

Freud and the Economics of Laughter

Mark Weeks

A model of the psyche as an energy system turns up quite often in Sigmund Freud's work. In a book of humor analysis, Elliott Oring observes that "Freud attempted to reduce mental functioning to a kind of psycho-physics. In Freud's view the nervous system is like an electrical grid through which energy flows. The health of the organism depends upon keeping levels of stimulation low and discharging any buildup of energy through appropriate activity."¹ Oring describes this as metaphor; some earlier readers of Freud saw it as a particularly bad one. V. N. Volosinov viewed it as "simply a groundless transposition to the mind of a principle of 'minimum expenditure of energy' that is as old as the hills. But when applied to subjectively mental material, that principle – which is in itself vacuous, and platitudinous to boot – becomes a mere metaphor, a poetic turn of phrase, and nothing more."² In fact, Volosinov recognized Freud was not merely offering a metaphor but attempting to build on his academic background in physiology, reflecting his "long-held belief that one day psychoanalytic theory might be translatable into a physiological theory of nervous energy."³

This is a somewhat complicated issue, reflecting the contentious status of Freud's "science of the mind." There is plenty of evidence that neural systems are indeed fundamentally what we call electrical, or at least electrochemical. On the other hand, the theory of the instincts of the "militantly rationalistic"⁴ physiologist Freud could at the same time be condemned by Jurgen Habermas among others for its "theological" and "precritical" speculations.⁵ Freud himself, in his self-deconstructive moments, conceded that "I am not really a man of science"⁶ and that Freudian "[i]nstances are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness."⁷ Freud's psychic topography and his all-encompassing, dynamic theory of the mind range ambiguously across the literal, metaphorical and mythical. Indeed, the success of psychoanalysis is likely in part due to its willingness and ability to exploit this ambiguity, this "indefiniteness," which is why it is often most effectively approached through literary and rhetorical analysis.

Actually, Freud's energy system is frequently less about electrical charges than about pressure exchanges, drawing on the 19th century science of thermodynamics. The management of that energy as a resource is then described through a vocabulary that seems to derive from 19th century economics. Freud's famous "reality principle," for example, describes the saving and marshalling of energy flowing from the instincts so as to limit the dangerously spontaneous (if pleasurable) expenditure of primal energy, allowing it to be diverted towards the work of building a relatively safe, productive and harmonious civilization. Mark Edmundson is almost stating the obvious, at least where specifically Freud's work is concerned, when he remarks "the easy commerce that exists between the rhetoric of psychoanalysis and that of investment finance."⁸

My own specific concern here is with how Freud's economics of energy, which has had an important influence upon the development of what Baudrillard calls the "modern energeo-economic myth," deals with the question of laughter.⁹ Freud famously wrote an entire book on the subject, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, first published in 1905, where laughter is conceptualized precisely as the pleasurable spending of excess energy. Though most of the book is concerned with jokes, he eventually presents a comprehensive theory of the laughable, using a tripartite taxonomy: jokes, the comic and humor.¹⁰ Here is his summation of the theory he comes up with: "The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy in expenditure upon ideation (upon cathexis) and the pleasure in humour from an economy in expenditure upon feeling. In all three modes of working of our mental apparatus the pleasure is derived from an economy."¹¹ I will explain Freud's taxonomy as we proceed. For now the main point is that laughter as Freud sees it is the expelling of energy we can waste without guilt because it represents a saving or economy in energy we've achieved through the course of the humorous discourse.

It's worth noting that *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is an important piece of writing. Firstly, it was Freud's initial attempt to apply psychoanalytic principles in a concerted way to the realm of aesthetics. Secondly, while it has its critics, it invariably pops up in overviews of humor theory and remains to this day an important point of reference for some scholars in the field. Humor theorist Oring, for example, continues to write extensively on Freud's contribution. And a recent book by the sociologist Billig likewise gives Freud's book a privileged position. While neither of these writers treats *Jokes* uncritically, both argue for its continued

relevance. The book also seems to have held some sway within psychoanalytic circles through the twentieth century. No less than Jacques Lacan described the book as a series of “admirably compelling detours.”¹² What’s more, late last century *Jokes* was the touchstone for certain literary and cultural critics examining the self-consciously “playful” mode of the postmodern. Interestingly, they too would home in on the numerous detours of Freud’s argument, reading them – perhaps somewhat over-creatively - as Freud’s attempt to allow play to permeate his text; they see this as appropriate given the subject, and as foreshadowing postmodernism itself.¹³

Of course, you could equally well argue that the detours are at odds with Freud’s generally positive evaluation of the supposed economy in laughter. But, in fact, almost all of these writers, in the course of their humor theory, sociology, poststructural psychoanalysis or postmodern cultural criticism, easily dispense with Freud’s crude ergo-economics, taking what serves the purpose at hand, dumping the rest. Though *Jokes* is saturated with the lexicon of ergo-economics, this is obviously a product of his socio-historical context, which is not our socio-historical context and not especially productive. So the thinking goes, and Freud’s economics is shunted off into the waste.

A certain amount of selectivity in reading is part and parcel of the critical process, so this hardly constitutes a condemnation. But I’d like to argue here that there’s something to be gained by *not* regarding the economics of *Jokes* as incidental and dispensable. Put simply, I read the book as Freud wrestling with laughter, striving with his enormous intellectual muscle, agility and determination to incorporate laughter within his economic scheme of things. He collected jokes, we know he liked them. He wanted to believe that they were working for us, that they had some kind of economic value. But perhaps he was haunted by a preconscious awareness that there is something in laughter that is not merely wasteful but actually attacks the whole concept of economy, even collapses the very economy of being, particularly the modern kind of being of *homo economicus*.¹⁴ In fact, I believe the book is permeated by that awareness, and that the numerous detours are to a more or less degree driven by the need to navigate through and around a decidedly anti-economic, pleasurable “counter-productive” dimension to laughter.

Freud’s Joke Factory

The desire to see laughter in a positive light is at this point in history very common.

We can see it in the cinematic celebration of Patch Adam and the frequent popular media reports we get about the health benefits of laughing. Billig identifies the tendency as “ideological positivism,” implying that it is associated with capitalism’s need to maintain an optimistic outlook (among investors, producers, and especially consumers...consumer confidence.) The positive feeling of laughter is, he argues, co-opted to that cause. Through a thorough investigation of the British and to some degree the European history, Billig shows that it hasn’t always been this way. Up to the middle of the twentieth century there was a mistrust, perhaps especially among intellectuals but also among members of the clergy, towards laughing. In Henri Bergson’s essay *Laughter (Le Rire)*, almost as famous as Freud’s work, the French philosopher expresses his preference for the restraint of a smile (*sourire*) over the loss of bodily control witnessed in laughter.¹⁵ All of this goes at least as far back as Thomas Hobbes, who excoriated laughter as a waste: “They that are intent on great designs have not time to laugh.”¹⁶

Because he himself enjoyed jokes, but also because part of the mission of psychoanalysis was to interpret its way to the discovery of hidden meanings, Freud was to some degree challenging the Hobbesian model (though, as we’ll see, Doctor Freud was no Doctor Patch Adams so far as the promotion of the actual laughter response is concerned). Success in that respect is ensured from the very beginning because of the idiosyncratic way he approaches the subject, which renders laughter as a kind of byproduct, as very nearly incidental. Today we are more likely to begin with the laughter response or the meaning produced by a joke as an end in itself, then work back through the text that produced those ends: “so the joke only is a joke through the effect of laughter that it produces, but which in turn constitutes it, as it were, retroactively.”¹⁷ Freud’s analysis, by contrast, is almost completely taken up with the producer of the joke and the evolution of the joke through what he calls the “joke work,” a term which corresponds in key respects with what he termed the “dream work” in his earlier study of the semiotic productions of dreams. Freud challenges Hobbes’s view of laughter as a kind of slacking not by defending the pleasures of play and laughter so much as by turning the play preceding laughter into work. In this sense, it is more like a rehabilitation, an adaptation of humor theory to a worldview, which, as is clear in Freud’s later *Civilization and Its Discontents* or *The Future of an Illusion*, is not without its Hobbesian aspects.

Here is a synopsis of what Freud calls the “psychogenesis” of jokes through the joke work:

1. The beginning is the childish pleasure of play. The creation of a joke begins with the play of words and ideas. Puns are an example. The original pleasure comes precisely from allowing the mind to roam, associate and dissociate freely, without the restrictions imposed by the social demands of sensible, constructive discourse.
2. Then, content (meaning/purpose) is introduced to protect the pleasure in play, which, as a waste of time from the point of view of the adult reality principle, is subject to prohibition, inhibition. We have to make it *look like* we're being productive. Freud thus writes, "the pleasure in jokes exhibits a core of original pleasure in play and a casing of pleasure in lifting inhibitions" (JU, 138n).
3. Next, precisely because we're playing, we're able to sneak in some generally prohibited ("tendentious") matter, such as rude, satirical or bigoted contents. Freud calls this "The principle of confusion of sources of pleasure" (JU, 137). We allow ourselves to think the pleasure we're getting is coming from the play when in fact most of it is coming from the release, from the unconscious, of dangerous content: "We are inclined to give the *thought* the benefit of what has pleased us in the *form* of the jokes; and we are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so spoil the source of a pleasure" (JU, 132).
4. In this way, under the cover of play, we are able to release normally restricted unconscious material with relative ease. So, we save ourselves the energy we usually need to spend on overcoming inhibitions. Now (and only now) we have a joke. Sure, Freud concedes, we've had to spend quite a lot of energy on the joke work in order to make this comparatively small economy, but he sees this as typical of the business-oriented mind. "The mind of the manager, if it is inclined to economy, will... turn to economy over detail. He will feel satisfaction if a piece of work can be carried out at a smaller cost than previously, however small the saving may seem in comparison with the size of the total expenditure" (JU, 157).
5. That saved energy can then be pleurably released in laughter. But first, we need to make another person laugh, so we can then laugh ourselves. We need the joke to be reflected. So, we tell the joke in order to use the audience to release our own saved energy. "When I make the other person laugh by telling him my joke, I am actually making use of him to arouse my own laughter" (JU, 156). On the surface, this might seem a passable analysis, but there are all kinds of prob-

lems: as I've already mentioned, it is a very crude transplation of thermodynamics onto psychophysiology; the joke-teller's reason for telling the joke is remarkably simplistic and dismissive of social psychology, as well as perhaps of an economy of the gift; while Freud explains the telling and re-telling of the joke as serving to elicit the teller's own laughter, the fact is joke tellers themselves very often *don't* laugh; focused on the producer, Freud leaves us to guess how the audience makes the saving by mentally "replaying" the genesis of the joke. Above all, on what grounds does Freud introduce the "mind of the manager... inclined to economy"? The notion of pleasure being fundamentally derived from saving energy suggests an unconscious – the ostensible focus of the book - that clearly has little to do with our primitive ancestry and everything to do with certain bourgeois preoccupations of 19th century Europe.

What you could do is say, "OK, Freud's focus on the ergo-economics of the producer is a problem, but if we remove this as pseudo-science and just look at the consumption of the joke to get laughter, maybe it works. The joke teller, by mixing play and tendentious content has helped us publicly subvert prohibitions against content emanating from unconscious drives. Laughter expresses the resulting pleasure." In fact, I think this is what many people imagine Freud's theory to be, especially those who haven't actually read *Jokes and the Unconscious* but take a guess about it based on the title and what they know about Freudian psychoanalysis.

To be fair, points 1 through 3 give a very loose approximation of a relationship between play and content in some jokes, the way in which a rather complicated mutual protection against inhibitions (against meaningless play from one direction, against contentious content from the other) might occur. The main problem is that Freud's theory eventually implies that *only* tendentious jokes - releasing content fundamentally derived from the unconscious - can be truly laughable (point 4). This is a difficult position to maintain, one rejected by theorists such as John Morreall, Max Eastman and Helmut Plessner.¹⁸ Of course, by plundering the limitless depths of the unconscious that psychoanalysis presents us, it's possible to mount a case. It's like saying all dreams have a meaning; a determined, creative mind can always generate meaning. Still, the general scientific consensus today seems to be that sometimes dreams have meanings ("meaning" is a narrower term than "function"), sometimes they don't. As it turns out, where jokes are concerned, Freud himself recognized at some level a weakness in the insistence upon content being essential. Because, as Plessner noted, "Freud sees the natural basis of systematization in the

point of the joke” [emphasis added],¹⁹ he has considerable trouble with the apparently pointless, the nonsensical or absurd joke. In other words, the question arises as to whether the “tendentious” content is necessary or simply a helpful, pleasurable supplement. Do we *need* those parts of the joke work description I designated points 2, 3 and 4 above, or are they simply desirable: firstly because of the inhibition against meaningless discourse Freud himself acknowledges under point 2, secondly as additional sources of pleasure?

It is nonsensical humorous discourse that focuses attention on this issue. The critical point comes in the middle of Freud’s book, where he acknowledges that jokes have “a core of original pleasure in play” and that jokes producing nothing but absurdity “have not had due attention paid to them” (JU, 138n). That’s a bold acknowledgement, and Freud does undertake a brief attempt at redress. Yet if nonsense deserves more attention why do it in a footnote? The literary critic J. Hillis Miller writes, “Footnotes, as any astute reader will know, are often places where an author gives himself away in one way or another in the act of fabricating a protective cover. A footnote often reveals an uneasiness, identifies a fissure or seam in an author’s thought by saying it is not there.”²⁰

The fissure here is the problem of nonsensical laughter in a theory that turns on the causal primacy accorded the expression of unconscious content. Of course, just like dreams and jokes, footnotes can be over-interpreted. But just how uneasy Freud was about this problem becomes more conspicuous when we find him returning to the subject yet again in an *addendum* to the footnote added to the 1912 edition. It appears from this addition to the earlier addition that in the interim Freud has continued to be nagged by the difficulty of fitting nonsense jokes into his theory. He gives two examples;

A man at the dinner table who was being handed fish dipped his hands twice in the mayonnaise and then ran them through his hair. When his neighbour looked at him in astonishment, he seemed to notice his mistake and apologized: “I’m so sorry, I thought it was spinach.”

“Life is like a suspension bridge,” said one man – “Why is that?” asked the other – “How should I know?” was the reply (JU 138-9n).

Freud admits that though the audience initially seeks semantic resolution in these texts, “they really are nonsense,” and that it is a “pleasure in nonsense” that is enjoyed. But, then he has to try to find some other motivation for such jokes: “These

jokes are not entirely without a purpose, they are a ‘take in’, and give the person who tells them a certain amount of pleasure in misleading and annoying his hearer. The latter then damps down his annoyance by determining to tell them himself later on” (JU, 139). The weird thing is Freud doesn’t mention laughter at all (though I for one laughed when I first read them), leaving us with the idea that what keeps the joke circulating is nothing but annoyance and a kind of revenge. The problem here is noted by Eastman: “He [Freud] cannot himself see that pure nonsense is ever comic. And that... is because he does not take a sufficiently discriminating look at nonsense. He does not distinguish leading a mind on and landing it nowhere, which is a funny trick, from talking gibberish, which is a bore.”²¹

This is no small matter, something that might be cleared up with a little tweaking, perhaps an addendum to the addendum. The fact is *all* jokes are a ‘take in.’ If there is a single essential element of jokes, that is it. It is the ‘take in’ that produces the pleasure of laughter. The *joke*, like any humorous text, *can* have meaningful content, which, because it leaves a semantic trace, we are actually more likely to reflect upon than the fact that for a moment there the train of discourse and thought collapsed into laughter. But as Plessner emphasizes, that collapse - whether or not the joke is also pushing some pleasurable pointed content - is indispensable to laughter. Moreover, it is specifically that collapse or end of discourse, avoiding the danger of the content continuing, getting out of hand (not simply some vague “play” and the “confusion of sources of pleasure,” as Freud would have it) that allows tendentious content to be imparted.²²

Time Out: Laughter’s Counter-Productivity

The idea of a “take in,” Eastman’s “leading a mind on and landing it nowhere,” characterizes “incongruity theories,” which, as Peter Berger remarks, have become a dominant approach among psychological theorists of humor: “there is widespread agreement that a sense of humour leads above all to a perception of *incongruence* or *incongruity*.”²³ This approach is commonly traced to Kant’s assertion at the end of the 18th century that “Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.”²⁴ This, as I read it (emphasizing more than most recent incongruity theorists the issue of a temporal effect), means not merely a surprising and somehow delightful diversion but its effect on our sense of time, the involuntary psycho-physiological disruption of our temporal consciousness,

particularly its orientation towards the future, its momentum. As Samuel Weber argues in his modern psychoanalytic critique of Freud's *Jokes*, "The 'automatism' of the joke, doubtless related to the automatic movements of that laughter in which the process finds its confirmation, raises the question of the temporality of the joke process."²⁵ Freud's theory of jokes completely avoids all this by divorcing jokes from the process/temporality of reception, reducing them to economic comparisons of expenditure which in effect imply something like a transcendental, atemporal, static point of view – it's as if some accountant or manager were overseeing operations at the joke factory, comparing projected with actual expenditure. But the issue here is in reality a breakdown (a spanner in the works, or a strike, if you like) interrupting the *process* of (discursive) production.

The forcing of the comparative economic model (over what I call a "temporalized incongruity theory") becomes more obvious in Freud's shorter analysis of the category he calls "comedy," which roughly equates with what we might now term "physical comedy." A full review and critique is not possible here, but let me briefly gloss the three subcategories he proposes. Firstly, there is the *comic of character*, which derives from the audience observing in a comic character an excessive expenditure of energy in movement, as epitomized in clumsiness for example. We compare our own estimated expenditure for the things the character is doing and record a relative saving in ourselves. The *comic of situation* involves some kind of interruption to the comic character: "The contrast which, through empathy, offers us the comic difference is that between the high degree of interest taken by him *before* the interruption and the minimal one that he has left over for his mental activity when the interruption has occurred" (JU 196-7). Finally, Freud discusses the *comic of expectation*, which relies on the notion of "ideational mimetics" and another quantitative economic comparison: "If I am expecting to catch a ball which is being thrown to me, I put my body into tensions which will enable it to meet the impact of the ball; and should the ball when it is caught turn out to be too light, my superfluous movements make me comic to the spectators" (JU 197). Through the notion of economic comparison the comedy here is relieved by Freud of its temporality, and the importance of comic timing, even when it involves an "interruption" or subverted "expectation."

However, again in a footnote, this time just three paragraphs before the end of the book, Freud makes this concession: "If we are prepared to do a little violence to the concept of 'expectation,' we can... include a very large region of the comic

under the comic of expectation” (JU, 234n). For the incongruity theorist this is not at all unexpected, except that the region covered is not so much “very large” as comprehensive. It is obvious in the case of the comics of situation and expectation, less so in the comic of character. Suffice to say, this latter depends on sudden and unpredictable actions or speech by the character, or unexpectedly predictable ones – he keeps going back to the same behavior when we’d expect him to change, adapt.

That leaves Freud’s notion of humor, which is pretty much what we would call “black humor.” Freud draws his main examples from what he considers the most fundamental type, *Galgenhumor* (gallows humor): “A rogue who was being led out to execution on a Monday remarked: ‘Well, this week’s beginning nicely’... The case was the same when the rogue on his way to execution asked for a scarf for his bare throat so as not to catch cold.” By refusing to give into despair, according to Freud, the man presents us with a saving in emotional energy. Intuitively, this seems right. In fact, there is a sense in which this might be applied to all forms of the laughable; hence the notion of comic indifference: “an anesthesia of the heart,” as Bergson called it. But that effect cannot be divorced from the temporal unfolding of the text, and particularly the subversion of expectation. Freud himself concedes this at the end of the book: “It is true that we feel humorous pleasure when an emotion is avoided which we should have expected because it usually accompanies the situation, and to that extent humour too comes under the extended concept of the comic of expectation” (JU, 235).

So, what started out as a project designed primarily as an application of newly developed psychoanalytic interpretative tools to the excavation of the unconscious depths of jokes seems to have threatened to unravel. When Freud attempted to extend the economic model he’d advanced through joke analysis to other forms of the laughable, a problem arose. The comic of expectation, which at first was a mere subspecies of a comparatively simple, apparently minor category, came to dominate that category. It even subsumed his third and final category, humor. This, I suspect, is why Freud needed to go back to the nagging problem of nonsense jokes for the 1912 edition, whether he was conscious of it or not. If the core of play in jokes that Freud himself had acknowledged was directed at a very simple subversion (as in the basic form of nonsense) of the progress and momentum of discourse, then the preexisting incongruity theory of laughter would have pushed the complex windings of his depth psychology of jokes to the sidelines.

Freud clearly made a contribution to humor theory in his analysis of the unconscious contents that may reside in jokes, as well as the inhibition we have concerning unproductive play, but as a kind of modernist theology or grand narrative, Freudian psychoanalysis was attempting to promote itself as the intellectual tool for excavating the *essence of everything* in the human psyche. It would have been a setback to the psychoanalytic project if its first application to aesthetics had fallen apart, though in a sense Freud was unfortunate in his choice of aesthetic subject.

The problem takes us back to the economic model, because what it indicates most strikingly is that in focusing on the notion of the economy produced by the “joke work,” Freud is investigating the pleasure of laughter through something like the reality principle, when surely it would make more sense to approach it through the pleasure principle, which would necessarily, and I would say appropriately, draw focus to the pleasurable laughter response. The obvious anomaly is not entirely surprising. As I mentioned before, Freud enjoyed jokes and wanted to ascribe them cultural value, which was much easier to do in early twentieth century middle-class Austria by identifying them with work rather than with play. Remember, too, that even dreams had been described as a form of work.

The basic problem is this. Through jokes (though notably not through comedy and humor, which don’t fit so well) Freud was attempting to show how first the wasteful activity of play and then the inhibited content emerge from the unconscious into the conscious and into social discourse: the content first protects the play, then the context of play protects the “working” content, a neat mutuality. Ironically, the pleasure of laughter, of which Freud writes almost nothing, derives precisely from a movement in the opposite direction: from the world of economy, work, discourse, delayed gratification and the temporal consciousness that comes with it - Derrida’s deconstruction would later elaborate the tight bond between each of these terms²⁶ - into the necessarily ephemeral, largely inhibited world of timeless immediacy and satisfaction.

There is little evidence that laughter might launch some radical carnival of being, as late twentieth century acolytes of Bakhtin dreamed, but it effects just for a brief moment (it is in a sense impossible for it to endure, being essentially what Bergson called a *détente*) a punctuation of temporal consciousness, of the delay through which language, a certain temporality, a sense of duration are constructed. I think this is ultimately where the intuitively sensed and well documented indifference in laughter comes from: its momentary subversion of that discursive desire, that

temporality and that sense of duration that constitutes “the self”. So, humor may in various ways be productive, but there is in the no less important laughter response something (difficult to articulate other than through the kind of negative strategy I’ve attempted here) which is essentially - and yes, perhaps even defiantly, as cultures accelerate through the existentially impoverishing reduction of time to productivity - counter-productive. This is laughter as a *petite mort*, a pleasurable “little death,” invaluable in itself, but valuable too (if we insist on making even this pleasure productive) in prefiguring that ultimate event which may render all our production, and certainly any obsession with productivity, absurdly comical. Unfortunately, it was not until two decades after publishing *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* that Freud would begin to develop conceptual tools for approaching that experience, leading tentatively towards the significance of the insignificant, the indifferent, the unproductive being *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.²⁷

Endnotes

¹ Elliott Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2003) 125.

² V. N. Volosinov *Freudianism: A Critical Sketch*, trans. I. R. Titunik (Bloomington; Indiana University, 1987) 121.

³ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule* (London: Sage, 2005) 169.

⁴ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951) 40.

⁵ Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972) 285.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, quoted in Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (London: Hogarth, 1958) 1: 382.

⁷ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 95.

⁸ Mark Edmundson, “Freudian Mythmaking: The Case of Narcissus,” *Kenyon Review* 10 (1988): 18.

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, “Symbolic Exchange and Death,” *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1988) 136.

¹⁰ The terms “humor” and “the comic” are shifting and awkward, being commonly used as both general, all-embracing terms and, as in Freud, as subcategories. For example, isn’t a joke a kind of humor? Don’t we call anything that is funny comic? On top of this there are questions of translation. I will use the term “humorous discourse” here as the general term

to distinguish it from Freud's use of "humor" as a subcategory.

¹¹ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960) 149. Designated "JU" within the text from hereon.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1968) 212.

¹³ See for example Jerry Aline Flieger, *The Purloined Punch Line* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1991) and Jeffrey Mehlman, "How to Read Freud on Jokes: The Critic as Schadchen," *New Literary History* 6 (1975): 439-61.

¹⁴ See Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

¹⁵ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: MacMillan, 1911)

¹⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, 11 vols. (London: Bohn, 1845) 4: 455.

¹⁷ Samuel Weber, "Laughing in the Meanwhile," *Modern Language Notes* 102 (1987): 695.

¹⁸ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (New York: State University of New York, 1983) 31-2; Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1937) 286; Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behaviour*, trans. James Spencer Churchill and Marjorie Green (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1970) 104.

¹⁹ Plessner, 104

²⁰ J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Trollope, James and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia, 1987) 102.

²¹ Eastman, 290.

²² See Mark Weeks, "Laughter, Desire and Time," in *Humor: The International Journal of Humor Research* 15:4 (2002) for a more detailed analysis of the complex interaction of meaning and the subversion of the process of generating discourse. There I analyze a joke used by Freud and later examined by semiotic theorist Victor Raskin.

²³ Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 208.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952) 199.

²⁵ Weber, 702.

²⁶ See for example Derrida's essay *Différance*, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University, 1982).

²⁷ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, in *Complete Psychological Works*, 18:38.

