

WHY THE FISH LAUGHED, AND OTHER MATTERS RELATING TO (THE INDIAN SENSE OF) “HUMOR”

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It is dangerous, I am told, to propose to lecture on the subject of “humor” in Finland in November.¹ But, as editor of the *JAOS*, I bring a perspective to the problem of the comic that is timeless, and sometimes even spaceless. Perhaps that is why it is possible for me to speak on “cross-cultural” humor – Indian humor (in this case) – a subject much neglected in “Oriental” discourse.

Let me begin by assuring the doubters that Indians *do* laugh – that there *is* an “Indian sense of humor” (as Prof. Asko Parpola has provocatively titled the lecture) – though what precise meaning should attach to this expression is just the problem I wish to address here. Let me also express my thanks to Prof. Parpola for affording me this opportunity to be in Helsinki in November, where the warmth of the hospitality makes up for the shortness of the days. It is also a real treat for me to visit the precincts of both brothers Parpola, who have done so much, in related ways, to teach us how to look afresh – and with new insight – at the evolution of early civilization on the planet.

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Now, the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, as those of you who read it regularly will realize, has occasionally ventured into the thicket of humor studies. I may have occasion to refer to several distinguished contributors, such as Montgomery Schuyler, in what follows, but I want, at the outset, to share with you

¹ This article is based on a lecture delivered 11 November 1996 at the University of Helsinki, at the invitation of Prof. Asko Parpola; it is here slightly modified better to suit the print medium and notes have been added. I am happy to have this second opportunity to felicitate Prof. Parpola, now on the occasion of his sixtieth anniversary.

the observations of the jovial Maurice Bloomfield, who, in 1916, published in our pages an article entitled, “The Laugh and Cry Motif”, wherein he applied the Indian method of “classification” to the question – prompted by the “Story of Vararuci” in Somadeva’s *Kathāsaritsāgara* – of “why the fish laughed”.² Bloomfield noted, as if anticipating today’s topic, that Indian literature provides us with examples of the

cry and laugh together, and each separately. Of laughter by itself, ... there is the laugh of joy, of irony, malice, trickery and triumph. Then there is the sardonic laugh, the enigmatic, fateful laugh ..., and finally there is the laugh of mystery, as in the case of the fish that laughed.³

Nicholas Penzer adds his own note of surprise to this summary:

Imagine anything being so funny or curious as to raise a laugh from the coldest-blooded of animals – a fish, and that a dead one! (Tawney & Penzer 1924–28, I: 47.)

While not wishing to suggest that the present inquiry takes its inspiration from a dead fish, I would nevertheless like to try your patience by offering my solution to the mystery of why it laughed.

I will begin, as is proper, in the German mode – with an etymology. But we will anticipate the many French contributions to our subject by taking as our *devise* the wise observation of the celebrated Dugas:

Maintes philosophes ont abordé le problème du rire ... Chacun d’eux prétend résoudre, à lui seul, cette épineuse question ... Nous n’avions plus qu’un moyen d’être original, c’était de renoncer à l’être ... (Dugas 1902: v.)

Few realize that the term “humor” has common semantic roots with the famous *rasa* of Sanskrit aesthetics. Latin *umor* and Vedic *rasa* in their primary meanings both signify the essential liquid element, the life-giving “sap” of plants. In both East and West this biological sense, which still survives in the “aqueous humor” of the eye, acquired a medical resonance. In the West, the four humors (bile, phlegm, black choler, blood), and in the East the six *rasas* (blood, sperm, etc.) figured in notions of health. Although the details differ, a “balance” among the “humors” was deemed essential to well being. This curious parallelism does not end here. “Humor” and *rasa* next find their way into the fine arts, via, it seems, the same route: drama. In the West, certain character types came to be seen in terms of the “unbalance” of the four essential “fluids”. A “humorous” character was, therefore, one in which a humor predominated – who was, ipso facto, not well – bilious, choleric. “Humorous” characters, of course, predominated in the “comedy”; Ben Jonson was a

² KSS 1.5 (16): *ahasad gatajīvo ’pi matsyo vipañimadhyagah*. The question is understandably asked in the story, too! (KSS 1.5.17.)

³ Quoted is Penzer’s summary of Bloomfield’s article (Tawney & Penzer 1924–28, I: 46–47, note).

particular fan of this “theory”. We need not expatiate on the subsequent evolution of the notion “humor” that eventuates in its modern senses: an unbalanced “disposition” becomes a “peculiar disposition”, which becomes a “fanciful, or whimsical disposition”; by synecdoche of cause for effect, “humor” becomes that fancy or that whimsy itself – anything “odd” – “that quality of action, speech, or writing that excites amusement” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.). In the East, the “medical” *rasas* reached drama via a culinary detour: six characteristic “tastes” of food (sweet, sour, etc.) came to be associated with the six bodily fluids; it is these “tastes” that analogically undergird Bharata’s eight dramatic “flavors” (love, pity, disgust, etc.) – which the drama combines into a unique and pleasing blend, just as does a good cook his ingredients.

The paths of humor and *rasa* do diverge at a certain point. On the Indian side, we see no conflation of “humor” with the “comic” sensibility. In its aesthetic meanings *rasa* remains a “humor” in the larger sense only. But, even here, the comic (*hāsya*) counts as one of the eight primary *rasas*, “humors”.

I do not engage in this preamble out of mere Indological chauvinism, or to propose any grand synthesis of Eastern and Western aesthetics. The question before us is not the genus humor, but its Indian species – *is* there an Indian species, or is “humor” simply a human universal, like breathing?

I have to admit that I wrote a very good undergraduate paper on this subject some forty years ago – and while I am not today reading extensively from that paper (you would certainly be able to detect the difference), I did derive from that effort a conviction that “humor” – especially the “humor” of lands far removed from our own – can only be approached through a “theory of humor”. Instances of humor are so idiosyncratic that without a “theory” *my* laughter may reflect little but the vanities of my society and my era. One of the few things the theorists seem to agree on is that “comedy” is – far more than its “serious” alternatives, tragedy, or whatever – essentially local and topical, specific to place and time. Without some kind of “theory”, I could never be sure, when I presume to find something Indian “funny”, that I and an Indian were laughing at the same thing, or, if at the same time, for the same cause. Indeed, the notion of “topicality” would suggest precisely the opposite – that we cannot laugh at the same thing, ever.

We must be wary, here, of confusing humor with the incongruous. There is much incongruity in the clash of cultures. A popular traveler’s guide to Japan informs me that the best place to get a cup of coffee in Tokyo is a Mr. Donut shop (*Japan: Travel Survival Kit*, p. 111). Does this reveal a Japanese comic sensibility? Lee Siegel’s recent work, *Laughing Matters* (1987), also devoted to the “comic tradition in India,” often seems to me flawed because it fails to distinguish the incongruous from the funny – witness its numerous Punjabi jokes that depend on exaggerated Indian accents, funny *to us*.

Now, here we are faced with a problem. The Indian tradition has given us no “theory” of humor, either psychological or aesthetic – comparable to those of Freud, of Bergson, or even of Aristotle (if Umberto Eco⁴ can be believed). Indeed, comparable even to its many speculations on “serious” states of mind, like “love”, or “heroism”, or serious forms of theater, like the *nāṭaka*. We are often told that Indians have no “tragedy”.⁵ Perhaps they have no “comedy” either.

As my further preamble to telling you what the Indians have found to be funny, and why, I will have to commit the impardonable sin of approaching the question in the light of available, and as far as my knowledge goes, all Western, authority. I am prepared to defy Edward Said: my approach is Orientalism at its worst! But if I am even to recognize the traces of a “theory” in the dispersed Indian writings, or hope, however desperately, that my amused smile reflects something beyond the prejudices of my own time, I have no other route to follow.

Theories of humor, Western theories, at least, are of two sorts – I might call them “structural” and “psychological”. The first tends to look at “the comic” in terms of its various societal manifestations, and is itself twofold, as it regards the humorous either from the point of view of the institutions that articulate the comedic function, or from that of the individual thus affected – the “social” individual. In the modern West, examples might be the night club and the late-night TV junkie.

Take for instance the entry in the *New Columbia Encyclopaedia*, s.v. “comedy” (p. 608): seven types are distinguished – essentially on the basis of their social target or repertoire:

satirical, or “old”	Aristophanes; excoriates individual vices, stupidity
romantic, or “new”	Menander; aims at resolution, celebrates love’s triumph
of manners:	Wilde, Elizabethans; targets class vices, pretensions
sentimental:	TV “Sit-Coms”: aims to reassure, hides unpleasant “real”
of ideas:	Shaw, Bunyan: “utopian,” castigates “this” worldly ways
musical:	(too many to mention)
black:	Beckett: mocks the “serious” shibboleths of (modern) society: death, god, self

Another instance might be the recent comparative study by the anthropologist M. L. Apte, entitled *Humor and Laughter*, which treats of “humor” under various categories borrowed from sociological analysis: language (puns, spoonerisms, malapropisms, etc.), family (the “joking” relationship), religion (the Holi festival), ritual

⁴ The “lost” second part of the *Poetics* has been the subject of much speculation, both serious and fanciful, including even a Sean Connery block-buster, *The Name of the Rose*, based on a novel by Eco.

⁵ For a recent discussion of this old chestnut, with citations of the relevant literature, see Gerow 1985, esp. pp. 410–412.

(the dice game in the royal consecration), etc.⁶ This is perhaps “low comedy”. Comedy as an art form hardly appears in Apte’s account.

An instance of the latter – focusing on the “socialization” of the individual – I might assume to have been Aristotle’s missing book on “Comedy”, which, had it been written, or remembered by his students, would have considered comedy’s roots, not in the psyche, but in the satirical pantomime; its formal or generic properties as a mode of social expression and definition; and its characteristic, and doubtless purgative, effect on the witness as citizen. If I am not allowed to display my post-modernism by *imagining* Aristotle in this role, Max Eastman might also serve, for his *Enjoyment of Laughter*⁷ situates the comic figure in one or another social role, or perhaps I should say, “anti-social” role. Comedy is for Eastman the contrary of the “earnest” business of life, evidencing what he calls a “shift of values”, whereby the “dis-agreeable” is deprived of its prefix. One of Eastman’s favorite stories concerns the very regal Queen Victoria, who,

when she wanted to sit down, whenever and wherever it was, ... simply sat down, trusting to God and the chivalry of the Court of St. James that there would be a chair between her and the floor by the time she arrived ...⁸

The comedian, at least mentally, asks us to consider what would happen if the chair weren’t there. It could also be taken as a “religious” view of comedy – at least in the sense that it seems to find society fundamentally disagreeable and to find in comedy a kind of “solution” (however evanescent) to the individual’s predicament.

The “psychological” theories are also of two sorts, as they focus either on the mechanism, essentially, of laughter – why we laugh, or on the objects at which we laugh – what is funny? Freud’s genial little treatise, entitled *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*⁹, serves as the classic example of the introspective approach. As those of you who have witnessed anyone slipping on a banana peel will attest, laughter represents a sudden and unexpected discharge of libidinous psychic energy that had been repressed by all those conventions of decorum, civility, consideration for one’s fellow men – in short, by civilization. Rather than revealing to us the vision of a perfected social environment, temporarily shorn of its inconveniences, in the manner of Max Eastman (or even Aristotle?), Freud’s “humor” reveals the

⁶ Apte 1985. The examples are taken from the Indian cultural context – puns, especially, find one of their most remarkable developments in the lucubrations of the classical Sanskrit poets (see below) – but Apte’s theory purports to be quite general.

⁷ Eastman 1936 – a somewhat more popular treatment of the subject than his “scientific” *The Sense of Humor* (1921).

⁸ Eastman 1936: 8. This view of comedy as upsetting the established order was doubtless congenial to the translator of Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*.

⁹ Freud 1916; now often more humbly translated as *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. The original (*Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*) dates from 1905.

animal lurking beneath the mask – but, of course, in a still socially sanctioned manner: better the joke than the aggression it expresses! Freud has little to say about the higher forms of the comic art, but a great deal to say about their basis in language and gesture. With his notion of the unexpected meaning lurking behind and in the surface meaning, and being liberated in the witticism, Freud's theory seems to privilege the pun, the innuendo, word-play in general, as the therapeutic device par excellence – a point to which we will return.

A theory that focuses on the objects of our laughter, or, rather, sees in objects the cause of our laughter, is well represented by Bergson's *Le Rire*.¹⁰ Again, it is in appendage to a larger theory that Bergson discourses on laughter. With a rigor that is ironical given what he has to say, Bergson, the proponent of the *élan vital*, finds the comic object to be just that – a living thing treated *as* an "object": that is to say, when we reduce any essentially vital process – an engaging person, a charming gesture, a lively speech – to the status of a mechanism, an automaton, when we deprive it of its vitality, its life-giving *élan* – treating it as though it were an object, we have found the source of the "comic." In linguistic terms, the "comic" is found in a pronominal confusion – a "him" taken for an "it." As those of you who have witnessed anyone slipping on a banana peel will attest, laughter represents just such a depersonalization of the person: the soul transformed into a mere body, subject to no law but that of gravity. Bergson's theory assigns such a basic status to gestures that even the comedy of language – not to speak of the higher art forms, satire, parody, and the rest – are seen as transmuted gestures. He who tells a joke is transforming himself and his object into a lifeless, or at least, a dysfunctional "thing". When M. Perrichon arrives —*enfin!* – at the train station with his family, eager to depart on their long-awaited vacation, he checks to see that the baggage is all there: "One, two, three, four, five, six", he counts the pieces, "and seven, my wife, eight, my daughter, nine, me."¹¹ This, for Bergson, is the essence of comedy. Although he does not dwell on the point of all this (as Freud might) it is clear that for Bergson, comedy serves no high moral purpose – it is a sanction, to put it bluntly, a punishment levelled on him and on those who would dare to be dysfunctional, less than vibrantly alive and original at all times. Laughter is a sign of our superiority to the lifeless.

Even though I have caricatured them in ways not always honorable, these theories may leave you with a fair sense that M. Dugas was on the right track all along. Do any (or all) of them give an *entrée* into the Indian risible? Do they agree on anything? Although they seem, taken together, to do little more than confirm the

¹⁰ The original articles on which it is based date from 1899; the definitive edition ("the twenty-third"), with a preface by the author, is dated 1924.

¹¹ *Le Voyage de M. Perrichon*, act I, scene 2 (comedy in four acts by E. Labiche and É. Martin, first produced in Paris, 1860).

general ambiguity of the subject, there are certain aspects, perhaps purely problematic, on which they do seem to agree. I list four such: (1) a link, difficult to define, with more original kinds of “play” – especially the “play” of children; (2) the secondary character of artistic forms of comedy, which is grasped more directly in jokes, gestures, the revels of satyrs, and the like; (3) a peculiar relation to the social environment – the factor of “topicality” I spoke of earlier, revealed especially in a peculiar symbiosis of colloquial language and humor; and (4) a systematic opposition to something more “serious”, and involving a separation from that “serious” – the more sudden and unexpected the separation, the better.

These theories are interesting also because they focus on different aspects of the comic problem; none, perhaps, captures it completely – and none (except the absent Aristotle) has much to say, apart from a general reductionism to simpler forms, about the high-culture forms of the comic art. These are, of course, exactly what one meets in the pre-modern Sanskrit or classical Indian tradition. There are no comic books, and no large collections of Punjabi jokes in our sources. We are obliged to approach the subject from a new angle: from the top down, or from the outside in – from the literary remains of “humor”, not all of which seem very funny. Nevertheless, these theories, in their variety and complementarity, point to certain characteristic deployments of the comic propensity and help us to characterize them as such.

I apprehend at least six loci, or topoi of the “comic” in the classical Indian textual remains – and we can at least be confident that, in at least one of them, we are not “inventing” the comic, inasmuch as something much resembling it (Skt. *hāsyā*, ‘the laughable’) figures as an explicit category in certain theories of dramatic criticism – on several levels, as we shall see. These topoi also bear a curiously problematic relation to the four theoretical perspectives we have outlined.

A) In the sociological mode explored by Apte – and many of these examples have been pointed out and discussed by him – a vast number of provocatively ambiguous “social” or “ritualized” manifestations of the comic are to be found – throughout the history of India: from the ode to the frogs in the earliest *Rigveda* – long thought to be a parody on brahmins’ endless chanting – to Vedic “riddles” in general and other verbal games; from the “dicing” and other “play” incorporated into certain Brahmanical rituals (consider the central position of the dice game in the *Mahābhārata* epic!), to the curious (but not at all unusual) “joking relationships” that characterize crucial and predictable nexus of the Hindu family systems, the “chaotic” play that today still marks certain great festivals (esp. “Holi”) as reenactments of the primeval chaos preceding creation, and finally the “play acting” that defines the holy man and the saint in (at least) certain Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions – a man whose holiness is measured by his willed and ecstatic “transport” into a fantasy world where Krishna “plays” eternally on his flute, and dallies with the cowherdresses. In some of its

most important ritual symbols, Hinduism seems to be a religion of “play” – not so much “opposed” to the playful as the serious ought to be, as incorporating this opposite as its central motif. The final chapters of *A Passage to India* well convey E. M. Forster’s utter bewilderment when brought face to face with this chaotic “center”.¹²

B) In the functional mode, which looks to types of art as they affect or transform men in society, we find the category of the “humorous” developed under the theatrical rubrics of “genre” and “character”. One of the “ten types” of drama – the *prahasana*, a satirical ‘farce’ – and certain stock dramatic characters – the *vidūṣaka* (a fallen brahmin, or ‘jester’?) and the *viṭa* (rogue, man about town) – are said to evoke the comic sentiment primarily. The “genre” and these “characters” function chiefly as parodies of certain prestigious social types or standard transactions. In one well-known *prahasana*, a brahmin’s “soul” (*ātman*), by a mischance of ritual, finds its way into a courtesan’s body (and vice-versa), with hilarious consequences.¹³ Laugh your heads off at *karma* and rebirth!

Kuiper has recently resuscitated the theory that Sanskrit drama has its origin in Vedic ritual, and that the *vidūṣaka* derives also from that source, where a similar character functioned as a scapegoat transporting away from the social realm the “sins” visited on us by Varuṇa (Kuiper 1977). This suggests an Eastmanian dimension to the Sanskrit drama that few had seen there before. Here, the “serious” drama incorporates an essential contrast within it, quite like “serious” Hinduism.

Montgomery Schuyler sees the *vidūṣaka* as a different kind of scapegoat, expressing himself in terms that would make even our “subaltern” theorists blush:

¹² Forster’s description of the “Birth of Krishna” (Part Three: “Temple”) impresses both with its sense of profound alterity –

“... they did not one thing which the non-Hindu would feel dramatically correct; this approaching triumph of India was a muddle (as we call it), a frustration of reason and form. ... Hundreds of electric lights had been lit in His honor (worked by an engine whose thumps destroyed the rhythm of the hymn). Yet His face could not be seen ...”

– and its flashes of sympathetic insight, more profound than the divagations of any orientalist:

“When the villagers broke cordon for a glimpse of the silver image, a most beautiful and radiant expression came into their faces, a beauty in which there was nothing personal, for it caused them all to resemble one another during the moment of its indwelling, and only when it was withdrawn did they revert to individual clods.”

Forster has, we might say, *seen* the *rasa*.

¹³ The *Bhagavadajjuk[īya]*, now generally attributed to Mahendravikrama, 7th-century king of Kāñcī, also the author of the other early “great” *prahasana*, the *Mattavilāsa* – see the *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature*, I: 422; edited several times – e.g., P. Achan (Cochin, 1925); P. Veturi (Madras, 1925); see also Krishnamachariyar 1937, § 589; translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen (– but never published? The translation was used in a stage production in Chicago in the late 70s.)

The vidūṣaka originated not in the court drama under the influence of the Brāhmaṇa caste, but in the earlier plays of the different tribes of India. These primitive efforts are presumed to have been for the most part farces, their characters were doubtless taken from the actual life of that time. It was in this way that the priest-ridden people had an opportunity to express their hatred of the Brāhmaṇas which, no doubt, they eagerly embraced. By making the 'vidūṣaka' a degraded and contemptible wretch, who was nevertheless a Brāhmaṇa, they could give a farcical element to their rude and formless plays and at the same time take revenge on the privileged class.¹⁴

Clearly, this interpretation accords with the view often expressed that the *prahasana* is a satire or parody of the higher orders, often Brahmins, by a kind of confusion of boundaries with the lower orders – harlots, thieves, perhaps even out-castes.

C) Turning to the “psychological” modes, we first consider “veiled language”. Here, the Indian psyche need cower behind no Freudian kathexis. One of the most obvious and aesthetically puzzling features of the Sanskrit learned tradition is its predilection for punning. *Śleṣa*, ‘adhesion’, as it is termed, is not the weak and apologetic pastime it has become in the West. Did you know that Charles Dickens got the idea for one of his novels from his bartender? Dickens, it seems, was ordering his usual martini, when the barman asked: “olive, or twist?”¹⁵ Punning in Sanskrit India is *au contraire* a high art form. Mere one- or two-word puns are so easy in polysemic Sanskrit that they are hardly noticed. The minimum pun extends to the verse foot, and often to the entire verse. In this śloka of Daṇḍin, two coherent “readings” emerge simultaneously: the first, an innocent bit of pastoral:

The moon yonder, risen next the eastern mountain, is lovely, ruddy orb'd; it steals the hearts of men with its soft rays;

but the second, a quite topical bit of conservative political rhetoric:

That handsome king yonder, beloved of his courtiers, has become prosperous – he extracts wealth from his subjects with “low” taxes.¹⁶

In the well-known *Rāghavapāṇḍavīya*, a simultaneous narration of both great Indian epics, we have an example of a double-entendre extending to an entire work!¹⁷ Though such puns are an intellectual delight, they appear also to be understood by the Indian theorists as the most perfect kind of language possible – freed, as it were, of its univocal dependence on objects and capable of creating out of it-

¹⁴ Schuyler 1899: 338; quoted also by G. K. Bhat 1959: 7.

¹⁵ A “prize-winning” pun, believe it or not, according to National Public Radio.

¹⁶ *asāv udayam ārūḍhaḥ kāntimān raktamaṇḍalāḥ |
rājā harati lokasya hṛdayaṃ mṛdubhiḥ karaiḥ* (Kāvyaḍarśa 2.310).

¹⁷ Attributed to Kavirāja, probably 12th century: see Krishnamachariyar 1937, § 86 (other works of similar sort are discussed in §§ 87–96).

self surrogate worlds: a Freudian Veda, you might say, continuously renewed. The “power” (*śakti*) of language is a leitmotif of Indian learned culture. Thanks to Roland Barthes, we post-moderns now also understand that he who frees language from its referent¹⁸ masters the cosmos! But the Indians did it with puns, not with pronouns.

D) Our next locus is found in the area of dramatic aesthetics itself, where a comic “emotion” is said to inform those genres and characters that are “funny”. The “risible” counts, as we noted, as one of eight *rasas*, “humors” – emotional potencies common to mankind and stable enough to dominate a “character” or a “play”.

Abhinavagupta, the preeminent theorist, alludes briefly to the curious linkage – made in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself – between the “amorous” *rasa* (*śṛṅgāra*) and the “comic”, which is said to derive from the former.¹⁹ Now, one dramatic function of the “comic” is to lighten and complement the serious stuff of love – thus, perhaps its “secondary” character. The *vidūṣaka* – as the royal protagonist’s “minister of fun and games”, his *narmasaciva* – illustrates the point. But Abhinava finds also a deeper meaning. The “comic” is dependent on the “amorous”, as well, in the sense that the appearance of love, the unsuitable pretense of love, is funny. The “comic” is found in counterfeiting something “serious”. It is thus as implicitly “universal” as is the “serious” business of love – being its obverse.²⁰ Furthermore, some theorists – Bhoja and the theologians of the bhakti cults – for whom “love” (of god, perhaps) was the all consuming emotion of “real” life – develop this ubiquity of love into the notion that “love” is not a *rasa*, but *rasa* itself.²¹ Abhinava’s offhand remark suggests yet another possibility: that the “comic”, too, is universal *because* of its inherent “unreality” – *māyā*, after all, is as universal as *brahman*. The Bergsonian echo is unmistakable.

E) Our fifth locus of the Indian “risible” is the laugh itself, as symbol. But our attention is not drawn to the stereotyped antics of the *vidūṣaka* – even though his raillery and deformities are central to his comedic function. Rather it is to tokens of the “risible” that are located beyond language, beyond society itself – “in the center of being” – that serve as symbols of “the way things are”. Two cases come at once

¹⁸ The elegant naïveté of *L'Empire des signes* (Barthes 1970) introduces us to a Japan entirely free of “signification”.

¹⁹ NŚ 6.39 (G.O.S. ed.).

²⁰ *tena karuṇādyābhāseṣv api hāsyatvam sarveṣu mantavyam |
anaucityapravṛttikṛtam eva hi hāsyavibhāvatvam
(Bhāratī, ad loc. [p. 296, G.O.S. ed.]*

²¹ Cf. Raghavan 1963. The theology of *rasa* is typically expressed in the works of the Bengali Vaiṣṇavas Rūpa and Jīva Gosvāmin, esp. *Bhaktīrasāmṛtasindhu* and *Ujvalanīlamanī*; cf. Haberman 1988: 197–198.

to mind – Śiva's "white laughter"²² and the Buddha's smile – which has, in some forms of Buddhism, intensified also to laughter – the "laughing Buddha": Maitreya's odd Chinese destiny. Here we may have found an "Oriental" sense of the risible that is "too serious" for our Western theories. Recall that many Indian cosmologies – notably the Śaivite ones – characterize the creative act as a kind of "play" – a *līlā* of the god. In part, this reflects a natural human reticence to attribute motives to so grand an actor, but, "in all seriousness", it betrays a positive side as well. The very notion that the god might have a "motive", or have "serious work yet to do" – even if it is only the creation – implies the god's imperfection and boundedness.²³ Śiva's laugh is thus a token of his absolute sovereignty. "Play" and "work" are inverted – and banana peels abound!

Despite appearances, Samuel Beckett's absurdist "black" laughter and Śiva's "white" have very little in common. Śiva's is not encoded in language at all – but is an aspect of his essential being: creation and destruction of worlds. Beckett, perhaps, makes the mistake of seeing these acts as different, still somehow desperately valuing the "normal" world. Śiva's "white" laugh puts negativity and distance back *into* the cosmos – yet another register of Hinduism's "inclusiveness" – its will to incorporate the "other": compare the often-cited cases of ascetic renunciation within the dharmic hierarchy, the "untouchable" within the social system, the ecstasies of devotion within austere Vedānta. And in this case, as the Vedic myth of the "churning" of the worlds also proclaims: the demons *within* creation, alongside the gods.²⁴ Evil, or what the untutored human thinks is evil, not only cannot be separated from the fabric of existence, but is the loom on which it is woven. It takes a god to understand this.

I cannot speak for Śiva, but I will refer you to the strange case of the brahmin boy who laughed, as he was about to be sacrificed to a celestial demon. His ritual murder had been connived in by his parents, who hoped to put an end to their poverty; by his king, who aspired to the favor of the deity; and by the deity, who salivated for flesh. "What was the meaning of that child's laugh?" asks the Vetāla of wise Trivikramasena, who responds:

²² *aṭṭahāsa*, a term first attested in Meghadūta 58.

²³ "... *līlā* is a theological or philosophical concept that seeks to express the free, spontaneous, sometimes unpredictable and incomprehensible nature of the divine and to set divine activity apart from actions that are motivated by needs and pragmatic desires. Divine activity, according to the idea of *līlā*, is outside the realm of karmic cause and effect. This is a central Hindu idea and in many ways suggests something distinctive about the Hindu tradition." (Kinsley 1996: 355.)

²⁴ Without their help, the churning (viz., creation) itself is impossible: Viṣṇupurāṇa 9.77 ff. (H. H. Wilson ed.).

... in the case of that child, all those were present [who should have been his protectors] and all behaved in exactly the opposite manner to what might have been expected of them ... The child said to itself: "To think that these should be thus deluded, being led so much astray for the sake of the body, which is perishable, loathsome within, and full of pain and disease! Why should they have such a strange longing for the continuance of the body, in a world in which Brahmā ... and the other gods, must certainly perish." Accordingly, the Brāhman boy laughed out of joy and wonder ... at beholding the marvellous strangeness of their delusion.²⁵

The Buddha's smile, in a much more genteel way, of course, makes much the same point – but from the point of view of one who has understood the riddle of existence, rather than one who involves us "playfully" in it. The smile that is the outward sign of enlightenment betokens not just the pleasure that must accompany the solution to a difficult problem, but to that same distancing from all those self-important and ultimately ephemeral activities that "serious" men seem determined to engage in. If I understand the brahmin boy correctly, then, Indians are the most jovial people in the world – for they have encoded in their most profound symbolism the view that the "comic" derives from sources far more "serious" than the "serious" itself – which, along with our overblown notion of ourselves, leads only to rebirth after rebirth, delusion after delusion. And that, perhaps, is why the fish, too, laughed.

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²⁵ *Kathāsaritsāgara* 94.127 ff.; tr. Tawney & Penzer 1924–28, VII: 96.

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