

LAUGHTER IN NIETZSCHE'S THOUGHT: A PHILOSOPHICAL TRAGICOMEDY

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To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh *out of the whole truth*—to do that even the best so far lacked sufficient sense for the truth, and the most gifted had too little genius for that. Even laughter may yet have a future.¹

Laughter is an important image in Nietzsche's writings; it is even expressed as the consummate goal to which he is calling his readers. In this essay, I would like to address three questions: 1) What is the meaning of laughter in Nietzsche's thought? 2) How does that meaning help us understand the meaning of laughter in general? 3) What can the issue of laughter tell us about Nietzsche's style? Questions 1 and 3 have been treated before.² I only want to add to the discussion and focus it in a particular way. Regarding question 2, I do not intend to offer a "theory" of laughter (the typical post-Wittgensteinian cop-out). I only want to suggest ways in which Nietzsche's thought can help illuminate the meaning of laughter in some important ways.

Laughter, for Nietzsche, is far from an incidental matter; it is a fundamental issue in his view of the world. I want to address the meaning of laughter by linking it to another central issue in Nietzsche's thought, namely the tragic. When we consider the drama of Zarathustra, we witness a surprising mixture of images and attitudes: a confrontation with the terror of existence and many terrible thoughts, fierce attacks on traditional beliefs, playful parodies and a call for joy and laughter in response to the terror of life. Indeed, this mixture is found in all of Nietzsche's writings. One clue to the sense of such a combination of attitudes is to be found in the Greek experience of tragedy and comedy. Nietzsche's analysis of Greek tragedy and its importance for his thought are well known. His remarks on Greek comedy are not as extensive. But a consideration of the relationship between comedy and tragedy in Greek culture will show that Nietzsche's call for laughter is related to the tragic in a comparable way.

The key to this relationship is as follows: Both the tragic and the comic are situations which show a negation of "being." For the Greeks, tragedy and comedy expressed a two-sided affirmative response to negation, limits and finitude. Nietzsche's philosophy of becoming inherits this mixture, and calls for laughter as an expression of, and an affirmative response to, the negation of "being." After this analysis has been worked out, I will then suggest ways in which the "negation" thesis can apply to an interpretation of laughter in general.

Finally, I will offer some remarks on how the issue of laughter relates to Nietzsche's style.

I. Nietzschean Laughter in Relation to Tragedy and Comedy

The tragic and the comic are two fundamental existential conditions. The tragic is a situation in which the inevitable finitude of existence, the destruction of life and meaning, is displayed. The human response to the tragic might involve terror, dread, a solemn awe, or tears. The comic is a situation in which the humorous side of existence is displayed, with a response of delight, joy and laughter. Normally we think that these two conditions are opposites, that the *tragic* is 1) a negative situation, involving 2) a negative state of mind, and that the *comic* is 3) a positive situation, involving 4) a positive state of mind. In my view, points 1 and 4 are surely correct, but points 2 and 3 are misleading. The tragic situation need not involve a negative state of mind, and so it might show a link with the comic state of mind. The comic also involves a kind of negation, and so it might show a link with the tragic situation. There is an ambiguity in the tragic-comic distinction which undermines a strict opposition between the terms, and which helps explain the importance of laughter in the tragic philosophy of Nietzsche.

I want to argue that both the tragic and the comic involve negation, and the peculiarly human phenomena of crying and laughing both arise from human awareness of negation and limits. If, in this way, a certain relationship between the tragic and the comic can be established, then we may better understand why a clear boundary line between the two is often difficult to draw.

I also want to argue that the intersection of the tragic and the comic not only illuminates the meaning of laughter in Nietzsche, but it might also represent the single most important element in Nietzsche's overall thought. The tragic-comic relationship is clearly significant in Nietzsche's writings, but it seems to have been avoided or gone unnoticed in many interpretations.

Nietzsche's philosophy presents two basic challenges: 1) An existential confrontation with the terror of existence (the priority of becoming and a continual negation of "being"). 2) An intellectual confrontation with the limits of knowledge (perspectives and appearances as opposed to an abiding "truth"). But in response to this tragic condition, Nietzsche recommends a special kind of joy and laughter as the only alternative to a pessimistic denial of existence, or to an optimistic fantasy that negation and limits can somehow be resolved. In Nietzsche's eyes, the tragic and the comic are two sides of the same coin, two ways in which negation can be acknowledged and affirmed. The world as a tragedy and the world as a comedy are two images that are predominant in Nietzsche's writings. Neither one is meant to be an opposite of the other. In fact, comedy and laughter can emerge as a particular positive response to the tragic, without, however, denying the negativity of the tragic. In other words, comedy, for Nietzsche, becomes a special way in which a tragic situation need not involve a negative

state of mind. In order to understand this point, we must turn to an historical precedent, namely the Greek experience of tragedy and comedy, which, seen in the light of Nietzsche's interpretation of early Greek culture, shows itself to be something other than polarized.

One reason why Greek tragedy and comedy were not opposites is that both can be traced to a common religious complex, the Dionysian. Nietzsche, of course, is noted for his analysis of Attic tragedy in terms of the link with Dionysian religion. I will only mention the essential features of that analysis here, and then develop a related analysis of comedy.

The worship of Dionysus involved an ecstatic self-transcendence, where the boundaries of form were shattered and immersion in the natural flow of destruction was given a sacred meaning. The Dionysian *mythos* of a god suffering dismemberment, death and rebirth was cultivated in rituals so that sheer negativity could be transformed into a cultural meaning and worshippers could experience a sense of harmony and redemption through self-negation. Although nature destroys the individual, the whole of nature was seen to be indestructible and sacred. Thus, Dionysian self-transcendence (as opposed to self-containment) granted religious integration. According to Nietzsche, the fatalistic themes of Attic tragedy, where the hero is doomed to inevitable destruction, expressed a Dionysian insight. However, the Apollonian element of Greek tragedy added beauty and form to express those themes with rich characterizations and structure. Apollonian art forms delighted the viewer, but at the same time they portrayed a dark Dionysian theme. In tragedy, even though the ultimate truth is Dionysian destruction, Apollonian "appearances" offered individuation and beauty so that man could find temporary meaning in the midst of a terrible truth.

According to Nietzsche, the following world view could be inferred from Greek tragedy: individuation and form allow life to be meaningful and beautiful; but within individuation is a formless flux which persists as a continual destruction of form. The important point is that Greek tragedy was not a purely negative phenomenon. Tragic poetry displayed two levels of affirmation: 1) the Apollonian affirmation of beauty and noble forms; and 2) the Dionysian affirmation of dissolution as *justified* destruction. The destruction of a noble hero is also the advent of a sacred power. By emphasizing the religious dimension of tragedy, Nietzsche was able to illuminate those positive aspects that distinguished the Greek experience of tragedy from something like pessimism. Tragedy was more likely to evoke joy than resignation among the Greeks (to the consternation of someone like Schopenhauer).³

The positive aspects of Greek tragedy can be further understood if we consider the Dionysian link between tragedy and comedy. Dionysian rites generally took two basic forms: 1) joyful erotic feasts in which the conventional self was lost in a surge of unrestrained sexual passion; and 2) somber rites in which frenzied followers of the god would re-enact his *mythos* by dismembering and devouring animal victims. Both rites were said to bring peace and blissful com-

munion with the god. It is important to emphasize this positive element and the fact that death and dismemberment represented only one side of Dionysus. As a nature deity, he was also a god of life; he bestowed erotic passion which promotes regeneration. One can notice, however, that eroticism displays an analogous "dismemberment" of conventional behavior and everyday order in the face of passion. In any case, joy and pleasure were just as much a part of the Dionysian complex as natural destruction and death. Dionysian religion, therefore, offered various subversions of form and conventional order; some were somber and fatal, others playful and hedonistic.

In this regard, the meaning of comedy can be illuminated if we consider an important Greek counterpart to the somber, violent rites, namely the *komos*, which was also associated with Dionysian worship. The *komos* was a swarming band of drunken men who engaged in dancing, laughter, witty and mocking language, and who generally threw off all social conventions and inhibitions.⁴ The *komos* permitted a more accessible and less severe form of Dionysian self-transcendence, a more frolicsome form of "ecstasy," in which social conventions were subjected to Dionysian "dismemberment." The etymological connection with comedy can be found in the Greek word *komodia*, "song of the *komos*." A more substantial connection should then be apparent. The religious phenomenon of disinhibiting revelry, and the mocking attacks against authority figures that were socially permitted during such celebrations, can easily be seen as a forerunner of comic drama.⁵

The two-dimensional character of Dionysian religion shows a common background for the dramatic forms of tragedy and comedy. On the one hand, the somber ecstasy of the violent rites promoted participation in the actual destruction of life, and hence reflected the fatal process of nature in which individual life and form are subjected to an annihilating force. Here we recognize the conditions of tragedy. On the other hand, the frolicsome ecstasy of the erotic feasts and the *komos* promoted a disinhibiting revelry which offered a relatively harmless destruction of social and cultural roles by means of mockery and the temporary subversion of convention and authority. Here we recognize the conditions of comedy. Both types can be said to display in different ways a common Dionysian insight: form (whether natural or cultural) is not substantial, and a sacred meaning can be found in the innihilating power of Dionysian ecstasy, which shatters a fixation on form.

We notice behind tragedy and comedy, therefore, two forms of Dionysian negation, one more severe, the other more playful and harmless. The element of negation gives a clue concerning the relation between tragedy and comedy, pathos and humor. Comedic negation is more a social matter; it can annihilate a pose or a convention (e.g., mockery, satire); it is temporary and relatively harmless; it evokes laughter. Tragic negation is a more vital and fatal matter, the annihilation of life or a complete cultural downfall. In the Greek context, both forms of negation were related and expressive of a religious insight: con-

vention and individual life are not what they seem to be; if one acknowledges the disruptive negation of culture and life, one can receive the blessings of humor and pathos, both of which teach about the necessary limits of form.

Greek tragedy and comedy, therefore, show a certain relationship and a positive religious background. In fact, the Dionysian relationship suggests that the "positive" features of comedy might not be unrelated to the intentions of tragedy. Humor might be a special way in which pathos can lead to Dionysian joy. Indeed, the early history of Greek drama lends credence to this suggestion. Although tragedy and comedy did become two separate art forms in Greek theater, a certain comedic element was associated with tragedy in the form of the satyr play. Early on, tragic performances took the form of a tetralogy, a series of three works followed by a satyr play, in which traditional legends or the heroes and gods from the tragedy were mocked or parodied (cf. "satire"). The satyr was a Dionysian figure, half-man half-beast, given to obscenity and burlesque, thereby expressing the erotic, playful side of Dionysian worship. In the satyr play, aside from a kind of comic relief, we should recognize the sacred meaning of such a comedic epilogue. Joy, eroticism and renewal were just as much a part of Dionysian worship as fatal destruction. Embracing the god was meant to produce an affirmative response in the midst of negation. The satyr could be seen as an effective way of expressing the rebirth of the god, by transforming the solemn destruction of the hero into the joyous recognition of a sacred force underlying that destruction. Such a process might be called a double negative leading to a positive, i.e., a satirical negation of the solemnity of tragic negation. Humor is therefore one way of transforming and disarming terror. Nietzsche noticed this and expressed the relationship between tragedy and comedy in the following way:

Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity. The satyr chorus of the dithyramb is the saving deed of Greek art; faced with the intermediary world of these Dionysian companions, the feelings described here exhausted themselves.⁶

Because the satyr plays were later dissociated from tragic trilogies, any relation between tragedy and comedy and any positive elements of tragedy could easily fade from view. But even Aristotle surmised that the solemn form of tragedy was a progression from an earlier (and to him, ludicrous) satyric form.⁷ In any event, the Dionysian link between tragedy and comedy could be the telling clue to Plato's suggestion that "the same man might be capable of writing both comedy and tragedy—that the tragic poet might be a comedian as well."⁸ In my view, Nietzsche wanted to be that "same man."

The key to Nietzsche's interest in tragedy and comedy is an overlapping element in which forms of being are subjected to negation. The response to negation would involve a recognition of a limit to forms of being. The tragic-comic

recognition of limits was a distinctive feature of Greek religion. Consider, for example, the curious phenomenon of divine laughter.⁹ Especially in Homer, we find that the gods laugh at humans and at themselves, surely a remarkable thing compared to the "seriousness" of the major world religions. But divine laughter expressed the peculiar Greek sense of limits, and was thereby related to the tragic. Humans, though kin to the gods, were distinguished from the gods by their mortality and the degree of their powerlessness. Gods, too, had limitations on their power. Whenever gods or humans tried to overstep their power, they appeared comical and were subjected to laughter. But only humans were mortal, and the death of a hero would prompt even a god to weep. What Nietzsche appreciated in *Dionysian* religion was a kind of synthesis of these two senses of limit, and also the kind of joy in the midst of negative limits that tragedy and comedy were able to evoke.

If tragedy and comedy can each be called an affirmative response to negative limits, it would not be surprising that a boundary line between them is often hard to draw. One possible distinction is that between harmful negation (of life and meaning) and harmless negation (of conventional order and social poses), evoking, respectively, pathos and laughter. But it is also possible for humans to laugh when suffering terrible and tragic situations. Surely this is not a common thing, but it happens, and such laughter would be quite different from the kind in jokes, satire, etc. But tragic laughter would at least be analogous to comic laughter in the sense that a laugh is an affirmative response to a limit. This special kind of laughter was one of Nietzsche's preoccupations. Such, I think, is the meaning of the shepherd scene in *Zarathustra*. The shepherd appears after the tragic doctrine of eternal recurrence is described. He is writhing in pain and nausea because a black snake has lodged inside his throat. But then he bites off the head of the snake.

No longer shepherd, no longer human—one changed, radiant, *laughing!* Never yet on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter; and now a thirst gnaws at me, a longing that never grows still. My longing for this laughter gnaws at me.¹⁰

I would say that, for Nietzsche, laughter is, among other things, a most positive form of tragic affirmation, an affirmative appropriation of the negative limits of "being." Here he saw himself inheriting the cheerful fatalism of the Greeks:

... the short tragedy always gave way again and returned into the eternal comedy of existence; and "the waves of uncountable laughter"—to cite Aeschylus—must in the end overwhelm even the greatest of these tragedians.¹¹

II. The Meaning of Laughter

Can the previous discussion add anything to an analysis of the meaning of laughter in general? I think so. Let me mention three classic types of theories concerning humor and laughter:¹² 1) superiority theories (e.g., tearing down by

mockery and satire; cf. Hobbes); 2) incongruity theories (e.g., absurdity, and the contradiction of an expected order, regularity or normality; cf. Kant); 3) relief theories (e.g., relief from social restraints, especially in sexual humor; cf. Freud). Each of these theories, alone, would not be sufficient, and one can think of examples in which the three types overlap. I do not claim to offer an exhaustive counter-theory to these types, but I would say that the issue of negation and limits can help illuminate 1) a common element in many forms of laughter, and 2) ways in which these forms often overlap.

Laughter reflects the enjoyment of something. I would suggest that laughter enjoys various situations in which a fixed form has been negated and shown its limits. Mockery and satire negate a certain pose; incongruities negate a certain expected order; and relief negates a certain social restraint. Moreover, these conditions often overlap: mockery and satire need not only evoke superiority feelings, they may simply follow from enjoying the incongruity of the ruined pose, and offer a kind of relief from the control of the pose; and absurdity, for example, may be a mockery of, and a relief from, logic. We notice here various overlapping forms of harmless negation, which show the limits of a certain construct.

In addition, there is something not quite covered in the above three theories, namely laughing at oneself, which could be said to collect and internalize satire, incongruity and relief, i.e., to enjoy one's own negation and limits in a social context. This, I think, best illuminates the meaning of a sense of humor about oneself, in contrast to a kind of "seriousness." People who are overly serious about roles, beliefs or causes seem fixated. The ability to laugh at oneself shows a freedom from fixation and affirms a willingness to sacrifice form-ality; it overcomes what Nietzsche called the spirit of gravity and is able to enjoy a surrender of structure; it acknowledges a kind of uncertainty about oneself and one's beliefs in a special way.

The negation thesis can also speak to forms of laughter in tragic or harmful situations, which are not apparently considered by other theories. Consider someone who can laugh at his own terrible downfall. Here, limits, mockery, incongruity and relief might find an unusual form and an unusual form of laughter.

To sum up this section, I am not sure "why" we laugh, but *when* we laugh, that response reveals something special in our nature: the peculiarly human ability to appropriate negation and limits in a positive way. In the laugh, something deep and instinctive in human nature acknowledges and affirms the dismantling of structure and "being."

It is no wonder, then, that Nietzsche, the advocate of becoming, would find laughter so important: "Laughing at something is the first sign of a higher psychic life."¹³ The obvious point would be laughter's dissolving effect on fixation. We began this essay with a quote which connected laughter with a "sufficient sense for the truth." We can say now that the "truth" revealed in a laugh is the shattering of a fixed truth. Nietzsche's call for laughter is related to his

attack on truth and foundations in western thought. The “seriousness” of western philosophy and religion reveals its struggle for, and fixation on, truth and certainty in a world of becoming. Truth and salvation have been no laughing matter; the western tradition displays something like the scolding of children, by insisting that there be “something at which it is absolutely forbidden henceforth to laugh.”¹⁴ Nietzschean laughter is a call to abandon truth and certainty and to embrace the limits of knowledge and life. Nietzsche calls on us to abandon our certainties in a good-natured way. Laughter would apply here as in other situations where the negation of form is enjoyed. Moreover, when it comes to confronting instances of philosophical seriousness, humor would be an appropriate form of “criticism.” That brings us to Nietzsche’s style.

III. Laughter and Nietzsche’s Style

Nietzsche is funny. There are times when I laugh out loud at some of the things he says. I cannot say the same for other great philosophers. (Forgive me if I have missed someone, but for me, they all weigh a ton, even Kierkegaard.) Of course, Nietzsche’s wit and biting style are obvious. And we all know that he is one philosopher for whom style and substance go together. His aphoristic style is related to his critique of traditional philosophical methods. His narrative style in *Zarathustra* is related to his existential assumptions. In view of the arguments in this essay, we can further say that Nietzsche’s humorous style is also related to his critique of traditional philosophical attitudes. In other words, Nietzsche’s humor is not accidental or incidental to his message.

But the interesting question is: When is Nietzsche being humorous? As I said, his wit is obvious. But I would like to suggest that some of the more outrageous and seemingly dangerous things Nietzsche says, which we lovers of Nietzsche either avoid or reject or feel bound to “decode,” might themselves be forms of humor. Moreover, some of the things we lovers of Nietzsche are very serious about might themselves be parodied at times in his writings.

When, and to what extent, is Nietzsche offering parodies, in which certain mistakes are meant to receive a “laughter which makes the required corrections”?¹⁵ A precise answer to such a question is impossible. One can, however, say the following: Nietzsche makes enough references to laughter and parody to warrant the suggestion that readers should often keep the humor option in mind when faced with certain Nietzschean “excesses” and even “profundities.” Indeed, I am not the first to say this; I only want to rehearse the point and keep it alive. Perhaps the way I have shaped the issue of laughter in this essay will help in that regard. With this in mind, let me offer a few remarks in the context of some textual references:

... we are the first age that has truly studied “costumes”—I mean those of moralities, articles of faith, tastes in the arts, and religions—prepared like no previous age for a carnival in the grand style, for the laughter and high spirits of the most spiritual revelry, for the transcendental heights of the highest nonsense and Aristophanean derision of the world.

Perhaps this is where we shall still discover the realm of our *invention*, that realm in which we, too, can still be original, say, as parodists of world history and God's buffoons—perhaps, even if nothing else today has any future, our *laughter* may yet have a future.¹⁶

In despite of that philosopher who, being a real Englishman, tried to bring laughter into ill repute among all thinking men—“laughing is a bad infirmity of human nature, which every thinking mind will strive to overcome” (Hobbes)—I should actually risk an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter—all the way up to those capable of *golden* laughter.¹⁷

When Nietzsche talks about laughter, how much of that is a warning and a clue about certain aspects of his writings? Again, a precise answer to this question cannot be given. But this much is true: Nietzsche wants us to laugh, and it is certainly possible that much of the bombast in his writings is playful and humorous. Consider Nietzsche's blistering attacks on Christianity and morality. He certainly has a serious agenda here. But we philosophers emphasize the agenda and engage his “argument.” When it comes to some of his excessive, explosive remarks, we either decode them, nervously avoid them, or simply apologize for an over-heated hero. In any case, for us, the philosophical agenda takes priority, and the fearsome persona that leaps out of the pages is subordinated to that agenda. But perhaps that persona is *part* of Nietzsche's “argument.”

Often students have complained about a bristling passage, and I have said: “Yes, I agree. I don't like it either. But let's try to put it in context.” Then I excavate, and conclude that the point is somewhere else, that he did not *have* to say what he said in the passage. But the better student would ask: “Why *did* he say it, then?” In researching this essay, I have become convinced that one way we can answer that question, and support our conviction that Nietzsche is “safe,” is the humor option.

Yes, there is an outrageous bashing of Christianity and morality in Nietzsche's writings. But there are also many references which show support for, and appreciation of, the religious and moral views he attacks. Perhaps some of his excesses are a kind of black comedy, meant to shock in a playful way. Moreover, if comedy and laughter represent a kind of harmless negation, then humor would be one way in which Nietzsche could criticize without “refuting,” something his “perspectivism” would not permit him to do in any case. In this way, a humorous style would be very much a part of Nietzsche's philosophical agenda, and an important reminder concerning the intent of his critiques.

It is sometimes said that Nietzsche deliberately shocks his readers in order to scare off the timid. Strong minds will endure the shock and be able to dig beneath the surface and unearth the precious gems of Nietzsche's thought. Fine, but what is meant by “strength” here? The idea has always made me nervous. Are Nietzschean “shocks” a kind of philosophical boot camp for fierce minds, or a test for a sense of humor about serious things? Perhaps true strength of mind would have to entail a sense of humor.

Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!¹⁸

Is Nietzsche's demonic assault against Christianity, for example, entirely serious?

Do you want to know a new name for me? The language of the church *has* one—I am . . . the *Antichrist*. Let us not forget how to laugh!¹⁹

Nietzsche's attacks could easily involve the harmless negation of humor, given his claim that:

. . . attack is in my case a proof of good will, sometimes even of gratitude. I honor, I distinguish by associating my name with that of a cause or a person: pro or con—that makes no difference to me at this point. When I wage war against Christianity I am entitled to this because I have never experienced misfortunes and frustrations from that quarter—the most serious Christians have always been well disposed toward me.²⁰

Was Zarathustra's "ape," who on the surface sounded very much like Nietzsche's fearsome persona, repudiated because, among other things, he was overly serious?²¹ Is Zarathustra's ape a parody of that fearsome persona? Nietzsche even hints that *Zarathustra* itself is a parody.²² It is surely a parody of religion and prophetic revelation. But there are also elements of self-parody, which would indicate a warning against taking Zarathustra's message too seriously and doing wrong with Zarathustra's thoughts (cf. the ape), or erecting a new edifice to replace the old.

. . . I *want* no "believers"; I think I am too malicious to believe in myself; I never speak to masses.—I have a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced *holy*: you will guess why I publish this book *before*; it shall prevent people from doing mischief with me.

I do not want to be a holy man; sooner even a buffoon.—Perhaps I am a buffoon.—Yet in spite of that—or rather *not* in spite of it, because so far nobody has been more mendacious than holy men—the truth speaks out of me.—But my truth is *terrible*.²³

Once again, we hear of the connection between humor and a terrible truth. I have tried to show how this tragic-comic connection might guide us in a reading of Nietzsche, from the standpoint of both style and substance. There is laughter in both the medium and the message.

You higher men, . . . *learn* to laugh away over yourselves! Lift up your hearts, you good dancer, high, higher! And do not forget good laughter. This crown of him who laughs, this rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter I have pronounced holy; you higher men, *learn* to laugh!²⁴

Of course, Nietzsche was a serious thinker who dealt with serious issues. But the *way* in which Nietzsche expressed these issues distinguishes him from other philosophers; and that way cannot be separated from the substance of his thought. Humor should be seen as a Nietzschean retrieval of a Dionysian insight about tragic limits in existence.

. . . I estimate the value of men, of races, according to the necessity by which they cannot conceive the god apart from the satyr.²⁵

Laughter would then be *part* of wisdom; it would not be contrary to serious issues, but rather a significant overture or finale to these issues as Nietzsche saw them.

. . . the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence that will often appear *inhuman*—for example, when it confronts all earthly seriousness so far, all solemnity in gesture, word, tone, eye, morality, and task so far, as if it were their most incarnate and involuntary parody—and in spite of all this, it is perhaps only with him that *great seriousness* really begins, that the real question mark is posed for the first time, that the destiny of the soul changes, the hand moves forward, the tragedy *begins*.²⁶

. . . For cheerfulness—or in my own language *gay science*—is a reward: the reward of a long, brave, industrious, and subterranean seriousness, of which, to be sure, not everyone is capable. But on the day we can say with all our hearts, “Onwards! our old morality too is part of *the comedy!*” we shall have discovered a new complication and possibility for the Dionysian drama of “The Destiny of the Soul”—and one can wager that the grand old eternal comic poet of our existence will be quick to make use of it!²⁷

And we should call every truth false which was not accompanied by at least one laugh.²⁸

I once had a student in a Nietzsche seminar who had read a lot of Nietzsche before the course. At the end of the term, he came to me and said that the course was a thrilling revelation of the philosophical importance of Nietzsche's thought (oh, good!), but nowhere near as enjoyable as his first reading. I had taught him how to make sense out of Nietzsche's writings, but I had taken some of the fun out of it, for him. My ambivalence at that remark was really the inspiration for this essay. As philosophers and teachers of Nietzsche, are we not trapped in a kind of tragicomedy? We surely must make sense of Nietzsche's writings and fit him into a philosophical agenda. He was a great thinker, and we in Europe and America have done a great service in demonstrating that fact and in weeding out the many misinterpretations, both silly and terrible. We have had to decode, modify, explicate, excavate, reconstruct, deconstruct, analyze, synthesize, push, pull and drag out the “argument,” the sense of it all. *We* have done this. But why didn't *Nietzsche* do what we do? Why didn't he save us some of the trouble? Is this *our* problem, not his? Somehow it has been determined that a “philosopher” cannot write in a manner such as Nietzsche's. He was electric, elusive and excessive; we must be cool, controlled and discursive.

We have made Nietzsche respectable and placed him within the professional philosophical landscape. We have deciphered his epistemology, his aesthetics, his ethics, his politics, his psychology and, lo and behold, his metaphysics. We have discovered Nietzsche the pragmatist, the existentialist, the linguistic analyst, the post-Kantian, the pre-Heideggerian. *We* have done this, and, I hasten to add, well we should. It is essential that Nietzsche's philosophical importance and relevance be disclosed. That could easily not occur if Nietzsche's manner of writing were not interpreted by us professionals. But deep in our hearts, we also recognize, and this essay has tried to emphasize, that Nietzsche's manner of writing was not an accident; it was very much a part of his message. Therein lies our own peculiar “tragic” dilemma: When we “translate” Nietzsche into our professional philosophical agenda, we do what must be done, but in so doing, we bring to ruin something special and vital, something equally necessary, equally “true.” It seems we must “murder to dissect.”

Among philosophical commentators, our unique problem is that none of our writing is even remotely like the subject of our writing—Nietzsche's writing.

Therein, too, lies a comedy. I have to say that once in a while, when I read my own work or when I hear a skillful, serious exposition at a conference on Nietzsche's thought, some of Nietzsche's own words come to me and the contrast is comical. I imagine Nietzsche somewhere howling with laughter. This, our dilemma, is a benevolent one, but a dilemma nevertheless, one which often makes me feel like the Emperor with no clothes.

Philosophers want the truth. Even we lovers of Nietzsche want the truth about Nietzsche's critique of truth. Nietzsche, however, was surely consistent in his critique of truth when he was able to use parody and humor in reference to his own enterprise. Of course, we would not get published or get tenure or get promoted if we did that. But I wish that just once we could turn an APA convention over to Monty Python. Punchline: How would we know the difference?

1 *The Gay Science* 1. This and other selections are taken from the translations by Walter Kaufmann.

2 For example, Harold Alderman, *Nietzsche's Gift*, Athens, Ohio, Ohio UP, 1977, especially chapters 3 and 6.

3 This positive-negative synthesis helps us make sense out of the decidedly non-catastrophic atmosphere in certain Greek tragedies, e.g., the conclusion of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*.

4 See C. Kerényi, *Dionysos*, tr. Ralph Manheim, Princeton UP, 1976, pp. 330-348.

5 See A. W. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb Tragedy and Comedy*, 2nd ed., rev. T. B. L. Webster, Oxford UP, 1962, pp. 132-62.

6 *The Birth of Tragedy* 7.

7 *Poetics*, Ch. IV, 1449a, 10-30. Pickard-Cambridge says that there may have been an early form of drama with serious and grotesque elements, out of which tragedy and comedy developed, but there is no textual evidence for such a claim (p. 76). Any claim about tragedy and comedy in such a vein is notoriously difficult to prove from a scholarly standpoint. But that is not my intention here. I only want to show a relationship between tragedy and comedy in terms of certain meanings, and to show how Nietzsche could have seen this relationship and worked with it.

8 *Symposium*, 223d.

9 See C. Kerényi, *The Religion of the Greeks and Romans*, tr. Christopher Holme, Westport Conn., Greenwood P, 1977, pp. 192-200.

10 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* III, "On the Vision and the Riddle," 2.

- 11 *The Gay Science* 1.
- 12 See D. H. Monro's essay on humor in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, New York, Macmillan, 1967, Vol. IV, pp. 90-93.
- 13 A note quoted by Walter Kaufmann in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, New York, The Modern Library, 1968, p. 422n.
- 14 *The Gay Science* 1.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Beyond Good and Evil* 223.
- 17 *Ibid* 294.
- 18 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* I, "On Reading and Writing."
- 19 Letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, March 1883, tr. Christopher Middleton in *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, U of Chicago P, 1959, p. 211.
- 20 *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am So Wise," 7.
- 21 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* III, "On Passing By."
- 22 See *The Gay Science*, Preface for the 2nd ed., 1, and Kaufmann's note (p. 33); see also *Ecce Homo*, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," 2.
- 23 *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am a Destiny," 1. Also, the following letter to Overbeck (Spring, 1886):
 The way people misunderstand happy serenity! Malwida . . . once wrote me, to my bitterest delight, that she could already see from reading my *Zarathustra* the serene temple beckoning from afar, the temple with which I could build on this foundation. Well, it's enough to make one die laughing; and by now I am content that people do not pay attention and do not see *what* kind of "temple" I am building. (*Selected Letters*, p. 252)
- 24 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* IV, "On the Higher Man," 20.
- 25 *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am So Clever," 4.
- 26 *Ibid.*, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," 2.
- 27 *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Preface, 7.
- 28 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* III, "On Old and New Tablets," 23.