

## HUMOUR AS THE INVERTED SUBLIME: JEAN PAUL'S LAUGHTER WITHIN LIMITATIONS

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Jean Paul (21 March 1763 - 14 November 1825), born Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, was a German Romantic writer, best known for his humorous novels and stories. He took the name Jean Paul in honour of Jean Jacques Rousseau. This paper presents an interpretation of Jean Paul's concept of humour as 'inverted sublime'. It explores the concept, first by analyzing it in relation to Kant's aesthetic theory, and then by way of a critical engagement with Paul Fleming's *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humour*: perhaps the only book-length critical study in English devoted to Jean Paul in recent years. The first part of the paper—the comparative analysis of Jean Paul with Kant—establishes the conditions for taking humour seriously (as something that resists categorization in terms of the body/mind split). The second part develops these insights by posing questions such as what consequences does humour have for the seriousness of theoretical judgement? Following twentieth century philosopher Georges Bataille, I suggest that laughter is an effect of the unknown (*le non-savoir*), which suddenly invades us when our expectations are exceeded. Laughter, for Bataille, is an instance of *nonproductive expenditure*. On the basis of Bataille's thought and that of others, I undertake a critical reading of Paul Fleming's argument for humour's "redemptive" power, i.e., its capacity to help us reconcile ourselves with human finitude. As a challenge to the logic of both Jean Paul and Paul Fleming, the paper concludes with a reading of concentration camp humour in Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*.

I will begin with a quote from the beginning of chapter 7 of *The Pre-School of Aesthetics (Die Vorschule der Aesthetik)*, where Jean Paul defines his celebrated concept of humour. Historically, this concept has been Jean-Paul's most influential contribution to romantic theory and criticism.<sup>1</sup> Humour also marks an extremely important characteristic of his prose:

Der Verstand und die Objekten-Welt kennen nur Endlichkeit. Hier finden wir nur jenen unendlichen Kontrast zwischen den Ideen (der Vernunft) und der ganzen Endlichkeit selber. Wie aber, wenn man eben diese Endlichkeit als subjektiven Kontrast jetzo der Idee (Unendlichkeit) als objektivem un-

terschöbe und liehe und statt des Erhabenen als eines angewandten Unendlichen jetzo ein auf das Unendliche angewandte Endliche, also bloß Unendlichkeit des Kontrastes gebäre, d.h. eine negative? Dann hätten wir den Humor oder das romantische Komische.

The understanding and the object-world know only finitude. In the romantic we find only the infinite contrast between the ideas (or reason) and all finitude itself. But suppose just this finitude were imputed as subjective contrast to the idea as objective contrast, and instead of the sublime as an applied infinity, now produced a finitude applied to the infinite, and thus simply infinity of contrast, that is a negative infinity. Then we should have humour or the romantic comic.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, when Jean Paul provides (above) his celebrated definition of the concept, he writes “humour or the romantic comic.” This makes clear that humour is, for him, a variation of romantic poetry—romantic poetry defined as that which “delights in presenting the infinity of the subject in which the object-world loses its limits as in a kind of moonlight.”<sup>3</sup> However, unlike romantic poetry, humour implies a breach in the subject, where the finite world of the subject’s endeavours is measured against the infinite of the subject’s idea of reason. This causes laughter, a laughter mixed with pain. Humour is not sublime poetry, where the finite world loses its limits as the mind occupies itself with ideas that contain a higher purposiveness, but an “inverted sublime” (*umgekehrte Erhabene*), where the *contrast* between the finite and the infinite creates an infinity without purposiveness, “a negative infinity,” whose content consists only in the separation or contrast between the two.

Measured against the infinite—the measuring rod of humour—all of finitude, including the whole world, becomes “infinitely small.” In other words, humour is a force of destruction for Jean Paul, and yet it is one that retains, through its very reversal, the trace of the sublime. This is laughter “in which both a pain and a greatness abide,”<sup>4</sup> where the understanding, caught between the finitude of experience and the infinitude of desire, faces an infinite, “sublime” contrast or separation, which is not opposed to finitude, but remains attached to it.

Folglich setz’ ich mich selber in diesen Zwiespalt [...] und zerteile mein Ich in den endlichen und unendlichen Faktor und lasse aus jenem diesen kommen. Da lacht der Mensch, denn er sagt: »Unmöglich! Es ist viel zu toll!

I divide my inner self into the finite and infinite factors and let the latter proceed from the former. People laugh then, saying: “Impossible! Much too mad!”<sup>5</sup>

## JEAN PAUL WITH KANT

To get a richer understanding of this difficult concept of the “inverted sublime”, it is helpful to go back to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, the conceptual vocabulary of which Jean Paul self-consciously employs. The sublime for Kant is firstly a *subjective* feeling, because by definition it is what cannot be contained in a sensible (which is to say, finite) form. Even if in order to feel the sublime we make use of our intuitions of nature, we do so only to experience the inadequacy of these intuitions to exhibit the object. Jean-Paul retains as an essential requisite for his understanding of humour this experience of human inadequacy, of what, as Kant puts it, is “violent to our imagination,” “contrapurposive to our power of judgment.”<sup>6</sup> Yet whereas in Kant this inadequacy induces the mind to abandon sensibility and occupy itself with ideas of an inner, higher purposiveness, in Jean-Paul there is no such “redemption.” In humour, the infinite idea is annihilating.<sup>7</sup> As in the Kantian sublime there is an inhibition of the vital forces, but without the rebound, the “outpouring” (*Ergießung*) that results from this inhibition.<sup>8</sup>

The finite world is rather turned upside down. Jean Paul’s understanding of humour is Saturnalian, and in this regard very close to Rabelais (who is also cited<sup>9</sup>). To illustrate this *lex inversa*, Jean Paul refers to the medieval “feasts of fools” which “reversed the worldly and the spiritual, inverted social ranks and moral values, and reduced all to one great equality and freedom of joy.”<sup>10</sup> He also refers to the tradition of the devils being portrayed as clowns in old German and French farces. This fact is taken as evidence of an “underlying earnestness” in

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humour, such that the sublime inversion operates not only on the world, but also on humour itself: “it makes men partly serious, it walks on the low *soccus*, but often with the tragic mask at least in its hand.”<sup>11</sup>

To draw a little more from the comparison with Kant, one can recall that Kantian aesthetics does not simply exclude consideration of laughter, even though it is not in any way related to the sublime. In paragraph 54 of the *Critique of Judgment*,<sup>12</sup> Kant argues that jest (like music) deserves to be considered more an agreeable than a fine art, which for him means that its purpose is merely enjoyment. The pleasure it affords (i.e., laughter) is sensible rather than contemplative. Unlike poetry, for example, jest is not a way of presenting that is purposive on its own, and therefore does not further the culture of our mental powers to facilitate social communication.<sup>13</sup>

Humorous poetry, the possibility of which Kant never takes into account, is in Jean Paul’s understanding similar to Kantian jest inasmuch as it is not purposive on its own and gives rise to sensible pleasure. (Indeed Jean Paul insists on the sensuality of humour<sup>14</sup>) However, unlike Kantian jest—and this has interesting consequences—as sensuous and non-purposive (even contra-purposive) humorous poetry gives to the understanding something to think—something, which is also nothing: “a negative infinity,” “simply infinity of contrast.” Such a possibility is, if not foreclosed by Kant, then unseen, perhaps not wanted to be seen. Laughter, for Kant, is simply an agitation that is conducive for our health; it is not intellectually significant; it does not have a philosophical weight. In a paradoxical formulation, Kant writes that jest (like music) is “a play with aesthetic ideas, with presentations of the understanding, by which in the end nothing is thought.”<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the pleasure and agitation caused by such play is exclusively bodily, even though (paradoxically) it is aroused by the ideas of the mind, and “shows that all the gratification we find at a lively party, extolled as being so refined and inspired, consists in the feeling of health that is produced by intestinal agitation corresponding to such play.”<sup>16</sup>

If, as Jean Paul suggests, humorous poetry as inverted sublime has an “underlying earnestness” (*unterlegte Ernst*), then strictly speaking such earnestness cannot be measured in the terms of Kant’s taxonomy. (Significantly, Kant’s theory of laughter as “an affect that arises if a tense expectation is reduced to nothing” is rejected by Jean Paul<sup>17</sup>) The laughter produced when man measures out the small world against the infinite world and sees them together defies the tendency in Kant and in philosophy in general to keep things in their proper place, and to hierarchalize. “Humour is a raving Socrates, as the ancients called Diogenes.”<sup>18</sup> But, more importantly still, if laughter can have an underlying earnestness, then this has consequences for the mind/body split - so powerful and determining not only for the Kant’s philosophical system, but—dare I say - for Western culture more generally. Kant is careful to maintain this split when attempting to think the gratification we experience in laughter and music, even though he recognizes that through this gratification “we can reach the body through the soul, and use the soul as the physician of the body.”<sup>19</sup> The consequences of such an insight are not explored because of the necessity (inherent to the system) to insist that the gratification here is purely corporeal, as distinct from intellectual or practical (moral).

## IS HUMOUR REDEMPTIVE?

In one of the few (perhaps the only) book-length critical study in English devoted to Jean Paul in recent years,<sup>20</sup> Paul Fleming argues that humour, as interpreted by Jean Paul, has a redemptive power:

Like fireworks, humour operates by means of contrast: its goal is the infinite, but since the only path available to the heavens is a finite one, humour pulls up short and misses the mark. Yet through the incongruence between the desired goal and the achieved end, humour at once holds fast to the possibility of the infinite (if only negatively, in failure) and redeems the experience of finitude.<sup>21</sup>

While Jean Paul never speaks of humour in terms of the redemption, Fleming’s builds his argument on the basis of a reading of Freud and Vischer (whose understandings of humour are indebted to Jean Paul), as well as Simon Critchley and Walter Benjamin. What is noteworthy, indeed humorous, in Fleming’s understanding of redemption is that it presupposes non-redemption, even the impossibility of redemption, because it derives

from the 'recognition' that the finite cannot be overcome. In striving to overcome it, one necessarily fails. According to Fleming, humour *uses* this experience of failure<sup>22</sup>; it puts it to work. The pay-off is the subject's experience, not of despair, but pleasure in abandonment. Through laughter and humour, we learn not to despise, but to enjoy the smallness and insignificance of our finite existence and ultimately, as Jean Paul writes, to "love the emptiest ending."<sup>23</sup>

Fleming's reading of Jean Paul is not at all incompatible with the idea that *it is healthy to have a sense of humour*, especially when things are looking very bad. Laughter is, as any doctor will tell you, therapeutic. In his late essay "On Humour" (*Der Humor*) Freud, on whom Fleming relies, helps to make the point clearer, when he uses the example of a criminal who is led to the gallows on Monday morning and exclaims, "Well, this is a good beginning to the week."<sup>24</sup> Humour, as Freud recognizes, works through the subversion of expectation. Rather than fear, anger, bitterness in the face of death, one is confronted with a joke, lightness. By virtue of this subversion of expectation, from an economical point of view mental energy is saved rather than expended, producing a humorous pleasure in the listener. Beyond the liberating element, humour has, Freud adds, "something fine (*Großartig*) and elevating (*Ehrhebendes*)."<sup>25</sup> One might even say sovereign:

The ego refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure.<sup>26</sup>

And further:

Humour is not resigned, it is rebellious (*trotzig*). It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle, which is strong enough to assert itself here in the face of the adverse real circumstance.<sup>27</sup>

Simon Critchley, who Fleming also cites, adds:

Humour has the same formal structure as depression, but it is an anti-depressant that works by the ego finding itself ridiculous.<sup>28</sup>

From the final quotation above from Simon Critchley, one may note that the analysis of humour may itself be humorous — if ever so slightly. Humour may affect or infect the serious task of theoretically analyzing it. One could even argue that it must do so, if the analysis of humour is to have a genuine relationship to what is being analyzed, for it in some way to 'ring true'. Put another way, the theoretical language must *in a certain way* give hospitality to humour's difference, its alterity, especially the alterity of laughter, if the work of the understanding is not to reduce and flatten it entirely. Even while undoubtedly Jean Paul, Freud, Simon Critchley and Paul Fleming have some sensitivity for this, none of them raise the question explicitly: what consequences does humour have for the seriousness of theoretical judgement? Can it be reduced to this seriousness? Or does the experience of humour always in some way exceed the efforts of theoretical judgement to make meaning and sense of it? What is, after all, the epistemological status of laughter? As noted above, Jean Paul believes that laughter gives the understanding something to think. It is not purely a bodily mechanism as it was for Kant. Yet when this 'something' becomes an object of knowledge, and further, a means to reconcile ourselves with the finitude of our existence, is not 'something' important about laughter also lost?

For Georges Bataille, a philosopher of the twentieth century, laughter cannot be simply the object of presentable knowledge, but must be interpreted firstly under the category of non-knowledge (*le non-savoir*).<sup>29</sup> It cannot be reduced to an example that would support or undermine any particular truth claim about it. Rather, it is that on the basis of which philosophy as such must be re-thought and re-elaborated.

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Insofar as I am a philosopher, mine is a philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter, and which does not even make any further claim. It is a philosophy, which casts off problems other than those provided by that precise experience.<sup>30</sup>

For Bataille, laughter is an effect of the unknowable, which suddenly invades us when our expectations are exceeded.<sup>31</sup> As for Jean Paul, laughter, for Bataille, remains inseparable from an experience of finitude. Unlike Jean Paul, however, Bataille interprets finitude as that which cannot be mastered through knowledge or the pleasure principle. Finitude and/or death is *a priori* unforeseeable and overwhelming. Laughter is an instance of *nonproductive expenditure*, irreducible to any use, instrumentalization or economization on the failure to overcome finitude, irreducible to any hope, health or gain for the subject in its 'relation' to abandonment and suffering, even to any project of understanding and making sense.<sup>32</sup>

Paul Fleming insists that in humour there is a fundamental ambivalence, for the night *does not* disappear. "The night persists despite the fireworks, after the fireworks."<sup>33</sup> Humour, everyone agrees, is inseparable from the night. Jean Paul remarks that not only were the greatest humourists very serious, but they come from "a melancholy people".<sup>34</sup> Jean Paul does not name them here. But it is difficult not to think of the Jews. Jewish characters and references to the Jewish scriptures litter Jean Paul's literature.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, when Paul Fleming argues for the redemptive character of the effects of humour, as understood by Jean Paul, he cites a specifically Jewish interpretation of the messianic promise, borrowed from Walter Benjamin and the Hasidic movement:

Es gibt bei den Chassidim einen Spruch von der kommenden Welt, der besagt: es wird dort alles so eingerichtet sein wie bei uns. Wie unsre Stube jetzt ist, so wird sie auch in der kommenden Welt sein; wo unser Kind jetzt schläft, da wird es auch in der kommenden Welt schlafen. Was wir in dieser Welt am Leibe tragen, das werden wir auch in der kommenden Welt anhaben. Alles wird sein wie hier—nur ein klein wenig anders.

The Hassidim have a saying about the coming world, which goes: everything will be arranged there as it is with us. How our room now is: so it will be in the coming world; where our child sleeps, there too it will sleep in the coming world. What we wear on our body in this world, we will still have on in the coming world. Everything will be as it is here—only a little bit different.<sup>36</sup>

To read this text seriously, I believe one must be sensitive also to the possibility of its gentle humour and irony. The text begins by subverting the expectation that the coming world will be any different from this one. Yet at the end, it subverts this subversion by announcing that after all, the coming world will be different, but only a very little bit (*ein klein wenig*). If one has an ear for it, this "only a little bit different" is gently humorous. At the end, it comes unexpected as a kind of punch line. Rather than no difference, nothing, one is confronted with almost nothing - perhaps a joke. Tiny and momentous, it is left undetermined in its meaning. In who or what this difference consists is left open, undecided but located unmistakably within the sphere of the intimate ("our room now" (*unsere Stube*), our child in the next room (*wo unser Kind jetzt schläft*), what we wear on our body (*was wir am Leibe tragen*)).

In his gloss of the messianic saying from the Chassidim and Walter Benjamin, Paul Fleming writes:

For those who expect the future life to be radically different than the present one, this image is worse than hell itself. Finitude has been destroyed, yet everything is familiar, even the clothes. This image of "the world to come" is written from the perspective of humour. In elevating us over finitude, humour ultimately only returns us to "the smallness of human nature." Night remains night; the fireworks do not dispel it. That which would otherwise be a source of great depression—the return of the same in the eternal—becomes an insight structured by humour, in which the finite as we know it is taken up into the city of God—as the blueprint itself. This "ever so slightly different" is the difference of humour: it is the pleasure found in abandonment.<sup>37</sup>

In this passage, the “ever so slightly different” is given an identity and a name. In Benjamin, however, it is left unnamed. To identify this difference is effectively to speak from the point of view of have been ‘redeemed’, of the messianic age. It is to claim *to know* the difference between this world and the one to come. Even if Benjamin and the Hassidim intimate, although perhaps only jokingly, that there is a difference, and give it the contour of “ever so slightly”, they leave the place of the ‘who’ or ‘what’ of this difference empty. Both because they do not speak from the place of the coming world and also because it is always possible that it may not come, just as a joke can always fall flat and no one laughs. If humour and laughter have the power to redeem us, as Paul Fleming suggests, such redemption could only take place on the condition that it is not assured. It could never take place as an ascertainable fact in the present. Inasmuch as redemption, humour, forgiveness<sup>38</sup> may be inscribed within the promise of a coming world, a messianic age, they are heterogeneous to the order of knowledge, determinate theoretical judgment, the self-presentation of appropriable meaning, and therefore rigorously *beyond any horizon of expectation or hope*.<sup>39</sup>

Now Paul Fleming is I believe not wrong to interpret Jean Paul’s concept and practice of humour in the manner he does. For Jean Paul the modern Romantic subject is a Christian subject, which is to say one who bears its infinity within itself and not externally, and consequently, who experiences the division between the finite and the infinite as irreconcilable.<sup>40</sup> The Greeks, according to Jean Paul, did not know humour, for it presupposes a modern experience of impossibility and abandonment. The Greeks “were too full of the joys of life for a humoristic spite of life.”<sup>41</sup> Because we moderns recognize that the infinite as such is unattainable, we cannot, according to Jean Paul, experience complete happiness, but only “happiness within limitations.”<sup>42</sup> We can only, following Jean Paul’s remarkable formulation, be “happier, but not happy.”<sup>43</sup> Through humour we learn to reconcile ourselves with the irreconcilable. Humour permits us to cultivate an acceptance, an ‘understanding’ for the lack of understanding (*Unverstand*) of finite being.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Fleming rigorously interprets Jean Paul’s comic literature as *Bildungsromane*, whose purpose is to teach the reader how to enjoy, rather than despise, their finitude through the art of relishing everything small.<sup>45</sup>

But what if (thinking of Kafka and the Holocaust), not only happiness, but even becoming happier were out of reach? What then? With this taboo thought, dare I say, the whole economic system would collapse and then perhaps someone would laugh... Fleming holds on, despite everything, to the teleology of Jean Paul’s concept of humour: “one *should* want something else, something different and better.”<sup>46</sup> And Jean Paul: “We play for the sake of seriousness, not play.”<sup>47</sup> I do not disagree. Yet even if humour can be—and so often is—put in the service of education and character formation (*Bildung*), which is to say, teleological finality and reconciliation with finitude, it can never be reducible to this servile position. If humour has a messianic structure, “the subversion of expectation”, which, according to Freud, produces laughter, cannot be contained by any pre-conceived outcome. Without this non-containment, this rebellion against pre-given expectations and possibilities, (even at the limit against what it is presumed to be and do), humour would not be very amusing.

## WHY DOES LAUGHTER MATTER?

To conclude, I would like to analyse another example of humour, or at least juxtapose Jean Paul’s theory of humour with a literary episode. I will not take an episode from Jean Paul’s own fiction; I am going to take rather an episode from Holocaust fiction, which one would think (not unjustly) is as far from humour as one could possibly imagine. Now I use the term ‘fiction’ here advisedly, not because I deny that what is called “Holocaust” (among other names) happened, but because fiction or fictioning—the possibility that the witnesses may lie or incorrectly remember—what they bear witness to is inseparable from any kind of truth telling, any auto-biographical or historical account.<sup>48</sup> Now the author I am going to speak about is very aware of this, even though he was also probably more than any other the one most responsible for bringing Nazi perpetrators to trial after the war. Over a 40-year career, his research helped to bring over 1100 perpetrators to trial, including the Dutch police officer Karl Silberbauer, who arrested Anne Frank, Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka (where approximately 900,000 people were murdered) and Adolf Eichmann, who oversaw the logistics of mass deportation.<sup>49</sup> Now the episode I going to discuss comes from an autobiographical novel entitled *The*

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*Sunflower* (1969), which recounts the story of a dying repentant SS-man, who during the war in Poland, asks an anonymous Jewish prisoner for his forgiveness. This prisoner's name, which the SS man never asks, is Simon Wiesenthal. The novel is an account not only of what happens between the two men, but also of Wiesenthal's disquiet afterwards, his need to talk about it, to hear the opinions of others, to research the limits of Jewish and Christian theology, and above all, his inability to find a solution to the dilemma and to destine and entrust the thinking about it to future generations.<sup>50</sup>

Before Wiesenthal recounts the episode, he situates or contextualizes it in an opening scene in a concentration camp near Lemberg where he is sleeping or trying to sleep in a stable with his fellow prisoners, who he calls his friends (*meine Freunde*). (Formally the capital of historical region of Galicia, Lemberg is today called Lviv, part of the Ukraine). This opening scene of *The Sunflower* testifies not so much to the discovery that God is absent, but more radically that such a 'discovery' is laughable! It becomes the object of a joke. One of the narrator's friends, Arthur, returns to the camp with news from an old lady in the ghetto:

“Was kann eine alte Frau schon sagen? Weiß sie vielleicht, wann wir hier herauskommen? Oder wann man uns umlegt?”

“Nein, diese Fragen kann dir niemand beantworten. Aber sie hat etwas anderes gesagt, etwas, woran wir in dieser Zeit denken sollen. Sie meinte, daß Gott auf Urlaub sei.” Arthur machte eine kleine Pause, wie um seine Worte wirken zu lassen.” Was meinst du dazu, Simon? Fragte er schließlich.

“Laß mich schlafen” gab ich zur Antwort. “Erzähl weiter, wenn Er wieder zurück ist.”

Zum erstenmal, seit wir in diesem Stall lebten, hörte ich meine Freunde lachen—oder hatte ich das nur geträumt?

“What could she have said? Does she know when we will get out of here? Or when they are going to slaughter us?”

“Nobody knows the answers to those questions. But she said something else, something that we should perhaps think about in times like these. She thought that God was on leave”...

“Let me sleep,” I replied. “Tell me more when he gets back.”

For the first time since we had been living in the stable I heard my friends laughing, or had I merely dreamt it?”<sup>51</sup>

How to read this improbable laughter? For the narrator's friend, Arthur, the news of God's absence comes as a revelation pregnant with meaning. For the narrator, on the other hand, it is not news. It is something everyone has known for a long time: “And this should be news? That we live in a world that God has abandoned?”<sup>52</sup> What makes the friends laugh (if indeed they do laugh) is in all probability the insouciance with which the narrator responds to the thought of God's abandonment, his treating it as if it is nothing particularly important. At the moment what is more important is just sleep: “Let me sleep,” I replied. “Tell me more when he gets back.”

But this reading is not enough to account for the improbability of what happened. As an event, the laughter is more than the 'joke', which supposedly caused it. It is quite possible that the narrator, who was half-asleep, did not even intend what he said to be funny. The laughter comes as a surprise: a rupture with the living present. The text suggests that it may have been a *dream of laughter*, leaving the ontological and epistemological status of what happened indeterminate and fragile: “For the first time since we had been living in the stable I heard my friends laughing, or had I merely dreamt it?” Now it is not just the friends' laughter that is held in epistemological and ontological suspension, but almost everything that is recounted in the narrative. The text is littered with hesitations, question marks as to the reality of that to which the narrator bear witness. The narrator can scarcely believe the events to which he testifies. During this period, his entire existence appears to him illogical, unreal, dreamlike, even ghostly (*gespenstliches*) and uncanny (*unheimlich*). (Such thoughts are particularly strong in relation to the later meeting with the dying SS man<sup>53</sup>) To faithfully testify to what happened, is also to testify to narrator's disbelief, to the incredible, dreamlike character of what happened—and to the fact that what is called “reason” and “logic” could not be trusted.



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Now it is certainly possible to interpret Wiesenthal's concentration camp humour in Jean Paul's terms, as pleasure found in God's abandonment and rebellion against life's suffering. The expression *Gott auf Urlaub* is already a little bit humorous, as if God were just a human being on holiday. The narrator, who delivered the joke at the expense of what the old woman in the ghetto had said, is also careful to give reason to her: "What the old woman said in no way shocked me, she had simply stated what I had long felt to be true."<sup>54</sup> The humorous pleasure, rebellion and even triumph is directed not against the suffering imposed on the prisoners by the Nazis, but against that imposed by the Abrahamic culture itself, from where comes the hope of a miraculous intervention, the faith "in a world order in which God has a definite place", and above all, in the dignity and sacredness of the life of a human being, because they have been made in the image of God (*imago Dei*).<sup>55</sup> Under these circumstances, such hope and faith are laughable. It is alone what is laughable. Indeed the joke could not have provoked such improbable laughter among the fellow prisoners had they not, in addition to the monstrous suffering caused by the Nazis, also been carrying the weight of the metaphysics of Judeo-Christian culture. In a sovereign, life-affirming way, this weight is laughingly thrown off, because it ceases to be useful. Perhaps. The joke and the laughter it provokes is a momentary triumph over metaphysics, which is humorously dismissed. In a more psychoanalytic vein, however, one might also suggest that the laughter is also a release of unconscious aggression against God, who, having made the Jews His chosen people, has, by virtue of a perverse anti-Semitic reversal, caused them to be the chosen victims of extermination. In *Moses and the Monotheistic Religion* (1939), Freud memorably argues that among the deeper, more unconscious motives for the intensity and lasting strength of anti-Semitism is the surprising belief on the part of those who are not Jewish in the Jewish people's divine election.<sup>56</sup>

Whether or not one interprets the laughter as deriving from atheism or theism, whether it was dreamed of or actually happened, it undoubtedly leaves a memorable trace. Everything remains the same, but by virtue of the laughter, it is "ever so slightly different". Perhaps. While it is certainly possible to read the laughter as a means of reconciliation and accommodation with 'life' under such circumstances, I think such a reading would be superficial. What would be less superficial would be to suggest that the prisoners experienced in laughing a shared recognition of the impossibility of their current situation and that of any miraculous salvation or redemption by God. And in this shared recognition, they may have felt also some unspoken compassion for one another. And perhaps through this compassion even some forgiveness towards themselves and one another for having found themselves there, eyewitnesses and victims of such incomprehensible injustice.<sup>57</sup>



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### NOTES

1. In the introduction to the translation of the text, Margaret R. Hale notes that Jean Paul's theory of humour is close in several respects to the theory of irony in Friedrich Schlegel and Schiller. She also notes that Jean Paul's theory was influential on K.W.F. Solger, Theodor Vischer and also Sigmund Freud. Outside of Germany, it was promoted by Thomas Carlyle and was heavily used by Coleridge for his lectures on wit and humour. Jean Paul Richter *The Horn of Oberon Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics* trans. Margaret R. Hale Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1973, pp. xlv-xlviii.
2. Jean Paul *Werke* Band 5, München 1959–1963, 124-125, Trans. Margaret R. Hale in *Horn of Oberon Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1973, 88.
3. "Wir haben der romantischen Poesie im Gegensatz der plastischen die Unendlichkeit des Subjekts zum Spielraum gegeben, worin die Objekten—Welt wie in einem Mondlicht ihre Grenzen verliert." Jean Paul *Werke*. Band 5, 124-125, Hale 88.
4. "jenes Lachen, worin noch ein Schmerz und eine Größe ist." Jean Paul: *Werke*. Band 5, 129, Hale 92.
5. Jean Paul: *Werke*. Band 5, 132, Hale 94.
6. "zweckwidrig für unsere Urteilskraft", "gewalttätig für die Einbildungskraft" I. Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. *Critique of Judgment* Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, 99. Ak. 245.
7. "Die vernichtende oder unendliche Idee des Humours. Diese ist der zweite Bestandteil des Humours, als eines umgekehrten Erhabenen." "The annihilating or infinite idea of humour: this is the second component of humour as inverse sublimity." Jean Paul *Werke*. Band 5, 131, Hale 91. In his invaluable introduction to Jean Paul, Paul Fleming argues that despite this annihilating quality, humour works to redeem the experience of finitude. I will return to this difficult and subtle question below. Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor* Königshausen & Neumann, 2005, 30, 57-58.
8. I. Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. *Critique of Judgment*, 98 Ak. 245.
9. Jean Paul: *Werke*. Band 5, 141, Hale 101-102.
10. "Weltliches und Geistliches, Stände und Sitten umkehren, in der großen Gleichheit und Freiheit der Freude." Jean Paul: *Werke*. Band 5, 132, Hale 94.
11. "so macht der Humour zum Teil ernst...er geht auf dem niedrigen Sokkus, aber oft mit der tragischen Maske, wenigstens in der Hand." Jean Paul: *Werke* Band 5, 129, Hale 92.
12. Kant *Critique of Judgment*. 201-207 Ak. 330-335.
13. I. Kant *Critique of Judgment*. 173, 196-197 Ak. 306.
14. "[W]ithout sensuousness, the comic cannot exist" "es ohne Sinnlichkeit überhaupt kein Komisches gibt" "[T]he serious always emphasizes the general and so spiritualizes things that we think, the comic writer fastens our minds on the physical detail" "der Ernst überall das Allgemeine vorhebt...so heftet uns der Komiker gerade eng an das sinnlich Bestimmte," "[T]he material element, as the exponent of applied finitude in humour, can never become too colorful." "so kann [die Sinnlichkeit] bei dem Humour als ein Exponent der angewandten Endlichkeit nie zu farbig werden." Jean Paul *Werke* Band 5, 139-140, Hale 99-100.
15. "Hingegen Musik und Stoff zum Lachen sind zweierlei Arten des Spiels mit ästhetischen Ideen, oder auch Verstandesvorstellungen, wodurch am Ende nichts gedacht wird." I. Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. *Critique of Judgment* 202-203. Ak. 332-333.
16. "das Gefühl der Gesundheit, durch eine jenem Spiele korrespondierende Bewegung der Eingeweide, das ganze, für so fein und geistvoll gepriesene, Vergnügen einer aufgeweckten Gesellschaft ausmacht" I. Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. *Critique of Judgment* 202-203. Ak 332-333. In other formulations Kant acknowledges the role of the lungs and the diaphragm in laughter and music, whose function is defined more generally as the "furtherance of the vital processes of the body".
17. "Das Lachen ist ein Affekt aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts." (Kant's emphasis) I. Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. *Critique of Judgment*. 203. Ak. 332. See also Margaret Hale's introduction to Jean Paul *Horn of Oberon Jean Paul Richter's School for Aesthetics*, xxviii.
18. "[D]er Humor ist, wie die Alten den Diogenes nannten, ein rasender Sokrates. ..." Jean Paul *Werke* Band 5, 140, Hale 99.
19. "man dem Körper auch durch die Seele beikommen und diese zum Arzt von jenem brauchen kann." I. Kant *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. *Critique of Judgment* 203 Ak. 332.
20. There is an extensive secondary literature on Jean Paul in German, most notably: Max Kommerell *Jean Paul*. 3. Auflage. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1957 and Eduard Berend (ed.) *Jean Pauls Persönlichkeit in Berichten der Zeitgenossen* Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1956. In the English speaking world, Thomas Carlyle's interest in him was responsible for the translation of many of Jean Paul's works, see Thomas Carlyle „Jean Paul Friedrich Richter.“ *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays: Volume One*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1896, 1-25. See also Paul Fleming „the Crisis of Art: Kommerell and Jean Paul's Gestures“ in *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 15, 2000. 519-43 and Dimitris Vardoulakis „The Task of the Doppelgänger: Jean Paul as Collocutor of Maurice Blanchot“ in *The Doppelgänger: Literature's Philosophy* New York: Fordham UP, 200. 106-35.
21. Paul Fleming. *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 30
22. "When the modern subject enters into itself and its night, it can only use the dark heavens, not dispel them." Paul Flem-

- ing. *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 52
23. "jene Liebe zum leersten Ausgange" Jean Paul *Werke* Band 5, 131; Hale, 93.
24. "Na, die Woche fängt gut an" Sigmund Freud, "Der Humor" in *Studienausgabe. Band IV. Psychologische Schriften*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1970. 299. Sigmund Freud "On Humour" in *Collected Papers*. Volume Five, ed. James Strachey New York: Basic Books, 1959, 215.
25. Sigmund Freud, "Der Humor," 278; Strachey 216.
26. "Das ich verweigert es, sich durch die Veranlassungen aus der Realität kränken, zum Leiden nötigen zu lassen, es beharrt dabei, dass ihm die Traumen der Außenwelt nicht nahe gehen können, ja es zeigt, dass sie ihm nur Anlässe zu Lustgewinn sind," Sigmund Freud "Der Humor" 278; Strachey 217.
27. "Der Humour ist nicht resigniert, er ist trotzig, er bedeutet nicht nur das Triumph des Ichs, sondern auch den des Lust-principals, das sich hier gegen die Ungunst der realen Verhältnisse zu behaupten vermag." Sigmund Freud, "Der Humor," 278; Strachey 217.
28. Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, New York, Routledge, 2002, 101.
29. Georges Bataille "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears" in *October* 36 MIT Press 1989, 89-102. In a comparable move, Friedrich Schlegel in the 18th Century analyses irony under title of incomprehensibility (*Unverständlichkeit*). See Friedrich Schlegel "Über die Unverständlichkeit" in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe. Erste Abteilung: Kritische Neuauflage*, Band 2, München, Paderborn, Wien, Zürich 1967, 363-373; "On Incomprehensibility" in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments* translated by Peter Firchow, Minneapolis, Minnesota UP, 1971, 278-271.
30. Georges Bataille "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears," 93.
31. "Let us suppose that that which induces laughter is not only unknown, but unknowable ... That which is laughable may simply be unknowable ... We would laugh, not for some reason which, due to lack of information, or sufficient penetration, we shall never manage to know, but because *the unknown makes us laugh*." Georges Bataille "Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears," 90.
32. Georges Bataille "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," in *Yale French Studies* 78, 9-28. See also Jacques Derrida "From a Restricted Economy to a General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve" in *Writing and Difference* trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1978, 251-277.
33. Paul Fleming. *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 56, 58.
34. "Darum waren nicht nur große Humouristen, wiegesagt, sehr ernst, sondern gerade einem melancholischen Volke haben wir die besten zu danken," Jean Paul *Werke*. Band 5, 129 Hale 92.
35. See, for example, the introduction to *Auswahl aus den Teufels Papieren* (A Selection of the Devil's Papers) written by the Jew Mendelben Abraham. See also Jean Paul, *Titan: A Romance* trans. Charles T. Brooks London: Trübner & Co. 1863. In *Siebenkäs*, one reads: "The Jewish people believe that after the messiah arrives hell will be pushed up against paradise so that one has a bigger dance hall, and God will lead the dance.—Siebenkäs did nothing the whole year long other than build and fit all his torture chambers and schools of the cross onto the pleasure room of his trivialities so as to dance a bigger ballet." Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor* 138.
36. Walter Benjamin, "In der Sonne" in *Gesammelte Schriften. Band IV.1 Kleine Prosa*, ed. Tillman Rexroth, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972, 419-20.
37. Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 58
38. In the final chapter of his book, Fleming links humour to the motif of forgiveness: "The dream of humor is then the dream of distance, a step back that is neither cold nor dismissive, but rather forgiving, for humor remains invested in life (in hammering, in pharmacy)—in fact it wants nothing else." Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 154.
39. As I imagine will be obvious for some, I am relying here on a Derridean reading of the messianic: "a life other than possible life you say, this can be imagined, even found, but not hoped for." Hélène Cixous *Insister of Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf Stanford, Stanford UP, 2005, 92. This is *not* a position, with which Paul Fleming agrees: "Hope is a gift given to the hopeless, which grants us a sense of possibility in the face of the impossibility. For Jean Paul, only finitude offers such hope, precisely because of its limitations." Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 117.
40. Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 50
41. "Die Alten waren zu lebenslustig zur humorischen Leben-Veractung," Jean Paul *Werke*. Band 5, 129 Hale 92.
42. "Vollglück in der Beschränkung." This is how Jean Paul defines the Idyll. Jean Paul *Werke*. Band 5, 258; Hale, 186.
43. "One can, as Jean Paul expressly says, only hope to be 'happier (not happy)'. Happiness plain and simple has disappeared from the map of modern life." Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 66.
44. Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 46
45. Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 68.
46. Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor*, 147
47. "Um Ernst, nicht um Spiel wird gespielt," Jean Paul *Werke* Band 5, 444; Hale, 307.

## HUMOUR AS THE INVERTED SUBLIME

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48. "There is no testimony that does not at least structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie and perjury— that is to say—the possibility of literature [...] If this possibility that it seems to prohibit were effectively excluded, if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted." Jacques Derrida *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. 29-30.
49. See Simon Wiesenthal *Justice, Not Vengeance* New York: Grove-Weidenfeld, 1989; *The Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Memoirs* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.
50. Simon Wiesenthal *Die Sonnenblume: Eine Erzählung von Schuld und Vergebung* Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1998. Simon Wiesenthal *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* trans. H.A. Pichler New York: Schocken Books, 1997.
51. Simon Wiesenthal *Die Sonnenblume: Eine Erzählung von Schuld und Vergebung* 11-12, Pichler 7-8.
52. "Und das soll etwas Neues sein? Daß wir in einer Welt leben, die von Gott verlassen ist?" Simon Wiesenthal *Die Sonnenblume: Eine Erzählung von Schuld und Vergebung* 12, Pichler 8
53. Simon Wiesenthal *Die Sonnenblume: Eine Erzählung von Schuld und Vergebung* 32, 75-76, 64. For a detailed analysis, see Peter Banki "The Survival of the Question: Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*" in *Terror and the Root of Poetics* edited by Jeff Champlin, New York, Atropos, 2012, 110-138.
54. "Mich konnten die Worte der alten Frau nicht erschüttern. Sie hatte nur ausgesprochen, was ich längst fühlte." Simon Wiesenthal *Die Sonnenblume: Eine Erzählung von Schuld und Vergebung* 13, Pichler 9.
55. *ibid.*
56. "[I]ch bin darauf gefasst, dass sie zunächst nicht glaubwürdig erscheinen werden. Ich wage die Behauptung, dass die Eifersucht auf das Volk, welches sich für das erstgeborene, bevorzugte Kind Gottvaters ausgab, bei den anderen heute noch nicht überwunden ist, so als ob sie dem Anspruch Glauben geschenkt hätten." "What I am going to say will at first appear incredible. I venture to assert that the jealousy which the Jews evoked in the other peoples by maintaining that they were the first-born, favourite child of God the Father has not yet been overcome by those others, just as if the latter had given credence to the assumption." Sigmund Freud *Der Mann Moses und Die Monotheistische Religion* Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 1999, 164, Sigmund Freud „Moses and Monotheism“ trans. Katherine Jones The Hogarth Press, 1939. 147.
57. In *The Speech of the Dead Christ* and elsewhere, Jean Paul also entertains the thought that there is no redemption, no life after death, that the hope and belief in God are groundless. However, this thought is always recuperated into an economy of hope and fear, where faith in God is saved as a necessary fiction. After having declared that "We are all orphans, I and you, we have no father" the dead non-resurrected Christ says: "Mortal one next to me, if you are still living, worship him: otherwise you have lost him for ever." Paul Fleming comments: "In imploring the narrator to worship a God he knows does not exist, the dead Christ makes clear that the immanent pleasures of hope, even if grounded in deception, outweigh the need for its realization." And further: "If there is no God, hope sufficiently fulfils the role of an ersatz-God. In the abandonment of finitude, the desire for a God must function as the infinite itself." Paul Fleming *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor* 108, 118, 120. It is against such a logic that the humour of the concentration camp is directed.