord’s capacity as a ‘man of feeling’, then, is his pliability, while this awareness of others ensures a congenial environment.

Any ethical mediation at work here is framed as an essentially economic one as well. The landlord’s good-natured response to his client’s expectations is a shrewd business decision, with the accord in the tavern part of a social contract tangled up in a monetary transaction. A crucial

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D. D. Raphael, and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

element of the landlord's job is the creation of good-humour, and the manufacture of sympathetic pleasure: valuable services for the success of his commercial enterprise, that run in tandem with the maintenance of a sociable community. Unnamed, and known only as a landlord, his identity is defined solely as the proprietor of the tavern, with his social function devolved around his business. That business is the production of pleasure, via leisure and entertainment. In this context, the apparent spontaneity of his laughter sounds rather automatic and pre-prepared: a "ready chorus" because it is the calculated response of a figure who knows what is expected of him and what sort of environment he needs to establish to boost his coffers. The landlord has adapted to his milieu, aware that the more amiable he is to his customers, the more they will spend. Thus his laughter can be heard as another commodity within an economic model of supply and demand, as the sympathy is driven by self-oriented monetary desire.<sup>11</sup> The laughter is an act of sociability; but this geniality is laced with a venal motive.

It is this economy of sympathy, the complicated process of exchange and investment between landlord and paying customer, that distinguishes the laughter in Burns's tavern from a similar incident in James Thomson's *The Seasons* (a poem Burns was fond of, and which may well influence the passage), where, in 'Winter',

the cottage-hind

Hangs o'er the enlivening blaze, and taleful there  
 Recounts his simple frolic: much he talks,  
 And much he laughs, nor recks the storm that blows  
 Without, and rattles on his humble roof.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Anon. 'The Tavern Hunter, or a Drunken Ramble' (London, 1702), p. 12. The landlord is so adroit that he "Dilated our Hearts till we drip'd at the Eyes, / Till tir'd with laughing then calling to pay".

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, III, p. 1356. The Canongate edition of Burns's poetry omits the allusion.

The laughter in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’, then, alerts us to what was felt to be a problem in the discourse of sympathy. At least since Lord Shaftesbury, people worried over the authenticity of a consciously sympathetic act even as they promoted it as a support to communities. William Hazlitt continues the tradition in the Romantic era when he concerns himself with whether or not sympathy enables individuals to look beyond their own self-oriented vision and share in a community of feeling.<sup>13</sup> The capacity of individuals to extend sympathy toward others will become an important component of the later sections of this chapter when discussing Wordsworth in particular. But the laughter of the landlord also reveals another notable strand of eighteenth-century thought: namely, that self-love operates for the social good. Bernard Mandeville expended much energy in depicting public benefits flowing not from human benevolence but from the egoistic operations of private vices. Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) identified the individual’s self-interest as fundamental to the dynamic of a modern commercial society. Read in this way, the landlord’s laughter articulates his investment in society, contributing not only to the pleasure of the group, but also the wealth of the nation.

The musical imagery of the landlord’s laughter brings him into a subtle association with the devil later in Burns’s poem.<sup>14</sup> Like the landlord, “auld Nick” (120) appears to be on the periphery of the action, but this does not mean, as McGinty would have us believe, that the “devil plays a minor role”.<sup>15</sup> Though the dancing takes centre stage, especially the erotic gyrations of Cutty-sark, it is the devil that plays the tune:

There sat auld Nick, in shape o’ beast;  
A tousie tyke, black, grim, and large,

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<sup>13</sup> For more on Hazlitt’s engagement in the debate, see John C. Whale, *Imagination under Pressure, 1789-1832: Aesthetics, Politics, and Utility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 110-139.

<sup>14</sup> There could well be a cultural explanation for the intertextual allusion I discuss, especially given Burns’s interest in Calvinism. In Northern Europe in the eighteenth century the publican was held in low regard; negative images of a cunning and dishonest landlord figure in popular farce and jokes, and the sin and disorder that was thought to derive from drinking houses meant that the landlord was often compared to Satan. See, Michael Frank, ‘Satan’s Servants or Authorities Agent? Publicans in Eighteenth-Century Germany’, in *The World of the Tavern: Public Houses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Beat A. Kümin and B. Ann Tlusty (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 12-43.

<sup>15</sup> Walter J. McGinty, ‘Milton’s Satan and Burns’s Auld Nick’, in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 34 (2004), 1-14 (p. 9).



To gie them music was his charge (120-122)

The devil also orchestrates events by producing a jocose environment. Like the landlord, “auld Nick” is a supplier of pleasure; both in effect have others dancing their jig. While it is the landlord’s responsibility to create a sociable environment by selling liquor and laughing at his clients’ stories, the devil’s “charge” is to provide stirring music. Both agents facilitate pleasure, and both are a catalyst (a charge) for how others feel and respond. Both orchestrate communal noise with their respective stimulants influencing the way others behave:

The mirth and fun grew fast and furious:

The piper loud and louder blew;

The dancers quick and quicker flew;

They reel’d, they set, they cross’d, they cleekit (144-147)

The landlord’s laughing chorus operates in a similar way: it sympathetically responds to the expectations of the group, aware of the desires of those in the drinking establishment, giving them what they want, creating a milieu that is harmonious and which assures continued and accelerating patronage. Such sympathetic modes of behaviour animate the surroundings with sensory stimulation. Reconfigured in the macabre scene with the devil, the musical harmony not only pleases the ghoulish figures, but also has the power of animating the lifeless objects within it: “He screw’d the pipes and gart them skirl, / Till roof and rafters a’ did dirl” (123-124). The laughing chorus in the tavern and the musical accompaniment of the devil illustrate the apparently irresistible force an entertainer has upon his or her audience.

The bagpipes are an apt choice in this context: grounded in common life, Scottish folklore also regularly depicted the devil playing them, especially in a rural setting like the one in “Tam o’ Shanter”. But conscious of the desires of his audience, “auld Nick” is also playing the part of

poet. Fred Parker has considered the tradition of linking the devil with the poetic spirit.<sup>16</sup> The local setting and the musical relation between the devil / poet and the landlord in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ means that Burns brings the relation closer to his own milieu. As a commercially aware writer Burns knows that poetic success is coined through popularity on the street. Much like the landlord and the devil in the poem, he must keep his audience happy if he is to find continued patronage. Moreover, by tying the productivity of the poet to the commercial enterprise of the landlord, and the magical yet ghoulish music of the devil, ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ suggests that poetry is first and foremost a pleasure-oriented activity that offers little in the way of engagement with wider social affairs. Francis Jeffrey was wary of what he saw as Burns’s “admiration” of “*the dispensing power* of genius and social feeling”, pointing out in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1809 that many of Burns’s poems achieve their pleasure at the expense of other people.<sup>17</sup> “It is a vile prostitution of language”, Jeffrey declares, “to talk of that man’s generosity or goodness of heart, who sits raving about friendship and philanthropy in a tavern, while his wife’s heart is breaking at her cheerless fireside, and his children are pining in solitary poverty”.<sup>18</sup> For Jeffrey, Burns’s imaginative expressions of social injustice come at the expense of care and attention toward actual experiences. Conversely, we might argue that works like ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ draw indirect attention to the way the conveyance of sympathetic pleasure – whether that is via the laugh of a landlord, the music of the devil, or the entertaining cadences of verse – might dampen moral obligations toward others rather than inspire them. The poem knowingly suggests that self-love and love of society are not inevitably linked as Smith and others hoped. Instead, it implies that sympathy gratifies a self-oriented impulse, revelling in pleasure that potentially dissociates the individual from their wider community.

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<sup>16</sup> Fred Parker, *The Devil as Muse: Blake, Byron and the Adversary* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> In *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Donald A. Low (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 178-195 (182).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 183.

### ‘The Idiot Boy’ and the Limits of Sympathy

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In contrast to the mercantile landlord and the devil in ‘Tam o’ Shanter’, William Wordsworth aspires to a laughter of sympathy that articulates clear devotion toward others. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he justifies his choice of agrarian life by arguing that a more sympathetic and untainted nature is found there. “Low and rustic life was generally chosen”, he explains, “because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language”.<sup>19</sup> The ambition with a poem like ‘The Idiot Boy’, meanwhile, is “to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature”.<sup>20</sup> This aim is apparent throughout the poem, as we read of Betty Foy’s increasing agitation and distress. But toward the poem’s end, when Betty is finally reunited with Johnny, we witness the overpowering effect of affection for others:

And Johnny burrs and laughs aloud,  
Whether in cunning or in joy,  
I cannot tell: but while he laughs,  
Betty a drunken pleasure quaffs,  
To hear again her idiot boy.

And now she’s at the pony’s tail,  
And now she’s at the pony’s head,  
On that side now, and now on this.  
And almost stifled with her bliss,  
A few sad tears does Betty shed.

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<sup>19</sup> *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen, and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 150.

She kisses o'er and o'er again,  
 Him whom she loves, her idiot boy,  
 She's happy here, she's happy there,  
 She is uneasy every where;  
 Her limbs are all alive with joy.<sup>21</sup>

It is less the sight of her son and more the sound of him that initially so overwhelms Betty, where “to hear again” is also to have him ‘here’ again. The imbibing of his laugh is part of this irresistible moment of feeling that involves her tangibly re-discovering him. She is not only intoxicated by his laugh, but also kisses him repeatedly, and frantically pats the pony, attempting to confirm the reality of what her mind has so desired. The connections of sound in the lines, where “joy” is heard again in “boy”, link Betty’s emotions to her son, implying that her own feelings are derived from him; perhaps even that her sense of self is rooted in him. For Wordsworth emphasises throughout the poem that her own wellbeing depends upon her son’s safe return.

Wordsworth’s description of feeling flowing autonomously between individuals through laughter reflects contemporary theories (particularly those emerging in the medical sciences) of sympathy as a largely physiological experience. Betty’s natural affection for Johnny leads to an experience that bypasses her rational faculty and violently seizes control of her body – a response not unlike some of the laughing experiences at the Pneumatic Institute in Bristol. The relief at the return of Johnny is depicted as a kind of physiological possession, as she is “almost stifled with her bliss” and sheds “sad tears”. Her reaction is congruent with release theories that explain laughter as the discharge of nervous energy. Helmuth Plessner explains laughter as deriving partly from the “release of a tension, which, in the superabundance of joy” consumes a person in

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<sup>21</sup> *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. by James Butler, and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 102. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

what he labels the “physical automatism” of the laugh.<sup>22</sup> Betty’s behaviour seems involuntary; she is not entirely in control of herself – “uneasy every where”. One of the central ideas in Henri Bergson’s dissection of the comic is that what makes us laugh is “something mechanical encrusted on something living...the momentary transformation of a person into a thing”.<sup>23</sup> Bergson’s theory revolves around people behaving with an involuntary, mechanical repetitiveness: “A really living life should never repeat itself”, he assumes, and so compulsive repetitions are to be laughed at.<sup>24</sup> Bergson’s Hobbesian approach to laughter as a corrective acknowledges that there is something amusing about certain forms of repetition, the sort of behaviour Betty and the verse exhibit: “She’s happy here, she’s happy there”. Read in this way, the laughter in ‘The Idiot Boy’ (and the verse that performs it) is itself laughable. Michael North has discussed how Bergson’s thesis conceives laughter as mechanical, as a repetitive reflex. So, “the statement that ‘it is really a kind of automatism that makes us laugh’”, not only “means that people laugh at automatism”, but “also means...that laughter itself is a kind of automatism”.<sup>25</sup> Thus the comedy of ‘The Idiot Boy’ (such as it is) is bound up with the laughter of this moment: her laugh “is a kind of automatism”, and our response to her automatic reflex and the repetitive lines might be to laugh, since laughter “goes off spontaneously” as the “result of a mechanism”.<sup>26</sup>

The image of Betty’s “limbs...all alive with joy” is strikingly similar to the moment in *Peter Bell* when the ass appears to perceive that Peter is looking for a way to retrieve his master:

in his uncouth way

Expressing all the joy he may

In every limb and every feature. –

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<sup>22</sup> Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 113-114. Sigmund Freud’s ‘relief’ theory is arguably the best known. See *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. and trans. by Joyce Crick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, reprinted in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 61-190 (97).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 188.

His meagre bones all shake with joy.<sup>27</sup>

*Peter Bell* was originally composed alongside ‘The Idiot Boy’ during that intense period of composition in 1798; both were initially intended for publication in *Lyrical Ballads*. There are of course numerous texts that play with a relation between the human and animal kingdoms, including *Gulliver’s Travels*, a work Wordsworth says is “much to my taste” in his early years.<sup>28</sup> As Simon Critchley has observed, one of the things that “makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human”.<sup>29</sup> When an animal becomes human or takes on human characteristics, the effect, as in the case of *Peter Bell*, is generally appealing. Evidently much of the humour of *Peter Bell* derives from anthropomorphising the ass, conferring feeling upon the asinine in order to play up Peter’s brutish behaviour. But what are we to make of Wordsworth’s similar description of Betty? What is particularly significant in the case of this sympathetic laughter is that during a moment that might be said to articulate Betty’s humanity, when she so clearly identifies herself as an emotional member of the human species, when, indeed, we might say she is being most human, she is brought into resemblance with an ass. So, although laughter is frequently described as an essential marker of being human, and is found in all cultures and periods, the noise and contortions that laughter produces – those “limbs...all alive with joy” – demonstrate the close likeness of humans to animals. Laughter, that signifier of the human, sometimes makes us look and sound like beasts.<sup>30</sup> This is a reflection of the fact that, as Critchley points out, “If humour is human, then it also, curiously, marks the limit of the human”.<sup>31</sup>

The effect in ‘The Idiot Boy’ is amusing but not unproblematic, for it potentially dehumanises Betty right at the moment of a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”.

<sup>27</sup> *Peter Bell*, ed. by John E. Jordan (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 96.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, 2 vols (London: E. Moxon, 1851), I, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> See Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (London: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 156-184.

<sup>31</sup> Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 29.

Relatedly, Jonathan Wordsworth has drawn attention to how Betty's "ridiculous eagerness", as "she darts as with a torrent's force" (384), and in her excitement almost overturns the pony, brings her into comparison with the "waterfall, / Which thunders down with headlong force" (357-358).<sup>32</sup> "We may tell ourselves, if we wish", he continues, that Betty's response is "a power like one of Nature's" as it is in Book XII of *The Prelude*, or invoke "the poet's response to the London beggar in Book VII, 'My mind did at this spectacle turn round / As with the might of waters'". Yet, however we wish to interpret the image, the simile makes her "half woman, half waterfall". It is the case that Betty's behaviour (and thus perhaps her affection) sometimes appears incongruous and laughable.

Coleridge certainly found the portrayal ludicrous. In *Biographia Literaria* he writes of the "folly of the *mother*" which presents "to the general reader... a laughable burlesque on the blindness of anile dotage" and not what Wordsworth professed it to be in the Preface, "an analytic display of maternal affection in its ordinary workings".<sup>33</sup> Is there a tension, then, between the laughter of sympathy within the poem, and the depiction of the principle figures? In other words, does Wordsworth sink to the lows of a mock-heroic character by laughing at Betty and her 'idiot' boy? If the poem feels close to ridicule at times it is precisely because its mode appears to encourage derision. Yet the poem also encourages us to feel warmly toward Betty and Johnny, as it brings in to play the ethics of laughter. In part one I discussed the Romantic period's interest in the incongruous experience of sympathetic laughter: how people may laugh at others and still feel sympathetically toward them. Something of that understanding appears present in 'The Idiot Boy', and this is presumably what Mary Jacobus has in mind when she ventures that the poem highlights how often in Wordsworth's poetry "the great triumph of the human heart' is celebrated through comedy, not in spite of it".<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, 'Wordsworthian Comedy', in *English Comedy*, ed. by Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 197–220 (200). Subsequent references are also to this page.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. by James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), II, pp. 48–49.

<sup>34</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 259.

Certainly Wordsworth was unhappy with those who could not sympathise with Johnny or Betty, or those who professed aversion for the poem itself. Responding to the young John Wilson's "inexpressible disgust", "contempt", and "inability to receive pleasure" from the work because, Wilson says, "it appears almost unnatural that a person in a state of complete idiotism should excite the warmest feelings of attachment in the breast even of his mother", Wordsworth acknowledges the challenge for the reader.<sup>35</sup> But he also argues that it is a challenge his poem encourages in order to widen the imaginative mobility of his readership. Rather than looking to present characters that "all men *do* sympathize with" Wordsworth intends to extend the limits of sympathy: "it is also highly desirable to add to these others, such as all men *may* sympathize with, and such as there is reason to believe would be better and more moral beings if they did sympathize with".<sup>36</sup> Comments like these move Wordsworth close to a Levinasian belief that it is through dialogue rather than in solitude that the ethics of existence is unearthed. For Levinas, the observation of another's humanness (mortality) is the obligation (and morality) of the self. For Wordsworth, it is through poems like 'The Idiot Boy' that a dialogue can begin between the reader and the 'other' often ostracised or occluded in society. Wordsworth tells Wilson that he has "looked upon the conduct of fathers and mothers of the lower classes of society towards Idiots as the great triumph of the human heart. It is there that we see the strength, disinterestedness, and grandeur of love".<sup>37</sup> As I explained earlier, the decision to depict rustic life derives from Wordsworth's belief that "in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity". Evidently one of the things Wordsworth anticipates in the laughing reunion between mother and son is a lesson in the natural benevolence of human nature. It is significant that Wordsworth looks for sympathy to the social class previous generations were reluctant to associate with sympathy (and which, as we will see later, Percy Shelley rarely associates with either). Wordsworth's answer to Wilson's professed

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<sup>35</sup> In *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robert Woof (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 113-114.

<sup>36</sup> Letter to John Wilson, Grasmere 7<sup>th</sup> June, 1802, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Early Years 1787-1805*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, rev. C. L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 358.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 357.



inability to get any pleasure from the poem is for the young man to live in closer proximity to those he would shun. But evidently part of the ambition for the poem is that it may act as a surrogate for social contact, bridging the gap that social status maintains.

Wordsworth tells Wilson, “I wrote the poem with exceeding delight and pleasure, and whenever I read it I read it with pleasure”.<sup>38</sup> That “exceeding delight and pleasure” in writing ‘The Idiot Boy’ is recounted in Isabella Fenwick’s notes:

this long poem was composed in the groves of Alfoxden, almost extempore; not a word, I believe, being corrected...I mention this in gratitude to those happy moments, for, in truth, I never wrote anything with so much glee.<sup>39</sup>

Wordsworth clearly enjoys giving the impression of being a naturally sympathetic genius, capable of creating “almost extempore” over four hundred lines of mock-epic verse while relaxing in nature. He talks up his imaginative intuition, here, as the possessor of a poetic mind capable of penetrating the barrier between himself and others. It might go further than this, as Wordsworth entertains a complete (if brief) identification with another so different to him in thoughts and society. For whilst Wordsworth recalls the “glee” he felt when composing the work, the poem itself describes Johnny as having a “heart...full of glee” (92). The potential similarity between the ‘poetic’ Wordsworth and the ‘idiotic’ Johnny suggests a close proximity in Wordsworth’s mind between the two of them. Donald Davie, Brennan O’Donnell and Matthew Bevis have noticed this too. Each of them thoughtfully draws attention to the apparent equivalence between the poet and Johnny: Wordsworth’s sense that they are different in degree not in kind.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 355.

<sup>39</sup> In *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, p. 354.

<sup>40</sup> Donald Davie, ‘Dionysus in Lyrical Ballads’, in *Wordsworth’s Mind and Art*, ed. by A. W. Thomson (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1969), pp. 110–139 (120); Brennan O’Donnell, *The Passion of Meter: A Study of Wordsworth’s Metrical Art* (London: Kent State University Press, 1995), pp. 164–165; Matthew Bevis, ‘Wordsworth’s Folly’, in *The Wordsworth Circle*, 43:3 (2012), 146–151 (p. 149).

Yet the very fact that Wordsworth has the mental capacity to write a poem about this ‘idiot’ boy draws attention to their profound and unavoidable difference. Similarly, what actually becomes evident in ‘The Idiot Boy’ is the impossibility of bridging the gap between one person and another. Because for all their closeness, the spatial proximity as well as their familial relation, Betty and Johnny do not seem to laugh at exactly the same thing. Betty’s laughter is largely the result of the release of her fears of never seeing her son again. But at no point does Johnny appear aware that his adventure is precarious, and at the close of the poem he shows no signs that he is conscious of the desperate agitation of his mother. He may feel the significance of their reunion and laugh for joy at it, or he may simply be making innocent sounds of glee as he does at the start of the poem, where, riding the pony, “His lips with joy they burr at you” (19). So whilst they laugh together, they cannot entirely grasp each other’s feelings, however “fast she holds her idiot boy” (386).

The moment also encapsulates the challenge of finding sympathy through poetry. When “Johnny burrs and laughs aloud” Wordsworth’s speaker “cannot tell” if this is in “cunning or in joy”. No doubt Wordsworth is being more than a little disingenuous here. Yet such mild uncertainty gestures toward the sublime ineffability of Johnny. Like the boy’s moonlight quest, which remains out of view even as Wordsworth conjures up fine tales of fancy for the “strange adventures” (351), the incident highlights how any portrait is a work of conjecture. The attempted representation becomes a performance of the bridging of the gap that calls greater attention to that gap. Johnny remains unknowable because he is, like all interiorities, illegible or unreadable. Like the depths of a poem, the feelings and meanings beneath his surface are always subject to speculations that admit the shortcomings of a sympathetic reading. That “I cannot tell” cheekily dramatizes the difficulty of knowing for sure why someone is laughing, but it also articulates the limitations of sympathetic communication between a poet and reader. Encouraging faith in acts of sympathetic communication (whether social or poetic) the laughter of ‘The Idiot Boy’ also voices the limits of sympathy.

## Sympathy with Nature

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Wordsworth's interest in the borders of sympathy extends, of course, to his approach to nature. This section will attend to the ways in which Wordsworth and Coleridge utilise laughter as a means of conveying and subtly questioning sympathetic feeling between people and the non-human world. Certain experiences attest to a universal harmony, like when "The valley rings with mirth and joy", in "The Idle Shepherd-Boys"; where "Among the hills Echoes play" a song which "welcomes in the May", and the "Magpie chatters with delight".<sup>41</sup> Other moments imply a correspondence between the gregarious kinship of nature – the birds observed in 'Home at Grasmere', that "frolic" and "flutter" as they "gambol" in a "fit of glee" around the lake – and the orientation of human life around a sense of community.<sup>42</sup> At other times the significance of nature resides in grasping that sympathy with the organic world grants a growing appreciation of the human one:

Why is it we feel  
 So little for each other, but for this,  
 That we with nature have no sympathy,  
 Or with such things as have no power to hold  
 Articulate language?  
 And never for each other shall we feel  
 As we may feel, till we have sympathy  
 With nature in her forms inanimate,  
 With objects such as have no power to hold  
 Articulate language. In all forms of things

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<sup>41</sup> *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, pp. 172-173.

<sup>42</sup> *Home at Grasmere*, ed. by Beth Darlington (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 86.

There is a mind.<sup>43</sup>

Wordsworth's laughter of sympathy is often mediated through distance that demands the distinctness of the poetic persona. The sound of laughter in Coleridge's 'The Nightingale', meanwhile, foregrounds a playful tension in its depiction of sympathy, that springs from trying to represent unity. In the examples below, Wordsworth and Coleridge reassert the difference between themselves and nature even as they seek to dissolve that difference. Their celebration of the self (and in particular the poetic individual's capacity to draw out the sympathies felt to exist) demands their separation from other things. Though they believe themselves to be different in degree not in kind, they do wish to differ. They do, after all, cast themselves as poets meaning to speak "of affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists / To common minds".<sup>44</sup> Deeply engaged with the world around them, and eager to promote a sense of the brotherhood that in their more optimistic moments they feel exists in all living things, they nevertheless retain their own individuality. They differ from the example witnessed in Burns, then, by remaining more pressingly aware of their distinctiveness in the face of the other.

The laughter in 'An Evening Walk' reflects an early attempt by Wordsworth to relay the sympathetic relation between himself and nature. Composed initially between 1788-1789, the poem was not published until 1793 – at which point it grabbed the attention of Coleridge. Certain passages added in 1794 while Wordsworth was at Windy Brow near Keswick have been

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<sup>43</sup> From the *Alfoxden Notebook*, January-March 1798, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-1949), V, p. 340. Despite Wordsworth's insistence on the power of nature to awaken sympathetic feeling for others through knowledge of all organic forms, Geoffrey Hartman proposes that "Wordsworth thought nature itself led him beyond nature", performing a "movement of transcendence". See *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 33. The dominant critical opinion of the 1980s meanwhile, argued that Wordsworth and Coleridge's devotion to nature served to replace or occlude their dedication to matters socio-political. See, for instance, Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989). For others, the turn to nature acts not as disengagement from society, but a re-engagement with it through a deeper understanding of nature's political significance. Thus Nicholas Roe argues that Wordsworth and Coleridge's poetry is not an "aesthetic retreat or escape" but a way to "address and answer the most pressing issues of the day", *The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 3, p. xi.

<sup>44</sup> Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, I, p. 134.

read in relation to his pantheism, or as an early indicator of his belief in the One Life.<sup>45</sup> But the sympathetic laughter in the poem exhibits more of what Coleridge will later associate with the fancy, than with the transformative insight of the imagination. Early on in the poem Wordsworth reflects on a time passed

When Life reared laughing up her morning sun;  
 When transport kissed away my april tear,  
 ...  
 When linked with thoughtless Mirth I coursed the plain,  
 And hope itself was all I knew of pain.<sup>46</sup>

Shadowed as this section is with the onset of suffering, and the contemplation of grief later in the poem, we might perhaps hear a degree of ‘mourning’ in that “morning sun” which laughingly ushers in the day, as though, even in such bliss, “pain” is not far from view. These lines might also reflect mourning for that lost period of childhood, when self-awareness did not yet cloud out the joy of experience. Yet if such knowledge darkens the mood, it does not eclipse the playfulness of the passage, nor the brief re-imagining of the sympathetic feeling. The poet’s “april tear” amusingly draws him into resemblance with April showers, appearing as an inversion of pathetic fallacy: imagining natural occurrences upon the human expressions of emotion. Nature is tantalising (“laughing up her morning sun”) yet attentive, as the “transport kissed away my april tear”. The “transport” generated by the wonder of Nature is compassionate, dealing with the poet’s suffering with tender care. This is an experience founded more on sensual

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<sup>45</sup> For the revisions in relation to pantheism, see Herbert Walter Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets* (London: The Athlone Press, 1962), pp. 72-74. Jonathan Wordsworth believes that the earlier revisions differ from the idea of the One Life, something found, he feels, primarily through discussions with Coleridge. See *The Music of Humanity* (London: Nelson, 1969), p. 186. Mary Jacobus argues that whilst the episodes might be “paving the way for Wordsworth’s later belief in the One Life”, they also “mirror the fashionable blend of science, sensibility, and Hartleianism found at the same period in Erasmus Darwin’s *Botanic Garden*”, a work known to have influenced Wordsworth. See *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads (1798)*, p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> *An Evening Walk*, ed. by James Averill (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 32.

pleasure than contemplation, as Wordsworth recalls a physical communion with a feminised nature, exaggerating his “thoughtless Mirth”.

A more epiphanic experience is heard in the laughter of Book IV of *The Prelude*. Rising early after spending the “night in dancing, gaiety and mirth”, Wordsworth recalls stumbling into the brightness of day, discovering a natural scene that is at once magisterial, yet benevolent, immutable and solid, yet exhibiting the little movements and activities of life:

Magnificent

The Morning was, a memorable pomp,  
More glorious than I ever had beheld;  
The sea was laughing at a distance; all  
The solid Mountains were as bright as clouds,  
Grain-tinctured, drench'd in empyrean light;  
And, in the meadows and the lower grounds,  
Was all the sweetness of a common dawn,  
Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,  
And Labourers going forth into the fields.<sup>47</sup>

The description of the sea laughing could partly flow from the picturesque tradition of the eighteenth century, but Wordsworth transforms it into a moment of imaginative insight. The slight shift to “The Sea lay laughing at a distance” in the 1850 edition of *The Prelude* increases the importance of nature for Wordsworth’s poetic development by echoing his realisation that “trivial pleasures” were “poor exchange / For books and nature”, for “all my deeper passions lay elsewhere”.<sup>48</sup> There seems a particular affinity between poet and the environment when Wordsworth observes the “sea...laughing”, as though each shares a similar sense of wonder and

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<sup>47</sup> *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, I, pp.158-159.

<sup>48</sup> *The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 88, and p. 87.

amused incredulity. This imagined emotional accord between Wordsworth and the anthropomorphic sea is heightened by the contrast to the imperious mountains.

However, the idea of the sea “laughing at a distance” is peculiar, especially when the point of the episode appears to be to stress the intimacy of the experiential moment. Wordsworth writes in similar terms about those high-spirited birds in ‘Home at Grasmere’, describing them as “Too distant...for plain view”. Like the allegorical birds that Wordsworth partly projects himself onto, the episode in *The Prelude* is one where the poet’s insistence on his place within the scene is matched by his insistence upon poetic detachment. This is a community of nature: we hear the “melody of birds”; observe labourers going into the fields; witness the “Dews” and “vapours” that imply the natural synthesis of the organic system; even the “solid Mountains” are identified with another, being “as bright as clouds”. Yet the immediate pleasure of the day is mediated by Wordsworth’s spectating eye, deliberately exaggerating his inimitable position. That sense of distance is exhibited not just by the laughing sea, but also by the poet’s eye gradually moving downwards, to rest upon the workers in the fields. The implied difference between the sweat of the labourers, and the sweet pleasure of the poet imaginatively ‘working’ upon the landscape is striking. Whilst they inhabit the same scene, poet and labourers are not linked in a shared experience of it. Similarly, Wordsworth’s studied observation of nature means that he absorbs the scene, but never fully dissolves into it. Rather, it bends to his needs, in characteristically Miltonic fashion.

Such moments illustrate the importance for Wordsworth of an alliance of serenity and excitement: the standing apart he finds necessary to see the “one life” and feel “that it was joy”.<sup>49</sup> Wordsworth’s laughter of sympathy engages outward, but in so doing performs solipsism, invariably turning toward self-reflection and self-focus. In the final section we will find Shelley flirting with laughter of sympathy that blurs the boundaries between subjects, even to the degree of enthusiasm for the absorption of self within the other. Wordsworth, by contrast, demands the

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<sup>49</sup> *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, I, p. 134.

retention of distinctness, and does not relinquish the individual self within a community of feeling. Instead, even as the moments of laughter intimate the interwoven connections between poet and his environment, they also maintain and affirm the uniqueness of that observing self. It is not surprising in a work like *The Prelude* to find Wordsworth's laughter of sympathy keeping hold of the self in relation to some other subject, since the poem gives such import to the development of a distinct identity. But Wordsworth's laughter of sympathy frequently affirms the Smithian defence of egoism in regard to sympathy – that re-affirmation of the self when brought into imaginative assembly with the other. Wordsworth evokes a co-existence, rather than indivisibility – be it between himself and nature, or himself and others. His use of laughter is sociable and other-oriented, but it refuses to relinquish the autonomy of the poet's superiority, even amidst the unity of all things. In the sonnet, "Beloved Vale", a Humean model of being influenced by surrounding impressions leads to the poet's amused and astonished engagement with the landscape he loves, but this play also re-affirms his sense of self: "I looked, I stared, I smiled, I laughed; and all / The weight of sadness was in wonder lost".<sup>50</sup> Wordsworth maintains the need for independence from the natural world and the things that inhabit it, in order for the individual self to feel affinity with that natural world. Being apart from nature allows Wordsworth to feel a part of it.

Added to the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* just as the collection is going to press, Coleridge's 'The Nightingale, a Conversation Poem' concludes by attending to Hartley's instinctive understanding of nature:

My dear babe,

Who, capable of no articulate sound,

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<sup>50</sup> *Poems in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. by Jared Curtis (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 127. Johnny in 'The Idiot Boy' is also "in wonder lost", but in his case, Wordsworth assumes, he is "still and mute", see *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, p. 100.



...

would place his hand beside his ear,  
His little hand, the small forefinger up,  
And bid us listen.<sup>51</sup>

Calling to mind Wordsworth's Alfoxden notebook entry from the same year (from which I quoted earlier) concerning humanity's lack of sympathy for "things" without the "power" of "articulate language", Coleridge insists on Hartley as "Nature's Play-mate" (97), mediating the mysterious sounds of the environment. Coleridge recalls a particular incident when Hartley was entranced by nature, particularly the witchery of the moon:

I hurried with him to our orchard-plot,  
And he beheld the moon, and, hushed at once,  
Suspends his sobs, and laughs most silently,  
While his fair eyes, that swam with undropt tears  
Did glitter in the yellow moon-beam! (101-105).<sup>52</sup>

Coleridge deftly moves from past to present tense here, as though re-imagining the incident is enough to make it leap forward in time. This collapsing of time (with time past becoming time present) mirrors the dissolving of space in the telepathic exchange between Hartley and the moon. The babe's "laugh most silently" also plays with the poem's space and time by echoing the "silently" flowing "stream beneath" the "mossy bridge" (4-6) at the start of the poem.

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<sup>51</sup> *Poetical Works, Poems (Reading Text)*, ed. by J. C. C. Mays, 3 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), I, p. 518. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

<sup>52</sup> Dating from the spring of 1798, Coleridge's notebook relays the inspiration for the episode, which is also the germ for 'Frost at Midnight': "Hartley fell down & hurt himself – I caught him up crying & screaming - & ran out of doors with him. – The Moon caught his eye – he ceased crying immediately - & his eyes & the tears in them, how they glittered in the Moonlight". In *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, 3 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-1973), I (Text), p. 219. Compare 'The Dungeon', also published in *Lyrical Ballads*, which speaks of how with "ministrations, thou, O Nature! / Healest thy wandering and distempered child". In *Poetical Works, Poems (Reading Text)*, I, p. 334.

Further articulating that “In nature there is nothing melancholy” (15), Hartley’s happy response reflects his preternatural affinity with nature, and its “sweet voices, always full of love / And joyance” (41-43). His resemblance to the nightingales, meanwhile, is implied by his “fair eyes” full of “undropt tears” that “glitter in the yellow moon-beam”. Earlier, the nightingales are described as perched on “moonlight bushes” with “eyes both bright and full, / Glistening” (64-68).<sup>53</sup>

The silent laugh implies a sonic communication that is nonetheless noiselessly conveyed; what Keats hears as the presence of soundless sound, that “little noiseless noise among the leaves, / Born of the very sigh that silence heaves”.<sup>54</sup> Or what Dorothy Wordsworth notes just a few months before Coleridge composes “The Nightingale” as the “noiseless noise which lives in the summer air”.<sup>55</sup> Or Coleridge’s recollected bliss of being “Silent with swimming sense” in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” – resonant too with Hartley’s swimming, glistening eyes.<sup>56</sup> The passage in “The Nightingale” also has an uncanny resemblance to the close of part one of *Christabel* and those “Large Tears that leave the Lashes bright...while she seems to smile / As Infants at a sudden Light”.<sup>57</sup> If “The Nightingale” echoes with these evocative incidents, it befits a work so preoccupied by latent presence. The silent laugh appears as a typical Coleridgean symbol of oxymoronic, syncretic notions – of antitheses brought into striking relation. This extends to the scene as a whole where the mortal world touches the numinous. Human understanding appears briefly to transcend its limits as it finds itself in relation to the unknowable. Like the “high poetic rapture, that becalms / Even while it agitates”,<sup>58</sup> Hartley’s silent laugh suggests he is “struck with joy’s deepest calm”.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Of course, the poem announces itself as a challenge to the literary precedent of the nightingale as a melancholic bird, most notably heard in Milton’s ‘Il Penseroso’. Coleridge sings a “different lore” (41), of “the merry Nightingale” (43), that warbles “delicious notes” (45). Hartley’s shift from distress to happiness symbolically enacts the poem’s move from previous understandings of those forlorn nightingales, toward Coleridge’s rendition of the joy in nature.

<sup>54</sup> ‘I stood tip-toe’, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 79.

<sup>55</sup> *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. by Pamela Woof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 142.

<sup>56</sup> In *Poetical Works, Poems (Reading Text)*, I, p. 352.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* I, p. 493.

<sup>58</sup> John Thelwall, ‘Lines Written at Bridgewater’, in *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* (Oxford: Woodstock, 1989), p. 132.

<sup>59</sup> In *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–1971), I p. 349.

But even as Hartley's silent laugh casts up the idea of organic sympathy between humanity and nature, Coleridge offers a mischievous qualification: "Well! – / It is a father's tale" (105-106). Coleridge's jokiness is felt as well in the intensifier, "laughs *most* silently". Though subtler, the impression is similar to the exaggerated description of the nightingales: their "bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full". Rather than entirely dispelling the magic between child and nature, though, the levity draws attention to the way sympathy between one self and a larger organic whole easily becomes ridiculous in the representation. Thinking about why we laugh, Coleridge would later remark that "when we contemplate a finite in reference to the infinite, consciously or unconsciously, [there is] humor. So says Jean Paul Richter".<sup>60</sup> In 1798, when Coleridge's conviction in the sympathy flowing through all things is arguably at its most pronounced, he nonetheless accepts the comic effect such feelings are bound up with. Perhaps it is Coleridge's confidence in the One Life at this time that allows him to be so playful with it, because whilst 'The Nightingale' resounds with confidence, it also enjoys doubting the possibility of such a universal movement of sympathy ever being communicable, or even entirely apprehended.

Hartley's laughter is meant to symbolise the inherent sympathy Coleridge feels exists between humanity and nature. The boy's absence of adult self-consciousness means that he retains that intuitive feeling for a force that is felt to be flowing through the scene. But as laughter it may also be thought to expose the emerging consciousness that separates humanity from the rest of the organic world. For Helmuth Plessner, laughter announces the unique position of the human being on earth. Laughter is the "essence of human nature": laying "claim to the widest range of human behaviour, to the context in which indeed the words 'mind', 'soul', and 'body' are once and for all at our disposal".<sup>61</sup> Whilst there may be some relation between the instinctive response to being tickled, and a chimpanzee's smile brought on by a stimulus, the

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<sup>60</sup> 'Wit and Humour', in *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. by Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Constable, 1936), p. 118.

<sup>61</sup> Plessner, *Laughing and Crying*, p. 25. Subsequent references are incorporated in the text as page numbers.

laughter of humans regularly confirms our distinctive cognitive abilities, which might be thought different to that of other creatures, and sets us apart from inanimate nature:

To laughing (and to crying) belongs...the significant and conscious relating of an expression to its occasion, an expression which breaks out eruptively, runs its course compulsively, and lacks definite symbolic form. It is not my body but I who laugh and cry, and for a reason, 'about something' (25).

In contrast to his discussion of a “physical automatism” (which I quoted in relation to “The Idiot Boy”), here Plessner stresses that laughter is proof of consciousness, articulating our ability for self-reflection, pointing to self-awareness. These characteristics distinguish us from the rest of nature: we do not simply experience the world, but experience that experiencing. As Plessner suggests, in laughing, “I reply” to experience, and as such discover that “I keep my distance” from experience (25). So whilst Hartley’s silent laugh articulates the child’s special bond with nature, it is also a laugh “about something”. We might venture to say that as well as voicing his awareness of the joy of the natural world, the laugh might also display the perception of Hartley as human – that is, as a creature capable of reflecting upon his experiences. If so, his laugh is at one with nature and also at an unavoidable distance from nature. Thus, as a sort of ideal poet whose imagination intimately interacts with nature, Hartley’s laughter moves in different directions at the same time. It suggests a sympathetic connectedness to the natural world, a sense that this affinity will always be mysterious or at least unspeakable beyond our own immediate experience of it, but it also presents the poet as unique in the capability of creating *and* laughing at these associations. In “The Nightingale”, Coleridge’s laughter of sympathy is an affirmation of the poet’s distinct place in the world, even as it voices coalescence with nature. In the next section I assess Percy Shelley’s attempts to render coalescence through laughter, and his belief in the poet’s unique role in this development.

### Percy Shelley's Ideal of Sympathy

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The reputation of Percy Shelley is that he could be rather po-faced. Edward Trelawny, for instance, suggests that he “did not laugh, or even smile, he was always in earnest”.<sup>62</sup> Yet the creation of the ‘myth of Shelley’ by Mary and his friends after his death in order to make him more palatable for Victorian readers – and the critical consensus that continues surrounding Shelley’s essentially solemn nature – tends to obscure evidence of a more impish side. Much of his poetry deconstructs the fixed impression of a melancholic and solitary genius that retains a hold on interpretations of Shelley, and on broader conceptions of Romanticism. According to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Shelley possessed “a mirthful sally; he could play joyous, funny pranks, and could...act them over again, in a vivacious manner, and with a keen relish and agreeable recollections of his own mischievous raillery”.<sup>63</sup> Hogg’s portrait of Shelley is comically lax in distinguishing between fact and fiction. But the admission of his friend’s mischief is especially striking since Hogg tends to talk up Shelley’s seriousness. Thomas Love Peacock, who probably had a better ear for this sort of thing, also notices the poet’s more light-hearted side and keenness for japes. According to Peacock, Shelley writes letters with “touches of humour”, offers plenty of jokes, finds “drollery” in silly misunderstandings and absurd situations, and frequently “laughed heartily”.<sup>64</sup> On several occasions in his *Memoirs*, Peacock makes a point of his friend’s predilection for pretence, and how Shelley would take the charade to quite ludicrous extremes. Rather than putting this down to his “addiction to falsehood”, Peacock charitably, if rather wryly, attributes it to Shelley’s “irresistible imagination”.<sup>65</sup>

In this final section of this chapter I want to explore the ways Shelley employs the ludic as well as the prophetic as a means of communicating sympathy. Byron played an important part in

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<sup>62</sup> Edward Trelawny, in *Records of Byron, Shelley and the Author*, ed. David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 55.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1933), II, p. 23.

<sup>64</sup> *Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, in *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith, and C. E. Jones, 10 vols (London: Constable & Co., Ltd, 1924–1934), VIII, pp. 112–113.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

this development. Shelley's unease at the Juvenalian satire of the Dedication and first canto of *Don Juan* gave way to enjoyment at the greater hybridity of subsequent cantos. As he admits in his letters to Mary, Percy's "vanity" means he notices his own "earnest exhortations to him to create something wholly new".<sup>66</sup> He writes to Byron in the autumn of 1821 praising the poem's capacity to bring "light" to the reader on human life that is otherwise darkened from view.<sup>67</sup> *Don Juan's* illuminating originality derives from its mingling amusement with seriousness. One of the moments Shelley particularly admires is the return of Lambro in Canto III. The incongruity of the "merriment of his daughter's guests made as it were in celebration of his funeral – the meeting with the lovers – and the death of Haidée, are circumstances combined & developed in a manner that I seek elsewhere in vain".<sup>68</sup> Perhaps *Don Juan* crystalizes what is for some time gestating in Shelley's mind. For he had been attracted to the pleasures of an incongruous style before 1821. Mary Shelley writes to Marianne Hunt on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1819 that Percy was finally reading Boccaccio and was "quite enchanted by his mixture of hilarity and Pathos".<sup>69</sup> In his last few years, then, Shelley is increasingly sympathetic to a Horatian view that poetry teaches through delight; keen to seek out ways of mingling amusement with the philosophic so as to spark a change in his audience.

In July 1820, Shelley begins translating what he called his "infinitely comical"<sup>70</sup> 'Hymn to Mercury' into ottava rima from the fourth of the Homeric Hymns, and Mary eventually publishes it in *Posthumous Poems* (1824). Early in the work, Mercury spies a tortoise and decides to make a lyre out of the "treasure".<sup>71</sup> Mercury,

Eyeing him laughed, and laughing thus began:

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<sup>66</sup> Letter to Mary Shelley, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1821, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), I, p. 323.

<sup>67</sup> Letter to Lord Byron, 21<sup>st</sup> October 1821, in *Ibid.* I, pp. 357-358.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* I, p. 358.

<sup>69</sup> *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980-1987), I, p. 104.

<sup>70</sup> Part of a letter from Mary to Maria Gisborne from Leghorn, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1820, see *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, II, p. 218.

<sup>71</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1989-), III, p. 511. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

A useful godsend are you to me now,  
 King of the dance, companion of the feast,  
 Lovely in all your nature (32-35).

In both the classical text and Shelley's translation, Mercury is a prankster, and his invention of the lyre, the symbol of poetry, comes as a direct result of his playful personality. The infant boy's whimsy means that he instinctively perceives the tortoise to be an "Excellent plaything" (36) which "will sing sweetly" when it is "dead" (44). In this instance, his laughter suggests that his imaginative or sympathetic capabilities (his vision of the musical and poetic promise of the empty shell) develop from his sense of humour.

There is undoubtedly much in Mercury's character that appeals to Shelley's mischievous side, with the childish god acting as a comic inversion of the Promethean figure. For Shelley, who writes to Peacock in August 1819 that "Social enjoyment in some form or other is the Alpha and Omega of existence",<sup>72</sup> Mercury offers a ludic and cheerful alternative to the anti-social Alastor, or the famously solitary

nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.<sup>73</sup>

Mercury's own "sweet sounds" profoundly move his audience later in the poem. He has angered Apollo by stealing his cattle, and although he is greatly amused by the young figure, Zeus rebukes Mercury and demands that he make amends for his transgression. Mercury initially considers hiding himself, but quickly changes his mind, and decides to win over his adversary with a music recital. The Greeks grouped music, dance, and poetry together under the heading *mousike*, and

<sup>72</sup> *Memoirs of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, p. 117.

<sup>73</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman, and Neil Fraistat (London: Norton, 2002), p. 516.

‘Hymn to Mercury’, with its roots in Hellenism and its intermixture of music and poetry, maintains this tradition.<sup>74</sup> The entertainment of the god of poetry highlights Shelley’s hope that profound reconciliation might be awakened by sympathetic delight:

Sudden he changed his plan, and with strange skill  
 Subdued the strong Latonian, by the might  
 Of winning music, to his mightier will;  
 His left hand held the lyre, and in his right  
 The plectrum struck the chords – unconquerable  
 Up from beneath his hand in circling flight  
 The gathering music rose – and sweet as Love  
 The penetrating notes did live and move  
  
 Within the heart of great Apollo – he  
 Listened with all his soul, and laughed for pleasure.  
 Close to his side stood harping fearlessly  
 The unabashed boy; and to the measure  
 Of the sweet lyre, there followed loud and free  
 His joyous voice; for he unlocked the treasure  
 Of his deep song, illustrating the birth  
 Of the bright Gods, and the dark desert Earth,  
  
 And how to the immortals every one  
 A portion was assigned of all that is...  
  
 ...and did move

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<sup>74</sup> Eric Prieto, *Listening In: Music, Mind, and the Modernist Narrative* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 1.



Apollo to unutterable love (557-580).

Redolent with David Hartley's vibratory system that explains the sympathetic movement of sensations upon the mind and body, it is significant that Mercury's poetic music and Apollo's own response are compared with love at this moment, as well as later, when "Thy harpings and thy song are soft as Love" (610). Shelley understood love as an act of sympathy, imagining it "awaken[s] in all things that are a community with what we experience within ourselves".<sup>75</sup> This desire for an awakening of corresponding empathy between our own selves and a wider community is performed in 'Hymn to Mercury' as the laughter articulates a developing affection between the two poets. The laughter echoes the young god's delight when he first strikes upon the idea of crafting the lyre, while the laughter produced by Mercury's notes marks not so much the end of the recital as it is the start of something magically transformative. The scene is pregnant with suggestions of poetic birth.

David Hume and Adam Smith both imagine the correspondence of sympathy as akin to the effect of music. Pondering "the nature and force of *sympathy*", Hume likens "the minds of all men" to "strings equally wound up, the motion of one readily communicates itself to all the rest" and "so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature".<sup>76</sup> While for Smith, "the great pleasure of conversation and society...arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinion, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another".<sup>77</sup> Their respective accounts reflect their different emphases regarding sympathy. Though he accepts the natural propensity of human nature to be sympathetic, Smith argues for the need to control sympathy, and thus he underscores the measured concordance of feeling as the subjects are in "harmony" and "keep time with one another". In contrast, Hume's

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<sup>75</sup> 'On Love', in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 503.

<sup>76</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 575-576.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 337.

description illustrates the sovereignty of the passions as they flood from one person to another in a process that is all-embracing. Though elsewhere Hume acknowledges the regulatory effect of sympathy for social relations, he nonetheless places great weight on the dynamism of the communication. For when we are “excited by sympathy”, he explains,

The passions are so contagious, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another, and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts...Such agreeable movements must give me an affection to every one that excites them...the transition from pleasure to love is easy.<sup>78</sup>

The “correspondent movements” in Apollo’s breast demonstrate the development of a joyous love toward the “one that excites them”. It is a Humean model of contagion that is manifest throughout the ‘Hymn to Mercury’ passage. Hume’s insistent modal verb which asserts “agreeable movements must give me an affection” is displayed in Shelley’s writing, where the music that spurs the laughter is initially spiritually coercive, as well as physiological. Mercury overwhelms his audience, as he “subdued the strong Latonian, by the might / Of winning music”. The chords are “unconquerable” as they physically pass into Apollo: “The penetrating notes did live and move / Within the heart” until “he / Listened with all his soul, and laughed for pleasure”. Thus Apollo’s emotional understanding derives from an essentially somatic encounter. This process is tangibly enacted in the verse via the dashes that draw attention to not just the link between the two poets, but also the fecund, even erotic, causation at play. The first dash performs the flight of the music, as the plectrum strikes the lyre and creates the sound; the second scores an inception as the “penetrating notes” (which are “sweet as Love”) enter Apollo’s body, while the third dash stages the prodigious and all-consuming internal transformation.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 605.

<sup>79</sup> In HARVARD MS. ENG. 258-2: Quire VI: Folio 10 Recto, see *The Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman (London: Garland, 1991), V, p. 131. For confirmation that the passage is in Percy’s hand not Mary’s see p. 41.

Tellingly, however, Apollo is both an active and perceptive listener. Stirred by the “revelry” (608), his laughter voices not just his appreciation of Mercury’s music, but also an understanding of that music’s artistic and ethical value. Whatever meaning Mercury’s pleasurable notes confer – and they are clearly something to do with the foundations of the universe and the natural harmony bestowed upon it – their worth now “live and move” in the god of poetry’s heart. Echoing Wordsworth’s “grand elementary principle of pleasure”, by which a person “knows, and feels, and lives, and moves”, the episode announces that “We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure”.<sup>80</sup> Apollo’s moment precedes Shelley’s thoughts in *A Defence of Poetry*, written just seven months later in the spring of 1821, that “Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls, open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight”.<sup>81</sup> Apollo opens himself up to wisdom so that his development is not simply an emotional awakening but the sowing of an imaginative seed that may enliven and inspire all poets to better understand the world, and grant that world a better understanding of itself. Soon after the recital Mercury gives Apollo his lyre, and instructs him to “wake / Thy joyous pleasure out of many a fit / Of tranced sound” and mingle his own voice with the instrument, so that “Thy liquid-voiced comrade talk with thee” (638-641). Like the fading coal in *A Defence of Poetry*, or the spirit contained in the instrument in ‘With a Guitar, to Jane’, the mischievous lyre will not respond to everyone,

To those who are unskilled in its sweet tongue,  
 Though they should question most impetuously  
 Its hidden soul, it gossips something wrong –  
 Some senseless and impertinent reply (651-654).

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<sup>80</sup> In *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, I, p. 140.

<sup>81</sup> *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 516.

But Mercury knows Apollo's voice can harmonise with the lyre's "sweet tongue" because he "Listened" intently to its joyous language and responded in sympathy with a laugh that voices his accord. Apollo's intense listening demonstrates that the physiological operation of sympathy does not preclude the development of rational understanding, but fosters it.

The intersection between Mercury's message and Apollo's sympathetic understanding of it is implied by the natural tri-rhyme of laughter's "pleasure", which becomes the "measure / Of the sweet lyre" and is "the treasure / Of his deep song". Douglas-Fairhurst reminds us that the way in which words come to be united in a rhyme asks us to acknowledge that their apparent relation is based on nothing more substantive than the arbitrary contingencies of language.<sup>82</sup> But he also points out that though "we may never be able perfectly to reconcile ourselves to one another, or to the form of life we share, any more than two rhyme words can ever become one", rhyme nonetheless opens up "the channels of sympathy", so that just as rhymes "imply meetings they cannot make", they are also a sound meeting place, which can represent and even lead to momentary accord.<sup>83</sup> Like the points of contact that encourage sympathy despite our fundamental irreconcilability from one another, sound relations in poetry invite us to hear a bond between them that gestures to a kinship beyond the arbitrary nature of their connection. Shelley takes this a step further, with the sonic interaction of words also frequently signifying a platonic connection between what they are trying to represent. In *A Defence of Poetry* he affirms that

Sounds as well as thoughts have relations, both between each other and towards that which they represent, and a perception of the order of those relations has always been found connected with a perception of the order of the relations of thoughts.

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<sup>82</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 177.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. pp. 177-178. Douglas-Fairhurst's point is principally to do with the way certain words become culturally associated with each other – "so that in English verse 'breath' invariably ends with 'death', 'womb' leads to 'tomb'" – but the idea would seem to hold for rhyme generally.

Hence the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry, and which is scarcely less indispensable to the communication of its influence, than the words themselves without reference to that peculiar order.<sup>84</sup>

Sounds, for Shelley, do sound out their relation to each other. But they also carry what they represent into a sonic assembly. Thus the acoustic connection between the laughter, the music, and what that music represents, might carry an actual correspondence between them. While the “harmonious recurrence of sound” within the poem also enacts the process Shelley demands of poetry and which is indispensable to its influence. Apollo’s laughter transports Mercury’s message.

As with all the examples in this chapter, laughter in ‘Hymn to Mercury’ highlights the ways poetry might converse with and influence a wider community. Arguably Shelley is the most insistent, however, with poets acting as “unacknowledged legislators of the World”, both the “hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration”, and “mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present”.<sup>85</sup> Despite this, though, the episode in ‘Hymn to Mercury’ is confined to a restricted dialogue between an elite deemed capable of experiencing sympathy, and illustrious enough to be trusted with relaying it. This follows the Romantic habit of elevating the creative ‘genius’ of the poet, and also suggests a more cautious, even conformist approach within Shelley’s ostensibly radical intent for sympathetic poetry. Moreover, though ‘Hymn to Mercury’ portrays an ideal of sympathetic feeling that might offer a platform for future diffusion, the delimited nature of the sympathetic laughter could also reflect concerns held throughout the eighteenth century. While sympathy is understood as a principle of social cohesion, and according to Hume in particular is the basis of congenial interaction (at least in the *Treatise* if not the more qualified ideas outlined in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* of 1748) it is also

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<sup>84</sup> *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 514.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p. 535.

assumed that the outpouring of sympathy needs to be carefully controlled. As Jon Mee explains, “if human beings were increasingly defined as sympathetic creatures across a whole range of discourses and practices in the period, there remained an anxiety about where such sympathies led”.<sup>86</sup> So whilst intimate groups formed from a ‘genteel’ class (such as the Edinburgh clubs Hume and Smith see as a “paradigm of sociability”) can be trusted to regulate themselves, the public at large is rarely credited with such self-control.<sup>87</sup>

Of course, in ‘Hymn to Mercury’, Shelley’s use of the laughter of sympathy is largely restricted by his source material. This partly explains the promotion of certain individuals in the poem. But as we shall see, the sympathetic laughter in ‘Julian and Maddalo’ (written between the summer of 1818 and August 1819) also restricts itself to a socially privileged elite. Shelley says he writes ‘Julian and Maddalo’ in a conversational style in an attempt to circulate his ideas to a wider audience, in contrast to some of his ‘visionary’ poetry intended for a small coterie of the like-minded. Yet, modeled partly on conversations between Shelley and Byron whilst in Venice in the summer of 1818, the sympathetic laughter within the poem is restricted to two figures from privileged social backgrounds. “Count Maddalo is a Venetian nobleman of ancient family and of great fortune” while “Julian is an Englishman of good family”.<sup>88</sup> As such Shelley’s ideal laughter of sympathy remains the sole province of the gentry.

The sympathetic laughter in ‘Julian and Maddalo’ occurs early in the poem. It appears to enact the ideal of human potential that will be put forward by Julian slightly later. As the two protagonists engage in excited conversation, their blissful exchange of ideas seems to be “Harmonizing” with their surroundings, which “sent / Into our hearts aërial merriment” (26-27). As jocund sounds pass from external to internal nature, so the human figures find their thoughts moving through laughter:

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<sup>86</sup> Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> See John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 3. See also pp. 18-56.

<sup>88</sup> Preface to ‘Julian and Maddalo’, in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1989-), II, pp. 660-661. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

So, as we rode, we talked; and the swift thought,  
 Winging itself with laughter, lingered not,  
 But flew from brain to brain, – such glee was ours –  
 Charged with light memories of remembered hours,  
 None slow enough for sadness; till we came  
 Homeward, which always makes the spirit tame (28-33).

One of the things Julian suggests when he is ‘talking Utopia’ to Maddalo is that our minds contain the truth to unlocking our ideal selves: “we might be all / We dream of” (172-173) for where is the “truth we seek / But in our mind?” (174-175). Here Julian and Maddalo act as though this truth is directly transmittable through laughter. Shelley’s drafts show his insistence on the direct communication of minds at this point. He refines the lines, trying a couple of phrases to go along with the general idea, but always retains the image of laughter flying “from brain to brain”.<sup>89</sup> The imagery of “swift”, and “winging” (added as Shelley continued to play with the passage at the draft stage) enhances the fleet-footed nature of the communication (and also reflects Shelley’s fondness for Grecian allusion). It is as though there is an immediacy and lightness to laughter’s transportation of thought, performing a purer discourse that by-passes the more laboured process of language, or language’s potential for misunderstanding. The episode differs from Mercury’s coercive music, which had to break down Apollo’s hostility before the sympathetic laughter erupted. In ‘Julian and Maddalo’, the laughter enacts not a one-way process of contagion, but rather an experience Julian and Maddalo are collectively “‘caught up’ in” making.<sup>90</sup> This is implied on the page by the parenthetical “– such glee was ours –”.<sup>91</sup> Whilst

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<sup>89</sup> *The Julian and Maddalo Draft Notebook*, ed. by Steven E. Jones, *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts: A Facsimile Edition*, gen ed. Donald H. Reiman, 23 vols (New York and London: Garland, 1986-1997), XV, p. 67.

<sup>90</sup> Lisa Blackman distinguishes between affective transmissions. See ‘Is Happiness Contagious?’, *New Formations*, 63 (Winter 2007/2008), 15-32 (p. 29).

<sup>91</sup> The dashes do not appear in the manuscript however.

Julian and Maddalo differ in temperament, their differences temporarily dissolve through the sound of laughter.

Georges Bataille's work on transgression, which argues for eroticism as a dissolver of the boundaries between human subjectivity, offers a way of reading the laughter of sympathy at work in 'Julian and Maddalo'. In *L'Erotisme*, Bataille explores moments where our individual existence breaches the demarcated borders of our physical selves and joins with a homogenous form of existence. His intention is to demonstrate the link between the erotic and death, but within the discussion he argues that the infectious nature of laughter is an experience where comprehension of the other is possible:

Seeing and hearing a man laugh I participate in his emotion from inside myself. This sensation felt inside me communicates itself to me and that is what makes me laugh: we have an immediate knowledge of the other person's laughter when we laugh ourselves.<sup>92</sup>

This is not so far from Hume's assertion in the *Treatise* that "the sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming, in some measure our own".<sup>93</sup> The observation of laughter in another leads to a participation in their emotion formed from an awakening of the feeling within our own self: "I participate in his emotion from inside myself", with the emotion carried by laughter creating an internal sensation that then "communicates itself to me". Laughter provides immediate knowledge of the other self, and dissolves the distinction between individuals by forming recognition of their similarity. Shared laughter is intimate in a very real sense, then, for it is an exposing of ourselves to some other, and their baring of themselves to us. But while the shift from a singular pronoun "I" to the collective "we" signifies co-operation, "I participate"

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<sup>92</sup> George Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. by Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 153. Bataille's ideas differ from the individuality of laughter that I discussed in Helmuth Plessner. I am not in any way attempting to reconcile these extreme contrasts, but rather to show the breadth of meanings in the subject within a history of ideas.

<sup>93</sup> *A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 441.



nonetheless acknowledges the individual subject's recognition of himself or herself as distinct from, if related to, others. It is a model of sympathy that necessarily imposes distinctions between subjects, even as it appears to endorse laughter as a form of communication that dissolves differences between those subjects.

Elsewhere, Bataille explores a community of laughter that leads to a total dissolution of individuality within the whole. In *Inner Experience* he outlines a process whereby individuals emerge from their "isolated existence" into

the contagion of a wave which rebounds, for those who laugh, together become like the waves of the sea – there no longer exists between them any partition as long as the laughter lasts; they are no more separate than are two waves, but their unity is as undefined, as precarious as that of the agitation of the waters.<sup>94</sup>

Laughter is here an organic experience that deliquesces individuality within an ocean of unity. There are important differences between this and Shelley's communal laughter in 'Julian and Maddalo'. We might infer, for instance, that Bataille's comparison of the figures with insentient waves implies passivity, even mindlessness, whilst Shelley's presentation aims to inspire thoughts of unity that can exist only through cognition. Shelley's image of sympathetic thought thus echoes Smith's demand for the participation of the mind.

Nonetheless, Bataille's description of laughter does echo the indivisibility we witness in 'Julian and Maddalo', where the laughter evokes the possible erosion of individuality during sympathetic exchange. Shelley and Bataille present laughter as a way of realising relations between individuals. And both pose questions over the effects of laughter upon the autonomy of the self. In Shelley's essay 'On Life' (probably written shortly after visiting Byron in Venice) Shelley proposes that any difference between individuals and minds is merely grammatical

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<sup>94</sup> Cited in Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (London: M.I.T. Press, 2010), p. 90.

necessity, arrangements that are a means of articulating the universality that exists even as they exhibit the difference. He writes that

the existence of distinct individual minds similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is [...] found to be a delusion. The words, *I, you, they*, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts to the monstrous presumption, that I, the person who now write and think, am that one mind. I am but a portion of it. The words *I*, and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement.<sup>95</sup>

The limitations of language and its inevitable separation of what Shelley sees as part of the same being seems to be on his mind when he writes of the way thoughts transport and unify through the medium of laughter. For what is telling in the moment in ‘Julian and Maddalo’ is that its pronouns do not acknowledge ‘I’ or ‘you’ but only “our” and “we”. Previously, Julian had recognised himself as distinctive: “I rode...This ride was my delight...I love all waste...I love / To ride as then I rode” (1-21). But the sympathy carried by the laugh means that the distinction between ‘I’ and ‘you’ dissolves and leaves only “our” or “we”: “our hearts”, “we rode, we talked”, “such glee was ours”. The collective consciousness that Shelley imagines in ‘On Life’, then, finds itself realised during the sympathetic laughter that opens ‘Julian and Maddalo’, where each individual subject knows itself as part of a wider community, where “one mind” can be “the type of all”.<sup>96</sup>

Thus the sympathetic laughter in ‘Julian and Maddalo’ seems to confirm what for a critic like Earl Wasserman is Shelley’s most urgent impulse, for his desire “at all times appears to have

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<sup>95</sup> *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 508.

<sup>96</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, in *The Poems of Shelley*, II, p. 191.

been to dissolve individual identity in an all-encompassing unity”.<sup>97</sup> Undoubtedly Shelley’s verse reflects the thoughts of a poet at times deeply drawn to an ideal of complete understanding and, as he outlines in ‘On Life’, the eventual unfurling of an existence of one mind. Yet, as Wasserman’s “appears” perhaps unwittingly reveals, a concurrence exists in Shelley’s poetics between such high aspirations toward the dissolution of difference, and the poet’s reluctance fully to embrace uniformity. Byron remarked to Lady Blessington that Shelley “had formed to himself a *beau idéal* of all that is fine, high-minded, and noble, and he acted up to this ideal even to the very letter”.<sup>98</sup> The remark teases out Shelley’s theatricality: a poet not so much living his ideals as performing them. Not unlike Peacock’s observations about Shelley’s tendency towards pretence spinning out of his capacious imagination, Byron’s comment invites us to think of Shelley’s poetry too as sympathetically capturing his high hopes, embodying them as an actor may a part, but never being fixed to them.<sup>99</sup>

The laughter of sympathy in ‘Julian and Maddalo’ performs this function for it is not continual, but momentary. Just as Bataille’s image of communion lasts only as long as the laughter, so the opening of ‘Julian and Maddalo’ performs then ceases sympathetic experience. Like the “invisible influence” of poetic inspiration, that “fading coal” of “transitory brightness”, the sympathy of laughter is not “durable in its original purity and force”.<sup>100</sup> Instead, the echo created by the sound carries hints of its own eventual undoing, because the unifying laughter that “flew from brain to brain” also internally half rhymes with “till we came”. The enjambment of the line, “till we came / Homeward, which always makes the spirit tame”, sees the sound of sympathy suffer a slow cessation, descending to the place where the coalescence meets its end point, its full-stop. The caesura draws attention to the rareness of the moment, even as the ebb and flow of the rhythms of verse encourage the episode’s perpetuation. As Michael O’Neill puts

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<sup>97</sup> Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 146. See also Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

<sup>98</sup> *Lady Blessington’s Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (New Jersey: Princeton, 1969), p. 52.

<sup>99</sup> Relatedly, Jerrold E. Hogle has countered the notion of a “strictly self-consistent ‘identity’ in Shelley’s thought”, urging instead an understanding of Shelley as the “interplay of changing voices” rather than being “univocal”. See *Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. viii.

<sup>100</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 531.

it, the episode is spoken of “as if it was typical and repeatable”, and yet caught “so specifically that its uniqueness comes to the fore”.<sup>101</sup> Shelley knows these moments are not possible, or at least not beyond the briefest of moments. This might suggest a political critique of the contemporary world: the setting of a paradigmatic sympathetic communication on a remote “uninhabited sea-side” (7) reflecting Shelley’s belief that such inspired sociability can only exist away from the frosty environment he feels around him, that unsympathetic, “cold world” (617) the poem makes so much of. But laughter also appears so appealing to Shelley as an example of sympathy precisely because it can synthesise in a moment, but also ceases and thus resists totality. As such, it reflects Shelley’s own amused understanding of sympathy as something transitory but repeatable, cohesive yet elusive, something indeed like laughter.

The laughter in this chapter shows the range of sympathy within Romantic poetry: it can be socially immersive, or distancing; imply immediate understanding, or conscious consideration of others’ points of view. Each of the case studies highlights sympathy as a work of translation or interpretation. They exhibit doubt (often latently, and sometimes comically) over whether transport can ever really occur. At its heart, the issue of laughter is that of any sympathetic experience: can we truly feel what another feels, and know what another thinks? Like all social performances, laughter between people has to contend with individual desires, expectations, and competing emotions. In sympathy with nature, part of the issue concerns how it can be possible for sympathy to exist between such different entities, something that sounds of laughter only exaggerate. In each of these spheres, a contending factor occurs: if sympathetic transmission is possible, what might that mean for the autonomy of the self? How do you connect with other identities – be they human or non-human – without losing your own identity? How can you laugh along with others and still retain your own distinct sound? Such matters correspond with

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<sup>101</sup> Michael O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 57.

the challenge to Romantic poets keen to preserve their poetic voice, even as they echo each other.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Sound of Unruliness

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"The Poet, gentle creature as he is, / Hath like the Lover his unruly times  
 – / His fits...The meditative mind...hath less quiet instincts"  
 (Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book I)

"Laughter rejoices in bonds" (Max Beerbohm, *And Even Now*)

Maria Edgeworth enjoyed the social embarrassment triggered by *Don Juan* during her stay at Kensington in February 1822:

Mr Ellice...*would* read passages of *Don Juan* to us and to tell you the truth the best of us and Lady Elizabeth herself could not help laughing. Lady Hannah turned her face almost off her shoulder and picked the embroidered corner almost out of her pocket handkerchief and she did *not* laugh. Mr Ellice asked kindly after the Bishop of Meath and all his family with whom he is or was well acquainted.<sup>1</sup>

Edgeworth's evident delight at the unfolding scene is revived through her retelling of it, with her eager eye offering her reader a comedy of manners, as she draws attention to the fact that "the best of us" and even "Lady Elizabeth herself could not help laughing". Lady Hannah's discomfort is comical, as she becomes something of a circus act (a woman capable of turning her face almost off her shoulder). The clamorous litotes, that repeated "almost", arouses attention toward the anxious activity of her body, while the firmness of the declarative "she did *not* laugh", offers conviction so as to playfully summon up doubt. The tension in the room derives from the

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Edgeworth, *Letters from England 1813-1844*, ed. by Christina Colvin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 339.

thrill of Ellice's reading aloud from a work that by this time has attained an infamous reputation as a scurrilous comedy with questionable moral intentions upon its readers. As John Murray notes on its initial publication, though, "there is a great outcry – but every body reads".<sup>2</sup> One explanation for Ellice's moving the conversation to the more venerable subject of the Bishop of Meath is that he recognises the poem's inappropriateness in this setting. Ellice is however "a jovial *parliamentary good fellow*" and a "*thick and thin* friend of Lord Byron's", and this raises the possibility of a further interpretation of his change in topic.<sup>3</sup> We do not know which passage Ellice reads aloud (in February 1822 it could have been anything from Cantos I-V) but if it included the first canto he may well have just read from Julia's protestations of her innocence to Don Alfonso, including her self-righteous remark, "Have I not had two bishops at my feet".<sup>4</sup> If Ellice has read this episode aloud then his "kindly" enquiry after the Bishop of Meath may be less a hasty retreat from the ribaldry of the text and more a mischievous continuation of it. The significance of bawdy humour to a culture at pains to stress its official politeness has been much discussed.<sup>5</sup> Here, Edgeworth observes a rule of acceptable behaviour that causes the women to stifle their laughter, and the eruptions that escape as a direct result of the etiquette at play – what in chapter two we heard as Hazlitt's perception that any "perverse impediment makes our temptation to laugh the greater".<sup>6</sup> As such, the laughter performs a real-life counterpart to the transgressive character ascribed to Byron's mock-epic. The ease with which the text induces unease is realised in the laughter's unruly effect on the individual body and the body politic of the group. As Lady Hannah picks the embroidered corner almost out of her pocket-handkerchief, so laughter undoes the artful delicacy of the social fabric, especially for women.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Letters of John Murray to Lord Byron*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 285.

<sup>3</sup> Edgeworth, *Letters from England*, p. 339.

<sup>4</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1993), V, p. 56. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as canto and stanza numbers.

<sup>5</sup> See Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> 'On Wit and Humour', in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 Vols (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), VI, p. 9.

What makes the episode so illicit is that women are (almost) laughing. As I alluded to in part one of this thesis, the official discourse of the history of laughter is inflected with a gendered politics that advises women not to laugh, particularly in public. One reason for this is due to laughter's licentiousness: its bodily tremors and auditory outbursts imply an association with female orgasm. T. S. Eliot's 'Hysteria' amusingly draws attention to the sexual connotations of laughter, and the unsettling of masculine order it can create, when the prudish speaker desperately assumes, "that if the shaking of her breasts could be stopped, some of the fragments of the afternoon might be collected".<sup>7</sup> Eliot's speaker is eager to shore these fragments against his own ruin. But historically the quietening of a woman's laugh is symbolic of the repression of female sexual independence and the silencing of their (artistic) voice. One means by which modern French feminism seeks to reassert autonomy for women is through laughter. Designating it as a characteristic of that intermixture of female body and text we label 'women's writing', the approach is perhaps most distinctively if cryptically voiced in Hélène Cixous's proposal that the text is "the rhythm that laughs you...that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style".<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Edgeworth's account of the modesty expected of the female circle in a formal setting, Thomas Moore portrays the license he and Byron enjoy in the private and exclusively male gathering at Samuel Rogers's home in the spring 1813. Rogers has recently received a presentation copy of a poetry volume imitating previous poets; both Moore and Byron find in the volume "abundant matter for mirth".<sup>9</sup> Discovering a panegyric to Rogers sets the two of them off into an uncontrollable convulsion of laughter:

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen 1: 4 (1976), pp. 875–893 (882). For laughter in relation to women's writing, see Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (London: M.I.T. 2010), pp. 101–118.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Moore, *Works of Lord Byron with His Letters and Journals, and His Life*, 17 vols (London: John Murray, 1832–1833), II, p. 197.



The opening line of the poem was... ‘When Rogers o’er this labour bent;’ and Lord Byron undertook to read it aloud; - but he found it impossible to get beyond the first two words. Our laughter had now increased to such a pitch that nothing could restrain it. Two or three times he began; but no sooner had the words ‘When Rogers’ passed his lips, than our fit burst forth afresh, – till even Mr Rogers himself, with all his feeling of our injustice, found it impossible not to join us; and we were, at last, all three, in such a state of inextinguishable laughter, that, had the author himself been of the party, I question much whether he could have resisted the infection.<sup>10</sup>

Published several years after Byron’s death, *Works of Lord Byron* is an attempt to direct his legacy, and affirm Moore’s central place in the poet’s affections. The latter is apparent in the above recollection via the repeated use of collective pronouns that insist upon Moore’s accord with Byron. Their camaraderie is heard most deliberately through their laughter, which sounds like the common experience of friends sharing a laugh that erupts spontaneously and captures their mischievous mood.<sup>11</sup> Though Rogers makes vain attempts to get them to reflect seriously on the collection, Byron and Moore are keener “to pounce only [on] such passages as ministered to the laughing humour that possessed us”.<sup>12</sup> As in Edgeworth’s account, Moore draws attention to how excessive laughter involves a loss of volition – what Max Beerbohm has in mind when he writes of laughter’s power to “master and dissolve me” in “a joyous surrender”.<sup>13</sup> Beerbohm’s quasi-erotic terminology hints at the interplay between being overwhelmed by laughter (mastered and dissolved) and willingness to acquiescence in the pleasure of it (joyous surrender). But as Moore’s description of being “possessed” testifies to as well, laughter is also imagined as a force that, curiously, exists independently of the subject that laughs. Thus, if laughter represents the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 197-198.

<sup>11</sup> John Cam Hobhouse disliked Moore and was hostile to his project of biography. Reading it over in 1831, however, Hobhouse found that a passage from the Ravenna Journal brought back vivid memories of his friend, and most especially his laughter: “Of all the peculiarities of Byron his laugh is that of which I have the most distinct recollection”. In Doris Langley Moore, *The Late Lord Byron: Posthumous Dramas* (London: John Murray, 1961), p. 297.

<sup>12</sup> Moore, *Works of Lord Byron*, p. 197.

<sup>13</sup> Max Beerbohm, *And Even Now* (London: William Heinemann, 1921), p. 309 and p. 305.

rebelliousness of an individual or group, laughter is also so rowdy as to be uncontrollable. In the case of Byron and Moore, laughter is raised “to such a pitch that nothing could restrain it”. Laughter is a “fit” which even Rogers, “with all his feeling of our injustice”, and the writer himself, could not have “resisted”. The overwhelming and irrepressible laughter finally unites all of them in an “inextinguishable” “joyous surrender”.

Historically, laughter’s disruptiveness has been linked to its sense of ridicule, and Moore’s account also makes something of this connection. As all of the anecdotes show, though, laughter’s apparent unruliness also invites curiosity over the relation between the individual and a wider community. Not least because the impact on self-governance frequently extends to questions of public governance, with assumptions about laughter’s ability to overwhelm an individual body extrapolated to its capacity to overpower the social body. In part one of this thesis, I described the Romantic fascination with the violent force of laughter. One example of this development is observable in the shift from Beattie’s typical eighteenth-century anxiety toward laughter’s “unrestrained energies” into the use of laughter as subversive by Romantic writers.<sup>14</sup> Throughout *Laughter and Ludicrous Composition*, Beattie emphasised the need for individual liberty and natural passions to be negotiated alongside the primary importance of social order and utility. In contrast, Hazlitt and others revelled in the bare cheek of laughter that aims to aggressively destabilise establishment forces.

This chapter considers the various ways the poetry of Burns, Wordsworth, Byron, and Percy Shelley, performs laughter as an important tool in socio-political and aesthetic issues. In the first section, I reflect on the link in Byron and Burns between laughter and sexual and artistic liberty that undermines social norms. Toward the end of this section I discuss how Shelley capitalises on laughter’s association with sexual and artistic independence to mock Wordsworth. The second section will suggest that transgressive laughter in Byron’s *Don Juan* is portrayed as politically quiescent, a charge that can be levelled at Bakhtin’s idea of carnival laughter as well. In

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<sup>14</sup> James Beattie, *Essays: On the Nature and Mutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism; on Poetry and Music, as They Affect the Mind; on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition; and on the Utility of Classical Learning* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1776), p. 667.

this section, I engage with various theories that assume laughter is inherently rebellious, countering oppressive forces. The third section of this chapter challenges such an idea, and highlights how Shelley in particular views the unruliness of laughter as playing both ways: that the laugh is a fitting signifier of authoritarian rule's overwhelming of the socially and politically subversive. The fourth and final section punctuates the more general discussion with a closer examination of poetic language via a close reading of Shelley's 'To Laughter'. This sonnet engages in revealing ways with a laugh that is scornful of the poet's creativity.

The belief that laughter is unruly is present in some of Western philosophy's earliest writing on the relationship between the individual and a wider culture or state. In Plato's section concerning the 'Primary Education for the Guardians' in the *Republic*, there is a discussion of the dangers of laughter, especially as it is depicted in Homer. Socrates counsels against young men being educated in favour of laughter, and advises that the protectors of the republic need to be wary of its capacious strength:

The stronger the laughter, the stronger the consequent emotional reaction...We should, therefore, refuse admittance to any poetry which portrays eminent humans as being overcome by laughter, and do so even more vigorously if it shows gods in that state...reject the lines of Homer where he says about the gods, 'unquenchable laughter arose among the blessed gods'.<sup>15</sup>

This account illustrates the importance in certain strands of classical thinking that being able to control your own excesses signals that you can regulate those of others too. In the *Republic*, loss of control of oneself implies an inability to regulate the polis, and therefore the pleasure of losing oneself to laughter threatens the stability of the state. Just as we heard in Edgeworth, Moore, and Beerbohm, there is a peculiar relation between laughter and the individual in Plato's imagination:

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 83.

it is not an act the subject performs entirely voluntarily; rather one is “overcome by laughter”. Often in his writing Plato appears to respect and fear laughter because he believes it has the potential to overwhelm anything.

Plato’s remarks imply a link between the overwhelming effects of laughter, and the overpowering influence of poetry. One manifestation of this is the idea of inspiration as it springs *ex nihilo*. In the German Romantic-idealist tradition, inspiration is strongly associated with the tragic and lyrical. Unruly laughter in verse suggests a comparable idea of Romantic creativity rooted in the comic and satiric. Related to this is the way in which laughter and poetry can be forms of subversion of the state, or coercion by it. The interpretations of laughter as both disrupting the status quo or of being used by those in authority to prop up their power, is emblematic of the dissident or repressive function poetry can take in society.<sup>16</sup> The similarity is most obviously apparent in the case of the laughter of satire, which in the Romantic age takes both Jacobin and anti-Jacobin form. The 1790s see satire embroiled in a war of words between radicals and Tories, with the latter in particular employing satire aggressively to combat the perceived threat of Jacobinism to the British government. Into the Regency period, satire (and humour more broadly) gains strength as a means of undermining a traditional, conservative agenda in socio-politics and poetics. Laughter is fundamental to these battles. But whilst the satire of the period has been discussed in recent years, the role of laughter itself has been unheard. This chapter redresses that omission and offers a new means of considering the subversive and reactionary as they are performed by laughter in Romantic poetry.

## Carnival Laughs

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Before leaving Italy for the last time in 1823 to embark on his pursuit of Greek independence, Byron writes on a quintessentially Italian theme, the carnival, or the “final orgasm of

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<sup>16</sup> Plato’s discussion of laughter comes just before the section on mimesis. Perhaps not co-incidentally, his belief in laughter’s unruliness and the need to own, control or contain it, also sits alongside his concerns over aesthetics. Later in the *Republic* he explains the power of the arts to manipulate an audience to extreme reactions of grief or laughter.

Buffoonery”, as he calls it.<sup>17</sup> For Byron, the *jouissance* of carnival is a convulsive spasm, an unbridled outburst of amusement and pleasure, where “hilarity” is “redoubled” (191) and where “laughing” mingles with “flirting” (192). He ironically illustrates the “universal amusement” (191) of carnival via antithesis: “grave and gay – old and young – handsome – and those who might be called so by Courtesy”, all come together in this “periodic Saturnalia” (192). Byron’s allusion to saturnalia plays on the cultural association between contemporary Italian carnival and the classical festival said to have taken place in ancient Rome to celebrate the god Saturn.<sup>18</sup> Like carnival, the unrestrained behaviour approved during saturnalia was assumed to have temporarily upended social hierarchies through role reversals.

Mikhail Bakhtin famously drew on saturnalia to develop his idea of carnival as a time and place where, as Byron also describes, “all ranks are jostled – and mingled – and delighted” (192). The exuberant hybridity Bakhtin outlines in relation to Rabelais and the carnival of the medieval and early modern period has been hugely influential in approaches to comedy and laughter. In keeping with the saturnalia and carnival traditions, Bakhtin argues for two synchronous but contradictory world patterns: that of the orthodoxy of ‘official’ culture (serious and sombre), and the boisterous and rude laughter of the people not normally given license by the ruling elite. For Bakhtin, carnival antics signify a celebration of physical indulgence and freedom from common codes of conduct. The theory of carnival is symbolised in the raucousness and collectivism of laughter, which is both “radical” and “universal”: “It is, first of all, a festive laughter...Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope”.<sup>19</sup> Laughter’s status as a force that can overwhelm all people and subvert hierarchical social structures is brought to the

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<sup>17</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, ‘An Italian Carnival’ (1823), in *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 190-193 (191). Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as page numbers.

<sup>18</sup> For a brief explanation of the classical view of saturnalia see Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (London: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 62-65.

<sup>19</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by H. Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), in *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. by Pam Morris (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), p. 200.

fore by Bakhtin as well, for the “truth of laughter embraced and carried away everyone; nobody could resist it”.<sup>20</sup>

In his comic poem *Beppo* (1818) Byron revels in the delights of continental carnival pleasures, implicitly mocking the stuffiness of English mores.<sup>21</sup> The first two stanzas set the scene, portraying the time leading up to the abstinence of Lent as a universal holiday of hi-jinks and overindulgence. Amusement is strongly associated with physical gratification:

’Tis known, at least it should be, that throughout  
 All countries of the Catholic persuasion,  
 Some weeks before Shrove Tuesday comes about,  
 The people take their fill of recreation,  
 And buy repentance, ere they grow devout,  
 However high their rank, or low their station,  
 With fiddling, feasting, dancing, drinking, masquing,  
 And other things which may be had for asking.

The moment night with dusky mantle covers  
 The skies (and the more duskily the better),  
 The time less liked by husbands than by lovers  
 Begins; and prudery flings aside her fetter;  
 And gaiety on restless tiptoe hovers,  
 Giggling with all the gallants who beset her;  
 And there are songs and quavers, roaring, humming,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 209.

<sup>21</sup> ‘An Italian Carnival’ also contrasts the two countries, but with a more overtly political intent, with the masquerade of Italy compared to the hypocrisy of English parliamentary democracy.

Guitars, and every other sort of strumming.<sup>22</sup>

Personified prudery is sexually liberated as she “flings aside her fetter”; while there is something frisky as well as frivolous about “restless” gaiety’s “giggling”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* proposes that giggling is suggestive of “uncontrollable amusement”.<sup>23</sup> Yet, like that “pleasing pain” tickling, gaiety’s giggling suggests the seductive qualities of laughter – acting as an aphrodisiac.<sup>24</sup> Just as there is a bawdy implication within the musical “humming” and “strumming”, so the laughter serves as foreplay.

Angela Carter argues that giggling evokes “the innocent glee with which women humiliate men in the only way available to them, through a frontal attack on male pride”, and because of the “traditional male narrator”, it is as such “not a sound which is heard very often in literature”.<sup>25</sup> The sexual politics imagined by Carter is problematic in *Beppo* because gaiety giggles “with” rather than ‘at’ the “gallants who beset her”, implying a shared and relaxed activity of courtship. Yet, the verb “beset” pushes a possible harassment within this apparently mutual pleasure. As with the compliant yet exploitable experience of tickling, this giggling implies the submission of the female to male will, even as it invites the impression of the sexual freedom of the female. In Carter’s terms, the only recourse open to gaiety as a defence against male predators, her giggling, is itself codified as and subsumed within a sexual discourse designed around the gratification of men. However, the event is also in the tradition of the cavalier servente (a “time less liked by husbands than by lovers”). Thus the episode exists as part of the Italian custom of attending to the public and private wishes of women, implying at least a degree of emancipation rather than the more common subservience displayed in Western romance.

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<sup>22</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, *Beppo*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1993), IV, p. 129. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition and incorporated in the text as stanza numbers.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Giggle’, v.1, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/78232#eid3175758>>, [accessed 11<sup>th</sup> November 2013].

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*, in *The Major Works*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). p. 475.

<sup>25</sup> Angela Carter, ‘Alison’s Giggle’, in *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings* (London: Virago, 2012), pp. 189–204 (189-190).

Indeed, one of the intentions with *Beppo* generally (and a moment like this specifically) was to mock English hypocrisy and scandalise readers via a display of Mediterranean mores.

Laughter is regularly linked in Byron's writing to sex. In Canto VI of *Don Juan*, Dudú's dream that wakes the whole harem is a "fond hallucination, and a theme / For laughter" (VI, 83) Though no one understands what her "*malapropos*" (VI, 84) dream is exactly about, the narrator's teasingly provocative tone and pointed phrasing leaves the reader in little doubt of the bodily stimulation that causes this vision. Dudú's over-excitement might be something the text invites us to laugh at ("a theme for laughter") but the sexual encounter that produces the "scream" is also "a theme for laughter" because of its implications of female orgasm. Unlicensed promiscuity in the harem does not only unsettle nightly slumbers; it disobeys strict regulations against men within a space reserved for the women of the sultan. But the dream is also one of staged expectation, what Jerome McGann identifies as Byron's playful exposition of male fantasies of a female-only space. The scene becomes a "voyeuristic spectacle" that knowingly implicates the narrator in the process of anti-feminine strains.<sup>26</sup> So this "theme for laughter" pokes fun at the sort of suppressed fantasies its male readers might be inclined toward, and at the same time highlights how these dreams are partly derived from and encouraged by aesthetic works themselves, not least, of course, the eastern tales of Byron.

Before Byron, Robert Burns had imagined poetry as a transgressive act: in a letter to Dr Moore he fondly recalls the first occasion when he "committed the sin of RHYME".<sup>27</sup> Celebrating the association between laughter and sexual adventures, he appreciates that poetry can sound like a delightful misdemeanour full of erotic possibilities. This is in evidence in the laughing refrain of both versions of 'Duncan Gray', his re-writing of a popular ballad at the time. Burns's adaptations are giddy with bawdiness, as he merrily flouts the sober views of his father, and the oppressive morality of the Kirk. In the more public version, which Burns sold as a work

<sup>26</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. by J. De Lancey Ferguson, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn ed. by G. Ross Roy, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I, p. 137.



that “precludes sentiment. – The ludicrous is its ruling feature”, laughter is a playful motif announcing a festive period of courtship.<sup>28</sup> Refrain becomes a mating call: “Ha, ha, the wooing o’t”.<sup>29</sup> In the ruder version in *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, though, the performance of laughter and poetry are explicitly linked to sexual stimulation: “Can ye play me Duncan Gray, / Ha, ha, the girdin’ o’t”.<sup>30</sup>

Writing in 1819, Percy Shelley exploits Burns’s libidinous reputation in order to ridicule Wordsworth. *Peter Bell the Third* parades a comical opposition between the sexual knowledge of Burns and the inexperience of Wordsworth so as to critique the latter’s artistic and political integrity. In an allusion to Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress*, Shelley mocks Peter-Wordsworth’s sexual timidity. He is a “moral eunuch” who “touched the hem of Nature’s shift, / Felt faint – and never dared uplift / The closest, all-concealing tunic”.<sup>31</sup> At this, many breasted Nature “laughed the while, with an arch smile” (318). Nature laughs here partly in amused awareness of Peter-Wordsworth’s bashfulness. But the laugh also teases his tentativeness by calling further attention to her erogenous features which Peter-Wordsworth is so poetically reticent about.

Shelley is reading the often bawdy novelle of Boccaccio during this time. The Florentine’s open-minded influence shows, for the narrator tells Peter-Wordsworth Boccaccio’s “sweet words might cure a / Male prude like you” (330-331). According to Jane Stabler, the allusion to the tale of Alatiel’s full sexual awakening in the *Decameron* at this moment (“Bocca basciata non perde ventura, / Anzi rinnuova come fa la luna”) makes Peter’s “feeble groping about the hem of Nature’s shift all the more comic and inadequate”.<sup>32</sup> Stabler identifies the political importance of Boccaccio to the Pisan circle for attacks on English censorship and the suppression of (especially) female sexuality. Something of Shelley’s frustration at the occlusion of feminine desire can be heard in Nature’s insistence that “I, not coy, / Yield love for love, frank, warm and

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. II, p. 164.

<sup>29</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), II, pp. 666-668.

<sup>30</sup> *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, ed. by G. Ross Roy (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1989-), III, p. 116. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

<sup>32</sup> Jane Stabler, *The Artistry of Exile: Romantic and Victorian Writers in Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 136.

true” (323-324). Her sexual openness is fundamental to any understanding of ‘nature’ and not to embrace this is to censure nature herself: to deny the nature of Nature. This laughter derides Wordsworth’s nature poetry as a refusal to accept the natural world’s inherently (sexually) uninhibited features. That “arch smile” presents her as somewhere between a mischievous coquette and a figure of haughty indifference. Nature is clearly out of Peter-Wordsworth’s league. If he is either unwilling or incapable of grasping her, though, Burns had no such trouble, for this “Scottish Peasant boy...knew my joy / More, learned friend, than you” (325-327).

Aesthetic differences toward nature are framed politically. From the sensual southern clime of Italy, Shelley suggests that the radical Scottish rustic knows nature much more intimately than the increasingly conformist and retiring English Wordsworth. Shelley casts Wordsworth’s clumsiness toward the procreative energies of the natural landscape as indicative of his ineptitude toward the political scene. Wordsworth’s reluctance to engage with Nature on her own terms symbolizes his cowardice toward the political realities of the country. More crudely, Shelley’s satiric attack characterises Wordsworth’s limpness toward Nature as symptomatic of his flaccid response to the British state. The Shelleys had been progressively moving toward this opinion. On 14<sup>th</sup> September 1814, Mary records being “much disappointed” with *The Excursion* after she and Percy read it for the first time. Wordsworth, she decides, is “a slave” to those pillars of the English establishment – the church and crown.<sup>33</sup> Percy announces his frustration in “To Wordsworth”, which he composes some time between 1814-1815. In it he bemoans the passing of the “Poet of Nature”, one whose far-reaching radical politics is irreducibly associated with his response to nature.<sup>34</sup> Thus Shelley’s use of laughter in *Peter Bell the Third* sounds out what he believes is now a deficiency in Wordsworth’s perceptual imagination, one that is linked to his growing political and religious conformism. I will return to Shelley’s critique of Wordsworth’s political apostasy later in the chapter. For now, it is important to note how frequently sexually suggestive laughter is given artistic and political import. In the next section, I consider the

<sup>33</sup> *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), I, p. 25.

<sup>34</sup> In *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Geoffrey Matthews, and Kelvin Everest, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1989-), I, p. 455.

political quiescence accompanying the pleasures of the sound of laughter.

### Roars of Laughter and Political Quiescence

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The Haidée episodes of *Don Juan* are usually identified as the place where Shelley's Platonism infiltrates Byronic materialism.<sup>35</sup> Yet Lambro's return to his paradisaic island finds him hearing not the "music of the spheres" but "unhallowed, earthly sound[s] of fiddling...A pipe too, and a drum, and shortly after, / A most oriental roar of laughter" (III, 28). The bacchanal thrown by Haidée and Juan is epitomised by this roar as it calls to mind the animalistic nature of human desire.<sup>36</sup> The laughter prioritises physical delights over visionary ones (as the prioritisation of sound, touch, and taste throughout the bacchanal re-orders the traditional philosophical hierarchy of the senses and its valorising of sight). It reveals the materialist discourse that is as much a feature of Romanticism as any idealist understanding of pleasure in the period.<sup>37</sup> Life on the island now revolves around indulgence of the body, a "place of pleasure" where "The servants all were getting drunk or idling, / A life which made them happy beyond measure" (III, 39). The scene embodies that gradual move away from a Christian framework of pleasure as something sinful (giving in to the temptations of the flesh) toward a growing individualism (the birth of the Romantic self) and greater tolerance toward gratification.<sup>38</sup>

Having heard (wrongly) of her piratical father's death, Haidée has set-up house with Juan in opulent fashion. Amusingly, Lambro's bewilderment at the "meaning of this holiday" (III, 42)

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<sup>35</sup> As I pointed out in my sympathy chapter, Shelley praises these episodes, and sees his influence upon them, especially his conversations with Byron concerning Greek philosophy.

<sup>36</sup> The noise contrasts with the silence with which Haidée meets death: "At last / Without a groan or sigh or glance to show / A parting pang, the spirit from her past" (IV, 69).

<sup>37</sup> See Lionel Trilling, 'The Fate of Pleasure: Wordsworth to Dostoevsky', in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. by Northrop Frye (London: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 73–106. Trilling's influential essay registers the Romantic celebration of an embodied pleasure even as many of its texts also adumbrate a joy or happiness that is said to transcend the body. See also Alan Richardson, 'Romanticism and the Body', *Literature Compass*, 1 (2004), 1–14. Richardson argues that the laudable reassessment of Romanticism that occurred in the 1990s, particularly in gender, cultural, and postcolonial studies, nonetheless held in place the tendency to read "canonical Romanticism...as a transcendentalizing, idealist literary movement, implicitly hostile...to physical nature and to the material body" (p. 2). The more recent tendency reflected by Richardson's own work, emphasises a materialist discourse that operates alongside the idealism.

<sup>38</sup> For the background and traditions see *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Roy Porter, and Marie Mulvey Roberts (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

does not derive solely from Haidée's lack of grief, or irritation at Juan's usurpation. His disapproval of the riotous party springs also from the fact that it transgresses his strict social laws and tight fiscal housekeeping. Finding his home transformed into Haidée and Juan's lavish court, he witnesses a mixed social scene, with servants, slaves, and suitors all vying for the feast of his spoils. He views all this "with aversion" because he perceives "in his absence such expenses", dreading "that climax of all human ills, / The inflammation of his weekly bills" (III, 35). Lambro, it turns out, is a rather bourgeois and financially vigilant pirate – Byron describes him as a "sea-attorney" (III, 14). His occupation takes him across turbulent seas, whilst at home he expects life to be temperate and quiet. He displays the "moderate form" of bourgeois pleasure the twentieth-century theorist Georges Bataille associates with a life of utility.<sup>39</sup> The "roar of laughter" is a rejoinder to such a measured and neat approach to life. But the excess of enjoyment it represents also performs an implicit critique of work ethic – the type of assumption found in Adam Smith, for instance, that labour is the most significant human occupation.

Yet if these sounds of laughter inadvertently scoff at work, the pleasure on the island is nonetheless assembled from others' labour. Haidée and Juan may be "happy in the illicit / Indulgence of their innocent desires" (III, 13), but their freedom is acquired at the expense of others' liberty. They directly profit from Lambro's slave trade, particularly Haidée, "The greatest heiress of the Eastern Isles" (II, 128). Just about the first thing we hear of her is that "Her brow was overhung with coins of gold, / That sparkled o'er the auburn of her hair" (II, 116). Whilst Haidée evidently does provide "A day of gold from out an age of iron / [which] Is all that life allows the luckiest sinner" (III, 36), part of the allure of this paragon of happiness lies in her material wealth. Haidée's luxury items, and by extension her personal 'charms', are the "merchandise" Lambro plunders on the seas: as he mercilessly sells his captives, he kindly rescues "classic articles of female want...selected from the spoil he gathers, / Robbed for his

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<sup>39</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 116–29 (116).

daughter by the best of fathers” (III, 17). The slaves that wait on Lambro’s household, meanwhile, are not given their freedom, but simply the chance to participate in ribaldry. Arguably, they purchase a superficial liberty at the expense of any meaningful change, and become willing participants in the “Pyrrhic dance” (III, 29) of their own enslavement. Moreover, by enjoying the spoils of Lambro’s slave trade, they are by association implicated in the suffering of others as well.

The “roar of laughter” is thus part of a process that lets its participants ignore (or perhaps never even hear) socio-political realities. As such this pleasure-oriented laughter, with its pointed connection to seclusion, and its association with indulgence of sensual and monetary delights, implies political quiescence.<sup>40</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue in their formulation of the ‘culture industry’ that, “Amusement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display”.<sup>41</sup> Their ideas evolve out of a different historical moment, with their theories of entertainment focusing on twentieth-century cinema and primarily interested in art that registers difficulty. Nonetheless, the laughter they link to their understanding of entertainment as an essentially leisure-based activity identified with the bourgeoisie, resonates with my interpretation of Haidée’s island paradise. Adorno and Horkheimer believe laughter represents the amusement industry’s skill at selling leisure at the expense of any meaningful reflection on present concerns or how to bring about social transformation: “Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness” (112). Amusement, and the laughter Adorno and Horkheimer associate with it, denies the opportunity for change, and negates freedom, because “at its root is powerlessness. It is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality” (116). Laughter,

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<sup>40</sup> The criticism levelled at the Romantics by modernists is also often focused around the belief that the pursuit of pleasure might reflect an indifference to the social difficulties surrounding them.

<sup>41</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 116. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the text as page numbers.

meanwhile, “echoes the inescapability of power” (112), because it tolerates the power structures in place rather than seeking to resist them. Immanuel Kant discussed the pleasure of illusions or trickery that often produce laughter in us, and (somewhat punctiliously) suggested Voltaire “might have added *laughter* to the list” of hope and sleep given by heaven to “compensate us for the many miseries of life”.<sup>42</sup> Something of this compensation may be heard in Byron’s realisation that “if I laugh at any mortal thing, / ’Tis that I may not weep” (*Don Juan*, IV, 4). But if so, it is a laugh borne of a realisation of profound powerlessness.

Byron’s celebration of noisy revelry in Canto III and IV of *Don Juan* thus also bears witness to the political consequences of such pleasures. The charge brought against carnival laughter by many modern critics is similar: namely that it operates as a form of political containment and barrier to genuine social reform.<sup>43</sup> Stallybrass and White defend carnival against such criticism by pointing out that forms of social protest often coincided with it, and that the presence of carnival “may often act as a *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*”.<sup>44</sup> Yet this view understands carnival as operating within pre-existing political structures: rather than bringing about substantive change, carnival is a participant in a continual and unresolvable dialectical battle between reform and conformism. Roger Sales offers a couple of explanations “why the fizzy, dizzy carnival spirit did not necessarily undermine authority”; one being that it “was licensed or sanctioned by the authorities themselves” so that “The release of emotions and grievances made them easier to police in the long term”.<sup>45</sup> The “carnival spirit”, typified by laughter, was “therefore a vehicle for social protest” but also “the method for disciplining that protest”.<sup>46</sup> While admiring carnival exuberance, Terry Eagleton identifies what he believes to be its great political weakness. “Carnival”, he says, “is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of

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<sup>42</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, ed. by Nicholas Walker, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 201.

<sup>43</sup> Another issue is the binaries that carnival establishes, not least the idea that those in authority did not frequently enjoy bawdy humour. Vic Gatrell shows that the rude humour of the eighteenth century was regularly aimed at elite audiences, however ‘low’ the taste may have been by polite standards. See *City of Laughter*, pp. 157-209. Another lack of nuance in carnival is that of the radical and ‘deserving’ masses versus the cruelty of the orthodoxy.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Roger Sales, *English Literature in History, 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 169.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art”.<sup>47</sup> Eagleton’s Marxist interpretation of carnival argues that outbursts of raucous laughter and revolutionary artworks are tolerated by authority precisely because such licensed rebelliousness makes it less likely that there will be any desire for real or meaningful change. Ironically, the transgressive behaviour signified by laughter operates only because of the shrewd indulgence of officialdom.

In *Beppo*, Byron provides an example of the charade that masks carnival’s apparent deviance, revealing how unruliness exists only so long as orthodoxy permits. Carnival condones “All kinds of dress, except the ecclesiastical” and so “All people as their fancies hit, may choose”, though “No one in these parts may quiz the clergy” (3). Evidently the freedom offered during carnival is a bit of a masquerade, because overstepping certain parameters has grave repercussions. “Therefore take heed, ye Freethinkers!”, for though you

swore it only was in fun; They’d haul you o’er the coals

...

Nor say one mass to cool the cauldron’s bubble

That boiled your bones, unless you paid them double (*Beppo*, 3-4).

The narrator’s easy acceptance of the imposed limits – “saving this, you may put on whate’er / You like” (5) – echoes the inherent conformity of the people as they internalise the boundaries placed upon them, and are rowdy but rarely truly unruly. As Byron points out, disruptiveness is “privileged to a certain point – and that is decency...there are...few who transgress the rule”.<sup>48</sup> From one perspective, then, the idea that laughter (and its various discourses and relations) is capable of effecting change through subversion, or that it may offer some means of resistance to authoritarian structures, becomes the most effective means by which authority wields power.

<sup>47</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 148.

<sup>48</sup> ‘An Italian Carnival’ *Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, p. 192.

Yet the notion that laughter is a potent form of political resistance is culturally widespread and often deeply appealing. Though Byron understands the limits of laughter, for “laughter / Leaves us so doubly serious shortly after” (*Beppo*, 79), he suggests at times his belief in its power to subvert, as we hear in his quip concerning Cervantes’s “single laugh [that] demolished the right arm / Of his own country” (*Don Juan*, XIII, 11). Many thinkers in the twentieth century have insisted upon the revolutionary qualities of laughter. The work of the philosopher John Morreall, for instance, consistently advances an optimistic view of laughter, suggesting that one way of remaining independent of, and rebellious toward, political oppression is to laugh, even if only in the private space of the heart and head.<sup>49</sup> When Walter Benjamin commented on Charlie Chaplin’s effect on the audience he proposed that the performer appeals “to the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses: their laughter”.<sup>50</sup> In this view, Chaplin’s routines offer the audience a universal language (laughter), which is a potentially democratizing performance itself, enacting the radical feeling of the populace. For Benjamin, in this instance at least, laughter represents an international and insurgent impulse, a common experience that implicitly unsettles the status quo. Even Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledge that what they term “reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from power”.<sup>51</sup> This laughter contains the possibility of a collective force of liberty, however faint and intangible that “echo” may be.

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### Laughter as the Great Oppressor

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However, despite the understandable desire to hear laughter as the great liberator, its unruliness means that it is not bound by any particular position. Indeed, if anything the superiority theory has historically lent laughter an air of malice toward those not in a position of power. In this

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<sup>49</sup> See especially John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. by Rodney Livingstone, 4 vols (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), II, p. 224.

<sup>51</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 112.



section, I explore Percy Shelley's use of laughter to seal violent oppression of the unruly, and the consequences of subjugation. I then suggest a link between laughter and debates in the Romantic period over the versatility of poets to speak truth to power, or, conversely, speak for that power. Like laughter, poetry can play both ways.

Shelley knows all too well that 'the people' could be entertained by suffering. For instance, Prometheus hears "the multitude laugh loud" at the sight of victims of religious intolerance "Impaled in lingering fire".<sup>52</sup> Yet, *Laon and Cythna* is more typical of Shelley's perspective by presenting cruel laughter to be the preserve of authoritarian regimes bent on suppressing revolutions.<sup>53</sup> It is a complex poem to discuss, as others have noted.<sup>54</sup> Set in the Ottoman Empire of the nineteenth century, and capitalising on the uprisings occurring in Europe, the poem's focus on revolution inevitably identifies it with the French Revolution too.<sup>55</sup> Attending to one small part of the work runs the risk of failing to do justice to its intricacies, and its deep political resonance for Shelley studies. That said, for my purposes it is significant that the chaotic counter-revolutionary laughter heard during the violent crushing of a bloodless revolution, and the after-effects of this defeat, voices Shelley's belief that it is not agitators that are threatening the peace, but those already wielding power.<sup>56</sup>

Laon tells the narrator of the poem that the day of the revolution "I...went in joy" through a "glorious pageant" and was met by "a shout of joyance" by "all the crowd" of the Golden City.<sup>57</sup> But barely a day passes before the city hears of the army of King Othman's brother coming to quash the rebellion. The revolutionaries panic, and soon the joyful festivities that

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<sup>52</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Kelvin Everest, and Geoffrey Matthews, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1989-), II, p.514.

<sup>53</sup> Shelley has been quoted as saying: "I am convinced that there can be no entire regeneration of mankind until laughter is put down". See Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1933), II, 23.

<sup>54</sup> David Duff calls it "uniquely challenging" in *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 215. See also, P.M.S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> As Ronald Paulson points out, events in France "created the paradigm of revolution". See *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> In the context of British politics we might recall that it was English radicals who were frequently charged with undermining stability by Tory sympathisers.

<sup>57</sup> *Laon and Cythna*, in *The Poems of Shelley*, II, p. 140. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

heralded a new dawn are replaced by terror. As the city is bombarded by counter-revolutionary forces, Laon witnesses the “despot’s bloodhounds” feasting on the innocent, “gorging deep / Their gluttony of death” (2389-2391). The horsemen of Othman’s allies

o’er the wide fields murdering sweep,  
And with loud laughter for their tyrant reap  
A harvest sown with other hopes (2392-94).

Laughter operates as a piercing sound here, as it is later when “the conquerors laughed / In pride to hear the wind our screams of torment waft” (2432-33). They laugh because “the shaft / Of the artillery from the sea was thrown / More fast and fiery” (2430-32) which brings even greater agony. But there is a sense in which each case implies laughter is itself a potent “shaft” that brings dread. The laughing “tyrant reap” catches the “gorging deep” on the “gluttony of death”, and that “murdering sweep” of the horsemen, so that the laughter marshals an inversion of harvest – reaping death and destruction of the innocent, who are “Unarmed and unaware” (2390). Echoing the earlier description of “the fruits...glowing / Beneath the stars, and the night-winds...flowing / O’er ripe corn” (2242-44) associated with freedom, the later incident sardonically mows down the burgeoning revolution and its promise of plenty.

The cutting down of the revolution soon brings deprivation to the country. After the failure of the uprising in the Golden City, Laon recounts entering a “desolate village in a wood...a place of blood” (2740-42) where “the life had fled / From all those corpses now” (2744-45). Here he meets only one living person:

withered from a likeness of aught human  
Into a fiend, by some strange misery:  
Soon as she heard my steps she leaped on me,

And glued her burning lips to mine, and laughed  
 With a loud, long, and frantic laugh of glee (2760-64).

Pestilence has replaced republican zeal with the laughing mania of the woman and the putrefying corpses symbolic of the social body rotting under psychological trauma. Biblical texts and Classical epics tend to associate the sacking of cities with divine retribution or cosmic intervention. But Shelley makes it clear that the destruction of the city and the plague of the village are a consequence of human actions (specifically those of authoritarian rulers) not some cosmic prejudice. Like the pestilence, the sacking of the city brings an ironic levelling of society that parodies the democratising impulse of political liberty. Moreover, the laughter is chaotic as well as despotic since it represents the annihilation of what Shelley believed to be a naturally liberal social order by those in positions of corrupted national authority.

Shelley assumes the tyrannic power of a ruling elite can plague and mutilate all facets of society, including turning the arts, which for Shelley should be the great liberator, into the great oppressor. The corruption of poetry by the powerful is the primary reason for his attack on Restoration courtly comedy in *A Defence of Poetry*. Bent to the will of “kingly power over liberty and virtue”, it stunts the moral progress of humanity by reminding us that, “we laugh from self-complacency and triumph instead of pleasure”.<sup>58</sup> Unlike Byron, who was delighted by Restoration comedy, Shelley refused to be entertained by a genre coupled with authoritarian rule. Much of Shelley’s verse expresses his faith in poetry’s part in bringing about radical change by influencing the hearts and minds of readers. Thus the corruption of poetry by the state is especially egregious. As I discussed earlier, Shelley scoffs at Wordsworth in *Peter Bell the Third* for abandoning his radical politics in favour of slavish acceptance of the religious and political establishment. Wordsworth himself linked religion and politics in *Ode: The Morning of the Day*

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<sup>58</sup> In *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman, and Neil Fraistat (London: Norton, 2002), p. 520. Elsewhere Shelley calls the effects of comedy “the spirit-sinking noise / Of heartless mirth”, in ‘A Tale of Society as it is’ (1811), in *The Poems of Shelley*, I p. 196.

*Appointed for a General Thanksgiving* (1816), reading the British victory at Waterloo as a mark of divine intervention. During *Peter Bell the Third* Shelley taunts Wordsworth through burlesque, recasting Wordsworth's lines from the *Ode...Thanksgiving* in light of the massacre at St Peter's Fields, Manchester, and other political protests that demanded parliamentary reform. Shelley suggests Wordsworth is a mouth-piece for the Tory administration, just as Peter is a defender of the unreformed British state craving and praising "Carnage and Slaughter", which is the devil's "niece and thy daughter".<sup>59</sup> Laughter is allied with the "Slaughter", as the "body-guard yeomen / Hew down babes and women, / And laugh with bold triumph till Heaven be rent" (647-649). Throughout the passage Shelley exploits the potential levity produced by short lines and feminine rhymes, which simultaneously undermines Peter, and, by association, ridicules Wordsworth's own mode and purpose for his political writing. The language of Peter-Wordsworth is complicit with the cruel laughter that is revelling in the violent oppression of democratic reform. By becoming a puppet of ruling authority, Peter-Wordsworth's verse becomes, like the laughter of the yeoman, a sound in the service of oppression: both laughter and their poetry give voice to the cruelty. Here laughter is a weapon of the state, while poetry is its propaganda. Shelley's satire frames Wordsworth as full of praise for an unreformed political order that sanctions violence against its people; implying that by doing so he has bought state protection for his own work. Byron performs a similar trick in *Don Juan* when he accuses the Lake poets of purchasing their own poetic and social seclusion through "loyal treason" (III, 94), abandoning their radical principles in favour of what Byron (like Shelley) believed to be puffery for the British state.

In *The Four Ages of Poetry*, Thomas Love Peacock casts poets not as agitators but as sycophants to those who rule. He wittily proposes that the roots of poetry lie in panegyric: it is born as a commodity of the powerful, singing "in a strain of tumid hyperbole, of the exploits and

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<sup>59</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, III, p. 143. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

possessions of a few pre-eminent individuals”.<sup>60</sup> In much less congenial language than Peacock’s, Hazlitt’s vitriol in his essay on *Coriolanus* claims that poetry and the imagination are dangerously elitist – agents of kings and queens, and of dominant ideologies. He notes that, “The cause of the people is...ill calculated as a subject for poetry...[because]...The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power”.<sup>61</sup> “The imagination”, he continues, “is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty”; it is “aristocratical” – unlike the “republican faculty” of understanding that “seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good by justice and proportion” (347-348). The

The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is every thing by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes. It presents an imposing appearance. It shows its head turreted, crowned and crested. Its front is gilt and blood-stained. Before it, it carries noise, and behind it, it leaves tears. It has its altars and its victims, sacrifices, human sacrifices. Kings, priests, nobles, are its train-bearers; tyrants and slaves its executioners – ‘Carnage is its daughter!’ Poetry is right royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right...our vanity, or some other feeling, makes us disposed to place ourselves in the situation of the strongest party...it is the assumption of a right to insult or oppress others, that carries an imposing air of superiority with it. We had rather be the oppressor than the oppressed (348).

Quoting (like Shelley above and Byron in *Don Juan*) Wordsworth’s notorious lines from *Ode...Thanksgiving*, Hazlitt identifies poetry (“the language of power”) as a cause of human misery by aligning itself with the powerful (as Wordsworth is charged with doing) whose

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<sup>60</sup> *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith, and C. E. Jones, 10 vols (London: Constable, 1924-1934) VIII, p. 4. The satire will of course spur Shelley to offer a more progressive view of verse’s importance to society in *A Defence of Poetry*.

<sup>61</sup> *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), V, p. 347. Subsequent references to the essay are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as page numbers.

“victims” are the suffering people.<sup>62</sup> Evidently Wordsworth has fallen some way from the revolutionary poetics Hazlitt identifies with the levelling politics of *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>63</sup> As he so often does, Hazlitt makes his point via a series of appositional assertions, rather than progressive argument. But the key idea he appears to be offering is that this formation is not an alternative to the sympathetic imagination he outlines elsewhere, but its logical conclusion. Unlike the understanding, which is disinterested, and brings justice and proportion by seeking only to understand the world as it is, the imagination powerfully fashions the world to its own desires and purpose, prioritising and exaggerating those features it most admires. Being capable of bending all things to its own will, it is innately sympathetic toward the cause of the powerful and neglectful of the weak.

Hazlitt’s conception of poetry is an appropriate description of ruling, superior laughter. Presenting an “imposing appearance”, laughter is “every thing by excess”, derived from the “assumption of a right to insult or oppress others, that carries an imposing air of superiority with it”. As we have seen, in the early nineteenth century there are many who ridicule Wordsworth’s apostasy of his radical politics. In *Peter Bell*, however, he too mocks a certain kind of poetry of the imagination (one he is often identified with) implying its sense of superiority and reckless disregard for the distress of the people; significantly, he links this mode with the laughter of superiority. He places *Peter Bell* at the end of his ‘Poems of the Imagination’, but, tellingly, the Prologue of the poem presents a rejection of one kind of imagination in favour of another. Mary Jacobus has argued that, “If the 1798 ‘Advertisement’ is Wordsworth’s earliest critical manifesto, the ‘Prologue’ to *Peter Bell* is his first poetic one”.<sup>64</sup> This Prologue amusingly dramatizes Wordsworth’s double-movement as the poet of the sublime or Miltonic imagination Coleridge praises, which bends all things toward its own ego, and his other inclination (which so often bewilders Coleridge): that of engaging with the common everyday matter of life. In Hazlitt’s

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<sup>62</sup> Wordsworth would remove the infamous lines that rhymed “slaughter” with “daughter” for *Poems* (1845).

<sup>63</sup> See ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, XVII; ‘The Spirit of the Age’, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, XI.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads* (1798) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 263.

terms, the Prologue illustrates the difference between the “exclusive faculty” of the imagination and the “republican faculty” of understanding.

The opening of the Prologue to *Peter Bell* wittily exploits the contemporary craze in ballooning so as to imagine the possibility of flying far away from earth’s troubles. The speaker whimsically wishes for a “little boat / In shape just like the crescent moon”.<sup>65</sup> Rather enchantingly he receives one, and it gives him the chance to float above the personal strains and political stresses of humanity:

I from the helm admire  
 The pointed horns of my canoe;  
 And did not pity touch my breast  
 To see how you are all distress’d,  
 Till my ribs ached I’d laugh at you.

Away we go, my boat and I,  
 Sure never man had such another;  
 Whether among the winds we strive  
 Or deep into the heavens we dive  
 We’re both contented with each other.

Away we go, and what care we  
 For treasons, tumults, and for wars;  
 We are as calm in our delight  
 As is the crescent moon so bright  
 Among the scattered stars (16-30).

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<sup>65</sup> William Wordsworth, *Peter Bell*, ed. by John E. Jordan (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 44. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

This episode exists in a long literary tradition of looking down on humanity and scornfully laughing at them, typified by the laugh at the end of Chaucer's *Troilus*. Wordsworth portrays an aspect of the poetic imagination as a medium springing, like laughter, from a 'superior' position that is distanced from common humanity. In this self-ironizing incident he accepts that violent and excessive laughter can be a poet's natural response to others, even if, it being Wordsworth, the admittance is prefaced by the prevailing effect of pity. Still, the speaker appears blithely unconcerned with others as his poetic journey leads him increasingly away from others. If the poet's laughter and his imaginative flight have the potential to devalue human life, they also have the effect of dehumanising him. After all, he assimilates himself with the supernatural boat: as strangely "calm in our delight / As is the crescent moon so bright". The moon's superior brightness within the heavens is mirrored by the majestic position of Wordsworth, as he floats high above the dwindling earth. This figure is a parody of contemporary criticism of Wordsworth, said to be increasingly isolated from political reality: "what care we / For treasons, tumults, and for wars".

Wordsworth associates laughter with an imagination fashioning its own concerns and even its own world, and his playfully knowing language reflects this. Instead of expansiveness and scope born of an elevated position, his vision and interests are described in curiously myopic terms, not least in the solipsism of, "I from the helm admire / The pointed horns of my canoe". As Wordsworth admits, the "little Barge!" of his imagination "quite forget[s] / What in the world is doing" (109-110) – and by implication Wordsworth does as well. Earlier, I discussed how Byron allied laughter with a form of entertainment that was politically quiescent. The Prologue to *Peter Bell* marks an instance of Wordsworth's humorous engagement with how laughter and a form of poetic flight represent not only quiescence, but also contempt toward the plight of others. At the end of the Prologue it is Wordsworth who is cast down. Choosing "This little earth of ours" (40), his little boat mocks his decision to inhabit the world, and tells him to "Go



creep along the dirt, and pick / Your way with your good walking-stick “(73-74). While Hazlitt, Byron, and Shelley will later accuse Wordsworth of making people suffer through his art, and its mocking, anti-radical laughter, in *Peter Bell* Wordsworth is at comical pains to portray himself as suffering for his poetry.

Throughout this chapter, I have examined the links between laughter and transgression, and conversely, as something that overrules rebelliousness. I have suggested that these forms of laughter are akin to forms of poetry as it performs subversion or oppression. The investigation has remained at a general level because I have been interested in exploring how unruliness is cast both within Romantic poetry, and in theories of laughter. In the final section, a close reading returns the chapter to the level of the dirt and walking stick. Shelley’s sonnet, ‘To Laughter’, addresses obstreperous laughter. Whereas the other examples suggest laughter is malleable, adapting (like poets) to various interests, Shelley implies that laughter will not conform. It is particularly unwilling to bend to the parameters of sublime and pathetic poetry. If Wordsworth’s Prologue to *Peter Bell* registers the self-importance that an ‘exclusive’ form of the imagination and superior laughter can take, Shelley’s ‘To Laughter’ portrays laughter as wildly opposed to the playful workings of the poet’s thought. If on first inspection laughter appears antithetical to Shelley’s craft, I will consider the uncanny relation between laughter and his poetic interests, even as laughter ironically hints at Shelley’s own doubts about his professed beliefs.

### A Close Reading of ‘To Laughter’

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‘To Laughter’ was unearthed as part of the Scrope Davies Notebook find of 1976. No drafts of the poem have been found, but the fair-copy is in Mary’s hand, and its inclusion within the

notebook, and its similarity in style and theme to other poems by Percy at the time, mark it out as his.<sup>66</sup> The sonnet dates from the summer of 1816, when the Shelleys were in Switzerland:

Thy friends were never mine thou heartless fiend:  
 Silence and solitude and calm and storm,  
 Hope, before whose veiled shrine all spirits bend  
 In worship, and the rainbow-vested form  
 Of conscience, that within thy hollow heart  
 Can find no throne – the love of such great powers  
 Which has requited mine in many hours  
 Of loneliness, thou ne'er hast felt; depart!  
 Thou canst not bear the moon's great eye, thou fearest  
 A fair child clothed in smiles – aught that is high  
 Or good or beautiful. – Thy voice is dearest  
 To those who mock at truth and Innocency.  
 I, now alone, weep without shame to see  
 How many broken hearts lie bare to thee.<sup>67</sup>

A natural rhyme would exist between the end of the first and third lines if “fiend” is interpreted as a slip in the copy for ‘friend’.<sup>68</sup> This would certainly be more consistent with the use of end

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<sup>66</sup> For more on the background of the poem see, Neville Rogers, ‘The Scrope Davies Shelley Find’, *KSBM*, 28 (1977), 1-9; Judith Cherniak and Timothy Burnett, ‘The Byron and Shelley Notebooks in the Scrope Davies Find’, *The Review of English Studies*, 29: 113 (February, 1978), 36-49. For the thematic connections between ‘To Laughter’ and the other poems in the Notebook see Roland A. Duerkson, ‘Thematic Unity in the New Shelley Notebook’, *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 83 (1980), 203-15.

<sup>67</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, I, p. 520.

<sup>68</sup> Timothy Webb considers this a strong possibility, but encourages a degree of uncertainty on the issue. See ‘Shelley and the Ambivalence of Laughter’, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by Kelvin Everest (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 43–62 (46). Webb is one of the few who attends in some detail to the formal and thematic concerns of the sonnet. Another is John Bleasdale, ‘To Laughter’: Shelley’s Sonnet and Solitude’, *Romanticism on the Net* 22 (2001), <doi: 10.7202/005972ar>, [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> October 2011]. Both have enriched my reading of the poem.

rhymes in the rest of the work. However, throughout the sonnet “Laughter is satanic”,<sup>69</sup> in keeping with the etymology from the Hebrew as ‘adversary’, and ‘to oppose’, placing the speaker seemingly on the side of heavenly angels. Early criticism of the poem offers various biographical sources for the callous figure. Neville Rogers cites Richard Holmes’s speculation that it is Scrope Davies, whom Shelley had recently met through Byron, and whose sense of humour Shelley apparently did not share.<sup>70</sup> Chernaik and Burnett claim the poem develops out of Byron’s complaints to the Shelleys of his mistreatment at the hands of caricaturists after the break-up of his marriage. In their reading, it is Byron’s heart that lies bare at the end of the poem.<sup>71</sup> Major modern editions of Shelley offer further tantalising possibilities. Reiman, Fraistat, and Crook, in their Johns Hopkins edition of the complete poems, refer to an incident witnessed by Mary Shelley (and possibly Percy as well) at Lake Geneva when John Polidori accused Byron of being “a person so unfeeling”.<sup>72</sup> While the editors of the Longman offer another anecdote: Fanny Godwin’s complaint to Mary that, “I am your laughing-stock and the constant beacon of your satire”.<sup>73</sup>

If the antipathy that initially inspires the work remains unknown, what is certain is that Shelley personifies superior laughter as contemptuous of his moral and aesthetic concerns. This is conveyed through antitheses, consigning laughter to an antagonistic relation to tropes the poet praises elsewhere. Laughter will not accept hope, which is an essential human virtue in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, also composed while in Switzerland that summer. In September 1816, Shelley writes to Byron, purporting to quote Samuel Taylor Coleridge that “Hope is a most awful duty, the nurse of all other virtues”.<sup>74</sup> He more or less repeats the dictum three years later to Maria Gisborne, describing hope as that “solemn duty which we owe alike to ourselves & to the world

<sup>69</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter, and generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts', in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. by P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 140-161 (148). Baudelaire imagines laughter as a demonic presence that overwhelms and overpowers us.

<sup>70</sup> Rogers, 'The Scrope Davies "Shelley Find"', pp. 2-3. Holmes's conjecture appeared as 'Scrope's Last Throw', *Harper's Magazine* (March, 1977).

<sup>71</sup> Chernaik and Burnett, 'The Byron and Shelley Notebooks in the Scrope Davies Find', p. 41.

<sup>72</sup> *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman, Neil Fraistat, and Nora Crook, 3 vols (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000-2012), III, pp. 469-70.

<sup>73</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, I, pp. 519-520.

<sup>74</sup> *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), I, p. 504.

– a worship to the spirit of good within”.<sup>75</sup> Though the speaker shows compassion for broken hearts, laughter gleefully ridicules them, and thus mocks as well the sympathy Shelley felt necessary for the rejuvenation of humanity. Laughter here works against the feeling deemed most essential for lyric and pathetic poetry, wildly dismantling the high feelings of impassioned verse: of “aught that is high / Or good or beautiful”.

Central to Shelley’s notion of the poet’s perceptive capabilities is the quiet borne of solitude; the need for absolute concentration in composition and reading is typified by his attention to the lyric form throughout his career. Edmund Burke had highlighted “Solitude and Silence” as ways of discerning the sublime.<sup>76</sup> Laughter’s coldness toward both in the sonnet suggests that it sneers at sublimity and the poet’s apprehension of it. As Timothy Webb and John Bleasdale also note, the allusion calls to mind ‘Mont Blanc’ (an early version of which appears in the Scrope Davies Notebook alongside ‘To Laughter’) and its faith in “Silence and Solitude” as part of an epistemology rooted in perception.<sup>77</sup> Shelley’s faith in the insight made possible by peace is also discernable in another sonnet from the notebook:

The breath of evening that awakes no sound  
 But sends its spirit into all, the hush  
 Which, nurse of thought, old midnight pours around  
 A world whose pulse then beats not, o’er the gush  
 Of dawn, and whate’er else is musical  
 My thoughts have swept until they have resigned  
 Like lutes inforced by the divinest thrall  
 Of some sweet lady’s voice that which my mind  
 (Did not superior grace in others shewn

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. II, p. 125.

<sup>76</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 71.

<sup>77</sup> Webb, ‘Shelley and the Ambivalence of Laughter’, p. 49; Bleasdale, ‘“To Laughter”: Shelley’s Sonnet and Solitude’.

Forbid such pride) would dream were all its own.<sup>78</sup>

This is Shelley at his most Wordsworthian, not least in the way “nurse of thought” brings forth “The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse” of ‘Tintern Abbey’, and its reaffirmation of nature’s guardianship of, and inspiration to, the mind.<sup>79</sup> As with Coleridge’s ‘The Nightingale’, and other poems discussed in my previous chapter, Shelley evokes a scene where sounds are sensed yet silent: “The breath of evening...awakes no sound / But sends its spirit into all”; while “the hush...pours around”. Though probably coincidental, the positioning in the notebook of ‘To Laughter’ after this reverent and muted work counters its hushed effect, providing a material illustration of laughter’s obstreperousness as it shatters the contemplation this poem seeks to attain. Laughter and tranquillity are self-evidently incompatible. This is one of the primary causes of the dismay displayed by the speaker in ‘To Laughter’, where, in place of silence, laughter is a “voice”, which finds amplification via those “who mock”. In contrast, the speaker associates the “high...good or beautiful” with prophetic vision that noiselessly interacts with the mind of the observer (“Hope” is a “veiled shrine”, while conscience is a “rainbow-vested form”) or with sight that implies insight: the moon has a “great eye”, and the “fair child” is “clothed in” what are silent “smiles”. Notably, the speaker implies that laughter can endure neither the moon nor the child.

‘To Laughter’ uses a version of the Shakespearean sonnet form, opening with a quatrain rhyming a-b-a-b, and appears to close with a couplet. But Shelley varies the second quatrain so that its rhyme scheme morphs from the expected c-d-c-d to c-d-d-c. As readers, then, we might be expecting the standard quatrain (especially after the first has conformed to the standard) only to be surprised by the second. There might be uncertainty too in whether to try and rhyme the tenth line with the twelfth (“high” / “Innocency”), thus forming the third quatrain more

<sup>78</sup> “Upon the wandering winds”, in *The Poems of Shelley*, I, p. 521.

<sup>79</sup> In *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. by James Butler, and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 119.

common in a Shakespearean, or to read the final lines as a triplet (“Innocency” / “to see” / “to thee”). What might be thought a deviation in form sounds more natural to the ear. Any possible hesitancy over whether to rhyme forward or back unsettles the orderly, decisive conclusion. The end stop in line 12 encourages the final two lines to be read “alone”, affirming laughter’s heartlessness and its complete divergence from the speaker. Yet “see” / “thee” catches hold of “Innocency”, and compels us to open up the couplet into a more unconventional triplet.<sup>80</sup> It is conspicuous too in the way other sounds offer submerged connections between things that are throughout cast as antithetical. For instance, the homophone “bare” / “bear” draws attention to the presumed vulnerability of laughter as well as the exposed, sentimental hearts. While laughter becomes amusingly assimilated with the things it opposes via an internal and recurring motif: “Thy” / “eye” / “Thy” / “I” / “lie”. Whilst these effects are most obviously intended to contrast laughter with the poet’s position, the contradictions suggested by the various pairings articulate the ambivalences at play in the poem. There are a number of ways in which laughter strangely resembles features Shelley admires, so that if laughter is cast as a “fiend”, it also appears as something of a demonic shadow of his thoughts. I explore this possibility below.

Michael O’Neill has pointed out that Shelley’s sonnets “aim to speak truth to power” but are also adept at resisting “merely moralizing”.<sup>81</sup> Something of the complexity of Shelley’s moral thought is on display in ‘To Laughter’. On the surface, the poem appears to speak truth to the power of laughter, chastising it for its “hollow heart”, and in turn accusing it of being defenceless against the innocent yet searching gaze of the moon and child. Yet Shelley’s moral philosophy is predicated on a defence of liberty, including that of freedom of opinion, and he is deeply uncomfortable with any system of belief that is absolutist. Freedom for Shelley is to be free from any restraint, whilst his politico-philosophic project is always in the process of becoming: fundamentally unsettled, and inquiring. In the sonnet, therefore, laughter performs an essential

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<sup>80</sup> Shelley’s resourcefulness with the sonnet form is well known. See Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>81</sup> Michael O’Neill, ‘The Romantic Sonnet’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 185-203 (197-198).

opposition to oppressive forces. Laughter's instinct is to resist anything attempting dominion over it, and so displays Shelley's compulsion to disrupt all fixities and dogma, even if that includes things he holds dear. Keen to set up a throne in laughter's heart, conscience is monarchical. It is thus associated with a social institution Shelley viewed as increasingly autocratic, as it sought ways of curtailing political opposition, and the freedom of individuals. The veiled shrine of Hope, and the blind devotion it demands, brings it into resemblance with dogmatic religious worship Shelley regularly attacks.

Something of this may also be apparent in the allusions to the sublime, and its overwhelming power over the self.<sup>82</sup> Coleridge's response to *Mont Blanc* was a hymn that transformed Burkean terror into sacred veneration:

O dread and silent form! I gazed upon thee,  
Till thou, still present to my bodily eye,  
Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer  
I worshipped the INVISIBLE alone.<sup>83</sup>

This act of worship dramatizes the commitment bordering on unthinking dedication that the sublime entails. Suspending thought, the "entranced" prayer implies a loss of volition. Shelley's 'To Laughter' covertly concedes this tension. The association of the sublime with the other "great powers" that behave tyrannically, imply that reverie which has soothed Shelley's heart in lonely hours also comes at the price of liberty. Even as the sonnet seems to scorn those that do not genuflect to the sublime, it also arguably carries a latent resistance to being "entranced by

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<sup>82</sup> Relatedly, Matthew Borushko has argued that the source of unease in *Mont Blanc* is founded on Shelley's resistance to the inherent violence of sublimity that acts as a model for repressive political authority. See, "The Politics of Subreption: Resisting the Sublime in Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'", *Studies in Romanticism*, 52 (Summer, 2013), 225-52.

<sup>83</sup> 'Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouny', in *Poetical Works, Poems (Reading Text)*, ed. by J. C. C. Mays, 3 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), II, p. 720. As Coleridge explained to William Sotheby, the experience of the power of the unknown is formed partly out of his encounters on the "humble mountains" of the lakes (principally Scafell) and his adaption of his "former feelings" to the "grander external objects" of the Alps. In *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press), II, pp 864-865.

prayer”. Laughter’s superiority ironically acts as a force of liberation, a way of keeping one’s heart and mind free from servitude to external powers – whether socio-political, natural, or aesthetic.

However, laughter is not only a powerful counterweight to sublimity, but is itself referred to in terms that echo Shelley’s and Coleridge’s descriptions of sublime power.<sup>84</sup> Shelley’s portrait of laughter as a “fiend” calls to mind the “demon-lover” and the savage poetic energy of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’.<sup>85</sup> The demonization of laughter also brings it into close relation to the monstrous presence Shelley imagines carved out Mont Blanc:

how hideously  
Its rocks are heaped around, rude, bare and high  
Ghastly and scarred and riven! – is this the scene  
Where the old Earthquake demon taught her young  
Ruin? were these their toys? or did a sea  
Of fire envelop once this silent snow?<sup>86</sup>

There is whimsy in the image of the wrecked landscape being a result of a demon mother encouraging her children through play with their “toys”. It encourages an incongruous impression. Not only in the combination of playfulness and violence, but also because nature is a good mother, and yet cruelly uncaring and destructive toward the landscape. If arbitrary, her actions nonetheless appear heartless. The chaos here is close to that of Burke’s sublime, but the allusion to play is unsettling, positioning the scene closer to aesthetic notions of beauty. In ‘To Laughter’, Shelley aligns amusement with sublime effect, for the figure imagined as entertained by its own destructiveness is laughter. Rather than the earth’s “bare”, “scarred”, and “riven”

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<sup>84</sup>As I suggested in a previous chapter, despite Hazlitt’s formulation of the incompatibility of wit and humour to an appreciation of the inexplicable, the increasing interest in primitive passions leads to an association of laughter with wildness. This seems to have led to a use of laughter to represent powerful forces in nature.

<sup>85</sup> Coleridge, *Poetical Works, Poems (Reading Text)*, p. 513.

<sup>86</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Mont Blanc’ ‘A’ Version, in *The Poems of Shelley*, I, p. 539.



landscape, the victims are human hearts that “broken...lie bare to thee”. Baudelaire will soon speak of “the primeval character of laughter”,<sup>87</sup> and we are used to conceiving of nature’s primordial temperament. But the echoes of nature’s power within the scorn of laughter bring a fiendish connection between the two in Shelley’s sonnet. Laughter’s unruliness resembles the creative spirit as Shelley views it in its wilful and capricious state.

Despite this, though, there is a difference between the unruly power of nature that might nonetheless present avenues of understanding, and that of unruly laughter, which rejects any attempt at accord. It is also the case that Shelley is generally more optimistic toward powers that are simply indifferent to (human) life, compared to those that are actively aggressive toward the apprehension of it. What perhaps comes across most strongly in ‘To Laughter’ is a blending of belief and doubt, as Shelley simultaneously affirms and undermines the things he holds dear through unruly laughter.<sup>88</sup> Earlier, I mentioned Shelley’s view of hope as a “solemn duty” owed to the world and ourselves, and, significantly, as something that nurses all other virtues. Writing on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1815, just months before spending the summer with the Shelleys, Byron asked “what is Hope?” and concludes with typical gusto that it is “nothing but the paint on the face of Existence; the least touch of truth rubs it off, and then we see what a hollow-cheeked harlot we have got hold of”.<sup>89</sup> Byron admits he may well have said this before, and, if so, he may well say it again to Percy as he was fond of recycling certain remarks. If laughter’s heart is “hollow”, so too might be the promises of hope. This is the unspoken but ever-present anxiety in ‘To Laughter’: that the things Shelley places his trust in are not simply delicate and therefore in need of protection, but also vulnerable to attack precisely because they are laughable. The fact that the speaker feels the need to defend such solemn ideas against laughter is chastening, and arguably demeans their importance. The fact that the speaker labours his point, and ultimately fails to

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<sup>87</sup> Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, p.142.

<sup>88</sup> In such moments Shelley appears typical of Harold Bloom’s view of Romantic irony as something that “can suddenly startle us in the midst of the sublime without dropping us into the bathetic”. In *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 283.

<sup>89</sup> To Thomas Moore, *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973-1994), IV, p. 323.

make laughter depart, implies that it is not only laughter that needs convincing, but the speaker as well. As I alluded to earlier, there are numerous candidates for those figures at the end of the poem with their hearts lying broken. But another is surely Shelley: his heart torn by the destructiveness of laughter, yet admiring of its strong and independent spirit. If he presents the harmful consequences of laughter's unruliness, Shelley also implicitly admits of its necessity. As I discussed earlier, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that, "laughter echoes with the escape from power". Shelley's sonnet suggests that the laugh is an escape from one form of power by the force of another: ridicule. 'To Laughter' voices discomfort toward the dissonance of laughter, even as it signals the freedom it stands for. As I have argued in this chapter, this tension toward the effects of laughter can also be heard as a battle over poetry (most explicitly witnessed in Shelley's verse) as a force capable of liberating human virtue, or, conversely, impeding its progress by appealing to "self-complacency and triumph".

## CHAPTER V

### The Sound of Glee

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"Of serious faith, and inward glee;

That was the Song, the Song for me!"

(Wordsworth, 'O Nightingale! thou surely art')

Next to a section praising laughter in Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man* (1788), William Blake adds his own interest on the subject, scribbling on his copy, "I hate scarce smiles I love laughing".<sup>1</sup> Discussing *Songs of Innocence*, David Erdman suggests that these annotations are the "nearest thing we have to a commentary on the songs themselves".<sup>2</sup> Given the physiognomical subject in which Blake is engrossed, we might conjecture that his spontaneous response to the text provides commentary on the poet's internal opinions. Blake's two contrary states – his crabbiness toward smiles and his love for laughter – articulate a Romantic poet's excitement about enthusiastic outbursts of merriment. Yet, the Arnoldian approach to canonical Romantics lingers and they retain an association with lyric high seriousness. But there is at least one undeniable way the tradition of lyric is linked to laughter and cheerfulness: through the etymology of glee. Deriving from the Old English 'gléo', the term has roots in early terms for poetry and the poet as an entertainer, or 'gléo-man', whose sport revolves around laughter. *Beowulf* (also, of course, usually thought of as a 'serious' work) contains some of the first 'literary' laughs in English literature and associates the sound with poetry and festive mirth. When Beowulf informs king Hygelac of the celebrations following the slaying of Grendel, he tells him that, "There was music and laughter,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David V. Erdman, and Harold Bloom, newly revised (London: University of California Press, 2008), p. 585.

<sup>2</sup> David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire* (New York: Dover, 1977), p. 127.

lays were sung”.<sup>3</sup> Commonly, as Michael Alexander explains, “poetry was an art to make glad the heart of man, taking its place at the centre of what are commonly summed up as hall-joys”.<sup>4</sup>

Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, glee fades from use in English literature, so that by the time Samuel Johnson writes his dictionary he feels confident in announcing that “it is not now used, except in ludicrous writing, or with some irony and contempt”.<sup>5</sup> However, despite Johnson, there is a renaissance in the use of ‘glee’ in literature from the latter half of the eighteenth century and Romantic period. A possible explanation lies in the growing interest in discovering native texts in British literary history to rival the influence of classical ones, which leads the antiquarian movement to retrieve and edit works from the past that were previously barely read or understood.<sup>6</sup> The recovery of the literature and culture of Anglo-Saxon and the Celts of the middle ages exemplifies the era’s fascination with natural spontaneous expression, primitivism, and a longing for greater proximity to the natural world. Interest in glee in the Romantic period is therefore part of the revival of interest in native poetry itself and the cult of the primitive poet.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the idea of the gléo-man who laughingly entertains his audience with harmonious song offers a counterpoint to the Romantic obsession with the solitary Bard.<sup>8</sup> The sound of glee is, then, also the sound of the poet. Greater recognition of glee’s importance to

<sup>3</sup> Anon. *Beowulf*, trans. by Michael Alexander (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Alexander, *A History of Old English Literature* (Ormskirk, Lancashire: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 72. Intriguingly for what I go on to discuss in this chapter these “hall-joys” are sometimes bittersweet, containing poignant remembrance of the past, with the glee accompanied at times by self-awareness of the loss of youthful adventures and light-heartedness. Thus in *Beowulf* there is wistful remembrance of youth, as the singer becomes “troubled / As the mind filled with the memories of those years” (p. 117). At the same time the songs suggest that merriment may be rediscovered through songs of glee, and acquired too in the laughter of festivity.

<sup>5</sup> Cited under ‘Glee’, n. 3a, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/78858?rskey=kRPPYY&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>>, [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> November 2014].

<sup>6</sup> Notable figures in this development are Bishop Percy and Thomas Warton. For a fuller account see Howard D. Weinbrot, *Britannia’s Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Richard Terry, *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past, 1660-1781* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Relatedly, glee clubs form a seminal place within the social and aesthetic fabric of the nation in the latter half of the eighteenth century, though the origins of this musical composition for three or more unaccompanied voices reaches back still further. The development of these clubs has been attributed to that same revival of interest in ancient, primitive culture and, more widely, the greater cultural and commercial value placed on natural and authentic passions. See Brian Robins, *Catch and Glee Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006). Of course Thomas Love Peacock mocks the tendency in poets to live “in the days that are past...The march of his mind is like that of a crab, backward”, *The Four Ages of Poetry*, in *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. by H. F. B. Brett-Smith, and C. E. Jones, 10 vols (London: Constable, 1924–1934), VIII, pp. 20–21.

<sup>8</sup> The interest in ‘glee’ and its connection to poetry wanes again in the Victorian period partly because antiquarians realise that a much more common word for ‘poet’ in Old English had been ‘scop’. I have Chris Jones to thank for pointing this development out to me.

Romantic poets provides a counterbalance to the prevailing prioritisation of melancholy and solitude in discussions of Romanticism.

As we have already heard in this thesis, glee and poetry combine in a variety of ways. The most striking examples of which are Wordsworth's glee at writing 'The Idiot Boy' and Johnny's "heart...full of glee", and that sympathetic glee in 'Julian and Maddalo'. Byron plays on its potential for unruliness and its association with mockery when the desperation of the shipwreck scene in *Don Juan* becomes the "sort of thing at which one would have laugh'd" with "a kind of wild and horrid glee".<sup>9</sup> Keats's alleged anger at this episode, especially his dismay at Byron's "making solemn things gay and gay things solemn",<sup>10</sup> also articulates instantaneous dismissal of laughter and the lugubrious that I am working to revise. This chapter looks at the significance of glee in greater detail as it is evoked and accomplished by the sound of laughter. It is striking (though it should not be surprising) how often glee keeps its roots in natural merriment and sociable cheerfulness, visible too in glee's etymological connection with bright colours and beauty. This chapter will consider how Blake, Keats, Wordsworth and the Cockney-School poetry of Leigh Hunt and Percy Shelley creatively register the laughter of glee: it will consider the role of the poet as gléo-man. That is, as a craftsman conscious of the social function of poetry – the ideological and commercial forces surrounding the production of it – but also eager to entertain the reader, inviting us to hear verse as fun, with its dancing rhymes and rhythms, allusive suggestiveness, playful ambiguousness, and riddling games.

As Thomas De Quincey knew well, writers are constantly "striving...to realize an ideal; and to reproduce the actual world under more harmonious arrangements. This is the secret craving of the reader" as well.<sup>11</sup> Though De Quincey is writing specifically about the novel here,

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<sup>9</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), V, p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> In *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers 1814-1879*, ed. by H. E. Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), II, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> A posthumously published note, in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, gen ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000-2003), VII, p. 290.

Romantic poetry also mediates between the real and the ideal via acts of imagination. For John Huizinga, this puts poetry into the realm of a “play-function”:

It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it. There things have a very different physiognomy from the one they wear in ‘ordinary life’, and are bound by ties other than those of logic and causality....poetry...lies beyond seriousness, on that more primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage and the seer belong, in the region of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter.<sup>12</sup>

Huizinga stresses poetry’s difference to “ordinary life”, as a dream world of its own that the mind creates, which is inhabited by laughter too. He also associates poetry with the child. The significance of the child at play, especially in the natural world, has an important function in this chapter, both as an image and as an idea embodying laughter’s glee and the poet’s playing upon the page.<sup>13</sup> Freud wonders whether we might say “that every child at play behaves like a creative writer” because the child “creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him”.<sup>14</sup> This formulation suggests creativity as a kind of fantasy or escape from the real. Like Huizinga’s “play-ground” it is a place for imaginative child’s play. The world of fantasy the artist creates is like the games of a child because it is finely invested with serious emotion, “while separating it sharply from reality” for “the opposite of [child’s] play is not what is serious but what is real”.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the notion that the child at play and the creative writer “re-arranges the things of his world in a new way” suggests that the filaments of the world remain within art’s conception of

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<sup>12</sup> John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Provine has claimed that his research proves children do not laugh more than adults, see *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000). Whatever the efficacy of this research there is undoubtedly a strong cultural association between the child and the laugh in the Romantic era and our own.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 437.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

fantasy. Children's play is shadowed by a degree of reality that is different to yet frequently displays features of the world they actually inhabit. Moreover, child's play is linked to reality because it can be thought of as prospective – that is, as practice for the adult life ahead. Similarly, we might conceive of poetry's roots belonging to “gay abandon, mirth, and jollity”, and a more dream-like or primitive level of consciousness, and laughter as existing within a larger group of play-like impulses keyed toward make-believe. But, despite their relationship with fantasy, poetry and laughter inevitably interact with and carry something of that “ordinary life” Huizinga separates them from.<sup>16</sup> This is the ‘truth-content’ of art for Adorno when he attempts to answer Schiller's formulation that “life is serious, art is lighthearted”.<sup>17</sup> Schiller views art as lighthearted, according to Adorno, because of its “demeanour”, its “playfulness” as a form that is other than real (248). “But art”, Adorno points out “takes all its material and ultimately its forms from reality, indeed from social reality, in order to transform them” and it “thereby becomes entangled in reality's irreconcilable contradictions” (249). Consequently, art is “something that has escaped from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and lightheartedness”, Adorno believes, and “It is this tension that constitutes art” (249). As such, art's forms embody the free play of the mind, even if its subject touches upon the ‘serious’ matter of life.

One of the primary ways in which Romantic poetry registers this double-movement is through the laughter-laced form of pastoral. Though sometimes discussed under the heading of Romantic pastoral,<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth's plaintive ‘Michael’ is actually closer to Georgic because of its attention to the harsh realities of agricultural work. In contrast to the labour-oriented tradition of Georgics, the pastoral mode offers a far more idealized environment into which Romantic poets might escape their present reality. What Hazlitt identifies in ‘Merry England’ as the metropolitan

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<sup>16</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Theodore W. Adorno, ‘Is Art Lighthearted?’, in *Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, 2 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), II, pp. 247-253 (247). Subsequent references to this edition are made in the text as page numbers.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Curran discusses the poem as pastoral without acknowledging this difference, see *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

dwellers desire to “transport one’s-self to the freedom and breathing sweetness of a country retreat”, is sated by the sweet sounds of Romantic pastoral poetry.<sup>19</sup> Some of the laughter in pastoral connects to make-believe by stepping away from reality, and is indicative of Schiller’s formulation of the sentimental poet, eager to return to a blissful state of nature but conscious that this ideal can never be reclaimed. But pastoral simultaneously provides a soundscape of laughter so as to re-conceive the ‘serious’ form of reality. In keeping with the allegorical tradition of the use of pastoral to discuss religious, political and social contexts, Romantic poetry frequently employs a protean form of pastoral so as to explore the world under the cloak of fantasy. The laughter of glee in pastoral thus performs a kind of utopian innocence, whilst also operating as contrast, offering a potentially satirical “yardstick” (in Anthony Holden’s phrase) with which to judge the world of experience.<sup>20</sup> The laughter in pastoral implies ‘as if’: initiating a tension between what is and what might be, offering a dialectical relation between ‘reality’ and the ‘possible’.

### Blake’s Laughing Songs

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Sounds of childish laughing glee are heard in the pastoral episodes of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* (1789). It is the “piping songs of pleasant glee” that fascinates the “laughing” “child” floating upon a cloud in the ‘Introduction’.<sup>21</sup> The causal relationship between the gleeful music and the child’s response is suggested by the anaphoric “piping” of the first two lines finding a choric echo in “laughing”. But one of the consequences of the “piping” and “laughing” is to instil an air of their pre-existence: a sense that both the music and laughter exist in perpetuity beyond the bounds of the poem itself. Throughout, there is a mimetic relationship between the child’s delighted response to the piper’s artistry, and the way in which the poem itself behaves in a

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<sup>19</sup> William Hazlitt, ‘Merry England’, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), XVII, p 156.

<sup>20</sup> *Greek Pastoral Poetry*, trans. by Anthony Holden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 26. See also David M. Halperin, *Before Pastoral: Theocritus and the Ancient Tradition of Bucolic Poetry* (London: Yale University Press, 1983), esp pp. 61-74.

<sup>21</sup> In *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 7. Subsequent references to the poem also refer to this page.



childlike and laughing (in the sense of repetitious and pleasing) manner. The tautological “pleasant glee”, “merry cheer”, and “happy cheer” evoke the excitable, uninformed language usage of a child, while their correspondence implies a voice receptive toward their cheerful delight. But it also implies cognisance of the similarity between a child trying out words and a poet at play.

The auditory signs of the ‘Introduction’ are consistently “pleasant” and “merry”. Such sounds are part of a sonic evolution that moves from a non-linguistic melody to a vocal imitation of the organic music, to an acceptance of the request to set the songs down in a book that “Every child may joy to hear”. Consequently, there is a shift from a clearly defined interpersonal relationship based on being able to hear the piping, to a disconnected audience accessible only through the restricted confines of the written word. That conditional “may” of the last line, despite the trochaic rhythm not allowing the reader to stress its significance too much,<sup>22</sup> does just enough to unsettle optimism in the gleeful sounds being heard and (given the child’s demand) inspiring laughter in all children. It echoes the earlier “may” of the child as well (“write / In a book that all may read”) as though the child is half-conscious even as he / she speaks of the disparity between what it has heard in the evanescent sounds of the pipes and what it may be possible to hear in the visual process of reading. Like the “hollow reed” the piper plucks in order to formalise his ephemeral song, the ‘Introduction’ implies a degree of anxiety over whether something might be lost in print transmission. The performance of the piper / poet in the ‘Introduction’ casts a significant silhouette upon the collection as a whole. There is an ironic tension throughout several poems in *Songs of Innocence* between spontaneous and fleeting fun and the studied process of reading. At the same time, though, these indeterminate poems consistently act as an entertaining landscape themselves, with the verse becoming an environment for “pleasant glee” that echoes the child-like sportiveness of their subject and draws attention to the possible value of poetry as play. Indeed, both subject and form probe the place of play in the

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<sup>22</sup> Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 8.

world, even as they appear to gesture toward a dream that might exist outside of a present reality. If the sequence of poems that follow feel “profoundly concerned with the attempt to use a post-lapsarian medium (language) to recover a pre-lapsarian state”,<sup>23</sup> they do so by accommodating an appreciation of the playful poetic possibilities that come alive through such a tension.

Three-quarters of the lines and one-fifth of the lexis of ‘Laughing Song’ refer to laughter, mostly associated with the environment. Thus in the first stanza, “green woods laugh”; the “dimpling stream runs laughing by”; the “air does laugh with our merry wit” and the “green hill laughs with the noise of it”.<sup>24</sup> Then in the second, “the meadows laugh with lively green / And the grasshopper laughs in the merry scene”. Whilst in the third stanza “the painted birds laugh in the shade”. This profusion of laughter, and its metonymic “voice of joy”, suggests animism with a spirit of mirth and benevolence overflowing in the natural world. Sound replicates the interconnectedness implied within nature. Not only in the childish repetitions (especially the laughter) but also the way certain phrases appear to imitate the pastoral reciprocity. So there are laughing “green woods”, “green hills” and “meadows...green” – all of which find pleasing echoes in “stream” and “scene”. Phonetics offers the streams and meadows as metonyms, with each distinct part synecdoche for the landscape as a whole. There is a satisfying run-on effect produced by the ‘l’ sound in “green hill laughs”, while a similar result is produced in the next line “When the meadows laugh with lively green”. The poem’s attempt at mimicking the laughing interrelatedness of nature is further sounded out if we hear the faint recurrence of the vowels of “green” and “woods” in “meadows”. Yet in its self-conscious patterning of laughter, the poem also winks at the arbitrary nature of its signs. Nature may exist beyond the world of signs, but any representation of it does not. To denote nature as laughing, then, is to establish it in humanity’s own image, and ultimately to reify it. Consequently, there is a whimsically entertaining form of aesthetic illusion at work here. It is as if this gléo-man is akin to one of his “painted birds”: bringing merriment by singing through artifice of a constructed natural world.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 11. Subsequent references to the poem also refer to this page.

As the poem's concluding lines, "come live & be merry and join with me, / To sing the sweet chorus of "Ha, Ha, He", famously call to mind Christopher Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to his Love', and Walter Raleigh's witty rejoinder, 'The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd', so the laughter registers an earlier series of auditory games. Blake had used typographical and onomatopoeic laughter in *An Island in the Moon* where the "Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho Hoooo", "Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha" and Ha Ha Ha Ho" are just some of the many lavish uses he makes of print's ability to suggest absurd associations, or imply submerged meanings.<sup>25</sup> At such times Blake seems to capitalise on laughter being non-verbal so as to create a momentary suspension of meaning. However, the refrain "Ha, Ha, He" in 'Laughing Song' echoes the "pleasant glee" / "laughing said to me" of the 'Introduction' via an extended or latent rhyme. It is thus sonically as well as thematically linked with the joyous feelings experienced by the piper and child at the start of the collection. The sonic iteration of "pleasant glee" in "ha ha he" highlights that rhyme must move backward as well as forward. Gillian Beer has great fun with the potential bawdiness this focus implies, since rhyme specialises in "words' back parts".<sup>26</sup> The more specific point, though, is that rhyme becomes meaningful, indeed becomes itself, only in retrospect: a process caught between moving on and turning back. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst discusses how the

double movement of rhyme has produced a split response in the history of critical thought: rhyme has been seen as a force that is both progressive and conservative, pulled on by expectation and tugged back by nostalgia or regret. Either of these attitudes might be true of a poet's use of rhyme, and for some speakers both will be true.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pp. 458-459.

<sup>26</sup> Gillian Beer, 'Rhyming as Comedy: Body, Ghost, and Banquet', in *English Comedy*, ed. by Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 180-196 (181).

<sup>27</sup> Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, 'Alexander Pope: "Renown'd in Rhyme"', in *Literary Milieux: Essays in Text and Context Presented to Howard Erskine-Hill*, ed. by David Womersley, and Richard McCabe (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2008), p. 239.

The latent rhyme of “Ha, Ha, He”, and “pleasant glee” feels loaded with both progressive hope for the future and conservative nostalgia for an ideal past because it is in the idea of an Edenic future that the speaker’s hopes rest. Hence, the optimistically orientated notes of “Ha, Ha, He” call forth an ideal future, but ‘fall’ back on a lost world. They pronounce the desire to return to a pre-lapsarian past that cannot be claimed yet forever lingers within cultural conceptions of an ideal to come. Ironically, however, being poised between the fantasy of a future pregnant with the past means the speaker exists in a perpetual state of desire. Gleefully rhyming toward a prospective of happiness that is always some way off and thus perfect, the speaker remains in his imaginative conception of pastoral so long as the future he desires never comes and is only ever echoing of the past.

In ‘Why Rhyme Pleases’ Simon Jarvis surveys the prejudices that underlie what he calls the “favoured terms from the lexicon of rhymehating”.<sup>28</sup> Unless it does “some serious ‘work’”, Jarvis explains, rhyme is habitually thought of (particularly in the eighteenth century) as a “meaningless noise, like the jingling of bells”, as if “a toy, a bawble, a gewgaw, a trifle; it jingles, it tinkles, it rattles and babbles. In short”, he declares, “it is something of absolutely no importance whatever”.<sup>29</sup> By linking rhyme with the frivolous “jingling of bells”, and the trifling playthings of children, Jarvis draws attention to the pejorative labelling of this sort of rhyme as mere entertainment or child’s play, that is contrasted with a protestant work ethic and the social value of productivity. Of course, Blake is known for his own insults toward rhyme, laying stress later in life on “the modern bondage of Rhyming”, as one of the ways “Poetry Fetter’d, Fetters the Human Race”.<sup>30</sup> Occasionally in his early career too Blake responds to the constraints upon the imagination by the bondage of rhyme. The final lines of “How sweet I roam’d from field to

<sup>28</sup> Simon Jarvis, ‘Why Rhyme Pleases’, *Thinking Verse*, I (2011), 17–43 (pp. 29–30).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 30, and pp. 18–19.

<sup>30</sup> *Jerusalem*, plate 3, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 144.

field”, for instance, suggest themselves as self-reflexively absorbed with the tension between the unbridled innocence of inspiration, and the machinations of a mastering poetic hand:

He caught me in his silken net,  
And caught me in his golden cage.

He loves to sit and hear me sing,  
Then, laughing, sports and plays with me;  
Then stretches out my golden wing,  
And mocks my loss of liberty.<sup>31</sup>

But Blake nonetheless embraces the jingly, childish rhyme here. That incessant, ensnared rhyme “he” / “me” is transformed at the end into a tri-rhyme of “liberty” which captures the indelible strains of all poetic craft, and hints at Blake’s radical politics within his poetics.

Of course, despite the stress of line 14 sounding as though it falls on ‘laugh’, “sports” and “plays” it would be hard to claim that this poem focuses on fun. Elsewhere in Blake’s writing though, rhyme does play happily alongside laughter as a counter-discourse to that apparent need for “serious ‘work’”. In many of Blake’s laughing rhyming poems the effect of labour conditions on human life is implicitly critiqued by unfettered play in a natural landscape, which lies unbroken by smokestacks and those “dark Satanic Mills” of the increasingly industrial world.<sup>32</sup> This play-alternative is in harmony with the inspiring example of nature. As such, Blake’s laughing songs, with their celebration of instincts and entertainments to the exclusion of labour, have some similarity to Herbert Marcuse’s later ideas regarding play and fantasy and their importance to any future freedom. “In its refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle [defined as life without leisure]” Marcuse argues,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 413.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 95.

and “in its refusal to forget what *can be*, lies the critical function of phantasy”.<sup>33</sup> If not entirely bringing such a life into being, playful fantasies at least retain sight of its purpose and potentiality.

David Fairer rightly points out that for Blake “Revolution cannot be won from the enclosed world of innocence and love”; instead it arrives “from reaction and counter-reaction in the world of experience – not from organic growth but in a clash of contraries”.<sup>34</sup> Yet Blake does imagine a radical alternative in that world of innocence. His later work will come to call for a far more profound form of opposition, reflected, perhaps, in his wariness toward the imprisonment of rhyme. But in the confines of innocence, and in that bell-like, childish form of rhyme, Blake’s gleeful laughter appears liberating precisely because it is contained within the organic harmonies of the natural world, and, as we will see, within close domestic or local community-focused landscapes. It exists in the vision of individuals that laughingly echo the natural intercourse of a laughing landscape, or the laughter of an older generation at the young, or the acquiescence of a nurse to the laughter of children playing upon the hill.

A good example is ‘The Ecchoing Green’. Its short, monosyllabic lines, and easy skipping couplets, its simple vision that implies a suggestively imaginative perception, and its reassuring conception of cause and effect, evokes a child’s way of interacting with the world through verse that is at once childishly familiar yet pleasingly fresh. Laughter and rhyme appeal to the child in the adult reader here, touching on our commonly held desire to have fun and be creative. This appeal to our native intelligence and the organic community in which it exists suggests itself opposed to the mechanised and commercial culture where freedom of natural human expression is delimited. Whatever foreboding might be attributable to its final lines, the poem insists upon patterns of harmony that gesture at reciprocity not simply within the natural world, but between the child and adult one too. There is undoubtedly a certain distance between the human figures and nature, and the children and adults in the poem. But it is a distance that can be bridged by

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<sup>33</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Enquiry into Freud* (London: Ark, 1987), p. 149.

<sup>34</sup> David Fairer, ‘Baby Language and Revolution: The Early Poetry of Charles Lloyd and Charles Lamb’, *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 74 (April, 1991), 33–51 (p. 48).

the play of sounds. It is precisely out of the easy pleasurable awareness of sitting upon the “Ecchoing Green” and the gleefulness of the children within it, that “Old John with white hair / Does laugh away care”.<sup>35</sup> Others echo this laughter, with the children recognising that “the old folk, / They laugh at our play”. Throughout this thesis, to “laugh at” something or someone is usually a sign of mockery. Blake’s inter-generational laugh does register the difference between the adults and children – something implied too in the pronouns of “they” and “our”. But the old people’s laughter actually expresses the desire to bridge this gap, as they recall “When we all girls & boys, / In our youth-time were seen, / On the Ecchoing Green”. The adults’ laughter is thus nostalgic for a past life, yet it is less a lament than recognition of their own place within the scene and the natural order of things. Indeed, their laughter reflects their remembrance of past “joys” being recalled because of the present merriness of the children. In this idealised world the adults appear able to momentarily re-experience their childish joys. That rhyme of “seen” with “Green” implies as much, bringing to the surface of the poem a vision of their past life, positioning that past within a present site. This “Ecchoing Green” then, a place that is, like the poem, a harmony of sound and vision, is a self-contained community linked through a shared universal experience discovered in an appreciation of play.

Blake’s poems from this period are often echoing greens; since one of the things they emphasise is the way childish poetics create a collective sense of understanding and shared experience through the instinctive pleasure of sounds. “I love the jocund dance” unites nature and swain in merry laughter:

I love the laughing vale,

I love the echoing hill,

Where mirth does never fail,

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<sup>35</sup> *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 8. Subsequent references to the poem also refer to this page.

And the jolly swain laughs his fill.<sup>36</sup>

Within the poem there is merriment at the pleasing echo of laughter between the jolly swain and the vale and hill. But this reverberation is matched by the poem itself, as it too provides a self-contained yet openly accessible space in which sounds pleasingly repeat and confidently echo each other. As the image evokes a semi-mythic moment that feels recognisable and universal, so the symmetrical, anaphoric, and echoic lines of the poem constitute a familiar, reassuring presence, drawing the reader toward a community of shared appreciation of the harmony described. Consistently Blake's playful poems become, much like the landscape they represent, terrain that conjures the idea of common human experience. The length of the poems, and how they are set out, their presentation with illustrations, and their rhyme and phrasing, constitute a form familiar to many of us as readers of nursery rhyme. As well as registering the experience of childhood, then, Blake's verse echoes with sounds and memories of childhood. If the landscape within the poems frequently suggests a child's interaction with the world, so the poems transmit the achievement of such a gleeful imagination to the process of poetry.

In 'Nurse's Song' the children are playing and throughout the poem their "laughing is heard on the hill" by the nurse.<sup>37</sup> These sounds of laughter celebrate the pastoral world as a place of ease and happiness. The contrast between the nurse's passivity and the liveliness the children implies a degree of separation between the adult and children's sensibilities. Indeed, like 'The Ecchoing Green', there are two landscapes co-existing in the poem: that of the nurse's detached tranquillity, and that of the gleeful children playing on the hill. Their incompatibility appears to be confirmed by the image accompanying the poem and its broken circle of young dancers actively playing alongside the inert nurse who sits and rests under the tree. Yet there is an imaginative attachment between the figures in the poem with the gap that separates them bridged by sound. By listening to their play the nurse's perceptions and thence her feelings are

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<sup>36</sup> "I love the jocund dance", *Ibid.* p. 414.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15. Subsequent references to the poem also refer to this page.



subtly altered by the children's gleefulness. This reciprocity is performed by the poem itself, for the 'ear' of "heard" (repeated both about the children's laughter and their voices) finds its way into the nurse's "heart", and is then altered just slightly as the assonance comes to "rest within my breast". When copying the poem from manuscript to etch in preparation for the publication, Blake substitutes "voices" for the original 'tongues'.<sup>38</sup> Though each is a rhetorical figure, "tongues" refers more directly to a material reality than does the disembodied, ethereal "voices".<sup>39</sup> Moreover, combined with the sound of laughter that filters into the nurse's heart, "voices" gives greater attention to the aural than orality of the educative process performed here through play. Like 'The Ecchoing Green', 'Nurse's Song' carries a certain similarity to what Victor Turner will later come to call *communitas*, and our "recognition to an essential and generic human bond",<sup>40</sup> which "transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships".<sup>41</sup> The laughter that echoes throughout 'Nurse's Song' invites an unsettling of social conventions as the nurse listens to the children and accommodates their wishes. This gentle yielding of adult and child hierarchies means that though she initially insists on her own senses ("the sun has gone down") the childish response seeking to prolong the play as long as possible ("it is yet day") causes her to relinquish her perspective and concede to their whimsy: "Well well go & play till the light fades away". In *An Island in the Moon* an earlier version of 'Nurse's Song' is followed by the actual games of the children. There, the reality of their play is revealed to be unsporting and insensitive, as they hit each other with bats, sabotage the game, and laugh cruelly at each other.<sup>42</sup> But in *Songs of Innocence* Blake withholds the contrast so as to exaggerate and prolong the innocent pastoral scene in the nurse and reader's mind. For all that, though, the final two lines are amusingly dissonant:

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Phillips, *William Blake: The Creation of the Songs, from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (London: British Library, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Richardson argues that there is typically a more disembodied character to early childhood as it is predominantly represented by the majority of male Romantic poets, in contrast to the more embodied presence offered by female poets. See *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 97.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128.

<sup>42</sup> *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, pp. 463-464.

x / x / / x / x x /

The little ones leaped & shouted & laughed

x / x / / x

And all the hills echoed

The absence of rhyme and the combination of pentameter and trimeter create an anti-climatic conclusion of sonic and spatial bathos. We are free to read this as a disturbance of the nurse's sharing of the glee of the children and a collapsing of pastoral: as a prelude to the world of experience soon to come. But it is also a metrical game that performs the abrupt shock of surprise we find so often in games and is essential to the joy they give ('we all fall down'), one of those "laughable surprises" Hazlitt associates with English pastimes and that appeal to a particular notion of Englishness. Whether we hear the lines as joyful or catastrophic (or indeed as a bit of both where part of the appeal of play lies in its flirtation with danger) to read the poem is to be participating in the making of it. As the scene recreates the playfulness of the children it carries the reader along with it too.

### Glee and Grief in Keats

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In these songs by Blake, then, the laughter of the child in the natural world is related to the inventiveness of the poet playing upon the page. The idea of a child instinctively at play within nature is a potent one for the Romantic imagination.<sup>43</sup> For John Keats, "A laughing school-boy, without grief or care, / Riding the springy branches of an elm" is one way to personify the

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<sup>43</sup> See, Ann Wierda Rowland, *Romanticism and Childhood: The Infantilization of British Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), especially the introduction and chapter 1.

potentiality and promise of “Life” that leads to a lifetime of poetic fulfilment.<sup>44</sup> A “laughing school-boy” is tantalisingly close to being an oxymoron. Denoting the child as a ‘school-boy’ might reflect the cultural institution historians have identified as a principle reason for the development of our modern understanding of childhood.<sup>45</sup> Yet Keats’s child is definitively schooled by nature, not the classroom, absorbed in a rapturous moment of sensuous escape from the cogitation of the mind, and the pressures of reality. In the preface to *Endymion* (dated 10<sup>th</sup> April 1818) Keats lingers over the “space of life between” boyhood and mature adulthood “in which the soul is in a ferment, that character undecided, the way of life uncertain”.<sup>46</sup> Keats also comments upon the time prior to this confused state when “The imagination of a boy is healthy”.<sup>47</sup> The laughter in ‘Sleep and Poetry’ evokes the healthy imagination of the boy in the way it reveals a blissfully untroubled mind, and an unfettered spirit. The adjective “springy” alludes directly to the branch’s flexibility, but also hints at the boy’s spiritedness. For Nicholas Roe, this boy “could have been Keats himself in gleeful mood, surmounting the ups and downs of life with a resilience of spirit that helped keep darker moods in check”.<sup>48</sup> There is indeed a likeness in this laughing child’s attitude and Keats’s own attraction toward “a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts”.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, there is something unsettlingly fleeting about the schoolboy’s glee. The parenthetical “without grief or care” recognises that play wins out, but also hints at how transient levity is, how pervasive are such things as grief and care within the world. After all, life is “A fragile dew-drop on its perilous way”.<sup>50</sup> In this section I consider Keats’s use

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Sleep and Poetry’, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), p.71.

<sup>45</sup> For Lawrence Stone, the increasing move from family to school education establishes childhood as a distinct space and an “increasingly prolonged period”. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 424. While Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt see the classroom as giving “to childhood an independent and recognisable status”. See *Children in English Society: From Tudor Times to the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969–1973), I, p. 297. For a more recent and literary focus see Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism*.

<sup>46</sup> Preface to *Endymion*, in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 102. The remarks reflect his desire to defend the poem against criticism from hostile reviewers.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Roe, *John Keats: A New Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> *The Letters of John Keats 1814 - 1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, p. 185.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Sleep and Poetry’, in *The Poems of John Keats*, p.71.

of sounds of laughter as part of his balancing act between glee and grief and the acceptance of the need for both together in his poetry.

Like the flexible but rooted branch of the elm that gives the boy a chance to laugh and sport upon it, many of Keats's poems become vehicles which his maturing self employs to experience the intoxicating sensations of life and hold in check those "darker moods". The second stanza of "Spirit here that reignest" (1818) nimbly counterbalances the "pale dominions" of the first 'Il Penseroso', acting as Keats's own 'L'Allegro':

Spirit here that laughest!  
 Spirit here that quaffest!  
 Spirit here that danceth!  
 Noble soul that pranceth!

Spirit! with thee  
 I join in the glee,  
 While nudging the elbow of Momus!

Spirit! I flush  
 With a Bacchanal blush,  
 Just fresh from the banquet of Comus!<sup>51</sup>

The stanza's tightly compact structure mirrors the sort of intimate spaces to which Keats often turns in verse. Yet the compressed lines contrast with the speaker's celebration of pleasurable excess. In keeping with other narratives of inspiration, the speaker finds himself physically intoxicated by a strange spirit, as he joins "in the glee" that "laughest... quaffest... danceth... pranceth". This is a high-spirited poem, likening inspiration to drunken intoxication. With the

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<sup>51</sup> "Spirit here that reignest", Ibid. p. 295.

merry-maker Comus, son of Bacchus, it revels tipsily in the classical associations between bibulousness and comedy.

Though suggestive of a feeling or state of mind, the spirit is a deliberately indefinite entity. But it could equally be Leigh Hunt in boisterous mood. Hazlitt, for one, celebrates the inebriating effect Hunt's company has upon others: his "natural gaiety and sprightliness of manner, his high animal spirits, and the vinous quality of his mind" creates "an immediate fascination and intoxication in those who come into contact with him".<sup>52</sup> Bryan Waller Procter knew first hand the impact of Hunt's social gatherings, recalling their "noisy merriment" and how, on one memorable "Christmas or New Year's evening...the jokes and stories and imitations so overcame me that I was nearly falling off my chair with laughter".<sup>53</sup> The influence of Hunt is felt in Keats's "flush / With a Bacchanal blush" which is distinctly Huntian in its sensuousness and use of rhyme.<sup>54</sup> Flaunting the effect Hunt has on Keats at this time, it provocatively embraces the liberal associations for which such couplets were notorious. Its reciprocity as rhyme, and the sociability aroused throughout the stanza, carries something too of Hunt's sociably oriented aesthetics, what Keats describes elsewhere as the "full hearted...friendly aids...the nurse of mutual good",<sup>55</sup> so that the stanza becomes a fitting "banquet of Comus".

The poem's attention to direct sensory experience includes the pleasure of forming impressions through playful phonetics. For throughout the song Keats builds up his associative meanings through auditory play, the sort of amusing sportiveness and surrender to the sound of verse that was to rile many reviewers. Famously for John Wilson Croker, Keats's Cockney rhyming lacks sense. Instead "Mr Keats" is simply "amusing himself and wearying his readers with an immeasurable game at *bouts-rimés*" Croker so enjoys noting in the *Quarterly Review* of 1818: "He seems to us to write a line at random, and...follows not the thought excited by this line, but

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<sup>52</sup> 'The Spirit of the Age', in *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XI, p. 176.

<sup>53</sup> Bryan Waller Procter, *Autobiographical Fragment and Biographical Notes* (London, 1877), p. 196.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher Ricks has imaginatively explored the importance of "blushing" to Keats, see *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

<sup>55</sup> 'Sleep and Poetry', in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 76.

that suggested by the *rhyme*".<sup>56</sup> *Baldwin's London Magazine* in 1820 suggests that such unorthodoxy means Keats's "verse frequently runs riot, and loses itself in air".<sup>57</sup> This review offers Keats's versification ambivalent praise. At times it reads like a more sensitive version of Croker's full-frontal attack:

He plunges into the ocean of Poetry before he has learned to stem and grapple with the waves; but they 'bound beneath him as a steed that knows its rider'; and will not let him sink. Still, however, while they bear him along triumphantly, it is evidently, at their will and pleasure, not at his. He 'rides on the whirlwind' safely; but he cannot yet 'direct the storm'.<sup>58</sup>

This casts Keats's verse as enthusiastically swept up in the elemental movements that form the currents of meaning in poetry; sustained by a power beyond Keats's conscious control, yet working through him as a type of inspiration. Keats delights in this chancy nature of the poetic game, what he calls "the magic hand of chance".<sup>59</sup> It is, of course, in many respects a feature of his famous "*Negative Capability*" as a poet "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts".<sup>60</sup> It often leads to the sort of sudden realisation that can come over you when possessed by poesy, alcohol, or laughter. During his more cheerful reflections Keats feels that there is a poetic spirit with which he joins in the glee of composition, as it buoys him along triumphantly. In May 1817 he writes to Haydon of his "hope for the support of a Higher Power" in composition.<sup>61</sup> "I remember your saying that you had notions of a good Genius presiding over you", Keats explains, before continuing, "I have of late had the same thought. For things which [I] do half at

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<sup>56</sup> In *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 112.

<sup>57</sup> *Baldwin's London Magazine*, *Ibid.* p. 133.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 147.

<sup>59</sup> "When I have fears that I may cease to be", in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 225. For more on chance in Keats see John Kerrigan, 'Writing Numbers: Keats, Hopkins and the History of Chance', in *Keats and History*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 280–307.

<sup>60</sup> In *The Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 193.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* I, p. 141.



For wine, for wine we left our kernel tree;  
 For wine we left our heath, and yellow brooms,  
     And cold mushrooms;  
 For wine we follow Bacchus through the earth –  
 Great God of breathless cups and chirping mirth (222-236).

Keats connects the sensual power of poetry with the exhilarating effects of alcohol and laughing mirth. The damsels and Satyrs have moved away from the simpler, innocent pleasures of their pastoral lands to enter another kind of enchantment that is far more erotically charged. The suggestiveness of the Damsels dancing before Bacchus for his pleasure, and those “breathless cups” accommodate the coupling of sex and wine. There is a rapturous impulse at play in these luxurious lines, with the giddy exuberance of the verse coming close to matching the enthusiasm of the figures. The excess of the revellers is echoed by the choric repetitions for instance. Yet the metre also acts to rein in the potential for disorder. Those charming rhymes, and the settled measure of the rhythm, serve to hold in check the possibility of rupture.

The poem, however, becomes increasingly outlandish, as the merry horde marches across distant exotic lands, entertaining themselves “with song and dance” (243). They are accompanied by “Web-footed alligators, crocodiles” (245) that bear “upon their scaly backs...Plump infant laughers mimicking the coil / Of seamen” (246-248). This incongruous image alludes directly to the coil’s nautical association as the laughing babes twist round the amphibians. But the phrase could also refer to their laughter via the auxiliary sense of ‘a noisy disturbance or confusing din’, which is also in keeping with the hectic intermingling at play. This proliferation of meaning is encouraged by the rich profusion of sensory stimulation throughout the Bacchus episode. But it registers too the ease with which sensation – be it of sex, verse, or laughter – can descend into pandemonium. At first the experience and its aesthetics are a “folly” (208), then a “wild minstrelsy” (227) and finally “mad minstrelsy” (238). The answers of both the Damsels and



Satyrs as they eagerly pursue a life of sensation typifies that heightened sense of individual experience brought on by laughter and drunkenness, sometimes matched by a loss of self-determination. There is something mindless about the merriment, and it is at once rousing yet threatening. This is far from surprising from a poet whose attraction toward the bacchanal is frequently matched by the need to somehow couple it with independent thought. For all of Keats's enthrallment of a "Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts" there is also the awareness at this time that these apparent antagonists need to exist in fertile counterpoint. That they should exist within a poetic personality playing host to a "complex Mind – one that is imaginative and at the same time careful of its fruits – who would exist partly on sensation and partly on thought – to whom it is necessary that years should bring the philosophic Mind".<sup>65</sup> As Rollins notes in his edition of the letters, the allusion calls forth Wordsworth's great Ode, published in 1807, written in between 1802-4, and the

soothing thoughts that spring  
 Out of human suffering,  
 In the faith that looks through death,  
 In years that bring the philosophic mind.<sup>66</sup>

Keats's wish for thought along with sensation is shadowed by a Wordsworthian impulse, the belief that knowledge is likely to be born of suffering rather than glee.<sup>67</sup>

But Keats often asserts the way merriment might also contain awareness of suffering and the knowledge to which it leads: "let me laugh awhile" Angela entreats Porphyro in *The Eve of St*

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<sup>65</sup> *The Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 186. See also Keats's comments to Reynolds in May 1818, *Letters*, I, p. 277.

<sup>66</sup> *Poems in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. by Jared R. Curtis (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 277.

<sup>67</sup> Duncan Wu casts Keats's poetry from this period as a combination of Huntian pleasure and a Wordsworthian appeal to the significance of suffering for thought. See, "Keats and the "Cockney-School", in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 37–52.

*Agnes*, for “I’ve mickle time to grieve”.<sup>68</sup> “We cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure”, Keats tells his brother and sister-in-law in the spring of 1819.<sup>69</sup> “Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting – While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events – while we are laughing”, he goes on, “it sprouts [for it] grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck”.<sup>70</sup> At times, though, the vulnerability of happiness finds would-be elegy becoming celebration: rather than tainting laughter, knowledge of suffering often enhances it. This is why “Death is Life’s high meed”.<sup>71</sup> It is not as simple as being the reward for the slings and arrows of life, or what Mark Storey calls just another instance of Keats’s “familiar death-wish”.<sup>72</sup> Instead the idea registers Keats’s realisation that awareness of death and oblivion bring new meaning to the sensations of life. Playfully implied in the pun on ‘mead’, death is the ultimate intoxication for making one feel alive. Thus Keats searches for a poetic existence lived in full awareness of the intermingling of pleasure and suffering within the shadow of death. This is the “camelion Poet” of which he writes to Woodhouse on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1818, who “enjoys light and shade” and “lives in gusto, be it foul or fair”.<sup>73</sup> Keats’s wink to Hazlitt’s ideas of Shakespearean aesthetics here (published in Hunt’s *The Examiner* on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1816) is performed in “Welcome joy, and welcome sorrow” (1818) as the speaker embraces both foul and fair, recording self-awareness at how frequently, and productively, they combine:

I love to mark sad faces in fair weather,  
And hear a merry laugh amid the thunder;  
Fair and foul I love together.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> ‘The Eve of St Agnes’, in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 304.

<sup>69</sup> *The Letters of John Keats*, II, p. 79.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> ‘Why did I laugh tonight’, in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 323.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Storey, *Poetry and Humour from Cowper to Clough* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 68.

<sup>73</sup> *The Letters of John Keats*, p. 387.

<sup>74</sup> *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 231.

It is the nearness of “laugh” and “love” that further encourages us to hear that final line as ‘carpe diem’, and an affirmation by Keats of fair and foul coming together in sounds of laughter.

### Wordsworth Keeping Gleeeful Company

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While Keats finds in Wordsworth’s faith in suffering a foundation for knowledge, there is also much laughing glee to be found in the older poet’s writing, particularly in the lyrics composed between 1802-1807. Yet if Keats’s verse revels in the exuberance, Wordsworth’s both accommodates and moderates the glee. It is during the course of these years that Coleridge is counselling Wordsworth to get on with writing *The Recluse*, and becoming increasingly concerned that Wordsworth’s shorter poems signal “a radical Difference in our theoretical opinions respecting Poetry”.<sup>75</sup> Wordsworth continues to labour over the great philosophic work Coleridge envisaged years before, and still harbours some hope of completing it. But he is also spending a great deal of his time composing light-hearted, frivolous lyrics that might appear to be a world away from his ‘philosophic’ project. Perhaps these shorter lyrics act as a merry respite (the sort Keats so luxuriously engages in) from the toil and weight of expectation brought by the idea of *The Recluse*. They must surely have been partly that, with their levity lightening the moods of his mind. But as Wordsworth outlines in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the “objects of a Poet’s thought are every where”.<sup>76</sup> The moments of laughing glee articulate Wordsworth’s attention to the smallest details of life and how they may contain deep significance.

‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’ famously finds the poet bewitched by what he fancies are a host of laughing dancing daffodils. These “dancing daffodils” that form a “laughing company” have none of the Christian mythology Keats condemns elsewhere in Wordsworth.<sup>77</sup> Instead the

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<sup>75</sup> Coleridge to Robert Southey, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1802, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–1971), II, p. 830.

<sup>76</sup> 1850 edition cited, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen, and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I, p. 141.

<sup>77</sup> *Poems in Two Volumes*, p. 208. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers. The laughing dancing daffodils produce a sense of ludicrousness that is too much for many readers. Anna Seward

poem seeks to illuminate a spiritedness felt to exist in the natural world and the speaker's profound enthusiasm toward, and affinity with, life at play. Dorothy's description on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1802 of a scene she and William chance upon is undoubtedly the germ for the poem, even if William will later only acknowledge the influence of his wife, attributing the poem's "two best lines" to Mary.<sup>78</sup> It will be at least two years after the incident Dorothy describes before William fully begins to develop the episode with sustained attention.<sup>79</sup> But he clearly retains her attentiveness to the way the daffodils and their environment seem socially reciprocal. Dorothy's account reflects her special appreciation of the organic world as a merry community. She has the daffodils laughing and dancing "*with* the wind" (my emphasis) not because of it, which makes them look "so gay"; while the wind heads deliberately for the daffodils as it blows over the lake. The image of the laughing and dancing daffodils foregrounds the harmonies of a gleeful community and, in William's poem becomes the object of subjective insight.

With typical Wordsworthian self-control, his scene is much more measured and self-possessed than Keats's imagining of gleeful laughter in *Endymion*. Wordsworth's poem attends to an emotional and intellectual acuity, and his verse (and especially its rhymes) is less riotous, more measured and cautious, than Keats's rhyming games. The work exists as both the enjoyment of sensation, and a mind presenting its awareness that reflection yields its own kind of joy, since much of the poet's pleasure in the moment derives from his own acute awareness of his perception of the lively scene and his reproduction of it. There is a sort of knowingly ludicrous one-upmanship between the lake and flowers, as each competes with the other to be the most

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writes to Walter Scott that Wordsworth's "worst foe" could not have come up with a better demonstration than this "caricature" of "egoistic manufacturer of metaphysic importance upon trivial themes". See *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robert Woof (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 250-251. For Lucy Aikin, writing in the *Annual Review* of 1807, the association Wordsworth tries to suggest "between daffodils waving in the wind, and laughter" is a complete failure, "for it would be strange indeed if any one besides himself ever formed associations so capricious and entirely arbitrary", see *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage*, I, p. 221.

<sup>78</sup> For the incident see *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. by Pamela Woof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 85. The episode appears to inspire the description of the blossom in 'The Barberry-Tree' as well, as "They laugh'd and danc'd upon the gale; / They seem'd as they could never fade", in *Poems in Two Volumes*, p. 576. If written by Wordsworth, the poem in all likelihood dates from the spring 1802. For the critical disagreement concerning its authorship, see the special issue of *Review of English Studies*, 37:147 (August, 1986). For Wordsworth's later remarks implying that Mary came up with "They flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude", see *The Fennick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), p. 14, and pp. 109-110.

<sup>79</sup> Written some time between March 1804 and April 1807, the poem is not published until five years after the initial incident, see *The Fennick Notes of William Wordsworth*, p. 109.

gleeful: “The waves beside them danced, but they / Outdid the sparkling waves in glee” (7-8). Wordsworth suggests that their sport disarms him, as the stuttering cadence of the next line finds him stumbling over his awareness that “A poet could not but be gay / In such a laughing company”. But the lines also implicitly include him in the game, as the metrical dancing of “glee” into “company” and thence into “me” suggests that the social mirth is ultimately shared by the solitary Wordsworth, to be recalled at some later date when “In vacant or in pensive mood” (14). Throughout the work we listen to a poetic voice delighting not only in recording the play of nature upon his mind, but also how such intimacy might be amusingly recorded in the written word, and presented to the reader for their own amusement. That “laughing company” (10) and the “shew” (12) of the scene, combined with the position taken up by Wordsworth as spectator, contribute to this natural scene being aesthetically managed as theatre. The daffodils play the part of a comic acting troupe whose own gleeful pleasure is also intended for the entertainment of their poetic audience. The choice of form participates in the production of this merry performance, since octosyllabic lines are commonly in laughing company with Hudibrastic poetry.<sup>80</sup>

For Walter Pater, the poetic form helps to produce a “certain quaint gaiety of metre” that is in turn “prompted by a sort of half-playful mysticism”.<sup>81</sup> As Pater’s pronouncement implies, Wordsworth’s verse calls attention to an association between the poem’s gleeful whimsy and its sense of wonder. Though it contains a more Christian framework than ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’, a similar relation exists in ‘The Matron of Jedborough and her Husband’, also published in *Poems, in Two Volumes*. Inspired by the owner of one of the establishments in which William and Dorothy stay during their tour of Scotland in 1803, the matron happily defies old age: ushering in “a train of laughing hours”, she “liveth in the prime of glee, / A Woman, whose

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<sup>80</sup> It is also found in hymns, and Tennyson would later adopt it for *In Memoriam*, while Wordsworth uses it in ‘She was a Phantom of Delight’ as well. Despite this it is more commonly associated with light and comic verse.

<sup>81</sup> Walter Pater, *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan and Co, Limited, 1889), p. 58

years are seventy-three”, but yet “will dance and sing with thee”.<sup>82</sup> Dorothy records in her journal at the time of their stay the “joyousness” in the “motions” of the matron, and William’s characteristic desire to turn the experience into poetry, for he “thought it worth while to express in verse the sensations which she had excited, and which then remained as vividly in his mind as at the moment when we lost sight of Jedburgh”.<sup>83</sup> As with the daffodils that “flash upon that inward eye” (15) the sense of wonder is conveyed through a certain jauntiness of form, as the iambic tetrameter mimics the matron’s glee and chirpily dances along. She is compared to “Jedborough Tower” (28), “jocund as it was of yore” (29), and the verse too appears to echo with its music, being “all alive with merry chimes” (31). The couplets and triplets, and a mischievous combination of masculine and feminine rhyme, ring out with merriment, while the stress on the first syllable of “laughing” bounces into the assonance of “Hours”. The pleasing tempo produced in the parallelism of “And bid them dance, and bid them sing” (3) which skips into “And she will dance and sing with thee”, finds the poem adopting the matron’s joyous rhythm, just as “Age” (1) is also requested to accept her glee.

But if the daffodils and the matron are gleefully active, Wordsworth himself remains still, silently observant: “I gaz’d – and gaz’d” (11). There is a similarity between Wordsworth’s quiet watchfulness of the glee, and Blake’s solitary adult figure in ‘Nurse’s Song’, serenely transformed by the play of the children. That change is not registered by external movement (or anything particularly quantifiable) but felt instinctively by the poet as an internal glee: “my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils” (17-18). The laughing daffodils and matron produce what Wordsworth elsewhere describes as “a gentle shock of mild surprise”, that serene jolt of astonishment felt through wonder, produced in this case by the “mirth and jocund din” of the hooting owls responding to the boy of Winander.<sup>84</sup> Like the husband, who, crippled by ill-

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<sup>82</sup> *Poems in Two Volumes*, pp. 188-189. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

<sup>83</sup> *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1941), I, p. 398.

<sup>84</sup> ‘There Was a Boy’, in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 140. For Wordsworth’s revised version of the incident see *The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 103-104.

health, sits immobile and lifeless yet watchful in the room, Wordsworth is “enclos’d / Within himself, as seems” (48-49), yet studies the matron with child-like astonishment:

in the guise  
Of little Infants, when their eyes  
Begin to follow to and fro  
The persons that before them go,  
He tracks her motions, quick or slow  
Her buoyant Spirit can prevail  
Where common cheerfulness would fail (52-58).

This is the way Wordsworth appears to approach numerous kinds of wondrous pleasure. On 20<sup>th</sup> November 1820 Henry Crabb Robinson accompanied the Wordsworths to the British Museum. William’s quietness leads Crabb Robinson to wonder whether “Wordsworth much enjoyed the Elgin Marbles”, yet he realises that Wordsworth “is a still man when he does enjoy himself, and by no means ready to talk of his pleasure, except to his sister”.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps Crabb Robinson reassures himself of this when he throws a musical party a few years later, and Wordsworth professes himself to be “perfectly delighted and satisfied”, though “he sat alone, silent...and was generally supposed to be asleep”.<sup>86</sup> If there is more than a note of jokey, cheerful incredulity in Crabb Robinson’s tone, his acceptance of Wordsworth’s reassurance is nonetheless based on the poet’s own assumptions about himself. For he had in fact aligned his internal happiness with his repose some years before. In 1812, Wordsworth declares himself “one of the happiest of men” to Crabb Robinson, because he is not one of those people “who lives a life of constant bustle”.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Diary, Reminiscences and Correspondence*, ed. by Thomas Sadler, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), II, p. 195, <[doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791796](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791796)>, [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> November 2014].

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* II, p. 249.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* I, p. 382.

Wordsworth appears to be happiest when quietly watching the glee. This method brings nourishment to his mind and pleasure to his heart. But it does so partly because the glee seems so purposefully aimless. In ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’ it is noticeable how easily “wandered” slips toward that ‘wonder’ of the poem. And whilst the matron’s activity might appear to amount to very little, yet it adds up to a profound amount for her husband and the watchful poet. In both poems Wordsworth takes care to convey how apparent purposelessness provides its own form of significance. In ‘The Tinker’ too the itinerant craftsman appears busy as he passes from house to house, but it is his leisurely meandering manner, and “careless head” that Wordsworth admires.<sup>88</sup> It is precisely because he is “Not too much a thinker” (4) that the “merry Tinker...leads a happy life” (1-2). Taking the maiden’s prejudices, and the children’s nervousness with good cheer (and a certain amount of brazen pleasure at the discomfort he causes), he simply shakes his head, “Laughing, laughing, laughing, / As if he would laugh himself dead” (44-45). Thus “the Tinker lives in fun...And sorrow and care blow over him” (47-49).

Wordsworth not only appreciates this side to the tinker’s character, but obliquely and comically identifies himself with it as well. The tinker has a habit of “Bumming, bumming, bumming” (37), which, with its repetition and isolation on the line mirrors the “Laughing, laughing, laughing” a few lines later. The sound might well refer to a sort of humming and buzzing, as the Cornell editors suggest. John Clare appears to use it in this manner in ‘Recollections after a Ramble’: “Sweet it was to feel the breeze... Bumming gad-flies ceased to tease”.<sup>89</sup> Yet the sound also has links to the local Cumbrian dialect Wordsworth knew well by this time, where the phrase refers to a type of mumbling. Recalling years later the time he spent working at Rydal Mount a “quondam gardener’s boy”<sup>90</sup> attributes the “bumming” to the noise Wordsworth makes while composing and revising his verse outside:

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<sup>88</sup> *Poems in Two Volumes*, pp. 528-529. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

<sup>89</sup> In *Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 55.

<sup>90</sup> H.D. Rawnsley, ‘Reminiscences of Wordsworth among the Peasantry of Westmoreland’, in *Wordsworthiana: A Selection of Papers Read to the Wordsworth Society*, ed. by William Knight (London: Macmillan, 1889), p. 91.



He was ter'ble thrang with visitors and folks, you mun kna, at times, but if he could git away from them for a spell, he was out upon his gres walk; and then he would set his head a bit forward, and put his hands behint his back. And then he would start a bumming, and it was bum, bum, bum, stop; then bum, bum, bum reet down till t'other end, and then he'd set down and git a bit o'paper out and write a bit; and then he git up, and bum, bum, bum, and goa on bumming for long enough right down and back agean. I suppose, ye kna, the bumming helped him out a bit. However, his lips was always goan' whoale time he was upon the gres walk.<sup>91</sup>

Wordsworth did not move to Rydal Mount until 1813, several years after he composed 'The Tinker'. Rawnsley's 'Reminiscences of Wordsworth among the Peasantry of Westmoreland' is, moreover, by its nature an anecdotal work, documenting events that may have occurred many years previously, relying upon the somewhat unreliable recall of memory. Nonetheless, others also speak of Wordsworth's "bumming" in the text, and it seems likely that he becomes aware of the habit at some point – either because he was told by someone, or through one of those moments of self-awareness when we suddenly become conscious of our peculiar habits. This amusing similarity implies that the tinker performs that whimsical side of Wordsworth which is deliberately purposeless because of the pleasing effects it can bring. Of course, we might interpret the similarity as a somewhat cruel comparison between Wordsworth's 'high' poetic bumming engaged in the crafting of verse, and the 'low' and fruitless bumming of the tinker. Such a reading is given greater weight if we hear contempt toward the tinker's frivolous and extravagant laughter ("As if he would laugh himself dead"). Yet Wordsworth's tone toward the tinker has little in the way of condemnation. Instead, Wordsworth sounds both curious toward the tinker and desirous to experience this life of fun. Wordsworth, it seems, is sometimes

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 90.

perfectly happy in a “careless season”, delighting in a “Baby, laughing in my arms”, and, in “Spite of care, and spite of grief”, content “To gambol with Life’s falling Leaf”.<sup>92</sup>

### Hunt and Shelley’s Poetics of Gladness

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In June 1818, Keats is “Sad-sad-sad” to find Wordsworth “canvassing for the Lowthers” against the Whig candidate in the Westmorland election.<sup>93</sup> Wordsworth’s shifting political allegiances, heralded by his dedication to the “illustrious Peer” the Earl of Lonsdale in *The Excursion* also greatly disappoints Leigh Hunt. The growing conservatism of Wordsworth throughout the nineteenth century is linked in Hunt’s mind to the poet’s rural isolation and increasingly egotistic poetry. This puts Wordsworth outside Hunt’s moral and aesthetic principle of sociality, said to develop the common good through cheerfulness practised in poetic and personal life. “I write to enjoy myself”, he explains, “but I have learnt in the course of it to write for others also; and my poetical tendencies luckily fall in with my moral theories”.<sup>94</sup> Hunt’s own poetic enjoyment is therefore incorporated alongside a socially oriented agenda driven by his moral theories for life. In the final section of this chapter I consider how Hunt’s laughing glee springs from his sociality, and his ambivalence toward the Lake poets, before closing with a discussion of Percy Shelley’s ‘The Cloud’ and the import of a poetry of gladness to Hunt and Shelley’s sounding of the world.

In the Preface to *Foliage* (1818) Hunt challenges the egotism and isolationism of Wordsworth and other Lakers, and what he identifies as a prevailing tendency toward “An unattractive creed”, and a despondent “melancholy”, that he criticises also in his note to *The Feast of the Poets*.<sup>95</sup> As an alternative, Hunt encourages a turn to the “cheerful tendencies of our nature”, for “It is high time”, he declares,

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<sup>92</sup> ‘The Kitten and the Falling Leaves’, in *Poems in Two Volumes*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>93</sup> *The Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 299.

<sup>94</sup> Leigh Hunt, *Foliage* (London, 1818), p. 18.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 15. See also Hunt’s long note on the Lake School, the principle target and focus of which is Wordsworth, in *The Feast of the Poets* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989), pp. 87-109.

for all of us, to look after health and sociality; and to believe, that although we cannot alter the world with an ipse dixit, we need not become desponding, or mistake a disappointed egotism for humility. We should consider ourselves as what we really are, – creatures made to enjoy more than to know, to know infinitely nevertheless in proportion as we enjoy kindly, and finally, to put our own shoulders to the wheel and get out of the mud upon the green sward again.<sup>96</sup>

The assimilation of health with sociality, said to be closer to “what we really are”, announces cheerfulness as an antidote to the despondency of the Laker’s “egotism” that masquerades as humility. Hunt highlights the way knowledge is mediated in direct proportion to enjoyment that is “kindly”. But by supposing that we are “creatures made to enjoy more than to know”, he is not displaying a disregard for reformist politics, as Duncan Wu seems to suggest,<sup>97</sup> so much as his shrewd awareness of the contingency and ambiguity of knowledge itself. The call to labour upon the “green sward” admits the very reformist politics Wu denies to Hunt, and that are such a part of his poetics of cheerfulness.<sup>98</sup> Bearing Hunt’s influence, Keats’s ‘Robin Hood’ imagines the loss of an English liberty which was associated with the festive cheerfulness of the merry men. The absence of liberty in the present is heard as the loss of a

mid-forest laugh,

Where lone Echo gives the half

To some wight, amaz’d to hear

Jesting, deep in the forest drear.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Foliage*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>97</sup> Keats and the “Cockney-School” in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, p. 41.

<sup>98</sup> For Green politics and radical dissent in relation to Keats and the Hunt circle, see Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), especially pp. 123-159.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Robin Hood’, in *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 228.

As my discussion in chapter two of ‘Merry England’ also showed, Hunt and his circle’s desire for a band of merry men and women is undoubtedly framed within their desire for an overhaul of the socio-political system, and what they felt to be the increasing commercialisation, expansionism, and exploitation exhibited by modern Britain.

But if Hunt laments Wordsworth’s lack of sociability, and his retreat from reform and withdrawal into nature, he also deeply admires Wordsworth’s poetry. In his Preface to *Foliage*, Hunt displays his debt to the avowed values of *Lyrical Ballads* by describing the principle “properties of poetry” to be “A sensitiveness to the beauty of the external world, to the unsophisticated impulses of our nature, and above all, imagination, or the power to see, with verisimilitude, what others do not”.<sup>100</sup> Hunt identifies with much in the older poet, particularly Wordsworth’s faith in the therapeutic and educative qualities of the natural world, the power of the imagination, and a poet’s skill at unlocking it. The programme for poetry Hunt adopts is thus markedly similar to Wordsworth’s younger self, looking as he is to nature as a model for fostering social reform, via “health and sociality”. The aims of *Foliage* are after all “to cultivate a love of nature out of doors, and sociality within”.<sup>101</sup> That reviewers slap Hunt and Keats with the same sneering lexicon of ‘simplicity’ and ‘childishness’ with which the *Lyrical Ballads* was attacked only goes to show their kinship.

Unlike Wordsworth’s casting of our imaginative response to the landscape as part of a gradual movement toward appreciation of the divine through orthodox Christianity, particularly in *The Excursion*, the opening of Hunt’s *Foliage* is self-consciously pagan. ‘The Nymphs’ exhibits many of the qualities evinced in the collection’s Preface. Not least the poet’s supposed ‘genius’ at discerning the animating spirits of the world, to see “with verisimilitude, what others do not”, conceiving of nature as a cheerful and compassionate model for life. As a whole, the collection evinces pastoral values and is divided between Hunt’s own compositions (the ‘Greenwoods’) and translations (the ‘Evergreens’). ‘The Nymphs’ is typically pastoral, not least in the sense of being

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<sup>100</sup> *Foliage*, p. 13

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

the work of an urban writer seeking in nature both joyful escapism and optimism, and finding within its landscape pastures replete with political significance. The poem opens with a request to the muse to take him to a pastoral land, as the speaker feels beckoned on by a cheerful destiny: “a new smiling sense has shot down through me, / And from the clouds, like stars, bright eyes are beckoning me”.<sup>102</sup> His muse is quick to laugh or smile, perceptive of communal happiness, and is tinged with the political suggestiveness of the green pastoral tradition, for it is “quick-dimpled to all social glee, / And yet the most sylvan of the earnest Nine” (8-9). Imagining his arrival in this idyll, the poet discovers an animistic landscape. He is privy to the highly evocative visions and sounds that murmur of the undercurrent of meaning contained in nature. Merry nymphs benevolently govern the scene, their pleasure pervasive to the habitat as they display the gregarious “warm and social feelings” Hunt attributes the previous year to Keats’s *Poems*.<sup>103</sup>

I see you, here and there, among the trees,  
Shrouded in noon-day respite of your mirth:  
This hum in air, which the still ear perceives,  
Is your unquarrelling voice among the leaves;  
And now I find, whose are the laughs and stirrings  
That make the delicate birds dart so in whisks and whirrings (39-44).

Their voices play upon and through the air, in terms reminiscent of Coleridge’s ‘The Eolian Harp’, and its “soft floating witchery of sound...As...Elfin make...Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air, / Is music slumbering on her instrument”, though Hunt does not share the Unitarianism stimulating Coleridge’s verse in the 1790s.<sup>104</sup> The way Hunt translates Coleridge’s “mute still air” into a “hum in air” then weaves the “still air” into “still ear” speaks not only to

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<sup>102</sup> ‘The Nymphs’, in *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, ed. by H. S. Mitford (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 320. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

<sup>103</sup> In *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 61.

<sup>104</sup> *Poetical Works, Poems (Reading Text)*, ed. by J. C. C. Mays, 3 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), I, p. 233.

the animating sounds within nature, but also the reverberation of other voices within poetry. Hunt's conflation blurs the boundaries between the environment and the ear of the poet, further encouraged by the floating of "air" into "ear". So the playful interconnectedness of the scene includes Hunt (and his poetics) who, like Wordsworth earlier, is silently attentive, and with his "still ear perceives". The brightness of the nymphs is suggestive too of a "light in sound, a sound-like power in light", but with a glimmer of mischievousness from the figures within the poem and the poet himself.<sup>105</sup> Their "laughs and stirrings", and their "voice among the leaves" has something of the sparkling birds and "lovely sky of blue / Clearly was felt, or down the leaves laughed through" of *The Story of Rimini*, a work which courted controversy when it was published two years before because of its sexual, and by implication, socio-political liberality.<sup>106</sup> Hunt's style is an essential part of this controversy, and so his continued use of by now provocative rhymes and lexical variations acts as a cheeky rejoinder to his critics. The couplet "stirrings" / "whirrings" sounds like more of the same unblushingly "Hudibrastic double-endings" the *Monthly Review* was disappointed by in 1816.<sup>107</sup> While that "here and there" evinces the colloquial register combined with supposedly high artistic ambitions that Lockhart scoffed at in *Blackwood's*. The way these conversational phrases dart in and out of the landscape of the poem emulates the interjections of the nymphs at play. As such, Hunt aligns his mixing of a 'high' and 'low' poetic register to the natural liberty of the landscape.<sup>108</sup>

The erotic significance of Hunt's political stance becomes apparent later in the poem, where the nymphs' laughter is not just frolicsome but sexually active: "when the bright-eyed Sun / Looks out...The laughing meadows may be bold, / And show their bosoms to him, white and

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, p. 22.

<sup>107</sup> 'The Story of Rimini; a Poem, by Leigh Hunt', *The Monthly Review* (London, 1816), pp. 138-147 (145).

<sup>108</sup> Nicholas Roe interprets this lexical variation as a liberating "suburban" idiom that reviewers were cautious of because it represented the Cockney-School's challenge to the political and cultural establishment. See *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, p. 128. Richard Cronin assumes Hunt perfects a "knowing innocence" to his style, always aware of the transgression it performs, see *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 185.

David Stewart, in contrast, suggests that the style derives more out of what he calls Hunt's "accidental poetry", that leaves his reader uncertain whether the effect is intended or unconscious, see 'Accidental Poetry', *Essays in Criticism*, 62:1 (2012), 25-40.

gold” (115-118).<sup>109</sup> Their excitement carries something of what Helmuth Plessner identifies as laughter born of “titillation from the ambivalence of sensuous excitation”.<sup>110</sup> Elsewhere the nymphs’ laughter is allied to a sexual promiscuity that is lush and luxurious:

There lie they, lulled by little whiffling tones  
 Of rills among the stones,  
 Or by the rounder murmur, glib and flush,  
 Of the escaping gush,  
 That laughs and tumbles, like a conscious thing,  
 For joy of all its future travelling (166-171).

The juxtaposition of long and shorter lines is typical of Hunt’s metrical playfulness, whilst the intermingling of sounds and tactile sensuality within the scene is mirrored in the sonic texture of the verse through alliteration and assonance. The reciprocity of the rhymes evokes the patterns of this mutually responsive, consenting landscape. Like the water it describes, these lines are conscious of their frisky movements, and of themselves as a combination of sound and vision. And, like the nymphs’ laughter, the verse is ever-present yet pleasingly, elusively, suggestive. If Hunt is associating the sexual freedom of the nymphs to their laughter here, he is also aligning his verse to this counter-culture of permissiveness. That “escaping gush, / That laughs and tumbles” could be Hunt’s own cheerful and sexually charged politics rolling within his poetics. Flowing through the natural landscape, it tumbles into the world of the reader. The pleasure is socially oriented and future-directed: their laughter is loaded with intent, “conscious” of joys “future travelling”. These nymphs are well versed in the processes of history, so that their sexual liberality suggests a trajectory toward the liberation of the future. This pastoral is not simply an

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<sup>109</sup> The closing poem of *Foliage*, ‘Nuptial Songs of Julia and Manlius’, appears to recommend marriage for the pleasures of Venus. But in ‘The Nymphs’ Hunt is much more liberal in his view.

<sup>110</sup> Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p113.

escape from Regency England, but one framed with historical resonance that implies the naturally liberal features of the organic world. By interpreting the animating spirits in the organic world to be underpinned by erotic principles, Hunt suggests that the way of the world in past present and future is ‘naturally’ liberal and progressive.

As he makes clear in the Preface to *Foliage* as well as “a love of sociality” and “of the country” the other “main feature of the book” is devotion to “the fine imagination of the Greeks”.<sup>111</sup> The paganism I have been describing is heavily influenced by Greek thought, which, Hunt noted, has

a sense of a supernatural state of things, however gross. It has a link with another world, from which something like gravity is sure to strike into the most cheerful heart. Every forest, to the mind’s eye of a Greek, was haunted with superior intelligences. Every stream had its presiding nymph, who was thanked for the draught of water.<sup>112</sup>

The sunny sociability and playfulness of ‘The Nymphs’ attempts to embody such beliefs in verse, taking its cue too from Greek art, and the formative influence of the natural environment upon it. Hunt’s interest in Greece enacts a pastoral movement of its own then, with the appropriation of a ‘golden age’ redolent of a nostalgic yearning to escape from the troubles of the present, and acts as a means of confronting the socio-political climate of contemporary life. The use of Hellenism in the Romantic period is, as Jeffrey Cox persuasively explains, “not primarily a debate over aesthetics” so much as “a struggle over the definition of post-Napoleonic culture and society”.<sup>113</sup> Greece is a plural idea for the Romantics. But the telling point in this context is that, as Marilyn Butler and others have highlighted, the Hunt circle adopts but also adapts Greek

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<sup>111</sup> *Foliage*, p. 18.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Spirit of the Ancient Mythology’ in *Essays*, by Leigh Hunt, ed. by Arthur Symonds (London: Scott, 1887), p. 229.

<sup>113</sup> Jeffrey Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 35. See also pp. 146-186.



culture as a model for dissent from prevailing conservative tendencies in art and politics.<sup>114</sup> By locating ‘The Nymphs’ in an unspecified pastoral land “of pipes and leafy playing”, with “Nymphs of all names, and woodland Geniuses” (35-38), Hunt employs Greek mythology as a cheerful and erotically charged pseudo-religious philosophy to act as a contrast to what he calls the “gloomy fanaticism” of orthodox Christianity.<sup>115</sup> The poetry of the Hunt circle frequently parades the idea that “the Greeks invented the poetry of gladness”.<sup>116</sup> This notion inspires and underpins their pursuit of a pagan celebration of life and liberty, presenting the world as gleeful rather than tragic.

Paying homage to Grecian animating spirits of nature, Percy Shelley’s ‘The Cloud’ looks to the Hellenistic world as it evokes the laughter ubiquitous to life. The poem is known to draw on the nature deities of the chorus in Aristophanes’s comedy *The Clouds* which remind the audience of the vital importance of rain to the planet’s ecosystem. It is also clear that the laughing guides of the clouds, the Nepheliads (Hunt’s neologism) in part two of ‘The Nymphs’, inspire Shelley’s poem as well.<sup>117</sup> But whilst Hunt’s nymphs are teasingly aloof, darting in and out of the landscape, Shelley’s cloud is audacious and immediate, her declarative first-person voice full of self-confidence and wit, with the anapaestic measure giving her movements great pace, sportiveness, and self-assurance. Characterised by *ataraxia*, that Greek notion of freedom from anxiety, she offers a mirthful alternative to the orthodox Christian doctrine of suffering as the essential principle of life. Rather than the possibility of eternal punishment, and resurrection derived out of the painful sacrifice of the crucifixion, Shelley’s cloud embodies a joyous perpetual renewal operating in the natural world; that more ‘comic’ feature of the Greeks and their laughing

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<sup>114</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 113-137. But see also Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, pp. 60-87; Jeffrey Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*, pp. 146-186; Ayumi Mizukoshi, *Keats, Hunt and the Aesthetics of Pleasure* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 71-103. For a broader overview of the influence of Greek culture to the Romantics see Timothy Webb, ‘Romantic Hellenism’, in *Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 148-177.

<sup>115</sup> *The Months: Descriptive of the Successive Beauties of the Year* (London, 1821), p. 68.

<sup>116</sup> Hunt, *Foliage*, p. 35. Hunt is quoting directly from Schlegel whose *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* had been translated into English in 1815.

<sup>117</sup> Shelley admirably refers to ‘The Nymphs’ as “truly *poetical*, in the intense and emphatic sense of the word”, in *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), II, pp. 2-3.

deities.<sup>118</sup> Her activity is a life-affirming representation of health and well-being, and of the shared pleasure and play at the heart of the natural world. And rather than the fascination with self-destructiveness of much ‘masculine’ Romantic poetry, Shelley’s creative creature is (like Hunt’s nymphs) generative.

Hunt’s Nepheliads sometimes let it rain for the sheer pleasure of the result – “for a rainbow run / Right before the laughing sun” (158-159). Shelley’s cloud also takes pure impulsive delight in the apparent pleasure of the universe, as when “The stars peep behind her and peer; / And I laugh to see them whirl and flee, / Like a swarm of golden bees”.<sup>119</sup> The moon and the stars behave as though engaged in a children’s game, as though the movement of the heavens are ordained by a sense of fun, of levity rather than gravity. But Shelley’s cloud is generally more purposeful than Hunt’s tender, unhurried nymphs, and always conscious of the vital part her amusement plays within the cycle of life:

I wield the flail of the lashing hail,  
And whiten the green plains under,  
And then again I dissolve it in rain,  
And laugh as I pass in thunder (9-12).

That she laughs as she passes in thunder might on first hearing align her with the “triumphant storm” in *Prometheus Unbound* (with which the poem is originally published in 1820) that passes early on “Like a conqueror” over the earth as we listen to “the thunder hoarsely laugh”.<sup>120</sup> At this moment in *Prometheus Unbound* the laughter is reflective of a world of tyrannic power, from which the drama discovers release. The function of “flail” in ‘The Cloud’ is therefore significant. Her

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<sup>118</sup> For a subtle explanation of the theological motivations behind assumptions that Greek deities laugh at the misfortune of human life, see Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp pp. 338-339.

<sup>119</sup> ‘The Cloud’, in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1989-), III, p. 362. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as line numbers.

<sup>120</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews, 4 vols (London: Longman, 1989-), II, pp. 519-520.

activity often appears like that of an imperialist conqueror, military weapon in hand, asserting her will over the landscape. But as the principal meaning of flail as an agricultural tool implies, her behaviour seeks not to overthrow but to productively play her part in creation. The boldness with which she performs her role should not disguise the cohesive relationship between the air and earth based on reciprocity. Both joyously acknowledge their dependence on each other for the flourishing of life. Thus later in the poem we hear of “The triumphal arch through which I march / With hurricane, fire, and snow” but all the while “the moist Earth was laughing below” (67-72).

Long ago Francis Thompson saw Shelley as the figure in the cloud. For Thompson, both poet and cloud are child-like, with the poem itself springing from the “child’s faculty of make-believe...The universe is his box of toys. He dabbles his fingers in the dayfall. He is gold-dusty with tumbling amidst the stars”.<sup>121</sup> Thompson’s insight flickers with that favourite Victorian cliché of the child-like Shelley. Yet there is something in Shelley’s artfulness that finds him casting himself in foreign bodies, be they mountains, skylarks, or in this case clouds. There is a self-conscious similarity drawn between the laughing cloud, inspired by, and part of, a universe teeming with ludic coherence and creativity, and the poet’s own shaping of his poetic voice, motivated by a playful imagination. So if this deity appears inspired by the “play-mood”, which “is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion”,<sup>122</sup> so too is Shelley’s poetics. The final lines continue with the riddles, inversions, incantations, and internal rhymes that are ever-present in the poem:

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,

And the nursling of the sky;

I pass through the pores of the oceans and shores;

I change, but I cannot die –

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<sup>121</sup> Francis Thompson, *Shelley* (London: Burns and Oates, 1909), pp. 45-46.

<sup>122</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 154.

For after the rain, when with never a stain,  
     The pavilion of Heaven is bare,  
 And the winds and sunbeams, with their convex gleams,  
     Build up the blue dome of air,  
 I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,  
     And out of the caverns of rain,  
 Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,  
     I arise, and unbuild it again (73-84).

Calling to mind that floating “pleasure dome” and those “caverns measureless to man” in ‘Kubla Khan’, Shelley upends the image of the Romantic imagination.<sup>123</sup> First by collapsing the distinction between the artifice of the pleasure dome and the natural sacred river so that these contrary but complimentary images of the imagination dissolve into an organic whole. Secondly by presenting an immortal imagination that flows through all things as gamesome and existent (if concealed), rather than savage and remote. We hear this in her riddling, “I change, but I cannot die” (76), but nowhere more so than in the internally rhyming, oxymoronic “I silently laugh at my own cenotaph” (81). That sepulchre – an empty tomb from which the figure interred has risen<sup>124</sup> – in turn acts as a physical celebration of the life-giving force and perpetuity of the cloud’s triumphant laughter, a laugh that echoes even in the silence of death. Like the cloud, sounds of laughter in Romantic poetry are ubiquitous yet too often drift by unheard. Like the cloud forever renewing itself, sounds of laughter constantly “unbuild” in Romantic poetry, arising from a seemingly limitless landscape of connections, allusions, and echoes. As such, the sound of laughter also unbuilds Romantic poetry, undoing our assumptions of it, and then making it anew from the same material.

<sup>123</sup> Coleridge, *Poetical Works, Poems (Reading Text)*, I, pp. 512-513.

<sup>124</sup> ‘Cenotaph’ n. 2, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*,  
 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29577?rskey=8cCvuZ&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>>, [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> January 2015].

## CONCLUSION

This thesis began with the noisy laughter in the hills in Wordsworth's 'To Joanna'. I want to start drawing my argument to a close by considering a similar description from a hundred years later. In his essay *Laughter*, first published in 1900, Henri Bergson stresses the "social significance" of laughing experiences:

Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain.<sup>1</sup>

Bergson's language (admittedly in translation) recalls the sublimity I have identified in Romantic laughter. It is a "noise of...thunder" which in its "excessive loudness" is one feature of the auditory sublime Edmund Burke outlines in the *Reflections*.<sup>2</sup> Bergson's imagery plays upon the violent discourse of the sublime, echoing Burke's masculine and violent conception of it. That potential for "reverberating from one to another" is aggressively charged, begun by a "crash" that continues with "rumblings". "Fain" suggests laughter is caught between joyful accord and submission, between something willingly done and something socially required.

The dramatic landscape Bergson depicts highlights what I have been arguing throughout this thesis (and which I have related to poetic acts as well): that laughter stages the complex and tense interplay between one individual and another, between the self and a community. If Bergson identifies laughter as a "sound which echoes itself, and which also invites other echoes",

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, reprinted in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 61-190 (64-65).

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 82.

then Bergson also acknowledges that the invitation is fraught with critical risk.<sup>3</sup> “Listen to it carefully”, he advises, laughter “is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound”. Perhaps a lack of clarity in evanescence makes laughter at once beguiling and mystifying. Its eruption is a composite of an ever-variable series of psychological, physiological, sociological, historical, and contextual elements. They play together in one unique moment and create a laugh. This almost magical process is why, for all our trying, we can never entirely predict when and where laughter will occur, nor entirely understand what it intends. As Derek Attridge realises, this is not simply a matter of the “inadequacy of our analytical tools, but because laughter is entirely dependent on unpredictability”.<sup>4</sup> But the risk that laughter carries is also fundamentally about what Bergson calls its “double act”.<sup>5</sup> That is, laughter hosts affinity and antagonism; laughter carries an inarticulate means of bonding with others, as well as the threat of separation and alienation.

In Romantic poetry, laughter consistently houses the hope of inclusion and the fear of exclusion. It is an affirmative “connecting force” like the one Wordsworth hopes rolls through all things and exists in the mind of every individual. Yet it also carries the sneer of selfishness. This double movement is dramatized most acutely in the chapters on sympathy and unruliness, where attempts at accord witnessed in chapter three are tempered by several examples of laughter’s discord in chapter four. Within these chapters we consistently witness a crisis point as well, particularly in the laughter of sympathy which at times is portrayed as advancing and sustaining deep ties, alongside an amused acknowledgement of sympathy’s illusionary nature or impossibility. Percy Shelley is arguably the most optimistic at times toward the transformative possibilities available for self and community through laughter, but his verse performances regularly register anxiety as well. The double act continues in chapter five, where, the inter-generational laughs in Blake’s ‘The Ecchoing Green’ are affirmations of what we all instinctively

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Bevis, ‘Wordsworth at Play’, *Essays in Criticism*, 61:1 (2011), 54-78 (p. 56).

<sup>4</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 65.

share, yet also articulate our inevitable distance in time and space as something which might not be bridgeable but only borne.

As I have been suggesting throughout, interpreting the multi-faceted nature of laughter reminds us that the reading process in which we are engaged exhibits a comparable complexity. Laughter and poetry offer an instance of readerly risk: each proposes a meeting place for the vital connection with, and possible separation from, another mind or entity. The experience of laughing and reading seem to prove undeniably to us that we are not alone, and yet also draw attention to our distinctive isolation in the seclusion of our consciousness.

Laughter in Wordsworth's writing regularly presents a tension between Romantic distance and social engagement. To be laughing "at a distance" as the sea does in Book IV of *The Prelude* seems to be Wordsworth's own preferred position. As we saw in chapter five, the delighted connection he feels toward the gleeful daffodils occurs as he noiselessly observes their jocund company. Mediated by the shelter of his mind, his interaction with the natural and social world co-exists with a sense of the observing mind's necessary isolation. The self-parody in the Prologue to *Peter Bell* acknowledges that laughter and verse each represent a natural tendency toward separation that jeopardises links with others. Yet elsewhere Wordsworth suggests that remaining "at a distance" is vitally important in order to feel himself a poet and engage in the life around him. During such moments, the questionable moral weight of laughter acts as a way of questioning the moral force of the imagination of the poet.

Wordsworth returns to this theme in Book IV of *The Excursion*. There, as part of the telling of his grief-stricken life, the Solitary describes his arrival in America. Restless and despondent, determined "to observe, and not to feel", he chances upon "a motley spectacle" of "high pretensions" that is matched only by its "obstreperous voice".<sup>6</sup> The scene evinces

#### Big Passions strutting on a petty stage:

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<sup>6</sup> *The Excursion*, ed. by Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 127. Subsequent references to the poem are to this edition and incorporated in the text as book and line numbers.

Which a detached Spectator may regard  
 Not unamused. – But ridicule demands  
 Quick change of objects; and, to laugh alone,  
 In woods and wilds, or any lonely place,  
 At a composing distance from the haunts  
 Of strife and folly – though it be a treat  
 As choice as musing Leisure can bestow;  
 Yet, in the very centre of the crowd  
 To keep the secret of a poignant scorn,  
 May suit an airy Demon; but, of all  
 Unsocial courses, 'tis the one least fit  
 For the gross spirit of Mankind, – the one  
 That soonest fails to please, and quickliest turns  
 Into vexations (III, 908-922).

The Solitary admits the pleasure of “laughing alone” at “strife and folly” when at a soothingly “composing distance”, even as he turns to moralising upon the “Unsocial” course of the “secret of a poignant scorn” amongst others. His concerns over the antisocial nature of laughter appear to articulate his “loss of confidence in social man” (IV, 261). But the Solitary’s confession of the “treat” of superior laughter admits the egoistic pleasure found at the expense of others, which does not bring people together but only confirms their difference.

To refer in poetry to “laughing alone” at a “composing distance” is to invite the idea of the composing of (and by extension compositional features of) poetry. Mischievously, Wordsworth’s verse enacts the very thing the Solitary is moralistically decrying: ridicule. Like Charles Lamb, whose allusion to the “motley spectacles” of Hogarth I alluded to in chapter two, the Solitary assumes that a motley spectacle is “the very essence of laughter”. Certain features of the passage



obliquely exhibit a sense of the motley the Solitary admits is laughable. If not quite a fool, the ambivalence of the passage is typical of the inconsistencies and perhaps incongruities Wordsworth offers throughout his depiction of the Solitary. We read that “ridicule demands / Quick change of objects”, and the Solitary’s pattern of speech consistently performs abrupt changes (despite his stilted manner) where the rhythmical firmness of his utterances is undermined by the interrogatives of the punctuating shifts (“But...or... – though it be...Yet...but”) that act as “secret” (and perhaps “poignant”) “scorn”. Secret scorn toward others may quickly lead to vexation. However, all roads lead that way for the Solitary whose hopes nowadays amount to little more than that the continual “ebb and flow” (IV, 1145) of his “current soon will reach / The unfathomable gulf, where all is still” (III, 990-991). Yet he nonetheless finds himself drawn to the “ebb and flow” that laughing can embody. In a rhetorical question, Geoffrey Hartman asserts that the Solitary is the tragically wavering “Hamletian man in black, and a dangerous part of the poet’s mind”.<sup>7</sup> But during such moments as above, the Solitary seems less a tragic representation of Wordsworth than another form of Wordsworthian self-parody. The piety of “not unamused” sounds like Wordsworth’s complicated response to the dangers and delights of London theatres in Book VII of *The Prelude*; while the Solitary echoes throughout this passage that Wordsworthian tension displayed in *Peter Bell* between laughing alone and its challenge to the moral determinacy of the poet.

As well as offering an ironic self-portrait, certain features about the Solitary strangely resemble the contemporary impression of a sneering Byronic figure. As Jane Stabler has pointed out in an article published recently, the Solitary’s “pallor (V, 212; 602), haughtiness (IV, 767), the ‘bitter language of the heart’ (III, 462) and the ‘faint sarcastic smile’ (II 595)” were all traits associated with Byron at the time.<sup>8</sup> To these misanthropic features we can add the unsociable laughs in Book III which, as well as befitting Byronism, recall the ridiculing of Wordsworth (amongst numerous others) in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* of 1809, and foreshadows the

<sup>7</sup> *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 307.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Stabler, ‘Byron and *The Excursion*’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 45:2 (2014), 137-147 (p. 142).

rancour towards all the (for Byron, parochial) Lakers that will follow in *Don Juan*. The sardonic and reclusive Byron is the one Hazlitt decries in *The Spirit of the Age*, who “like a solitary peak, all access to which is cut off...is seated on a lofty eminence, ‘cloud-capt’...and in his poetical moods reminds us of the fabled Titans, retired to a ridgy steep, playing...Pan’s-pipes”.<sup>9</sup>

Byron’s aloof and sarcastic wit is legendary. One means of capturing his “aversion” for the turgid style of *The Excursion* is to call it a “drowsy-frowsy poem”.<sup>10</sup> “Turdsworth”, meanwhile, became a favourite bit of wordplay to conjure the impression of poetic excrement dropping from Wordsworth’s pen.<sup>11</sup> However, Byron’s response to Wordsworth was deeply ambivalent, and often deeply admiring. Two years after the publication of *The Excursion*, and worn out by the ridicule being poured upon him in the press following the break-up of his marriage, Byron retreats to the Swiss Alps with Wordsworthian passion for solitude and nature. He kept a journal of his time in the Bernese Oberland, in which he addresses himself to his half-sister Augusta. The final entry at the end of September bears witness to the apparent failure of the nature project “to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty & the power” and its inability to “lighten the weight upon my heart”.<sup>12</sup>

Taken as a whole, though, the journal consistently speaks not of disappointment, but of the enriching of his social inclinations in the isolation of the Alps. His short account of Switzerland is full of childish glee, like his snowball fight with John Cam Hobhouse (102); pleasure at the customs, sounds, and company of Alpine life; peppered with frequent fits of laughter at himself and others as they stumble across the mountains: “I fell a laughing & tumbled too” (99). At this moment, Byron, Hobhouse, and their guide, have all fallen down the side of a mountain; across from them on another slope they see and hear a shepherd “playing upon his *pipe*” (99). These moments leave a very different impression to that heard from Hazlitt – of Byron as a Titan

<sup>9</sup> *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), XI, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> George Gordon Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, and Barry Weller, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-1993), V, p. 195.

<sup>11</sup> Byron refers to Wordsworth as “Turdsworth” on at least two occasions in letters. To John Murray he writes of the “Tadpole of Poet Turdsworth’s” and his “ragamuffins”. To Douglas Kinnaird he talks of “Mr Turdsworth’s *Peter Bell*”. See *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973-1994), VII, p. 158, and p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, V, p. 99. Subsequent references to the Alpine Journal are to this edition, and incorporated in the text as page numbers.

playing his pipe in his lofty eminence upon a solitary peak. For Byron, at this moment, “the Shepherds’ shouting to us from crag to crag & playing on their reeds where the steeps appeared almost inaccessible” realises “all that I have ever heard or imagined of a pastoral existence” (99). It is a pastoral existence populated by people, where Byron discovers the dissolution of the artificial boundary between the human and natural worlds: “I have lately repeopled my mind with Nature” (99).

Hobhouse’s more detailed account offers a useful gloss on the episode. The herdsman “began to play on a pipe, which we heard distinctly – as also his shouts of laughter intended for the echo, which reverberated them from every hill”.<sup>13</sup> Byron’s writing to Augusta is itself, of course, an attempt to always be in company, retaining the hope that by setting down his words on the page he is reaching out to another. But what we hear from the pages of the Alpine Journal in the echoing laughter of the mountains is the voicing of another means of connecting – offering itself as the possibility of a universal mode of communication that transcends the differences of language or culture, just as it overcomes the physical (and social) space between Byron and the herdsman. Social even in solitude, the sound of laughter (and the sound of poetry) is always “changeable too, yet somehow ‘*Idem semper*’”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Diary of John Cam Hobhouse*, ed. by Peter Cochran, <<https://petercochran.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/22-switzerland.pdf>>, [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> April 2013].

<sup>14</sup> *Don Juan*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, V, p. 660.

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