"Ridendo dei nostri mali, trovo qualche conforto": Giacomo Leopardi's Humour

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Abstract. In the present article, I focus on the manifestation of desire in Leopardi's dark humour, which is best expressed through the dianoetic laugh. I argue that this humour offers the writer an antidote to his otherwise pessimistic and nihilistic philosophical outlook. Through his conception of humour, Leopardi introduces an intermediate space for desire. In this way, humour is closely allied with the reductively termed "comic," but also inextricably linked to something unsettling, disturbing, and yet potentially elevating. I analyze this mirthless laugh in Leopardi through Sigmund Freud's theories (which were later taken up by Jacques Lacan), whereby the humour in question acknowledges and draws strength from human impotence and its radical inner split.

Keywords: Giacomo Leopardi; Humour; Comic; Dianoetic laughter; Desire; Freud; Lacan; Pirandello

> . . . in life and in letters, fate reserved for the fool, oh Shakespeare, the task of keeping accessible the place of truth that Freud brought to light. (Lacan, 2006, p. 554)

1. Introduction to Leopardian Humour

Is Giacomo Leopardi funny? In this article I propose that there is such a thing as Leopardian humour, which offers the writer an antidote to his otherwise pessimistic and nihilistic philosophical outlook. More specifically, there is a Lacanian desire locked in Leopardi's dark humour, and it is expressed through his dianoetic laugh. In humour, counterintuitively, Leopardi introduces an intermediate space for desire where humour intersects with the reductively termed 'comic,' and links to something unsettling but also potentially elevating.

This unsettling humour, characterized by a grim ribaldry that expresses the sense of the absurd at the root of existentialism, is typical of the zeitgeist of the twentieth century (Kayser 188). But Leopardi combats existentialist stalemates (*ante-litteram*) and thus his humour merits finer qualification. In Leopardi, grim humour expresses itself through something akin to dianoetic laughter. Jacobsen and Mueller state that dianoetic laughter ridicules mysterious, malignant outer forces that torment the body, thereby providing relief, even though the immediate victim of that laugh is the human being who suffers (92). They also claim, however, that the dianoetic laugh lampoons "that which mocks suffering" – that is, "those malevolent powers which delight in torturing poor mortals" (174) – so that it erases the human victim. The human sufferer, however, surely has the right to wed affliction and wit and laugh at misfortune. Leopardi promotes this right through his portrayal of dianoetic laughter at the crux of what one can construe as desire-as-paradox.

Giacomo Leopardi (Recanati, 1798 – Naples, 1837).

In spite of the remarkable predilection for ataraxic bliss in much of his work, Leopardi's poetic voices often wryly mock their distress, and through this mockery express desire. This is the mirthless laugh of laughs, which in Leopardi can be conceived through the theories of Sigmund Freud (taken up by Lacan), for the humour in question acknowledges and draws strength from human impotence and its radical inner split.

It is thus my contention that Freud's theories of humour, particularly the revised ideas expressed in his 1927 essay 'Der Humor,' and the way in which Lacan later took up these ideas, are particularly pertinent to Leopardian notions of laughter. Freud's theory of the drives at the core of humour and Lacan's location of desire in witticisms and jokes both deserve

special attention in relation to Leopardi's dianoetic laugh. While the humour in question goes back specifically to Freud (this is the same notion Simon Critchley explores in *On Humour*, in which resistance to nothingness takes the form of the comic), the desire-as-paradox at the heart of this humour could be Lacanian. Desire in this context is Lacanian in the way in which (very reductively put) it condenses the Freudian 'wish' and 'drive' while adding an elusive supplement. In *Écrits* Lacan says:

> it was certainly the Word that was in the beginning, and we live in its creation, but it is our mental action that continues this creation by constantly renewing it. And we can only think back to this action by allowing ourselves to be driven ever further ahead by it. (Lacan 1966, p. 225)

On the one hand, Lacan explains, desire regresses (and here it is closer to Lacanian demand): its source contains its very death. On the other hand, it lucidly and satirically moves forward, despite being fully aware that it is an absence that language cannot attain or contain. In Leopardi the intertwining of humour and a not entirely discreditable desire is found in both his *Operette morali* and *Zibaldone*. The role of the Leopardian dianoetic laugh opens a paradoxical in-between space for the infinite movement of desire. Of particular interest in this regard are excerpts from *Zibaldone* and the moral tales "Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro" and "Detti Memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri."

Freud's later revised view of humour, particularly when analysed from a Lacanian perspective, comes conceptually close to the humour expressed by Leopardi's dianoetic laugh. This guffaw at human frailty in all its repressed misery simultaneously fights and gives expression to our weaknesses. Such a tussle laughingly gives vent to misery and accepts the infinite cyclicality of *physis*. It echoes the humour of pre-Socratic philosophers, which Leopardi described as "veramente sostanzioso, esprimeva sempre e metteva sotto gli occhi, per dir cosi, un corpo di ridicolo" ("a humour that was truly substantial, whose expressive potential brought to light, so to speak, that which is essentially ridiculous").[1] This dark humour, stemming from Democritus and woven through the centuries, owes its intricacies to numerous contributors. Indeed, Leopardi's humour grows out of a remarkably long lineage.[2] It is not surprising that Leopardi should contribute to a dark humour that interweaves opposing strands in an effort to alleviate perennial human suffering—"*souffrance*."

In *Zibaldone*, Leopardi defines his suffering as more in sync with the desperate pain of Antiquity than the Romantic ennui as conceived of by, say, Jean Paul.[3] Leopardi defends the comicality of pre-Socratic philosophers as opposed to modern notions of the 'comic.' The Italian poet-philosopher, however, is also full of praise for the French comic *esprit*, even as he pits it against Classical humour. However, as Luigi Pirandello points out in *L'Umorismo*, "Il

[1] Quoted in Luigi Pirandello, 42, my translation.

[2] Among the writers who participate in this dark humour, at the heart of which are interwoven conflicting strands, are Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson. As Zarathustra teaches in Thus Spake Zarathustra: "he who wanteth to kill most thoroughly, laugheth" (387). Bergson underscores that "an absence of feeling" accompanies laughter since it "has no greater foe than emotion" (63). In stating that humour "demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (64), Bergson was depicting humour as a temporary relief from the usual restrictions of social feeling and sanity, thus portraying it as a catalyst of insanity. In Thus Spake Zarathustra, Nietzsche too mentioned this insane aspect of laughter whose bacchanalian joys "want deep, profound eternity" (397). Freud, in his 1927 essay "Humour," claims that humour is one of the great methods that the human mind has constructed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer "a series which begins with neurosis and culminates in madness" (429). Indeed humour is a moment when the senses are closed off to the world, (or where there is a regression of anti-desire), but one cannot ignore that it is also an empowering moment which comes to terms with human desire. Dark humour is on the one hand a rational and lucid moment where there is an interruption of feeling but, on the other, it is a moment that acknowledges human fallibility.

[3] Also see Zibaldone 107,1 and 188,1.

Leopardi . . . parla qui dell'*esprit* francese in contrapposizione del ridicolo classico senza pensare che questo . . . è classico anch'esso" ("Leopardi . . . counterpoises the French *esprit* to Classical humour without realizing that the latter . . . is also Classical"; 42; my translation). Leopardi thus, at one point, conceives of Classical humour, the humour of Democritus and the Pre-Socratics, as shot through with the same opposing qualities that Jean Paul refers to as "the annihilating and infinite idea of humour."[4]

Leopardi is indeed fully aware of the empowering quality of oppositions and his poetics of "*il vago*" and "*l'infinito*" have an oppositional basis. The poetical quality of all that is indefinite lies in its direct opposition to humanity's limited reality, which is delineated by the definite; Leopardi's poem "L'Infinito" exemplifies the artistic beauty of this tension of opposites. In *Zibaldone* he explains: "una torre . . . veduta in modo che ella paia innalzarsi sola sopra l'orizzonte, e questo non si veda, produce un contrasto efficacissimo e sublimissimo tra il finito e l'indefinito" ("a tower . . . perceived in such a way that it appears as if it alone soars above the horizon, while the horizon cannot be seen, produces a most effective and sublime contrast between the finite and the indefinite"; 953; my translation). When we consider the intertwining of similar oppositional threads in humour, we come face to face with one of humour's *sine qua non* characteristics: ambiguity. Those same ambiguous strings, somewhat frayed by wear, also knot together the comic space as an empowering one.

2. Superiority Theory of Humour in Leopardi

Leopardi offers many reflections on humour, some of which fall under the superiority theory.[5] In *Zibaldone* and in *Pensieri*, Leopardi defines laughter as a means both of success and of integration in the mundane. Laughter, according to Leopardi, is a way to assert superiority. Underlying laughter is only human weakness. Perceived from this angle, Leopardi's is more of a Hobbesian laugh, a joyless grimace. In the *Leviathan* Thomas Hobbes produced what was perhaps the first superiority theory of laughter, a theory that construes laughter as mockery, and expresses a fearful vision of society. The superiority theory offers clues about the sustainability of ideological self-deception. By discouraging the unquestioning acceptance of the goodness of laughter and hinting at its underlying malice, Hobbes argues in *Human Nature* for a pleasure that induces one to draw near to the thing that provoked the feeling, and

[4] This explains why at a later stage in L'Umorismo, Pirandello would cite Leopardi specifically as a good example of 'umorismo' as opposed to 'comicita' (which recalls, as I shall explain later, the Freudian distinction between humour and the comic). When listing Italian literati who are truly capable of umorismo Pirandello states: "penso a quei certi dialoghi e a quelle certe prosette del Leopardi" ("what comes to mind are some of those dialogues and prose pieces by Leopardi"; 127; my translation). In his 1984 essay "The Frames of Comic Freedom," Umberto Eco also distinguishes between the "comic" and "humour." For Eco the comic operates at the level of the *fabula* (story) while humour operates at the level of discourse.

[5] The dark side of humour was well known as far back as Antiquity. Although theorists like Leopardi have refined the violence in comedy so that its tribal roots are almost unrecognizable, it is in fact primitive. Comedy is a rite transformed into art, or, as Francis M. Cornford puts it, "a scene of sacrifice and a feast" (47). Plato, in Philebus (47–50 BCE), intimated as much with reference to phthonos or malice, which plays an important role in comedy. Peter Berger points to an underlying implication of phthonos when he states, "Since malice is hardly an admirable quality, this also raises an ethical issue: is there something reprehensible about comic laughter?" (18). The Greek festival in honour of Gelos, as well as the Festival of Risus at the core of the Roman carnival, were, as Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us, as much about birth as about death, and their crude mockery continued in an unbroken tradition from the ancient world to the carnivals of the medieval period (52). That these comic protagonists had to be depicted, as in *Poetics*, as "worse than the average [since] the comic is a sub-species of the ugly" (1963 ed. 10), is a view reiterated by, among others, Agnes Heller, who insists that humour and laughter exalt ugliness rather than beauty and, as already stated, rationality over intuition (8). In the schadenfreude of the comic protagonists' tormentors, receptors expressed savage and sadistic glee at others' misfortunes. Their laughter conveyed a disdain roused by seeing someone's mischance, deformity, or ugliness. The latter variety of laughter constitutes, perhaps, the oldest of theories about humour, the superiority theory (the other two theoretical traditions being the theories of incongruity and release).

for a pain that induces one to "retire from the thing that displeaseth" (43). Thus, Hobbes outlined an early utilitarian, materialist psychology similar to Leopardi's later exposition in his *teoria del piacere*.

The clear Hobbesian echoes in Leopardi have deep roots. Leopardi's theory of pleasure, as explained in *Zibaldone*, is sensualistic and utilitarian. According to Leopardi's "*teoria del piacere*," the human being is condemned to a life that is a continual search for happiness. Happiness is synonymous with pleasure, and the human being pursues happiness and pleasure through material objectives in an attempt to fill the void that characterizes existence. In real terms, happiness is impossible to achieve because there is no pleasure that can last forever. The human being spends life running from one pleasure to the next in a desperate attempt to fill the painful void. Pleasure and pain stem from need, from the desire for self-preservation: "E questo amore del piacere è una conseguenza spontanea dell'amor di sé e della propria conservazione" ("And this love of pleasure is a spontaneous consequence of self-love and the urge for self-preservation"; 196; my translation). Desire in Leopardi is founded on this same *amor proprio*, a desire for pleasure that is concerned with both stilling pain as well as seeking pleasure that can never be completely satisfied – a desire based on lack.[6]

The sensualistic procedure in Leopardi's poetical creation begins from this internal sensation of lack, which transforms itself into attention, memory, and finally, as argued below, into imagination and judgment. In an 1821entry in *Zibaldone* Leopardi wrote, "il piacere umano . . . si può dire ch'è sempre futuro . . . L'atto proprio del piacere non si dà'" ("Human pleasure . . . could be defined as always future . . . The real act of feeling pleasure is never experienced"; 414; my translation). The resultant view of human beings and their motives paves the way for Leopardi's idea that the moral beliefs of humankind are really expressions of selfish, material desire. In *Zibaldone* he writes:

> L'infinità della inclinazione dell'uomo al piacere, è una infinità materiale, e non se ne può dedur nulla di grande o di infinito in favore dell'anima umana, più di quello che si possa in favore dei bruti nei quali è naturale ch'esista lo stesso amore e nello stesso grado, essendo conseguenza immediata dell'amor proprio. (194)
>
> The infinite human inclination towards pleasure is a material infinity, and one cannot deduce anything grand or infinite in favour of the human soul, more than what one can deduce in favour of brutes in whom that same love is intrinsic and expressed in a similar manner, being an immediate consequence of self-love. (my translation)

Nonetheless, Leopardi's inquiry into the nature of pleasure ends with his statement in *Zibaldone* that "gli esseri sensibili sono per natura *souffrants*" ("sensitive human beings are by their own nature *souffrants*"; 960; my translation). *Amor proprio* constitutes *souffrance*, which every living, striving organism experiences. The famously terrifying inscription above Leopardi's garden of unhappiness specifically expresses this misery. Leopardi's poem "A se stesso" announces the complete removal of desire, but the motivations of this removal are rooted in the above-mentioned inscription. Only distraction through a multitude of chores can drive a wedge between man's insatiable desire for *amor proprio* and the inevitable *souffrance* to which it leads. In the *operetta morale* "Storia del genere umano," Leopardi points out:

[6] Sensation is thus primary in pursuing pleasure and is indeed the parameter by which Leopardi analysed the formation of human faculties and by which he arrived at the establishment of a hedonistic ethic. As Daniela Bini put it, "the sensationalistic [sensualistic] methodology which Leopardi followed strictly led him to a materialistic view of the world" (9). It is not clear whether Leopardi knew Hobbes but he definitely knew that sensualist methodology and materialism owed much to John Locke who, in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, reduced all ideas to sensation.

> Bramando sempre e in qualunque stato l'impossibile, tanto più si travagliano con questo desiderio da se medesimi, quanto meno sono afflitti dagli altri mali; deliberò valersi di nuove arti a conservare questo misero genere . . . implicarla in mille negozi e fatiche, ad effetto d'intrattenere gli uomini, e divertirli quanto più si potesse dal conversare col proprio animo, o almeno col desiderio di quella loro incognita e vana felicità. (32-33).
>
> They [humans] crave the impossible, they always and in any state they find themselves in, crave the impossible, and the more they torment themselves with such desire, the less they are afflicted by other evils; He [the human being] decided, therefore, to have recourse chiefly to two new expedients for preserving this miserable species . . . to involve men in a thousand activities and a thousand toils so as to occupy them and divert them as much as possible from communing with their own minds – or at least with their desire for an unknown and impalpable happiness. (my translation)

3. Leopardian Humour as a Distraction from Existential Unhappiness

The need to distract oneself from one's own desire requires an awareness of the gulf that separates desire for self-love from unhappiness. In "Detti Memorabili Di Filippo Ottonieri" ("Memorable Sayings of Filippo Ottonieri"), Leopardi hints that this same awareness can also become the above-mentioned humorous moment. The Italian poet-philosopher insists that we seldom laugh at funny things but at that which is not really worthy of our laughter; in this way laughter is a manner of distancing and distracting ourselves from reality, and thus a way of preventing ourselves from confronting the underlying, unpalatable truths that we refuse to face. Leopardi proposes to suspend desire by slicing open laughter, which conceals the malicious nature of the human being's desires:

> D'infinite cose che nella vita comune, o negli uomini particolari, sono ridicole veramente, è rarissimo che si rida; e se pure alcuno vi si prova, non gli venendo fatto di comunicare il suo riso agli altri, presto se ne rimane. All'incontro, di mille cose o gravissime o convenientissime, tutto giorno si ride, e con facilità grande se ne muovono le risa negli altri. Anzi le più delle cose delle quali si ride ordinariamente, sono tutt'altro che ridicole in effetto; e di moltissime si ride per questa cagione stessa, che elle non sono degne di riso o in parte alcuna o tanto che basti. (322-25)
>
> There are an infinite number of things in everyday life and in individual men that are extremely ridiculous, and yet we do not laugh at them; and if someone laughs at them, as soon as he discovers that he cannot communicate his laughter to others, he quickly desists. On the contrary, we often laugh at things that are either extremely serious or extremely dignified, and we very easily manage to have others join in our laughter. As a matter of fact, most of the things at which we normally laugh are anything but ridiculous; and we laugh at a great many of them for the very reason that they are not worthy of our laughter either in part or in whole.[7]

It is thus a cold and calculating laugh rather than a boisterous one that here veils a person's underlying motives. Indirectly, this is also a way of attempting to assert not only superiority to the object of laughter but also the ultimate vacuity of the humorous moment, which is stripped of anything that comes close to passions or feelings, as this description in the *Zibaldone* reveals:

> Sopravvenendo il pericolo, ridere, diventare allegro fuor dell'uso, o più che il momento prima non si era, o di malinconico farsi giulivo; divenir loquace essendo taciturno di natura, o rompere il silenzio fino allora per qualche ragione tenuto; scherzare, saltare, cantare, e simili cose, non sono già segni di coraggio, come si stimano, ma per lo contrario son segni di timori. (3526,1)

[7] For passages dealing with the same argument see Zibaldone 1774 (23 September 1821); Zibaldone 3000 (11July 1823); Pensieri CVI.

> In the face of danger, if one laughs or becomes immeasurably and more than ever joyful, or turns from melancholic to mirthful, or becomes loquacious despite having a taciturn temperament, or ruptures the silence that was held up until then for whatever reason, becoming suddenly jocular, jumping, singing and doing similar things, these are not signs of bravery, as it is thought, but on the contrary, they are signs of fear. (my translation)

The smokescreen of humour in Leopardi is thus doubly oxymoronic. Linking desire directly to *amor proprio* and the impossible search for happiness implies that to cut through humour and reveal the consuming effects of desire, the human being needs to be distanced from his search for happiness and must readily admit his insignificance in the face of *physis.* This task, as Farfarello tells Malambruno in "Dialogo di Malambruno e di Farfarello", is impossible:

> FARFARELLO: Dunque, amandoti necessariamente del maggiore amore che tu sei capace, necessariamente desideri il più che puoi la felicità propria; e non potendo mai di gran lunga essere soddisfatto di questo tuo desiderio, che è sommo, resta che tu non possi fuggire per nessun verso di non essere infelice. (100–101)
>
> Well, then, since of necessity you love yourself with the greatest love of which you are capable, of necessity you desire your happiness as strongly as you can. And since this supreme desire of yours can never be satisfied even in the smallest degree, it follows that in no way can you escape being unhappy.

In "Dialogo della natura e di un anima" in the *Operette morali*, Nature echoes the same idea, once more underlining the link between *amor proprio* and unhappiness (106). Nonetheless, just as, on the one hand, the drive to pleasure and pain focuses on material desire, that same pleasure and pain can, on the other hand, be subsumed in memory, from which imagination finally springs. Imagination, and the ability to have sensations in act and remembrance, can create something new. In his *teoria del piacere*, Leopardi foregrounds the drive exerted by the imagination and the resultant deluding power which is, above all, absolutely necessary. In "Storia del genere umano" he speaks about the importance of dreams and illusions (28-9). Leopardi's idealistic sense of aesthetics resists the insufficiency of reality and its lack of purpose and instead allows the human being to create his/her own meaningful world, which is acknowledged to be *de facto* an illusion. That same garden which evokes images of beauty and harmony hides suffering and death and reflects the way in which life perpetuates itself through death. Leopardi overcomes this paradoxical principle by subsuming it into a higher paradox: that of the dianoetic laugh. Laughter is a celebration of the deluding but necessary power of the imagination in the face of the recognition of nothingness.

Rather than through the smokescreen of humour, then, the attenuation of human pain is possible through the Leopardian dianoetic laugh where the human being accepts suffering and simultaneously empowers him/herself by resorting to the stormy depths of the imagination. The weapons of the ridiculous deconstruct the weapons of pure rationality. In *Zibaldone* Leopardi writes:

> Ne' miei dialoghi io cercherò di portar la commedia a quello che finora è stato proprio della tragedia, cioe' i vizi dei grandi, i principii fondamentali delle calamità e della miseria umana . . . E credo che le armi del ridicolo, massime in questo ridicolissimo e freddissimo tempo . . . potranno giovare più . . . Cosí a scuotere la mia povera patria, e secolo, io mi troverò avere impiegato le armi dell' immaginazione nella lirica, e in quelle prose letterarie ch'io potrò scrivere; le armi della ragione, della logica, della filosofia, ne' trattati filosofici ch'io dispongo; e le armi del ridicolo ne' dialoghi e novelle Lucianee ch'io vo preparando. (1394)
>
> In my dialogues I will attempt to bring into comedy that which has been thus far the subject matter of tragedy, that is the vices of the great ones, the principal causes of human calamities and miseries . . . I believe that the weapons of the ridiculous, particularly in this most ridiculous time period . . . would be more beneficial . . . Thus in order to shake my poor country, and the century

> in which I live, I will have to use the imagination in my poems, and in the literary prose works that I will be writing: the weapons of reason, logic, philosophy in the philosophical treatises that I will pen; and the weapons of the ridiculous in the dialogues and Lucianesque short stories that I am preparing. (my translation)

Counterpoising the Hobbesian echoes of superiority theory in his writing on humour,[8] Leopardi thus strives to uncover the cowardice of his "secol superbo e sciocco" ("proud and foolish century"), as he describes the nineteenth century in "La ginestra" (line 53). In this manner, Leopardi points out the importance of humorously acknowledging such foolishness.[9] Hence, following the long lineage of philosophers starting with the above-mentioned Democritus, Leopardi conceives of humour as a shield against the heritage of humanity's ancient impotence in the presence of nature. This is the result of a perspective based on incongruity, a response to Hobbes's austere notion of humour.

4. Incongruity Theory of Humour in Leopardi

The basic idea of incongruity theory was that two jarring ideas suddenly connect with comic effect. Immanuel Kant phrases the incongruity theory in a brilliant short discussion of laughter from *The Critique of Judgement* where humour is a sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing (196-203). In Leopardi, as in Democritus, this incongruity is manifested in the way insanity is conceived as wisdom and human life is ultimately portrayed as a fable that nourishes illusions. In a December 17, 1823 entry in *Zibaldone* Leopardi wrote: "Tutto è follia in questo mondo fuorché il folleggiare. Tutto è degno di riso fuorché il ridersi di tutto. Tutto è vanità fuorché le belle illusioni e le dilettevoli frivolezze" ("Everything is insane in this world except for behaving insanely. Everything is worthy of laughter except for laughing at everything — everything is vanity except for the beautiful illusions and the pleasant frivolities"; 3990; my translation).[10]

It is in this paradoxical but highly creative zone, where one laughs at the engulfing misery of one's ephemeral physicality, that the Leopardian humour mentioned by Luigi Pirandello in his 1908 essay *L'Umorismo* ['*On Humour*'] (42) comes to life. In L'Umorismo, Pirandello specifically cites Leopardi as a good example of 'umorismo' as opposed to 'comicità' (which recalls the same Freudian distinction between humour and the comic). Feeling is the pivot of Pirandello's philosophy; he thus adopts the anti-intellectual tradition of Western thought represented by Jean Paul, Leopardi, Schopenhauer, and Bergson, who are all quoted in *L'Umorismo*. Pirandello claims that the comic, namely the "avvertimento del contrario" (the "perception of the opposite") should not be confused with humour, namely "il sentimento del contrario" ("the feeling of the opposite"; *L'Umorismo* 135; my translation). As in Leopardi's theory of humour, in *L'Umorismo* Pirandello makes rationality crumble, plunging the human being into a near-complete darkness. The Pirandellian guffaw indeed laughs at life, which is unpredictable, but whose elusiveness does not impede, as in Leopardi, a feeling for it. This humour fights against the nihilistic notion of human doom. Indeed, for Leopardi, humour acts as a double-edged sword. While it offers strong resistance to earthly delusions and to the consuming effects of desire, providing a buffer between the human being and his passions, it is also the only conceivable way to respond to the trials and tribulations of life, because it paradoxically allows expression to the desiring self. Leopardi's humour works through a

[8] These ideas were opposed by eighteenth-century British philosophers like Lord Shaftesbury, for whom humour was the very height of reasonableness.

[9] In Leopardian prose, "allegrezza" (cheerfulness) is not disconnected from "tristezza" (sadness). The relationship between physical reaction and passion reflects the influence of the idéologues (Tracy, Cabanis).

[10] In "Storia del genere umano" Leopardi explores the importance of dreams and illusions (Operette *m*orali 28-9).

tongue-in-cheek kind of writing whereby the laughter of his so-called 'cosmi-comic' mode faces the stark confrontation of its fable-like quality and the finitude of the physical world.

According to Freud in his essay "Humour," humour is "the contribution made to the comic through the agency of the super-ego" (432); in Lacan's words in *Écrits*, "Humour betrays the very function of the superego in comedy" (648). Leopardi's view of humour as an attitude that one takes towards oneself thus prefigures Freud's theories. As Freud points out, the superego treats the ego as one treats one's childhood self from an adult perspective, recognizing and laughing at one's insignificance. Leopardi and Freud indeed interpret that same impudence of humour not simply as an act of superiority, but also as a mode of representation through a 'feeling' for the opposite, an ability to laugh knowingly in the face of adversity. As Freud points out in his essay "Humour," this humour is superior to the laughter of superiority, which, on its own, is simply the expression of repressed desire and unconscious aggression (429).

In a May 1825 entry in *Zibaldone,* Leopardi gave expression to this laugh that knowingly 'feels' the opposite, the laugh of dianoia: "quanto più l'uomo cresce . . . e crescendo si fa più incapace di felicità, tanto egli si fa proclive e domestico al riso, e più straniero al pianto" ("the more the human being ages, and ageing becomes increasingly incapable of happiness, the more he is prone and susceptible to laughter, and the more he is a stranger to crying"; 4138; my translation). This is a dignified ageing laugh that is echoed in "Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro" where Eleandro's "disperazione ha sempre nella bocca un sorriso" ("despair always carries a smile on its lips"; 404-406). This dignified smile acknowledges and bravely takes stock of human weaknesses, not precluding our propensity for vain desire. The Leopardian ageing laugh offers solace in a way that the laughter of superiority does not, and his poignant and wise smile forms part of the thread that leads to Freudian humour, particularly as envisaged by Freud's late-career theories on the subject.

In the Classical *quaestio* of Leopardi's Eleandro ("Dialogo di Timandro e di Eleandro," *Operette morali*) − whether it would be better to laugh or cry when confronted with the misfortunes and unhappiness of the world – the obvious choice is Democritian laughter; central to Leopardi's work, this laughter involves a mad guffaw at the ills of the physical world:

> Ridendo dei nostri mali, trovo qualche conforto; e procuro di recarne altrui nello stesso modo. Se questo non mi vien fatto, tengo pure per fermo che il ridere dei nostri mali sia l'unico profitto che se ne possa cavare, e l'unico rimedio che vi si trovi. (406-7)
>
> Laughing at our ills gives me some comfort and helps me to bring some to others. Even if I could not do this, I would still remain thoroughly convinced that laughing at our ills is the only benefit we can draw from them and the only remedy we can find in them. (my translation)

The root of Leopardi's comic spirit is thus a person taking his or her human role seriously. In *On Humour*, Simon Critchley pinpoints precisely this element when, referring to Helmuth Plessner, he explains the specifically human element of humour as follows:

> As Plessner puts it, laughter confirms the eccentric (*exzentrisch*) position of the human being in the world of nature. Plessner's thesis is that the life of animals is *zentrisch*, it is centred. This means that the animal simply lives and experiences (*lebt und erlebt*). By contrast, the human being not only lives and experiences, he or she experiences those experiences (*erlebt sein Erleben*). That is, the human being has a reflective attitude towards its experiences and towards itself. This is why humans are eccentric, because they live beyond the limits set for them by nature by taking up a distance from their immediate experience. . . . The working out of the consequences of the eccentric position of the human is the main task of a philosophical anthropology, which is why laughter has such an absolutely central role in Plessner's work (28).

The human being's ex-centricity, the human predisposition to self-reflection, explains the cynical, brooding, black misanthropy of some excerpts in Leopardi. The ex-centricity of this

humour, however, also recalls the Lacanian split self in its tragicomic fate, unable to come to terms with its own desire. Humour is thus not just a process of safeguarding pleasure against the denials of reason, which is wary of pleasure. Freud's analysis of humour makes this clear. In *Jokes* (1905) Freud argues that laughter is not necessarily an honest reflection of the soul. Moreover, in his 1927 essay, "Humour," Freud speaks of the superego who laughs at the ego, describing an internal human mechanism whereby one refuses to take oneself seriously. In this instance, Freud speaks of magnanimity in reference to the already-mentioned gallows humour. The magnanimity of humour in Freud's 1927 essay goes beyond the simple notion of malicious desire repressed behind a humorous front.

5. Relief Theory of Humour in Leopardi, Freud and Lacan

Not surprisingly, one can draw more than one parallel between Freud's theories of humour and some of Leopardi's. At the core of another theory of humour—relief theory—[11] one can detect the basic elements of the first version of the Freudian theory of laughter which echoes not only Victorian humour writers but also, among others, Leopardi, who had explored many of the ideas about human intuition and desire that Freud would later propose.

When Freud suggested the universality of the oppositional death and life drives in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, or when Lacan juxtaposed Imaginary demand with Symbolic desire, both were describing the tension between the need to restore an earlier state of things and the perennial desire to placate our impulse to self-assertion. This same tension is crucial to humour. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud makes an important remark about the relation between the comic and repression:

> Evidence, finally, of the increase in activity which becomes necessary when these primary modes of functioning are inhibited is to be found in the fact that we produce a comic effect, that is, a surplus of energy which has to be discharged in laughter, if we allow these modes of thinking to force their way through into consciousness. (766)

The claim here is that we emit a surplus of energy in laughter when repressed material from the unconscious threatens to break into our conscious awareness. In *Jokes*, Freud delves deeper into the argument. He proposes that the energy discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes energy that ordinarily would contain or repress psychic activity. It is also in the *Jokes* book that Freud specifically distinguishes between the comic and humour. This distinction also lies at the core of both Pirandello's *L'Umorismo* and one of its sources, Theodor Lipps' 'Komik und Humor' (1898), which Freud mentions as well (*Jokes* 202). Freud states that "what are quite especially unfavourable for the comic are all kinds of intellectual processes . . . There is no place whatever left for the comic in abstract

[11]The laughter at the heart of Relief Theory, or Victorian Relief Theory, whose pleasures are once more seen as not entirely estimable, appears, for instance, in the nonsense genre and particularly in innocent-looking, unsuspicious works like the *Book of Nonsense* by Edward Lear. In these limericks, produced at the height of Victorianism, the dividing line between joy and disaster is frightfully thin. Lear's limericks underplay the terror of the situation through restraint of emotion reflected in the rigid poetic form and the accompanying hackneyed caricature. But as Donald J. Gray points out, within an illusory frame, nonsense expresses suppressed anxiety and "cho[o]se[s] to consider death, pain, desolation and other powerfully disruptive forces" (172). Nonsense is based on that same 'topsyturvydom' that Mikhail Bakhtin refers to and dwells on the incongruities that result from turning the world of sense, rules and plausibility upside down. Laughter in this case represents a rebellion against order- a temptation to a dangerous moment of anarchy against the severe demands of social constraint. The nonsense idiosyncrasies, and the relief theory in general, were absorbed into mainstream literature by the onset of the twentieth century but the comic effect is the same: the laughter sticks in one's throat and the resulting sense of isolation, disintegration and discontinuity is overwhelming.

reflection except when that mode of thought is suddenly interrupted" (219). He then dissects the comic further and contrasts it with humour:

> The comic is greatly interfered with if the situation from which it ought to develop gives rise at the same time to a release of strong affect . . . Yet precisely in cases where there is a release of affect one can observe a particularly strong difference in expenditure bring about the automatism of release [. . . These are] case[s] in which laughter occurs in circumstances other than pleasurable ones and accompanied by intensely distressing or strained emotions. (221)

If the release of distressing affects is, as Freud puts out in *Jokes*, "the greatest obstacle to the emergence of the comic" (228), humour is "a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place" (228). The conditions of humour occur when "we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and [when] motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect in *statu nascendi*" (228). Freud goes on to pay homage to disaster humour and its variant, gallows humour − where the threat of death and the facts of human catastrophe are transformed into the material for jokes. Humour is then, according to Freud's first model proposed in the *Jokes* book, what Critchley in *On Humour* terms "[a] symptom . . . of societal repression . . . a return of the repressed" (12).

In *Jokes* Freud locates the essence of humour in a preconscious link and compares it with puerile pleasure. He asserts that humour, despite being a defence mechanism, goes beyond the arch-defence process of repression. Indeed, he explains, humour "scorns to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention as repression does, and thus surmounts the automatism of defence." Humour brings this change about by finding a means of "withdrawing the energy from the release of un-pleasure that is already in preparation and of transforming it, by discharge, into pleasure" (233). Humour transforms and releases unpleasant feelings. It is thus no wonder that many of Leopardi's *Operette morali* speak of death and suffering with utter humour. In *Jokes* Freud offers this explanation of the transformation that humour engenders:

> The species of humour are extraordinarily variegated according to the nature of the emotion which is economized in favour of the humour: pity, anger, pain, tenderness, and so on. Their number seems to remain uncompleted because the kingdom of humour is constantly being enlarged whenever an artist or writer succeeds in submitting some hitherto unconquered emotions to the control of humour, in making them . . . into sources of humorous pleasure. (232)

In his later essay "Humour," however, Freud adds, significantly, that humour allows one not only to release repressed emotion, desire not precluded, and to derive pleasure from it, but also to laugh at oneself and to take stock of one's faults, which leads to an elevating feeling. In the 1927 essay, Freud concludes that humour is the contribution made to the comic by the inflated position of the superego, who reassuringly laughs at the ego. Baudelaire had already alluded to this division that takes place during the humorous moment. He comments, "the man who trips would be the last to laugh at his own fall, unless he happened to be a philosopher, one who had acquired by habit a power of rapid self-division and thus of assisting as a disinterested spectator at the phenomena of his own ego" (154).[12]André Breton,

[12] The splitting of the human interior during the humorous moment, echoing Freud's dialectic between ego and superego, is of primary importance in Jean Paul's notion of humour as expressed in Preschool of Aesthetics (253). It is significant, nonetheless, that this humour is defined once more through an oxymoron: it is at once infinite and devoid of anything. In Jean Paul's words, it is humour as the "inverse sublime" (250). In Jokes, Freud would also refer to the "degradation of the sublime" which creates "the comparison between this new ideational method . . . and the previously habitual one . . . [T]his comparison . . . creates the difference in expenditure which can be discharged by laughter" (201). As Jean Paul states, "humour might seem to border on madness, which takes leave of its senses naturally, as the philosopher artificially, but like the latter, keeping its

directly inspired by Freud's 1927 paper, would call this humour *l'humour noir* (1). Indeed black humour is replete with the unhappy black bile, the medieval melan-cholia, to which in "Humour" Freud attributes a mental state expressed as the suppression of the ego by the usually cruel (or in the case of *humour noir*, not-so-cruel) superego (431). Such humour has, as Freud specifies in his 1927 essay, "something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation" (428), which is why it comes conceptually close to dianoetic laughter. This elevation, also of primary importance in Leopardi, highlights an interesting contrast between what Freud stated in *Jokes* and his revised notion of humour, which echoes the cerebral resistance of *dianoia*. Freud's revised notion is empowering in that it brings about a change of situation where the real is 'surrealized.' This explains why Breton was so interested in *l'humour noir*. According to this model of humour, unlike the humour of jokes, one laughs at oneself and acknowledges this self-reflexive laughter in a dignified attitude. Freud further explains, "Humour possesses a dignity which is wholly lacking, for instance, in jokes" (429). The grandeur of such a humorous moment lies, as Freud concludes, in the triumph of narcissism (428). And with the triumph of the ego comes the previously mentioned Freudian 'pleasure principle.'

It is precisely here that Freud's line of argumentation merits further scrutiny. It cannot be ignored that in the same 1927 essay, Freud states that "the putting through of the pleasure principle bring[s] humour near to the regressive or reactionary processes" (429). The pleasure principle emerges from the reactionary mechanism of "a return to the peace of the inorganic world" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 166), but also, as Freud specifies, "the pleasure-principle … remains for a long time the method of operation of the sex impulses" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 143). One cannot thus overlook the fact that Freud's pleasure principle lies at the heart of the dualistic theory of death and life forces (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 167). Gabriel Reisner underlines that death and life are both goals of desire (*Death Ego*14). This thought adds an interesting twist to the matter. As much as the regressive, reactionary forces of that "opposition to desire within the ego" are crucial to humour, the "desire which supersedes the ego" also struggles against those forces. Humour thus lies not only near to the regressive process, or, as Freud defines it in his essay, to the ego which refuses to be wiped out by the distress that surrounds and engulfs it, but it also has to struggle against an opposite force of desire, "the keenest threat to the sovereignty of the ego" (*Death Ego* 34).

In his 1927 essay, then, Freud affirms that humour conceals repressed desire (429), but he does not highlight its opposing force. Humour indeed strives to allow the "desire which supersedes the ego" (*Death Ego* 34) to break through the pressure bearing down on it. And repressed desire erupts in humour through language – a language made up of witticisms and puns. It is a language characterized by lack, by the inability to grasp the underlying unconscious desires. Language can only signify a coming-to-terms with loss, ultimately the lack-of-being, or, as Lacan states in *Écrits*, the desire that is "desire for desire, the Other's desire," that defines the Lacanian split subject (723). Thus, if we supplement Freud's theories with the Lacanian registers of human experience – the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real orders

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reason; humour is, as the ancients dubbed Diogenes, a raving Socrates" (259). This contradictoriness is also highlighted by Baudelaire in On the Essence of Laughter, where he states that "Laughter is satanic: It is thus profoundly human . . . and since laughter is essentially human, it is, in fact, essentially contradictory" (153). Jean Paul also delves into the satanic aspect in humour, suggesting that the devil is "usually the tomfool" (253). Nietzsche echoes this thought in Thus Spake Zarathustra: "night is also a sun-go away! Or ye will learn that a sage is also a fool" (396). Humour, according to Kayser, is "filled with bitterness, it takes on characteristics of the mocking, cynical, and ultimately satanic laughter" (187). This satanic aspect is also raised by Bergson who speaks of the comic art as having "a touch of the diabolical, rais[ing] up the demon who had been thrown by the angel" in that it divines "beneath the skin-deep harmony of form . . . the deep-seated recalcitrance of matter" (77).

of being – some crucial distinctions can be made between the energies, actions, and expressions of the dual movement of desire at the core of humour.

Lacan points out the central theme of the breach that results in the internal conflict within the 'self' on various occasions: "If we ignore the self's radical ex-centricity to itself with which man is confronted, in other words, the truth discovered by Freud, we shall falsify both the order and the methods of psychoanalytic mediation" (*Écrits* 171). The radical internal breach that defines the individual's ex-centricity, his or her being off-centre, is caused by desire, which renders that same subject darkly humorous or tragicomic. In *Seminar VII* Lacan states:

> The pathetic side . . . [is] the counterpart of tragedy. They are not incompatible since tragi-comedy exists. That is where the experience of human action resides. And it is because we know better than those who went before how to recognize the nature of desire, which is at the heart of this experience, that a reconsideration of ethics is possible. (314)

The tragicomic resides within the human inner split, within the human being's inability to come to terms with the overwhelming force that is desire. Quoting Freud on jokes and then concluding with his own remarks, in *Écrits* Lacan surmises:

> For, however little interest has been taken in it — and for good reason — *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* remains the most unchallengeable of his [Freud's] works because it is the most transparent; in it, the effect of the unconscious is demonstrated in all its subtlety. And the visage it reveals to us is that of wit in the ambiguity conferred on it by language, where the other face of its regalia power is the witticism, by which the whole of its order is annihilated in an instant – the witticism, indeed, in which language's creative activity unveils its absolute gratuitousness, in which its domination of reality is expressed in the challenge of non-meaning, and in which the humour, in the malicious grace of the free spirit, symbolizes a truth that does not say its last word . . . Nowhere is the individual's intent more evidently surpassed by the subject's find — nowhere is the distinction I make between the individual and the subject so palpable — since not only must there have been something foreign to me in my find for me to take pleasure in it, but some of it must remain foreign for this find to hit home. This takes on its importance due to the necessity, so clearly indicated by Freud, of a joke's third person, who is always presupposed, and to the fact that a joke does not lose its power when told in the form of indirect speech. In short, this points, in the Other's locus. (223–224)

Without an understanding of desire and the unconscious, the human being is susceptible to losing what little control he or she has in a world in which mastery is elusive. The search for mastery and unity is destined to fail, and this is the tragicomic destiny of humanity. Understanding the fictions of the Lacanian Real and the power of the unconscious allows us to come to terms with our tragicomic selves.

At this point the parallels between Lacan's theory of the registers and Freud's revised theory of humour should become evident. Indeed, the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order entails a loss: a loss, as Lacan says in *Écrits*, of "the Other's desire since it is originally desire for what the Other desires" (662). An intrinsic link can be traced between the Imaginary and the death drive on the one hand, and the Symbolic and the life drive on the other, which suggests that the Imaginary involves a yielding while the Symbolic entails play. The Symbolic is, however, a play of signifiers which, as in the *fort/da* game described in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is a presence playing on an absence. To regress to the Imaginary is to turn away from desire, to lose and undo desire, or as Reisner points out in *Death Ego*, "anti-desire" (21). The Symbolic, on the other hand, progresses by finding desire, though significantly this desire "comes from the Other" (*Écrits* 724).

The humour under discussion here, the humour expressed through the laugh of *dianoia* and construed in Lacanian terms, results in a struggle between Imaginary desire, which forcefully attempts to still the current or stop it mid-stream, and Symbolic desire, which fights

back satirically. Freud's insistence in "Humour" that "humour is not resigned; it is rebellious" (429) and is inextricably linked to something elevating (428), acquires new meaning when considered in this light. The same gulf that exists between *amor proprio* and unhappiness in Leopardi is filled with this humour. It is a laugh that restlessly agitates, shattering any possibility of inner peace since it is a relic of the radical ex-centricity of the human being. The laugh in Leopardi's oeuvre is the dianoetic guffaw of a reflective soul. It celebrates cerebral power but it cannot, on its own, laugh off adversity. The revised Freudian humour that accompanies this laugh is essential. Leopardi's outer ageing laugh, detached from inner suffering, springs to mind when we consider the division of the self that Freud locates in the humorous moment. The same cleaving paves the way for the Lacanian split subject, where desire, realized at the level of language, points to the impossibility of attaining a unified perception of the self.

6. Conclusion

The ex-centricity of this humour emphasizes a gap within the self that permits one laughingly to view that 'self' as if from the outside. This gap is the predominant characteristic of the *risus purus*. And this two-pronged move exists also in the 1927 version of Freudian humour, characterized by a two-way movement between desire and anti-desire. The positive side, *pars construens*, of Leopardi's laugh is thus more pronounced than its negative side, *pars destruens*. The Leopardian dianoetic laugh is ultimately a cognitive laugh in its wise acceptance of the finite. It is both an expression of self-consciousness marked by an awareness of human limitations as well as a reminder that the infinity of desire survives in humour specifically through its marked ex-centricity. Leopardian dianoetic laughter is thus constructive in its knowledge that the human being is able to reflect on, laugh at, and ultimately work to alleviate his/her own painful condition.

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