

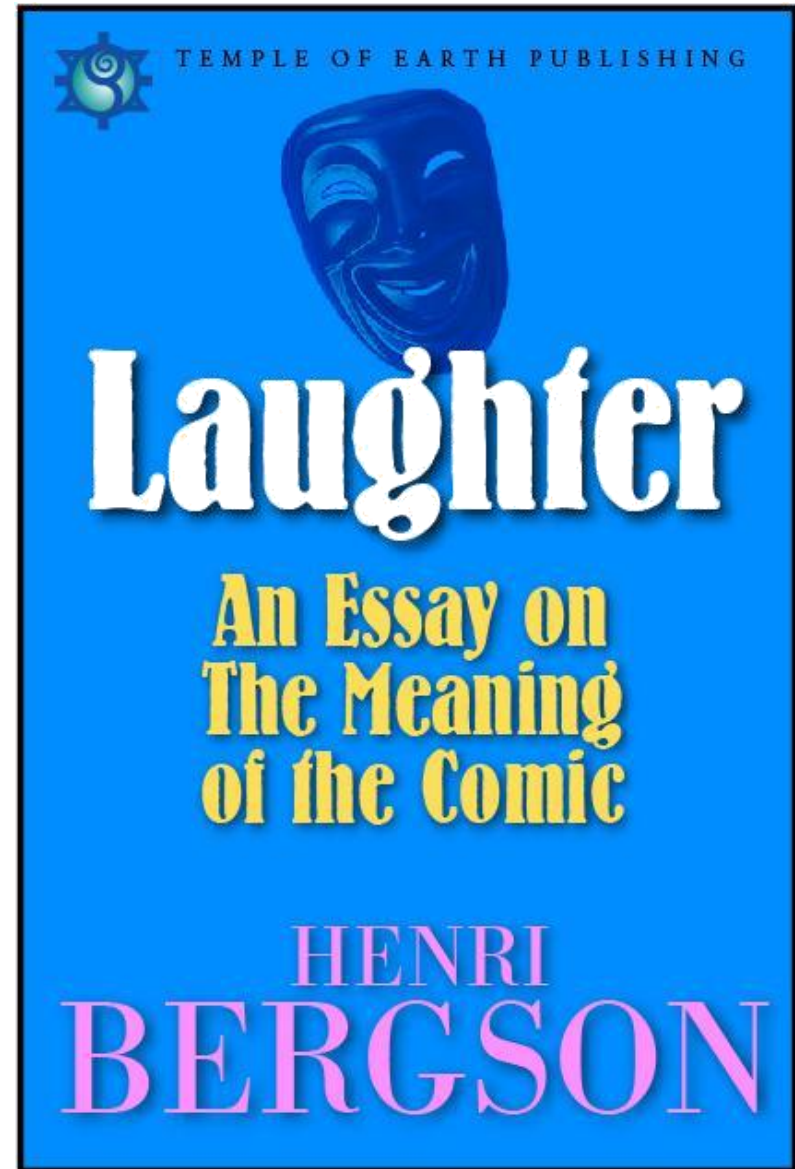
# LAUGHTER: AN ESSAY ON THE MEANING OF THE COMIC

By Henri Bergson, Chapter III

About Henri Bergson (adapted from Wikipedia):

**Henri-Louis Bergson** (18 October 1859 – 4 January 1941) was a French philosopher who was influential in the tradition of continental philosophy, especially during the first half of the 20th century until the Second World War.

He was awarded the 1927 Nobel Prize in Literature "in recognition of his rich and vitalizing ideas and the brilliant skill with which they have been presented". In 1930 France awarded him its highest honor, the Grand-Croix de la Legion d'honneur.



# **LAUGHTER**

## **AN ESSAY ON THE MEANING OF THE COMIC**

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### **TRANSLATORS' PREFACE**

This work, by Professor Bergson, has been revised in detail by the author himself, and the present translation is the only authorised one. For this ungrudging labour of revision, for the thoroughness with which it has been carried out, and for personal sympathy in many a difficulty of word and phrase, we desire to offer our grateful acknowledgment to Professor Bergson. It may be pointed out that the essay on Laughter originally appeared in a series of three articles in one of the leading magazines in France, the *Revue de Paris*. This will account for the relatively simple form of the work and the comparative absence of technical terms. It will also explain why the author has confined himself to exposing and illustrating his novel theory of the comic without entering into a detailed discussion of other explanations already in the field. He none the less indicates, when discussing sundry examples, why the principal theories, to which they have given rise, appear to him inadequate. To quote only a few, one may mention those based on contrast, exaggeration, and degradation.

The book has been highly successful in France, where it is in its seventh edition. It has been translated into Russian, Polish, and Swedish. German and Hungarian translations are under preparation. Its success is due partly to the novelty of the explanation offered of the comic, and partly also to the fact that the author incidentally discusses questions of still greater interest and importance. Thus, one of the best known and most frequently quoted passages of the book is that portion of the last chapter in which the author outlines a general theory of art.

C. B. F. R.

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## CHAPTER III

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## THE COMIC IN CHARACTER

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5 We have followed the comic along many of its winding channels in an  
 6 endeavour to discover how it percolates into a form, an attitude, or a  
 7 gesture; a situation, an action, or an expression. The analysis of comic  
 8 CHARACTERS has now brought us to the most important part of our task.  
 9 It would also be the most difficult, had we yielded to the temptation of  
 10 defining the laughable by a few striking--and consequently obvious--  
 11 examples; for then, in proportion as we advanced towards the loftiest  
 12 manifestations of the comic, we should have found the facts slipping  
 13 between the over-wide meshes of the definition intended to retain them.  
 14 But, as a matter of fact, we have followed the opposite plan, by throwing  
 15 light on the subject from above. Convinced that laughter has a social  
 16 meaning and import, that the comic expresses, above all else, a special lack  
 17 of adaptability to society, and that, in short, there is nothing comic apart  
 18 from man, we have made man and character generally our main objective.  
 19 Our chief difficulty, therefore, has lain in explaining how we come to laugh  
 20 at anything else than character, and by what subtle processes of  
 21 fertilisation, combination or amalgamation, the comic can worm its way  
 22 into a mere movement, an impersonal situation, or an independent  
 23 phrase. This is what we have done so far. We started with the pure metal,  
 24 and all our endeavours have been directed solely towards reconstructing  
 25 the ore. It is the metal itself we are now about to study. Nothing could be  
 26 easier, for this time we have a simple element to deal with. Let us examine  
 27 it closely and see how it reacts upon everything else.

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29 There are moods, we said, which move us as soon as we  
 30 perceive them, joys and sorrows with which we sympathise, passions  
 31 and vices which call forth painful astonishment, terror or pity, in the  
 32 beholder; in short, sentiments that are prolonged in

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4 sentimental overtones from mind to mind. All this concerns the  
5 essentials of life. All this is serious, at times even tragic. Comedy  
6 can only begin at the point where our neighbour's personality  
7 ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact, with what might be called a  
8 growing callousness to social life. Any individual is comic who  
9 automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about  
10 getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of  
11 laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his  
12 dream. If it is permissible to compare important things with trivial  
13 ones, we would call to mind what happens when a youth enters one  
14 of our military academies. After getting through the dreaded  
15 ordeal of the examination, he finds he has other ordeals to face,  
16 which his seniors have arranged with the object of fitting him for  
17 the new life he is entering upon, or, as they say, of "breaking him  
18 into harness." Every small society that forms within the larger is  
19 thus impelled, by a vague kind of instinct, to devise some method  
20 of discipline or "breaking in," so as to deal with the rigidity of  
21 habits that have been formed elsewhere and have now to undergo a  
22 partial modification. Society, properly so-called, proceeds in  
23 exactly the same way. Each member must be ever attentive to his  
24 social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment;  
25 in short, he must avoid shutting himself up in his own peculiar  
26 character as a philosopher in his ivory tower. Therefore society  
27 holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of  
28 correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which,  
29 although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the  
30 function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against  
31 whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social  
32 "ragging."

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34 Hence the equivocal nature of the comic. It belongs neither  
35 altogether to art nor altogether to life. On the one hand, characters  
36 in real life would never make us laugh were we not capable of  
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41 watching their vagaries in the same way as we look down at a play  
42 from our seat in a box; they are only comic in our eyes because  
43 they perform a kind of comedy before us. But, on the other hand,  
44 the pleasure caused by laughter, even on the stage, is not an  
45 unadulterated enjoyment; it is not a pleasure that is exclusively  
46 esthetic or altogether disinterested. It always implies a secret or  
47 unconscious intent, if not of each one of us, at all events of society  
48 as a whole. In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to  
49 humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his  
50 will, at least in his deed. This is the reason a comedy is far more  
51 like real life than a drama is. The more sublime the drama, the  
52 more profound the analysis to which the poet has had to subject  
53 the raw materials of daily life in order to obtain the tragic element  
54 in its unadulterated form. On the contrary, it is only in its lower  
55 aspects, in light comedy and farce, that comedy is in striking  
56 contrast to reality: the higher it rises, the more it approximates to  
57 life; in fact, there are scenes in real life so closely bordering on  
58 high-class comedy that the stage might adopt them without  
59 changing a single word.

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61 Hence it follows that the elements of comic character on the stage  
62 and in actual life will be the same. What are these elements? We  
63 shall find no difficulty in deducing them. It has often been said  
64 that it is the TRIFLING faults of our fellow-men that make us  
65 laugh.

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67 Evidently there is a considerable amount of truth in this opinion;  
68 still, it cannot be regarded as altogether correct. First, as regards  
69 faults, it is no easy matter to draw the line between the trifling and  
70 the serious; maybe it is not because a fault is trifling that it makes us  
71 laugh, but rather because it makes us laugh that we regard it as  
72 trifling, for there is nothing that disarms us like laughter. But we may go  
73 even farther, and maintain that there are faults at which we

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4 laugh, even though fully aware that they are serious,--Harpagon's  
5 avarice, for instance. And then, we may as well confess--though  
6 somewhat reluctantly--that we laugh not only at the faults of our  
7 fellow-men, but also, at times, at their good qualities. We laugh at  
8 Alceste. The objection may be urged that it is not the earnestness  
9 of Alceste that is ludicrous, but rather the special aspect which  
10 earnestness assumes in his case, and, in short, a certain  
11 eccentricity that mars it in our eyes. Agreed; but it is none the less  
12 true that this eccentricity in Alceste, at which we laugh, MAKES  
13 HIS EARNESTNESS LAUGHABLE, and that is the main point. So  
14 we may conclude that the ludicrous is not always an indication of a  
15 fault, in the moral meaning of the word, and if critics insist on  
16 seeing a fault, even though a trifling one, in the ludicrous, they  
17 must point out what it is here that exactly distinguishes the trifling  
18 from the serious.

19  
20 The truth is, the comic character may, strictly speaking, be quite in  
21 accord with stern morality. All it has to do is to bring itself into  
22 accord with society. The character of Alceste is that of a thoroughly  
23 honest man. But then he is unsociable, and, on that very account,  
24 ludicrous. A flexible vice may not be so easy to ridicule as a rigid  
25 virtue. It is rigidity that society eyes with suspicion. Consequently,  
26 it is the rigidity of Alceste that makes us laugh, though here rigidity  
27 stands for honesty. The man who withdraws into himself is liable  
28 to ridicule, because the comic is largely made up of this very  
29 withdrawal. This accounts for the comic being so frequently  
30 dependent on the manners or ideas, or, to put it bluntly, on the  
31 prejudices, of a society.

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33 It must be acknowledged, however, to the credit of mankind, that  
34 there is no essential difference between the social ideal and the rule,  
35 that it is the faults of others that make us laugh, provided we add  
36 that they make us laugh by reason of their UNSOCIABILITY

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41 rather than of their IMMORALITY. What, then, are the faults  
42 capable of becoming ludicrous, and in what circumstances do we  
43 regard them as being too serious to be laughed at?  
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45 We have already given an implicit answer to this question. The  
46 comic, we said, appeals to the intelligence, pure and simple;  
47 laughter is incompatible with emotion. Depict some fault, however  
48 trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity; the  
49 mischief is done, it is impossible for us to laugh. On the other  
50 hand, take a downright vice,--even one that is, generally speaking,  
51 of an odious nature,--you may make it ludicrous if, by some  
52 suitable contrivance, you arrange so that it leaves our emotions  
53 unaffected. Not that the vice must then be ludicrous, but it MAY,  
54 from that time forth, become so. IT MUST NOT AROUSE OUR  
55 FEELINGS; that is the sole condition really necessary, though  
56 assuredly it is not sufficient.

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58 But, then, how will the comic poet set to work to prevent our  
59 feelings being moved? The question is an embarrassing one. To  
60 clear it up thoroughly, we should have to enter upon a rather novel  
61 line of investigation, to analyse the artificial sympathy which we  
62 bring with us to the theatre, and determine upon the  
63 circumstances in which we accept and those in which we refuse to  
64 share imaginary joys and sorrows. There is an art of lulling  
65 sensibility to sleep and providing it with dreams, as happens in the  
66 case of a mesmerised person. And there is also an art of throwing a  
67 wet blanket upon sympathy at the very moment it might arise, the  
68 result being that the situation, though a serious one, is not taken  
69 seriously. This latter art would appear to be governed by two  
70 methods, which are applied more or less unconsciously by the  
71 comic poet. The first consists in ISOLATING, within the soul of the  
72 character, the feeling attributed to him, and making it a parasitic  
73 organism, so to speak, endowed with an independent

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4 existence. As a general rule, an intense feeling successively  
5 encroaches upon all other mental states and colours them with its  
6 own peculiar hue; if, then, we are made to witness this gradual  
7 impregnation, we finally become impregnated ourselves with a  
8 corresponding emotion. To employ a different image, an emotion  
9 may be said to be dramatic and contagious when all the harmonics  
10 in it are heard along with the fundamental note. It is because the  
11 actor thus thrills throughout his whole being that the spectators  
12 themselves feel the thrill. On the contrary, in the case of emotion  
13 that leaves us indifferent and that is about to become comic, there  
14 is always present a certain rigidity which prevents it from  
15 establishing a connection with the rest of the soul in which it has  
16 taken up its abode. This rigidity may be manifested, when the time  
17 comes, by puppet-like movements, and then it will provoke  
18 laughter; but, before that, it had already alienated our sympathy:  
19 how can we put ourselves in tune with a soul which is not in tune  
20 with itself? In Moliere's *L'Avare* we have a scene bordering upon  
21 drama. It is the one in which the borrower and the usurer, who  
22 have never seen each other, meet face to face and find that they are  
23 son and father. Here we should be in the thick of a drama, if only  
24 greed and fatherly affection, conflicting with each other in the soul  
25 of Harpagon, had effected a more or less original combination. But  
26 such is not the case. No sooner has the interview come to an end  
27 than the father forgets everything. On meeting his son again he  
28 barely alludes to the scene, serious though it has been: "You, my  
29 son, whom I am good enough to forgive your recent escapade, etc."  
30 Greed has thus passed close to all other feelings  
31 ABSENTMINDEDLY, without either touching them or being  
32 touched. Although it has taken up its abode in the soul and become  
33 master of the house, none the less it remains a stranger. Far  
34 different would be avarice of a tragic sort. We should find it  
35 attracting and absorbing, transforming and assimilating the divers  
36 energies of the man: feelings and affections, likes and dislikes,  
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41 vices and virtues, would all become something into which  
42 avarice would breathe a new kind of life. Such seems to be the  
43 first essential difference between high-class comedy and drama.  
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45 There is a second, which is far more obvious and arises out of the  
46 first. When a mental state is depicted to us with the object of  
47 making it dramatic, or even merely of inducing us to take it  
48 seriously, it gradually crystallises into ACTIONS which provide the  
49 real measure of its greatness. Thus, the miser orders his whole life  
50 with a view to acquiring wealth, and the pious hypocrite, though  
51 pretending to have his eyes fixed upon heaven, steers most skilfully  
52 his course here below. Most certainly, comedy does not shut out  
53 calculations of this kind; we need only take as an example the very  
54 machinations of *Tartuffe*. But that is what comedy has in common  
55 with drama; and in order to keep distinct from it, to prevent our  
56 taking a serious action seriously, in short, in order to prepare us  
57 for laughter, comedy utilises a method, the formula of which may  
58 be given as follows: INSTEAD OF CONCENTRATING OUR  
59 ATTENTION ON ACTIONS, COMEDY DIRECTS IT RATHER TO  
60 GESTURES. By GESTURES we here mean the attitudes, the  
61 movements and even the language by which a mental state  
62 expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other  
63 cause than a kind of inner itching. Gesture, thus defined, is  
64 profoundly different from action. Action is intentional or, at any  
65 rate, conscious; gesture slips out unawares, it is automatic. In  
66 action, the entire person is engaged; in gesture, an isolated part of  
67 the person is expressed, unknown to, or at least apart from, the  
68 whole of the personality. Lastly--and here is the essential point--  
69 action is in exact proportion to the feeling that inspires it: the one  
70 gradually passes into the other, so that we may allow our sympathy  
71 or our aversion to glide along the line running from feeling to  
72 action and become increasingly interested. About gesture,  
73 however, there is something explosive, which awakes our

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4 sensibility when on the point of being lulled to sleep and, by thus  
5 rousing us up, prevents our taking matters seriously. Thus, as soon  
6 as our attention is fixed on gesture and not on action, we are in the  
7 realm of comedy. Did we merely take his actions into account,  
8 Tartuffe would belong to drama: it is only when we take his  
9 gestures into consideration that we find him comic. You may  
10 remember how he comes on to the stage with the words: "Laurent,  
11 lock up my hair-shirt and my scourge." He knows Dorine is  
12 listening to him, but doubtless he would say the same if she were  
13 not there. He enters so thoroughly into the role of a hypocrite that  
14 he plays it almost sincerely. In this way, and this way only, can he  
15 become comic. Were it not for this material sincerity, were it not  
16 for the language and attitudes that his long-standing experience as  
17 a hypocrite has transformed into natural gestures, Tartuffe would  
18 be simply odious, because we should only think of what is meant  
19 and willed in his conduct. And so we see why action is essential in  
20 drama, but only accessory in comedy. In a comedy, we feel any  
21 other situation might equally well have been chosen for the  
22 purpose of introducing the character; he would still have been the  
23 same man though the situation were different. But we do not get  
24 this impression in a drama. Here characters and situations are  
25 welded together, or rather, events form part and parcel with the  
26 persons, so that were the drama to tell us a different story, even  
27 though the actors kept the same names, we should in reality be  
28 dealing with other persons.

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30 To sum up, whether a character is good or bad is of little moment:  
31 granted he is unsociable, he is capable of becoming comic. We now  
32 see that the seriousness of the case is of no importance either:  
33 whether serious or trifling, it is still capable of making us laugh,  
34 provided that care be taken not to arouse our emotions.  
35 Unsociability in the performer and insensibility in the spectator--  
36 such, in a word, are the two essential conditions. There is a third,  
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41 implicit in the other two, which so far it has been the aim of  
42 our analysis to bring out.

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44 This third condition is automatism. We have pointed it out from the  
45 outset of this work, continually drawing attention to the following  
46 point: what is essentially laughable is what is done automatically. In a  
47 vice, even in a virtue, the comic is that element by which the person  
48 unwittingly betrays himself--the involuntary gesture or the  
49 unconscious remark. Absentmindedness is always comical. Indeed,  
50 the deeper the absentmindedness the higher the comedy. Systematic  
51 absentmindedness, like that of Don Quixote, is the most comical thing  
52 imaginable: it is the comic itself, drawn as nearly as possible from its  
53 very source. Take any other comic character: however unconscious he  
54 may be of what he says or does, he cannot be comical unless there be  
55 some aspect of his person of which he is unaware, one side of his  
56 nature which he overlooks; on that account alone does he make us  
57 laugh. [Footnote: When the humorist laughs at himself, he is really  
58 acting a double part; the self who laughs is indeed conscious, but not  
59 the self who is laughed at.] Profoundly comic sayings are those artless  
60 ones in which some vice reveals itself in all its nakedness: how could it  
61 thus expose itself were it capable of seeing itself as it is? It is not  
62 uncommon for a comic character to condemn in general terms a  
63 certain line of conduct and immediately afterwards afford an example  
64 of it himself: for instance, M. Jourdain's teacher of philosophy flying  
65 into a passion after inveighing against anger; Vadius taking a poem  
66 from his pocket after heaping ridicule on readers of poetry, etc. What  
67 is the object of such contradictions except to help us to put our finger  
68 on the obliviousness of the characters to their own actions?  
69 Inattention to self, and consequently to others, is what we invariably  
70 find. And if we look at the matter closely, we see that inattention is  
71 here equivalent to what we have called unsociability. The chief cause  
72 of rigidity is the neglect to look around--and more



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4 especially within oneself: how can a man fashion his  
5 personality after that of another if he does not first study others  
6 as well as himself? Rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness  
7 and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and all serve as  
8 ingredients to the making up of the comic in character.  
9  
10 In a word, if we leave on one side, when dealing with human  
11 personality, that portion which interests our sensibility or appeals  
12 to our feeling, all the rest is capable of becoming comic, and the  
13 comic will be proportioned to the rigidity. We formulated this idea  
14 at the outset of this work. We have verified it in its main results,  
15 and have just applied it to the definition of comedy. Now we must  
16 get to closer quarters, and show how it enables us to delimitate the  
17 exact position comedy occupies among all the other arts. In one  
18 sense it might be said that all character is comic, provided we  
19 mean by character the ready-made element in our personality, that  
20 mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound  
21 up once for all and capable of working automatically. It is, if you  
22 will, that which causes us to imitate ourselves. And it is also, for  
23 that very reason, that which enables others to imitate us. Every  
24 comic character is a type. Inversely, every resemblance to a type  
25 has something comic in it. Though we may long have associated  
26 with an individual without discovering anything about him to  
27 laugh at, still, if advantage is taken of some accidental analogy to  
28 dub him with the name of a famous hero of romance or drama, he  
29 will in our eyes border upon the ridiculous, if only for a moment.  
30 And yet this hero of romance may not be a comic character at all.  
31 But then it is comic to be like him. It is comic to wander out of  
32 one's own self. It is comic to fall into a ready-made category. And  
33 what is most comic of all is to become a category oneself into which  
34 others will fall, as into a ready-made frame; it is to crystallise into a  
35 stock character.  
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40 Thus, to depict characters, that is to say, general types, is the object  
41 of high-class comedy. This has often been said. But it is as well to  
42 repeat it, since there could be no better definition of comedy. Not  
43 only are we entitled to say that comedy gives us general types, but  
44 we might add that it is the ONLY one of all the arts that aims at the  
45 general; so that once this objective has been attributed to it, we  
46 have said all that it is and all that the rest cannot be. To prove that  
47 such is really the essence of comedy, and that it is in this respect  
48 opposed to tragedy, drama and the other forms of art, we should  
49 begin by defining art in its higher forms: then, gradually coming  
50 down to comic poetry, we should find that this latter is situated on  
51 the border-line between art and life, and that, by the generality of  
52 its subject-matter, it contrasts with the rest of the arts. We cannot  
53 here plunge into so vast a subject of investigation; but we needs  
54 must sketch its main outlines, lest we overlook what, to our mind,  
55 is essential on the comic stage.  
56  
57 What is the object of art? Could reality come into direct contact  
58 with sense and consciousness, could we enter into immediate  
59 communion with things and with ourselves, probably art would be  
60 useless, or rather we should all be artists, for then our soul would  
61 continually vibrate in perfect accord with nature. Our eyes, aided  
62 by memory, would carve out in space and fix in time the most  
63 inimitable of pictures. Hewn in the living marble of the human  
64 form, fragments of statues, beautiful as the relics of antique  
65 statuary, would strike the passing glance. Deep in our souls we  
66 should hear the strains of our inner life's unbroken melody,--a  
67 music that is oftentimes gay, but more frequently plaintive and  
68 always original. All this is around and within us, and yet no whit of  
69 it do we distinctly perceive. Between nature and ourselves, nay,  
70 between ourselves and our own consciousness a veil is interposed:  
71 a veil that is dense and opaque for the common herd,--thin, almost  
72 transparent, for the artist and the poet. What fairy wove that veil?

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4 Was it done in malice or in friendliness? We had to live, and life  
5 demands that we grasp things in their relations to our own needs.  
6 Life is action. Life implies the acceptance only of the  
7 UTILITARIAN side of things in order to respond to them by  
8 appropriate reactions: all other impressions must be dimmed or  
9 else reach us vague and blurred. I look and I think I see, I listen  
10 and I think I hear, I examine myself and I think I am reading the  
11 very depths of my heart. But what I see and hear of the outer world  
12 is purely and simply a selection made by my senses to serve as a  
13 light to my conduct; what I know of myself is what comes to the  
14 surface, what participates in my actions. My senses and my  
15 consciousness, therefore, give me no more than a practical  
16 simplification of reality. In the vision they furnish me of myself and  
17 of things, the differences that are useless to man are obliterated,  
18 the resemblances that are useful to him are emphasised; ways are  
19 traced out for me in advance, along which my activity is to travel.  
20 These ways are the ways which all mankind has trod before me.  
21 Things have been classified with a view to the use I can derive from  
22 them. And it is this classification I perceive, far more clearly than  
23 the colour and the shape of things. Doubtless man is vastly  
24 superior to the lower animals in this respect. It is not very likely  
25 that the eye of a wolf makes any distinction between a kid and a  
26 lamb; both appear to the wolf as the same identical quarry, alike  
27 easy to pounce upon, alike good to devour. We, for our part, make  
28 a distinction between a goat and a sheep; but can we tell one goat  
29 from another, one sheep from another? The INDIVIDUALITY of  
30 things or of beings escapes us, unless it is materially to our  
31 advantage to perceive it. Even when we do take note of it--as when  
32 we distinguish one man from another--it is not the individuality  
33 itself that the eye grasps, i.e., an entirely original harmony of forms  
34 and colours, but only one or two features that will make practical  
35 recognition easier.  
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40 In short, we do not see the actual things themselves; in most cases  
41 we confine ourselves to reading the labels affixed to them. This  
42 tendency, the result of need, has become even more pronounced  
43 under the influence of speech; for words--with the exception of  
44 proper nouns--all denote genera. The word, which only takes note  
45 of the most ordinary function and commonplace aspect of the  
46 thing, intervenes between it and ourselves, and would conceal its  
47 form from our eyes, were that form not already masked beneath  
48 the necessities that brought the word into existence. Not only  
49 external objects, but even our own mental states, are screened from  
50 us in their inmost, their personal aspect, in the original life they  
51 possess. When we feel love or hatred, when we are gay or sad, is it  
52 really the feeling itself that reaches our consciousness with those  
53 innumerable fleeting shades of meaning and deep resounding  
54 echoes that make it something altogether our own? We should all,  
55 were it so, be novelists or poets or musicians. Mostly, however, we  
56 perceive nothing but the outward display of our mental state. We  
57 catch only the impersonal aspect of our feelings, that aspect which  
58 speech has set down once for all because it is almost the same, in  
59 the same conditions, for all men. Thus, even in our own individual,  
60 individuality escapes our ken. We move amidst generalities and  
61 symbols, as within a tilt-yard in which our force is effectively pitted  
62 against other forces; and fascinated by action, tempted by it, for  
63 our own good, on to the field it has selected, we live in a zone  
64 midway between things and ourselves, externally to things,  
65 externally also to ourselves. From time to time, however, in a fit of  
66 absentmindedness, nature raises up souls that are more detached  
67 from life. Not with that intentional, logical, systematical  
68 detachment--the result of reflection and philosophy--but rather  
69 with natural detachment, one innate in the structure of sense or  
70 consciousness, which at once reveals itself by a virginal manner, so  
71 to speak, of seeing, hearing or thinking. Were this detachment  
72 complete, did the soul no longer cleave to action by any of its

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4 perceptions, it would be the soul of an artist such as the world has  
5 never yet seen. It would excel alike in every art at the same time; or  
6 rather, it would fuse them all into one. It would perceive all things  
7 in their native purity: the forms, colours, sounds of the physical  
8 world as well as the subtlest movements of the inner life. But this  
9 is asking too much of nature. Even for such of us as she has made  
10 artists, it is by accident, and on one side only, that she has lifted  
11 the veil. In one direction only has she forgotten to rivet the  
12 perception to the need. And since each direction corresponds to  
13 what we call a SENSE--through one of his senses, and through that  
14 sense alone, is the artist usually wedded to art. Hence, originally,  
15 the diversity of arts. Hence also the speciality of predispositions.  
16 This one applies himself to colours and forms, and since he loves  
17 colour for colour and form for form, since he perceives them for  
18 their sake and not for his own, it is the inner life of things that he  
19 sees appearing through their forms and colours. Little by little he  
20 insinuates it into our own perception, baffled though we may be at  
21 the outset. For a few moments at least, he diverts us from the  
22 prejudices of form and colour that come between ourselves and  
23 reality. And thus he realises the loftiest ambition of art, which here  
24 consists in revealing to us nature. Others, again, retire within  
25 themselves. Beneath the thousand rudimentary actions which are  
26 the outward and visible signs of an emotion, behind the  
27 commonplace, conventional expression that both reveals and  
28 conceals an individual mental state, it is the emotion, the original  
29 mood, to which they attain in its undefiled essence. And then, to  
30 induce us to make the same effort ourselves, they contrive to make  
31 us see something of what they have seen: by rhythmical  
32 arrangement of words, which thus become organised and  
33 animated with a life of their own, they tell us--or rather suggest--  
34 things that speech was not calculated to express. Others delve yet  
35 deeper still. Beneath these joys and sorrows which can, at a pinch,  
36 be translated into language, they grasp something that has  
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41 nothing in common with language, certain rhythms of life and  
42 breath that. Are closer to man than his inmost feelings, being the  
43 living law-- varying with each individual--of his enthusiasm and  
44 despair, his hopes and regrets. By setting free and emphasising this  
45 music, they force it upon our attention; they compel us, willy-nilly,  
46 to fall in with it, like passers-by who join in a dance. And thus they  
47 impel us to set in motion, in the depths of our being, some secret  
48 chord which was only waiting to thrill. So art, whether it be  
49 painting or sculpture, poetry or music, has no other object than to  
50 brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially  
51 accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us,  
52 in order to bring us face to face with reality itself. It is from a  
53 misunderstanding on this point that the dispute between realism  
54 and idealism in art has arisen. Art is certainly only a more direct  
55 vision of reality. But this purity of perception implies a break with  
56 utilitarian convention, an innate and specially localised  
57 disinterestedness of sense or consciousness, in short, a certain  
58 immateriality of life, which is what has always been called idealism.  
59 So that we might say, without in any way playing upon the  
60 meaning of the words, that realism is in the work when idealism is  
61 in the soul, and that it is only through ideality that we can resume  
62 contact with reality.  
63  
64 Dramatic art forms no exception to this law. What drama goes  
65 forth to discover and brings to light, is a deep-seated reality that is  
66 veiled from us, often in our own interests, by the necessities of life.  
67 What is this reality? What are these necessities? Poetry always  
68 expresses inward states. But amongst these states some arise  
69 mainly from contact with our fellow-men. They are the most  
70 intense as well as the most violent. As contrary electricities attract  
71 each other and accumulate between the two plates of the condenser  
72 from which the spark will presently flash, so, by simply bringing  
73 people together, strong attractions and repulsions take place,

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4 followed by an utter loss of balance, in a word, by that  
5 electrification of the soul known as passion. Were man to give way  
6 to the impulse of his natural feelings, were there neither social nor  
7 moral law, these outbursts of violent feeling would be the ordinary  
8 rule in life. But utility demands that these outbursts should be  
9 foreseen and averted. Man must live in society, and consequently  
10 submit to rules. And what interest advises, reason commands: duty  
11 calls, and we have to obey the summons. Under this dual influence  
12 has perforce been formed an outward layer of feelings and ideas  
13 which make for permanence, aim at becoming common to all men,  
14 and cover, when they are not strong enough to extinguish it, the  
15 inner fire of individual passions. The slow progress of mankind in  
16 the direction of an increasingly peaceful social life has gradually  
17 consolidated this layer, just as the life of our planet itself has been  
18 one long effort to cover over with a cool and solid crust the fiery  
19 mass of seething metals. But volcanic eruptions occur. And if the  
20 earth were a living being, as mythology has feigned, most likely  
21 when in repose it would take delight in dreaming of these sudden  
22 explosions, whereby it suddenly resumes possession of its  
23 innermost nature. Such is just the kind of pleasure that is provided  
24 for us by drama. Beneath the quiet humdrum life that reason and  
25 society have fashioned for us, it stirs something within us which  
26 luckily does not explode, but which it makes us feel in its inner  
27 tension. It offers nature her revenge upon society. Sometimes it  
28 makes straight for the goal, summoning up to the surface, from the  
29 depths below, passions that produce a general upheaval.  
30 Sometimes it effects a flank movement, as is often the case in  
31 contemporary drama; with a skill that is frequently sophistical, it  
32 shows up the inconsistencies of society; it exaggerates the shams  
33 and shibboleths of the social law; and so indirectly, by merely  
34 dissolving or corroding the outer crust, it again brings us back to  
35 the inner core. But, in both cases, whether it weakens society or  
36 strengthens nature, it has the same  
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41 end in view: that of laying bare a secret portion of ourselves,--what  
42 might be called the tragic element in our character.  
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44 This is indeed the impression we get after seeing a stirring drama.  
45 What has just interested us is not so much what we have been told  
46 about others as the glimpse we have caught of ourselves--a whole host  
47 of ghostly feelings, emotions and events that would fain have come  
48 into real existence, but, fortunately for us, did not. It also seems as if  
49 an appeal had been made within us to certain ancestral memories  
50 belonging to a far-away past--memories so deep-seated and so foreign  
51 to our present life that this latter, for a moment, seems something  
52 unreal and conventional, for which we shall have to serve a fresh  
53 apprenticeship. So it is indeed a deeper reality that drama draws up  
54 from beneath our superficial and utilitarian attainments, and this art  
55 has the same end in view as all the others.  
56  
57 Hence it follows that art always aims at what is INDIVIDUAL.  
58 What the artist fixes on his canvas is something he has seen at a  
59 certain spot, on a certain day, at a certain hour, with a colouring  
60 that will never be seen again. What the poet sings of is a certain  
61 mood which was his, and his alone, and which will never return.  
62 What the dramatist unfolds before us is the life-history of a soul, a  
63 living tissue of feelings and events--something, in short, which  
64 has once happened and can never be repeated. We may, indeed,  
65 give general names to these feelings, but they cannot be the same  
66 thing in another soul. They are INDIVIDUALISED. Thereby, and  
67 thereby only, do they belong to art; for generalities, symbols or  
68 even types, form the current coin of our daily perception. How,  
69 then, does a misunderstanding on this point arise?  
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71 The reason lies in the fact that two very different things have been  
72 mistaken for each other: the generality of things and that of the  
73 opinions we come to regarding them. Because a feeling is generally

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4 recognised as true, it does not follow that it is a general feeling.  
5 Nothing could be more unique than the character of Hamlet.  
6 Though he may resemble other men in some respects, it is clearly  
7 not on that account that he interests us most. But he is universally  
8 accepted and regarded as a living character. In this sense only is he  
9 universally true. The same holds good of all the other products of  
10 art. Each of them is unique, and yet, if it bear the stamp of genius,  
11 it will come to be accepted by everybody. Why will it be accepted?  
12 And if it is unique of its kind, by what sign do we know it to be  
13 genuine? Evidently, by the very effort it forces us to make against  
14 our predispositions in order to see sincerely. Sincerity is  
15 contagious. What the artist has seen we shall probably never see  
16 again, or at least never see in exactly the same way; but if he has  
17 actually seen it, the attempt he has made to lift the veil compels our  
18 imitation. His work is an example which we take as a lesson. And  
19 the efficacy of the lesson is the exact standard of the genuineness of  
20 the work. Consequently, truth bears within itself a power of  
21 conviction, nay, of conversion, which is the sign that enables us to  
22 recognise it. The greater the work and the more profound the dimly  
23 apprehended truth, the longer may the effect be in coming, but, on  
24 the other hand, the more universal will that effect tend to become.  
25 So the universality here lies in the effect produced, and not in the  
26 cause.

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28 Altogether different is the object of comedy. Here it is in the work  
29 itself that the generality lies. Comedy depicts characters we have  
30 already come across and shall meet with again. It takes note of  
31 similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes. It even  
32 creates new types, if necessary. In this respect it forms a contrast  
33 to all the other arts.

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35 The very titles of certain classical comedies are significant in  
36 themselves. *Le Misanthrope*, *l'Avare*, *le Joueur*, *le Distrain*, etc.,  
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41 are names of whole classes of people; and even when a character  
42 comedy has a proper noun as its title, this proper noun is  
43 speedily swept away, by the very weight of its contents, into the  
44 stream of common nouns. We say "*a Tartuffe*," but we should  
45 never say "*a Phedre*" or "*a Polyeucte*."  
46  
47 Above all, a tragic poet will never think of grouping around the  
48 chief character in his play secondary characters to serve as  
49 simplified copies, so to speak, of the former. The hero of a tragedy  
50 represents an individuality unique of its kind. It may be possible to  
51 imitate him, but then we shall be passing, whether consciously or  
52 not, from the tragic to the comic. No one is like him, because he is  
53 like no one. But a remarkable instinct, on the contrary, impels the  
54 comic poet, once he has elaborated his central character, to cause  
55 other characters, displaying the same general traits, to revolve as  
56 satellites round him. Many comedies have either a plural noun or  
57 some collective term as their title. "*Les Femmes savantes*," "*Les*  
58 "*Precieuses ridicules*," "*Le Monde ou l'on s'ennuie*," etc., represent  
59 so many rallying points on the stage adopted by different groups of  
60 characters, all belonging to one identical type. It would be  
61 interesting to analyse this tendency in comedy. Maybe dramatists  
62 have caught a glimpse of a fact recently brought forward by mental  
63 pathology, viz. That cranks of the same kind are drawn, by a secret  
64 attraction, to seek each other's company. Without precisely coming  
65 within the province of medicine, the comic individual, as we have  
66 shown, is in some way absentminded, and the transition from  
67 absent- mindedness to crankiness is continuous. But there is also  
68 another reason. If the comic poet's object is to offer us types, that  
69 is to say, characters capable of self-repetition, how can he set about  
70 it better than by showing us, in each instance, several different  
71 copies of the same model? That is just what the naturalist does in  
72 order to define a species. He enumerates and describes its main  
73 varieties.

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5 This essential difference between tragedy and comedy, the  
6 former being concerned with individuals and the latter with  
7 classes, is revealed in yet another way. It appears in the first draft  
8 of the work. From the outset it is manifested by two radically  
9 different methods of observation.  
10  
11 Though the assertion may seem paradoxical, a study of other men  
12 is probably not necessary to the tragic poet. We find some of the  
13 great poets have lived a retiring, homely sort of life, without having  
14 a chance of witnessing around them an outburst of the passions  
15 they have so faithfully depicted. But, supposing even they had  
16 witnessed such a spectacle, it is doubtful whether they would have  
17 found it of much use. For what interests us in the work of the poet  
18 is the glimpse we get of certain profound moods or inner struggles.  
19 Now, this glimpse cannot be obtained from without. Our souls are  
20 impenetrable to one another. Certain signs of passion are all that  
21 we ever apperceive externally. These we interpret--though always,  
22 by the way, defectively--only by analogy with what we have  
23 ourselves experienced. So what we experience is the main point,  
24 and we cannot become thoroughly acquainted with anything but  
25 our own heart-- supposing we ever get so far. Does this mean that  
26 the poet has experienced what he depicts, that he has gone through  
27 the various situations he makes his characters traverse, and lived  
28 the whole of their inner life? Here, too, the biographies of poets  
29 would contradict such a supposition. How, indeed, could the same  
30 man have been Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and many  
31 others? But then a distinction should perhaps here be made  
32 between the personality WE HAVE and all those we might have  
33 had. Our character is the result of a choice that is continually being  
34 renewed. There are points--at all events there seem to be--all along  
35 the way, where we may branch off, and we perceive many possible  
36 directions though we are unable to take more than one.  
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41 To retrace one's steps, and follow to the end the faintly  
42 distinguishable directions, appears to be the essential element in  
43 poetic imagination. Of course, Shakespeare was neither Macbeth,  
44 nor Hamlet, nor Othello; still, he MIGHT HAVE BEEN these  
45 several characters if the circumstances of the case on the one hand,  
46 and the consent of his will on the other, had caused to break out  
47 into explosive action what was nothing more than an inner  
48 prompting. We are strangely mistaken as to the part played by  
49 poetic imagination, if we think it pieces together its heroes out of  
50 fragments filched from right and left, as though it were patching  
51 together a harlequin's motley. Nothing living would result from  
52 that. Life cannot be recomposed; it can only be looked at and  
53 reproduced. Poetic imagination is but a fuller view of reality. If the  
54 characters created by a poet give us the impression of life, it is only  
55 because they are the poet himself,--multiplication or division of  
56 the poet,--the poet plumbing the depths of his own nature in so  
57 powerful an effort of inner observation that he lays hold of the  
58 potential in the real, and takes up what nature has left as a mere  
59 outline or sketch in his soul in order to make of it a finished work  
60 of art.  
61  
62 Altogether different is the kind of observation from which comedy  
63 springs. It is directed outwards. However interested a dramatist  
64 may be in the comic features of human nature, he will hardly go, I  
65 imagine, to the extent of trying to discover his own. Besides, he  
66 would not find them, for we are never ridiculous except in some  
67 point that remains hidden from our own consciousness. It is on  
68 others, then, that such observation must perforce be practised. But  
69 it; will, for this very reason, assume a character of generality that it  
70 cannot have when we apply it to ourselves. Settling on the surface,  
71 it will not be more than skin-deep, dealing with persons at the  
72 point at which they come into contact and become capable of  
73 resembling one another. It will go no farther. Even if it could, it

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4 would not desire to do so, for it would have nothing to gain in the  
5 process.  
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7 To penetrate too far into the personality, to couple the outer effect  
8 with causes that are too deep-seated, would mean to endanger and  
9 in the end to sacrifice all that was laughable in the effect. In order  
10 that we may be tempted to laugh at it, we must localise its cause in  
11 some intermediate region of the soul. Consequently, the effect  
12 must appear to us as an average effect, as expressing an average of  
13 mankind. And, like all averages, this one is obtained by bringing  
14 together scattered data, by comparing analogous cases and  
15 extracting their essence, in short by a process of abstraction and  
16 generalisation similar to that which the physicist brings to bear  
17 upon facts with the object of grouping them under laws. In a word,  
18 method and object are here of the same nature as in the inductive  
19 sciences, in that observation is always external and the result  
20 always general.  
21  
22 And so we come back, by a roundabout way, to the double  
23 conclusion we reached in the course of our investigations. On the  
24 one hand, a person is never ridiculous except through some  
25 mental attribute resembling absent-mindedness, through  
26 something that lives upon him without forming part of his  
27 organism, after the fashion of a parasite; that is the reason this  
28 state of mind is observable from without and capable of being  
29 corrected. But, on the other hand, just because laughter aims at  
30 correcting, it is expedient that the correction should reach as great  
31 a number of persons as possible. This is the reason comic  
32 observation instinctively proceeds to what is general. It chooses  
33 such peculiarities as admit of being reproduced and consequently  
34 are not indissolubly bound up with the individuality of a single  
35 person,—a possibly common sort of uncommonness, so to say,—  
36 peculiarities that are held in common. By transferring them to the  
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41 stage, it creates works which doubtless belong to art in that their  
42 only visible aim is to please, but which will be found to contrast  
43 with other works of art by reason of their generality and also of  
44 their scarcely confessed or scarcely conscious intention to correct  
45 and instruct. So we were probably right in saying that comedy lies  
46 midway between art and life. It is not disinterested as genuine art  
47 is. By organising laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural  
48 environment, it even obeys an impulse of social life. And in this  
49 respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from  
50 society and a return to pure nature.  
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52 II  
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54 Now let us see, in the light of what has gone before, the line to take for  
55 creating an ideally comic type of character, comic in itself, in its  
56 origin, and in all its manifestations. It must be deep-rooted, so as to  
57 supply comedy with inexhaustible matter, and yet superficial, in order  
58 that it may remain within the scope of comedy; invisible to its actual  
59 owner, for the comic ever partakes of the unconscious, but visible to  
60 everybody else, so that it may call forth general laughter, extremely  
61 considerate to its own self, so that it may be displayed without scruple,  
62 but troublesome to others, so that they may repress it without pity;  
63 immediately repressible, so that our laughter may not have been  
64 wasted, but sure of reappearing under fresh aspects, so that laughter  
65 may always find something to do; inseparable from social life,  
66 although insufferable to society; capable—in order that it may assume  
67 the greatest imaginable variety of forms—of being tacked on to all the  
68 vices and even to a good many virtues. Truly a goodly number of  
69 elements to fuse together! But a chemist of the soul, entrusted with  
70 this elaborate preparation, would be somewhat disappointed when  
71 pouring out the contents of his retort. He would find he had taken a  
72 vast deal of trouble to compound a mixture which may be found  
73 ready-made

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4 and free of expense, for it is as widespread throughout mankind  
5 as air throughout nature.  
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7 This mixture is vanity. Probably there is not a single failing that is  
8 more superficial or more deep-rooted. The wounds it receives are  
9 never very serious, and yet they are seldom healed. The services  
10 rendered to it are the most unreal of all services, and yet they are  
11 the very ones that meet with lasting gratitude. It is scarcely a vice,  
12 and yet all the vices are drawn into its orbit and, in proportion as  
13 they become more refined and artificial, tend to be nothing more  
14 than a means of satisfying it. The outcome of social life, since it is  
15 an admiration of ourselves based on the admiration we think we  
16 are inspiring in others, it is even more natural, more universally  
17 innate than egoism; for egoism may be conquered by nature,  
18 whereas only by reflection do we get the better of vanity. It does  
19 not seem, indeed, as if men were ever born modest, unless we dub  
20 with the name of modesty a sort of purely physical bashfulness,  
21 which is nearer to pride than is generally supposed. True modesty  
22 can be nothing but a meditation on vanity. It springs from the  
23 sight of others' mistakes and the dread of being similarly deceived.  
24 It is a sort of scientific cautiousness with respect to what we shall  
25 say and think of ourselves. It is made up of improvements and  
26 after- touches. In short, it is an acquired virtue.  
27  
28 It is no easy matter to define the point at which the anxiety to  
29 become modest may be distinguished from the dread of becoming  
30 ridiculous. But surely, at the outset, this dread and this anxiety are  
31 one and the same thing. A complete investigation into the illusions  
32 of vanity, and into the ridicule that clings to them, would cast a  
33 strange light upon the whole theory of laughter. We should find  
34 laughter performing, with mathematical regularity, one of its main  
35 functions--that of bringing back to complete self- consciousness a  
36 certain self-admiration which is almost automatic, and thus  
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41 obtaining the greatest possible sociability of characters. We should  
42 see that vanity, though it is a natural product of social life, is an  
43 inconvenience to society, just as certain slight poisons, continually  
44 secreted by the human organism, would destroy it in the long run,  
45 if they were not neutralised by other secretions. Laughter is  
46 unceasingly doing work of this kind. In this respect, it might be  
47 said that the specific remedy for vanity is laughter, and that the  
48 one failing that is essentially laughable is vanity.  
49  
50 While dealing with the comic in form and movement, we showed  
51 how any simple image, laughable in itself, is capable of worming its  
52 way into other images of a more complex nature and instilling into  
53 them something of its comic essence; thus, the highest forms of the  
54 comic can sometimes be explained by the lowest. The inverse  
55 process, however, is perhaps even more common, and many coarse  
56 comic effects are the direct result of a drop from some very subtle  
57 comic element. For instance, vanity, that higher form of the comic,  
58 is an element we are prone to look for, minutely though  
59 unconsciously, in every manifestation of human activity. We look  
60 for it if only to laugh at it. Indeed, our imagination often locates it  
61 where it has no business to be. Perhaps we must attribute to this  
62 source the altogether coarse comic element in certain effects which  
63 psychologists have very inadequately explained by contrast: a short  
64 man bowing his head to pass beneath a large door; two individuals,  
65 one very tall the other a mere dwarf, gravely walking along arm-in-  
66 arm, etc. By scanning narrowly this latter image, we shall probably  
67 find that the shorter of the two persons seems as though he were  
68 trying TO RAISE HIMSELF to the height of the taller, like the frog  
69 that wanted to make itself as large as the ox.  
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71 III



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4 It would be quite impossible to go through all the peculiarities of  
5 character that either coalesce or compete with vanity in order to  
6 force themselves upon the attention of the comic poet. We have  
7 shown that all failings may become laughable, and even,  
8 occasionally, many a good quality. Even though a list of all the  
9 peculiarities that have ever been found ridiculous were drawn up,  
10 comedy would manage to add to them, not indeed by creating  
11 artificial ones, but by discovering lines of comic development that  
12 had hitherto gone unnoticed; thus does imagination isolate ever  
13 fresh figures in the intricate design of one and the same piece of  
14 tapestry. The essential condition, as we know, is that the  
15 peculiarity observed should straightway appear as a kind of  
16 CATEGORY into which a number of individuals can step.

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18 Now, there are ready-made categories established by society itself,  
19 and necessary to it because it is based on the division of labour.  
20 We mean the various trades, public services and professions. Each  
21 particular profession impresses on its corporate members certain  
22 habits of mind and peculiarities of character in which they  
23 resemble each other and also distinguish themselves from the rest.  
24 Small societies are thus formed within the bosom of Society at  
25 large. Doubtless they arise from the very organisation of Society as  
26 a whole. And yet, if they held too much aloof, there would be a risk  
27 of their proving harmful to sociability.

28  
29 Now, it is the business of laughter to repress any separatist  
30 tendency. Its function is to convert rigidity into plasticity, to  
31 readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the  
32 corners wherever they are met with. Accordingly, we here find a  
33 species of the comic whose varieties might be calculated  
34 beforehand. This we shall call the PROFESSIONAL COMIC.

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39 Instead of taking up these varieties in detail, we prefer to lay stress  
40 upon what they have in common. In the forefront we find  
41 professional vanity. Each one of M. Jourdain's teachers exalts his  
42 own art above all the rest. In a play of Labiche there is a character  
43 who cannot understand how it is possible to be anything else than  
44 a timber merchant. Naturally he is a timber merchant himself.

45 Note that vanity here tends to merge into SOLEMNITY, in  
46 proportion to the degree of quackery there is in the profession  
47 under consideration. For it is a remarkable fact that the more  
48 questionable an art, science or occupation is, the more those who  
49 practise it are inclined to regard themselves as invested with a  
50 kind of priesthood and to claim that all should bow before its  
51 mysteries. Useful professions are clearly meant for the public, but  
52 those whose utility is more dubious can only justify their existence  
53 by assuming that the public is meant for them: now, this is just the  
54 illusion that lies at the root of solemnity. Almost everything comic  
55 in Moliere's doctors comes from this source. They treat the patient  
56 as though he had been made for the doctors, and nature herself as  
57 an appendage to medicine.

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59 Another form of this comic rigidity is what may be called  
60 PROFESSIONAL CALLOUSNESS. The comic character is so  
61 tightly jammed into the rigid frame of his functions that he has no  
62 room to move or to be moved like other men. Only call to mind the  
63 answer Isabelle receives from Perrin Dandin, the judge, when she  
64 asks him how he can bear to look on when the poor wretches are  
65 being tortured: Bah! Cela fait toujours passer une heure ou deux.

66  
67 [Footnote: Bah! It always helps to while away an hour or two.]

68  
69 Does not Tartuffe also manifest a sort of professional callousness  
70 when he says--it is true, by the mouth of Orgon: Et je verrais

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4 mourir frere, enfants, mere et femme, Que je m'en souciera  
5 autant que de cela!  
6  
7 [Footnote: Let brother, children, mother and wife all die,  
8 what should I care!]  
9  
10 The device most in use, however, for making a profession ludicrous  
11 is to confine it, so to say, within the four corners of its own  
12 particular jargon. Judge, doctor and soldier are made to apply the  
13 language of law, medicine and strategy to the everyday affairs of  
14 life, as though they had become incapable of talking like ordinary  
15 people. As a rule, this kind of the ludicrous is rather coarse. It  
16 becomes more refined, however, as we have already said, if it  
17 reveals some peculiarity of character in addition to a professional  
18 habit. We will instance only Regnard's *Joueur*, who expresses  
19 himself with the utmost originality in terms borrowed from  
20 gambling, giving his valet the name of Hector, and calling his  
21 betrothed Pallas, du nom connu de la Dame de Pique; [Footnote:  
22 Pallas, from the well-known name of the Queen of Spades.] or  
23 Moliere's *Femmes savantes*, where the comic element evidently  
24 consists largely in the translation of ideas of a scientific nature into  
25 terms of feminine sensibility: "Epicure me plait..." (Epicurus is  
26 charming), "J'aime les tourbillons" (I dote on vortices), etc. You  
27 have only to read the third act to find that Armande, Philaminte  
28 and Belise almost invariably express themselves in this style.  
29  
30 Proceeding further in the same direction, we discover that there is also  
31 such a thing as a professional logic, i.e. certain ways of reasoning that  
32 are customary in certain circles, which are valid for these circles, but  
33 untrue for the rest of the public. Now, the contrast between these two  
34 kinds of logic--one particular, the other universal--produces comic  
35 effects of a special nature, on which we may advantageously dwell at  
36 greater length. Here we touch upon a  
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41 point of some consequence in the theory of laughter. We propose,  
42 therefore, to give the question a wider scope and consider it in its  
43 most general aspect.  
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45 IV  
46  
47 Eager as we have been to discover the deep-seated cause of the  
48 comic, we have so far had to neglect one of its most striking  
49 phenomena. We refer to the logic peculiar to the comic character  
50 and the comic group, a strange kind of logic, which, in some cases,  
51 may include a good deal of absurdity.  
52  
53 Theophile Gautier said that the comic in its extreme form was the logic  
54 of the absurd. More than one philosophy of laughter revolves round a  
55 like idea. Every comic effect, it is said, implies contradiction in some of  
56 its aspects. What makes us laugh is alleged to be the absurd realised in  
57 concrete shape, a "palpable absurdity";--or, again, an apparent  
58 absurdity, which we swallow for the moment only to rectify it  
59 immediately afterwards;--or, better still, something absurd from one  
60 point of view though capable of a natural explanation from another,  
61 etc. All these theories may contain some portion of the truth; but, in  
62 the first place, they apply only to certain rather obvious comic effects,  
63 and then, even where they do apply, they evidently take no account of  
64 the characteristic element of the laughable, that is, the PARTICULAR  
65 KIND of absurdity the comic contains when it does contain something  
66 absurd. Is an immediate proof of this desired? You have only to choose  
67 one of these definitions and make up effects in accordance with the  
68 formula: twice out of every three times there will be nothing laughable  
69 in the effect obtained. So we see that absurdity, when met with in the  
70 comic, is not absurdity IN GENERAL. It is an absurdity of a definite  
71 kind. It does not create the comic; rather, we might say that the comic  
72 infuses into it its own

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4 particular essence. It is not a cause, but an effect--an effect of a  
5 very special kind, which reflects the special nature of its cause.  
6 Now, this cause is known to us; consequently we shall have no  
7 trouble in understanding the nature of the effect.

8  
9 Assume, when out for a country walk, that you notice on the top of  
10 a hill something that bears a faint resemblance to a large  
11 motionless body with revolving arms. So far you do not know what  
12 it is, but you begin to search amongst your IDEAS--that is to say, in  
13 the present instance, amongst the recollections at your disposal--  
14 for that recollection which will best fit in with what you see. Almost  
15 immediately the image of a windmill comes into your mind: the  
16 object before you is a windmill. No matter if, before leaving the  
17 house, you have just been reading fairy-tales telling of giants with  
18 enormous arms; for although common sense consists mainly in  
19 being able to remember, it consists even more in being able to  
20 forget. Common sense represents the endeavour of a mind  
21 continually adapting itself anew and changing ideas when it  
22 changes objects. It is the mobility of the intelligence conforming  
23 exactly to the mobility of things. It is the moving continuity of our  
24 attention to life. But now, let us take Don Quixote setting out for  
25 the wars. The romances he has been reading all tell of knights  
26 encountering, on the way, giant adversaries. He therefore must  
27 needs encounter a giant. This idea of a giant is a privileged  
28 recollection which has taken its abode in his mind and lies there in  
29 wait, motionless, watching for an opportunity to sally forth and  
30 become embodied in a thing. It IS BENT on entering the material  
31 world, and so the very first object he sees bearing the faintest  
32 resemblance to a giant is invested with the form of one. Thus Don  
33 Quixote sees giants where we see windmills. This is comical; it is  
34 also absurd. But is it a mere absurdity,--an absurdity of an  
35 indefinite kind?  
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40 It is a very special inversion of common sense. It consists in  
41 seeking to mould things on an idea of one's own, instead of  
42 moulding one's ideas on things,--in seeing before us what we are  
43 thinking of, instead of thinking of what we see. Good sense would  
44 have us leave all our memories in their proper rank and file; then  
45 the appropriate memory will every time answer the summons of  
46 the situation of the moment and serve only to interpret it. But in  
47 Don Quixote, on the contrary, there is one group of memories in  
48 command of all the rest and dominating the character itself: thus it  
49 is reality that now has to bow to imagination, its only function  
50 being to supply fancy with a body. Once the illusion has been  
51 created, Don Quixote develops it logically enough in all its  
52 consequences; he proceeds with the certainty and precision of a  
53 somnambulist who is acting his dream. Such, then, is the origin of  
54 his delusions, and such the particular logic which controls this  
55 particular absurdity. Now, is this logic peculiar to Don Quixote?

56  
57 We have shown that the comic character always errs through  
58 obstinacy of mind or of disposition, through absentmindedness, in  
59 short, through automatism. At the root of the comic there is a sort  
60 of rigidity which compels its victims to keep strictly to one path, to  
61 follow it straight along, to shut their ears and refuse to listen. In  
62 Moliere's plays how many comic scenes can be reduced to this  
63 simple type: A CHARACTER FOLLOWING UP HIS ONE IDEA,  
64 and continually recurring to it in spite of incessant interruptions!  
65 The transition seems to take place imperceptibly from the man  
66 who will listen to nothing to the one who will see nothing, and from  
67 this latter to the one who sees only what he wants to see. A  
68 stubborn spirit ends by adjusting things to its own way of thinking,  
69 instead of accommodating its thoughts to the things. So every  
70 comic character is on the highroad to the above-mentioned  
71 illusion, and Don Quixote furnishes us with the general type of  
72 comic absurdity.

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5 Is there a name for this inversion of common sense? Doubtless it  
6 may be found, in either an acute or a chronic form, in certain  
7 types of insanity. In many of its aspects it resembles a fixed idea.  
8 But neither insanity in general, nor fixed ideas in particular, are  
9 provocative of laughter: they are diseases, and arouse our pity.  
10  
11 Laughter, as we have seen, is incompatible with emotion. If there  
12 exists a madness that is laughable, it can only be one compatible with  
13 the general health of the mind,—a sane type of madness, one might  
14 say. Now, there is a sane state of the mind that resembles madness in  
15 every respect, in which we find the same associations of ideas as we  
16 do in lunacy, the same peculiar logic as in a fixed idea. This state is  
17 that of dreams. So either our analysis is incorrect, or it must be  
18 capable of being stated in the following theorem: Comic absurdity is  
19 of the same nature as that of dreams.  
20  
21 The behaviour of the intellect in a dream is exactly what we have  
22 just been describing. The mind, enamoured of itself, now seeks in  
23 the outer world nothing more than a pretext for realising its  
24 imaginations. A confused murmur of sounds still reaches the ear,  
25 colours enter the field of vision, the senses are not completely shut  
26 in. But the dreamer, instead of appealing to the whole of his  
27 recollections for the interpretation of what his senses perceive,  
28 makes use of what he perceives to give substance to the particular  
29 recollection he favours: thus, according to the mood of the  
30 dreamer and the idea that fills his imagination at the time, a gust  
31 of wind blowing down the chimney becomes the howl of a wild  
32 beast or a tuneful melody. Such is the ordinary mechanism of  
33 illusion in dreams.  
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35 Now, if comic illusion is similar to dream illusion, if the logic of the  
36 comic is the logic of dreams, we may expect to discover in the logic  
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41 of the laughable all the peculiarities of dream logic. Here, again,  
42 we shall find an illustration of the law with which we are well  
43 acquainted: given one form of the laughable, other forms that are  
44 lacking in the same comic essence become laughable from their  
45 outward resemblance to the first. Indeed, it is not difficult to see  
46 that any PLAY OF IDEAS may afford us amusement if only it bring  
47 back to mind, more or less distinctly, the play of dreamland.  
48  
49 We shall first call attention to a certain general relaxation of the  
50 rules of reasoning. The reasonings at which we laugh are those we  
51 know to be false, but which we might accept as true were we to  
52 hear them in a dream. They counterfeit true reasoning just  
53 sufficiently to deceive a mind dropping off to sleep. There is still an  
54 element of logic in them, if you will, but it is a logic lacking in  
55 tension and, for that very reason, affording us relief from  
56 intellectual effort. Many "witticisms" are reasonings of this kind,  
57 considerably abridged reasonings, of which we are given only the  
58 beginning and the end. Such play upon ideas evolves in the  
59 direction of a play upon words in proportion as the relations set up  
60 between the ideas become more superficial: gradually we come to  
61 take no account of the meaning of the words we hear, but only of  
62 their sound. It might be instructive to compare with dreams  
63 certain comic scenes in which one of the characters systematically  
64 repeats in a nonsensical fashion what another character whispers  
65 in his ear. If you fall asleep with people talking round you, you  
66 sometimes find that what they say gradually becomes devoid of  
67 meaning, that the sounds get distorted, as it were, and recombine  
68 in a haphazard fashion to form in your mind the strangest of  
69 meanings, and that you are reproducing between yourself and the  
70 different speakers the scene between Petit-Jean and The  
71 Prompter. [Footnote: *Les Plaideurs* (Racine).]

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4 There are also COMIC OBSESSIONS that seem to bear a great  
5 resemblance to dream obsessions. Who has not had the experience  
6 of seeing the same image appear in several successive dreams,  
7 assuming a plausible meaning in each of them, whereas these  
8 dreams had no other point in common. Effects of repetition  
9 sometimes present this special form on the stage or in fiction:  
10 some of them, in fact, sound as though they belonged to a dream.  
11 It may be the same with the burden of many a song: it persistently  
12 recurs, always unchanged, at the end of every verse, each time with  
13 a different meaning.

14  
15 Not infrequently do we notice in dreams a particular  
16 CRESCENDO, a weird effect that grows more pronounced as we  
17 proceed. The first concession extorted from reason introduces a  
18 second; and this one, another of a more serious nature; and so on  
19 till the crowning absurdity is reached. Now, this progress towards  
20 the absurd produces on the dreamer a very peculiar sensation.  
21 Such is probably the experience of the tippler when he feels himself  
22 pleasantly drifting into a state of blankness in which neither reason  
23 nor propriety has any meaning for him. Now, consider whether  
24 some of Moliere's plays would not produce the same sensation: for  
25 instance, *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, which, after beginning  
26 almost reasonably, develops into a sequence of all sorts of  
27 absurdities. Consider also the *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, where the  
28 different characters seem to allow themselves to be caught up in a  
29 very whirlwind of madness as the play proceeds. "If it is possible to  
30 find a man more completely mad, I will go and publish it in Rome."  
31 This sentence, which warns us that the play is over, rouses us from  
32 the increasingly extravagant dream into which, along with M.  
33 Jourdain, we have been sinking.

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35 But, above all, there is a special madness that is peculiar to  
36 dreams. There are certain special contradictions so natural to the  
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41 imagination of a dreamer, and so absurd to the reason of a man  
42 wide- awake, that it would be impossible to give a full and correct  
43 idea of their nature to anyone who had not experienced them. We  
44 allude to the strange fusion that a dream often effects between two  
45 persons who henceforth form only one and yet remain distinct.  
46 Generally one of these is the dreamer himself. He feels he has not  
47 ceased to be what he is; yet he has become someone else. He is  
48 himself, and not himself. He hears himself speak and sees himself  
49 act, but he feels that some other "he" has borrowed his body and  
50 stolen his voice. Or perhaps he is conscious of speaking and acting  
51 as usual, but he speaks of himself as a stranger with whom he has  
52 nothing in common; he has stepped out of his own self. Does it not  
53 seem as though we found this same extraordinary confusion in  
54 many a comic scene? I am not speaking of *Amphitryon*, in which  
55 play the confusion is perhaps suggested to the mind of the  
56 spectator, though the bulk of the comic effect proceeds rather from  
57 what we have already called a "reciprocal interference of two  
58 series." I am speaking of the extravagant and comic reasonings in  
59 which we really meet with this confusion in its pure form, though  
60 it requires some looking into to pick it out. For instance, listen to  
61 Mark Twain's replies to the reporter who called to interview him:

62  
63 QUESTION. Isn't that a brother of yours? ANSWER. Oh! Yes,  
64 yes, yes! Now you remind me of it, that WAS a brother of mine.  
65 That's William-

66  
67 - BILL we called him. Poor old Bill!

68  
69 Q. Why? Is he dead, then? A. Ah! Well, I suppose so. We never  
70 could tell. There was a great mystery about it.

71  
72 Q. That is sad, very sad. He disappeared, then? A. Well, yes, in a  
73 sort of general way. We buried him.

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5 Q. BURIED him! BURIED him, without knowing whether he was  
6 dead or not? A. Oh no! Not that. He was dead enough.  
7  
8 Q. Well, I confess that I can't understand this. If you buried him,  
9 and you knew he was dead--A. No! No! We only thought he was.  
10  
11 Q. Oh, I see! He came to life again? A. I bet he didn't.  
12  
13 Q. Well, I never heard anything like this. SOMEBODY was dead.  
14 SOMEBODY was buried. Now, where was the mystery? A. Ah!  
15 That's just it! That's it exactly. You see, we were twins,--defunct  
16 and I,--and we got mixed in the bath-tub when we were only two  
17 weeks old, and one of us was drowned. But we didn't know which.  
18 Some think it was Bill. Some think it was me.  
19  
20 Q. Well, that is remarkable. What do YOU think? A. Goodness  
21 knows! I would give whole worlds to know. This solemn, this awful  
22 tragedy has cast a gloom over my whole life. But I will tell you a  
23 secret now, which I have never revealed to any creature before.  
24 One of us had a peculiar mark,--a large mole on the back of his left  
25 hand: that was ME. THAT CHILD WAS THE ONE THAT WAS  
26 DROWNED! ... etc., etc.  
27  
28 A close examination will show us that the absurdity of this  
29 dialogue is by no means an absurdity of an ordinary type. It would  
30 disappear were not the speaker himself one of the twins in the  
31 story. It results entirely from the fact that Mark Twain asserts he is  
32 one of these twins, whilst all the time he talks as though he were a  
33 third person who tells the tale. In many of our dreams we adopt  
34 exactly the same method.  
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36 V  
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42 Regarded from this latter point of view, the comic seems to show  
43 itself in a form somewhat different from the one we lately  
44 attributed to it. Up to this point, we have regarded laughter as first  
45 and foremost a means of correction. If you take the series of comic  
46 varieties and isolate the predominant types at long intervals, you  
47 will find that all the intervening varieties borrow their comic  
48 quality from their resemblance to these types, and that the types  
49 themselves are so many models of impertinence with regard to  
50 society. To these impertinences society retorts by laughter, an even  
51 greater impertinence. So evidently there is nothing very benevolent  
52 in laughter. It seems rather inclined to return evil for evil.  
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55 But this is not what we are immediately struck by in our first  
56 impression of the laughable. The comic character is often one with  
57 whom, to begin with, our mind, or rather our body, sympathises.  
58 By this is meant that we put ourselves for a very short time in his  
59 place, adopt his gestures, words, arid actions, and, if amused by  
60 anything laughable in him, invite him, in imagination, to share his  
61 amusement with us; in fact, we treat him first as a playmate. So, in  
62 the laughter we find a "hail-fellow-well-met" spirit--as far, at least,  
63 as appearances go--which it would be wrong of us not to take into  
64 consideration. In particular, there is in laughter a movement of  
65 relaxation which has often been noticed, and the reason of which  
66 we must try to discover. Nowhere is this impression more  
67 noticeable than in the last few examples. In them, indeed, we shall  
68 find its explanation.  
69  
70 When the comic character automatically follows up his idea, he  
71 ultimately thinks, speaks and acts as though he were dreaming.  
72 Now, a dream is a relaxation. To remain in touch with things and  
73 men, to see nothing but what is existent and think nothing but

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4 what is consistent, demands a continuous effort of intellectual  
5 tension. This effort is common sense. And to remain sensible is,  
6 indeed, to remain at work. But to detach oneself from things and  
7 yet continue to perceive images, to break away from logic and yet  
8 continue to string together ideas, is to indulge in play or, if you  
9 prefer, in *dolce far niente*. So, comic absurdity gives us from the  
10 outset the impression of playing with ideas. Our first impulse is to  
11 join in the game. That relieves us from the strain of thinking. Now,  
12 the same might be said of the other forms of the laughable. Deep-  
13 rooted in the comic, there is always a tendency, we said, to take the  
14 line of least resistance, generally that of habit. The comic character  
15 no longer tries to be ceaselessly adapting and readapting himself to  
16 the society of which he is a member. He slackens in the attention  
17 that is due to life. He more or less resembles the absentminded.  
18 Maybe his will is here even more concerned than his intellect, and  
19 there is not so much a want of attention as a lack of tension; still,  
20 in some way or another, he is absent, away from his work, taking it  
21 easy. He abandons social convention, as indeed--in the case we  
22 have just been considering--he abandoned logic. Here, too, our  
23 first impulse is to accept the invitation to take it easy. For a short  
24 time, at all events, we join in the game. And that relieves us from  
25 the strain of living.

26  
27 But we rest only for a short time. The sympathy that is capable of  
28 entering into the impression of the comic is a very fleeting one. It  
29 also comes from a lapse in attention. Thus, a stern father may at  
30 times forget himself and join in some prank his child is playing,  
31 only to check himself at once in order to correct it.

32  
33 Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it  
34 must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is  
35 directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken  
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40 with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy  
41 or kindness.

42  
43 Shall we be told that the motive, at all events; may be a good one,  
44 that we often punish because we love, and that laughter, by  
45 checking the outer manifestations of certain failings, thus causes  
46 the person laughed at to correct these failings and thereby  
47 improve himself inwardly?

48  
49 Much might be said on this point. As a general rule, and speaking  
50 roughly, laughter doubtless exercises a useful function. Indeed, the  
51 whole of our analysis points to this fact. But it does not therefore  
52 follow that laughter always hits the mark or is invariably inspired  
53 by sentiments of kindness or even of justice.

54  
55 To be certain of always hitting the mark, it would have to proceed  
56 from an act of reflection. Now, laughter is simply the result of a  
57 mechanism set up in us by nature or, what is almost the same  
58 thing, by our long acquaintance with social life. It goes off  
59 spontaneously and returns tit for tat. It has no time to look where  
60 it hits. Laughter punishes certain failing's somewhat as disease  
61 punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are  
62 innocent and sparing some who are guilty, aiming at a general  
63 result and incapable of dealing separately with each individual  
64 case. And so it is with everything that comes to pass by natural  
65 means instead of happening by conscious reflection. An average of  
66 justice may show itself in the total result, though the details, taken  
67 separately, often point to anything but justice.

68  
69 In this sense, laughter cannot be absolutely just. Nor should it be  
70 kind-hearted either. Its function is to intimidate by humiliating.  
71 Now, it would not succeed in doing this, had not nature implanted  
72 for that very purpose, even in the best of men, a spark of

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4 spitefulness or, at all events, of mischief. Perhaps we had better  
5 not investigate this point too closely, for we should not find  
6 anything very flattering to ourselves. We should see that this  
7 movement of relaxation or expansion is nothing but a prelude to  
8 laughter, that the laugher immediately retires within himself, more  
9 self-assertive and conceited than ever, and is evidently disposed to  
10 look upon another's personality as a marionette of which he pulls  
11 the strings. In this presumptuousness we speedily discern a degree  
12 of egoism and, behind this latter, something less spontaneous and  
13 more bitter, the beginnings of a curious pessimism which becomes  
14 the more pronounced as the laugher more closely analyses his  
15 laughter.

16  
17 Here, as elsewhere, nature has utilised evil with a view to good. It  
18 is more especially the good that has engaged our attention  
19 throughout this work. We have seen that the more society  
20 improves, the more plastic is the adaptability it obtains from its  
21 members; while the greater the tendency towards increasing  
22 stability below, the more does it force to the surface the disturbing  
23 elements inseparable from so vast a bulk; and thus laughter  
24 performs a useful function by emphasising the form of these  
25 significant undulations. Such is also the truceless warfare of the  
26 waves on the surface of the sea, whilst profound peace reigns in  
27 the depths below. The billows clash and collide with each other, as  
28 they strive to find their level. A fringe of snow-white foam,  
29 feathery and frolicsome, follows their changing outlines. From  
30 time to time, the receding wave leaves behind a remnant of foam  
31 on the sandy beach. The child, who plays hard by, picks up a  
32 handful, and, the next moment, is astonished to find that nothing  
33 remains in his grasp but a few drops of water, water that is far  
34 more brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought  
35 it. Laughter comes into being in the self- same fashion. It indicates  
36 a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly  
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41 adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is afroth  
42 with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the  
43 philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the  
44 substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter.  
45  
46 [THE END]