

TERRY EAGLETON'S DIVINE COMEDY

LA DIVINA COMEDIA DE TERRY EAGLETON

Steven Connor 
University of Cambridge
skc45@cam.ac.uk

Fecha de recepción: 13/05/2022

Fecha de aceptación: 07/07/2022

<https://doi.org/10.30827/tn.v5i2.24633>

Abstract: This essay reflects on the links between comedy and religion in Terry Eagleton's writing since 2000. It proposes that religious thought provides the same kind of occasion and imperative to take comedy seriously as Marxist theory had done earlier in Eagleton's career. The essay argues that the connecting principle between Marxism, Catholicism, criticism and comedy is the body, especially in its conjoining of absurdity and abasement. It proposes that comedy is best regarded as the enactment of the fantasy of cognitive omnipotence, or the abstract will-to-enjoyment in constant search for occasions. We therefore likely joke for the same reason as we pray, for the pleasure of getting above ourselves, which includes the gratifying prospect of seeing ourselves tumbling off the ladder, which might be a slapstick translation of the *felix culpa*, or fortunate fall. If Eagleton's critical comedy is officially offered as a salutary foretaste of the pleasure of redemption, its gratifications seem always also to lie down where all the ladders start, in suffering and finitude.

Keywords: Comedy; religion; the body; suffering; politics.

Resumen: Este ensayo reflexiona acerca de los vínculos entre la comedia y la religión en los escritos de Terry Eagleton desde el año 2000 y plantea que el pensamiento religioso provee el mismo tipo de ocasión e imperativo para tomarse la comedia en serio que la teoría marxista había brindado previamente a la carrera profesional de Eagleton. En este artículo argumentamos que el principio de conexión entre el marxismo, el catolicismo, la crítica y la comedia es el cuerpo, especialmente en su conjunción de absurdo y abajamiento. Sugerimos que la mejor manera de considerar la comedia es como puesta en escena de la fantasía de la omnipotencia cognitiva o como voluntad abstracta de disfrute en constante búsqueda de ocasiones. Por lo tanto, es probable que bromeemos por la misma razón que rezamos: por el placer de creernos más importantes de lo que somos. Esto incluye la grata posibilidad de vernos caer de la escalera, lo cual podría ser considerado una traducción bufonesca de la *felix culpa* o caída afortunada. Si la comedia crítica de Eagleton se presenta oficialmente como un anticipo salutífero del placer de la redención, sus gratificaciones parecen encontrarse siempre también allá donde empiezan todas las escaleras: en el sufrimiento y la finitud.

Palabras clave: Comedia; religión; cuerpo; sufrimiento; política.

In an earlier essay on Terry Eagleton, written for a conference in Oxford in 1998 to mark his work, at which he remarked how surprisingly agreeable it felt to be, like Tim Finnegan, at once in attendance and posthumous, I took the pleasurable opportunity to reflect on Eagleton's negotiation in his writing of the oxymoronic tensions between art, revolutionary Marxism and comedy. Now, almost a quarter of a century on, with as much "late Eagleton" having accumulated as "late capitalism", and in the sure and almost certain knowledge that another quadricentennial retrospective opportunity is unlikely to come round, I mean to reflect on what has emerged as another area of generative and indeed defining feature of Eagleton's thought, namely the striking consubstantiality of questions of comedy and religion in it.

The return, like a long-overdue library book, of religious preoccupations to Eagleton's work dates, appropriately enough, more or less from the turn of the millennium, and was mediated by a series of books on different aspects of tragic violence: *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2002), *Holy Terror* (2005), *On Evil* (2010) and *Radical Sacrifice* (2018), interleaved with two books that more explicitly consider the relation between religious and critical thought, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (2009) and *Culture and the Death of God* (2014). This might suggest

that religion is allied closely to dark and tragic matters, but, as always, and, in his book *Humour* (2019) explicitly, comedy has something to do with this reparative labour of the negative.

None of this represents a penitent return to the skirts of Mother Church. Eagleton asserts, in the introduction to *Sweet Violence*, that “religion today represents one of the most odious forms of political reaction on the planet, a blight on human freedom, and a buttress of the rich and powerful” (xvii). He begins *Reason, Faith and Revolution*, perhaps his most vehemently explicit defence of religious thinking, with the similarly round assertion “Religion has wrought untold misery in human affairs. For the most part, it has been a squalid tale of bigotry, superstition, wishful thinking, and oppressive ideology” (xi). In his writings on religion through the last couple of decades, Eagleton has proved himself no more an apologist for established religion than he is for the forms of twentieth-century official state socialism: he once tipped off his first-year English undergraduates in Wadham College, I was one, that he was off to China to lecture, as the CPC had expressed “a guarded interest in hearing about Marxism”. But he does seem to feel that, in the cases both of Marxism and Christianity, there is, splashing about in the murky, turgid bathwater of history, a babe too bonny of aspect to swirl away with it down the plughole.

The religious hand I myself was dealt (soggy south-eastern public-school Anglican-ecumenical) had a different character from that dealt to Terry Eagleton in his youth (Salford Christian-Brother Catholic-brutalist). But I find that we are both in our different ways more inclined in our seniority (and the older we both get, the closer we must come to seeming coeval to the generations treading us down) to draw from this hand. In my case this is largely because of the benefits of an education which involved a great deal of religious observance, musical, linguistic, and amateur-dramatic, followed by a life-long interest, much of it, to my continuing astonishment, salaried, in subjects like literary criticism and philosophy, from which in those days it was almost inevitable that one would acquire, if only by rumour or on the rebound, a pretty tidy working knowledge of Christian ideas and writings. This was a time when the word *sacramental* was as familiar in English departments as the term *eduroam* is today. Nowadays this kind of familiarity only seems to be possessed by students I feel I should really be turning in to the Prevent programme. How else was one to make sense of the fact that a tenth of the population of England might in the seventeenth century alone have been reduced to sewage over an abstruse question of semiotics (body of Christ, or token thereof) and those who rallied to either side of the fraught signifier/signified dichotomy. Such sensitivities may not have completely vanished. I was once about to take part in a radio discussion on

metaphor when a production assistant came up and murmured that they had a regular correspondent who got volubly inflamed by any mention by the national broadcaster of transubstantiation, so would I perhaps mind steering clear of the topic? "But the word is never off my lips!" I protested. Similarly, I found myself a few years ago at a dinner in a Cambridge college in which a discussion arose as to the desirability of adding a fourth person (female, those were the days) to the Trinity. I was able, I compliment myself, to hold my own in the sparkling repartee that developed between the chaplain and a fellow in engineering, the latter seeing the issue primarily in terms of tetrahedral as opposed to tripodal symmetry. My easy commerce between physics and metaphysics, Mariolatry and milking-stools (and I must surely have thrown in Joyce's joke about the puns in *Finnegans Wake* not being trivial, but at least quadrivial), has something to do with the fact that, though I have never felt at home in religious thought, I have felt able to make it into my element.

The examples just given might make it easy to say why, for it will surely seem irritatingly obvious to some that my impostor insiderliness with regard to religious, or strictly speaking Christian, idiom and argument comes from the fact that I feel no pressure to take an iota of it at all seriously. I hope I could nevertheless defend myself against the charge of not taking seriously the seriousness of other people's religious commitments. In any case, I will try to wonder in this essay whether the question of religious comedy, which seems to set the seriousness of religious commitment aside, is itself a serious question. My suggestion is going to have to be that joking and the libido of laughter have become for Eagleton not just a style or, as we have been saying for the last fifty years, a strategy, but something like a necessity, even, increasingly, a kind of compulsion, to resort to the word we use for a comically unnecessary necessity.

Category Mistakes

Eagleton begins *Humour* with a dismissal of the conventional complaint that to analyse humour is to destroy it, arguing that analysis and laughter can coexist perfectly well since they are in fact wholly autonomous and non-interfering operations. Cracking jokes is simply a different thing from explicating them. I remember him ringing the changes in tutorials on this particular category of category-mistake, one of the most surprising being his sage observation that an ability to play or even have played football well is not in fact a necessary qualification for being a successful football coach. This is a self-instancing instance, since I could not imagine that Eagleton's knowledge of this principle could have been obtained empirically, either on the field or the bench.

However, his own practice seems to illustrate an opposite principle, or at least an opposite reason for believing that analysis and interpretation do not compromise comedy, and that comedy does not scotch analysis and interpretation. This, to be quick about it, is the idea that analysis and interpretation are essentially comic procedures. Comedy need not be funny and one might even articulate it as an aggressive principle of anything we find funny that not everyone will. An argument in favour of this unlikely-sounding association between analysis and comedy might proceed in part via the widely-accepted association between comedy and incongruity. Comedy often arises when things do not seem to agree or add up, when things seem, as we may say, “funny”, which is coincidentally just the kind of circumstance which might prompt the act of rational enquiry aimed at interpretative explanation. Comedy requires interpretation, most particularly in the case of jokes, which require us to “get” them, in a way that is perhaps not as far away as it might seem from grasping an argument, but also in the case of absurd situations, which require that we “read” them aright. Perhaps comedy does not always arise in such circumstances, but when it does, it often looks as though some kind of incongruity that calls for a remedial straightening out.

In any case, the incurious conviction of the refractoriness of comedy to analysis is productive of one of the most venerable of comic routines, which plays out the pleasingly chiasmic logic that analysing comedy is never itself funny, except when it is done with such leaden solemnity, as the case of the “jokes” offered for analysis by Kant and Schopenhauer for example, as to seem itself absurd. Bergson’s theory of laughter, along with the comedy of inflexible eccentricity that gives us the word “humour”, depends on this principle that laughter is sparked by people who do not realise how ludicrously mechanical they must seem. Comedy may feel more like feeling than thinking, but always seems to involve at the very least feelings about thinking.

Can we then say that interpretation necessarily requires or produces comedy? Well, probably not, but it may nevertheless be that the solution of difficulties or unravelling of riddles which is characteristic of the act of interpretation parallels the dissolution of psychic tensions at which Freud’s account of laughter points (riddles, remember, tend to be wisecracks as well as conundrums). I do not pretend that the abstract-conceptual nature of comedy, especially as it relates to the question of embodiment, is any kind of mystery to Eagleton, who points out that “Laughter is a form of utterance that springs straight from the body’s libidinal depths, but there is a cognitive dimension to it as well”, meaning that children are “strangers to the kind of comedy that depends upon deviating from established norms, since they have as yet no grasp of them” (*Humour* 19). So I think there is enough to go on here to suggest that Eagleton’s well-recognised comic turns have a more than ornamental function in his thinking, and the wording of it.

Anatomy

Indeed, the red thread or connective tissue running for Eagleton between Marxism, Catholicism, criticism and comedy is the body. He quotes with approval Simon Critchley's judgement that "What is funny, finally, is the fact of having a body" (Critchley, *On Humour* 62; quoted Eagleton, *Humour* 21). Actually, as he immediately observes, the funny thing is not just the fact of having a body, otherwise we might expect more in the way of spontaneous merriment among alligators and elephants, but the fact of having a body as well as being one. This is to say that the fact of having a body is also the fate of having a body, and, even more specifically, remembering that *fatum* is the past participle of *fari* to speak, the fate of having, or being able—in fact, to mince words to their maximum, having to have been able—to speak of the body as well as with it, phew. "A poem should not mean / But be" rules Archibald MacLeish (51), as the conclusion of a poem which it thereby seems conclusively to rule out as a poem. Bums are not *eo ipso* nearly as funny as their designation with the word "bum" rather than some more stylishly polysyllabic bit of Latin. Gorillas' bodies are not funny, except when they can be mistaken for people in gorilla suits. George Herbert invites us to see the act of prayer as "the soul in paraphrase" (45): but elsewhere, in speaking of himself as "A wonder tortured in the space / Betwixt this world and that of grace" (82), he seems to suggest that it might be the crucified body, or the body as itself a kind of crucifixion, that forms the space of that paraphrase. Torment and tomfoolery consort handy-dandy and arsy-versy in Eagleton's writing. It is the tension between sign and substance, or soma and seeming, that makes possible comic play, and makes it hard for the most earnest metaphysics to keep a straight face. This is a matter not just of the matter of Eagleton's thought, but of its manner, not just of the soul of wit, but of what Wyndham Lewis called the "brain-body's snort of exultation" (152).

This tension animates if not every word, then a sizeable proportion of all the sentences in Eagleton's writing. It may account for his frequent recourse to traditions of what might be called the Hiberno-Cartesian grotesque, in Swift, Sterne, Wilde, Joyce, and, perhaps most favoured at all when it comes to the politics of the body as incarnational humiliation, Beckett. Perhaps the tradition of learned wit on which Eagleton draws is epitomised in the observation in Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies* that "sticklers have been met with who had no peace until they knew for certain whether their carcinoma was of the pylorus or whether on the contrary it was not rather of the duodenum" (*Three Novels* 236), a sentence in which the intestinal windings of syntax seem perfectly to simulate the alternation between the immediacy of pain and the medicating mediations of discourse. It also represents a rejoinder to Eagleton's enjoyable, but actually ques-

tionable observation that “An anatomical acquaintance with the large intestine is no obstacle to enjoying a meal” (*Humour* x). Beckett was at pains in his later writing and in his productions of plays written earlier in his career, to try to mute or ruin the itch to quippery, even if the hamstringing could sometimes act as a kind of intensifier, as when the inquisitor in *What Where* gravely enquires of his associate in damnation “Are you free?” (*Complete Dramatic Works* 473), daring its respectfully solemn audience to let out the snigger it seems both to stifle and to extort. One sometimes senses in Eagleton the same uneasiness about the fascination of what comes so easily, since the point of comedy seems to be to point us to the reputedly serious matters, of redemption or revolution, which it intimates. So his striving for comedy is also similarly a kind of striving against it—as in Frankie Howerd’s lugubrious mock-reproof “No, missus, *don’t*”.

If the intestinal sentence just quoted is not so much a joke as *the* joke in Beckett’s writing, its reflexive convolution is also powerfully evidenced in what is known as the Irish bull, which operates on the principle of what I unluckily elected in an earlier essay on the subject to call body-illogic (Connor, “Art Criticism and Laughter”), as exemplified in the story of the Kilkenny cats, here rendered in the form of a stretched limerick:

There once were two cats of Kilkenny;
Each thought that was one cat too many;
So they fought and fit,
And they scratched and they bit,
Till excepting their nails,
And the tips of their tails,
Instead of two cats, there weren’t any (Jerrold 28).

Absurdity is also close to bodily abasement in Christian narrative, and Eagleton is often drawn to the holy-fool cavortings of Christianity, frequently focussed in the carnivalesque image of Christ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. (One should note that animals, as comic shorthand for the degraded or unsouled body, doing their baffled best to get their inexistent heads round things, are as abundant in Eagleton’s oeuvre as in Eddie Izzard’s.) Eagleton’s system of comic belief draws a great deal from the tradition attributed to Tertullian, who is reputed to have declared robustly *Credo quia absurdum*, I believe because it is crazy. In fact his actual words, in his *De Carne Christi* were slightly different:

et mortuus est dei filius: prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est. et sepultus resurrexit: certum est, quia impossibile.

and the Son of God died; it is utterly credible, because it is unfitting; and he was buried and rose again; it is certain, because it is impossible (Tertullian 18).

As James Moffatt suggested more than a century ago, *ineptus* is maybe closer to funny-peculiar than to funny-haha, since, in the strait-laced Aristotelian tradition which Tertullian in many respects is still following, what is objectionable about laughter and the absurd is not so much that it is undignified as that it is discordant or out of tune with the cosmic. So Tertullian perhaps meant, not that the story of Christ's resurrection is ridiculous, though this was certainly the line taken by some pagan objectors to the story, but rather that it is so improbable as to be likely to be true, on the principle that you couldn't make it up (Moffatt), always remembering that this is what is said about things that are exactly the sort of stuff that gets made up.

Soul in Paraphrase

At the heart of Eagleton's practice, and the source of his poise and potency as a writer, is his superb capacity for refractive paraphrase, which seems able to concentrate in a few choice words, like a genie captured in a bottle, the gist of arguments that would otherwise need many hours of readerly slog to construe for oneself. It is not that Eagleton necessarily sells these arguments short, or misrepresents them, for his paraphrases are often once-heard-never-forgotten miracles of salty compression. But the effect of the compression is in a broad sense comic, for much of their yield comes from the sense of the saving of cognitive expenditure they offer, in a striking parallel with the Freudian "economics of humour", to which Eagleton regularly adverts (*Humour* 11). That is, in form as well as content, Eagleton's arguments by paraphrase enact an oscillation of scales, as elaborate processes of ratiocination are cut down to size, in a way that is at once efficient, and, in an odd kind of way, exhibitionist. This abridgement seems to offer to the grateful reader a Hobbesian sense of "*Sudden Glory* . . . the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER" (Hobbes, *Leviathan* 2.48), since, as Hobbes explains in *Human Nature*, "the passion of laughter proceeds from the *sudden* imagination of our own odds and eminency: for what is else the recommending of ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity?" (*The English Works* 46). In Eagleton's judgement that Hobbes's "superiority theory", as it has become known, is "not only implausible but actually rather funny" (*Humour* 39), the condescending manner of his *mot* contrives to lend a certain credence to what it slaps down.

Eagleton is also adept at bathetic autocommentary, all the time reaching for cartoon objective correlatives for his more abstract arguments, like the graphic artists who can be hired to sketch real-time visualisations of seminar discussions: glossing Fichte's

idea of subjectivity, for example, we are told “It is as though in perverse style this supremely self-assured entrepreneur fashions stumbling blocks to its own freedom, simply in order to flex its muscles against them and relish its own powers” (*Culture and the Death of God* 55).

An allied form of comedy which Eagleton relishes is the clashing of linguistic register, as in the following example from *Culture and the Death of God*:

If religion is feeling, as it is for Rousseau and Schleiermacher, passionate inward conviction, as it is for Lessing, Hamann and Kierkegaard, or essentially a form of symbolic practice, as it is for Emile Durkheim, it is hard to see how it can be argued against, any more than one can argue against arthritis or a hurricane (38-39).

The casual throwaway at the end (“arthritis or a hurricane”) is both finely-worked and charitable to its reader, inviting them (as usual, I probably mean just me) to try out for themselves other homologous pairings which might serve the turn almost as well and in the process disclose the design principles of the original. What about “any more than one can argue with psoriasis or a sandstorm” for example? Or, with a touch more gravity, “any more than one can argue with old age or magnetism”? Once the heavy lifting has been done by Eagleton's nicely-engineered dying fall, the light-fingered reader can easily keep the shuttlecock aloft.

Actually, though, the apparent readiness-to-hand of the clincher provided by this clause tossed off at the stately sentence's end is a sleight of hand, since there are all kinds of ways in which religion, even in the form of passionate inward conviction, and perhaps especially in this form, can be argued against. Come to think of it, there are also all kinds of ways in which one might argue against simple submission either to the ills which flesh is heir to or to acts of God (in the latter case by suggesting they are unlikely to be any such thing, for example). You can't argue with arthritis, to be sure, but the tradition of theodicy is evidence of a long and stubbornly renewed argument about it, or wrangling with and against God for allowing or devising it.

The conjuring trick pulled off here is no better or worse than many others, and I am responsive to it no doubt because it is of a kind that infests my own writing, by what feels like a kind of amicable contagion. Still, one might want to register the fact that the joke seems to want to put beyond argument the unarguability it is trying to evoke, and therefore might subtly, to swipe a favourite idiom of Eagleton's, give itself the slip in the process. This is not to mention something that the sentence itself does not see fit to, the fact that feeling is not in any case the opposite of reason (the opposite of reason is unreason), meaning that there is really nothing particularly outlandish about the idea of arguing with feelings (“I wouldn't be so sure”; “you should calm down”; “what are you

grinning at?"; "cheer up, it may never happen"). Perhaps then I am here performing just that operation of arguing with feeling that is said to be countermanded, in taking mild issue with this smartly and enjoyably contrived sentence, insofar as the joke seems to offer the trumping force of comic feeling to seal its argument. If I get the joke, it seems, the preceding argument it seems to consummate must have got at me. A comic punch-line even in the form of a by-blow like this, might be seen as a sort of pseudo-argument, or brute-force form of QED. Like many jokes, it exercises, so to speak, the force of form, the force of the pure facticity of form that seems to break and enter into every after-the-fact kind of formality. Do I feel tricked or betrayed by this ruse, or think anybody else ought to be? Not a bit of it. The clinching afterthought, with its pesky provocations to demur, is very much to the point of what is going on in the sentence, and elsewhere in Eagleton's writing.

Omnipotence

Those who have set themselves to writing about comedy have often striven to find some essential thing that comedy is, or some essential and recurrent function that all instances of it may be held to perform. So successful have writers on laughter-phenomena been in this ambition that they have actually narrowed the range of options drastically, such that commentators struggle (or in fact, don't much) to avoid falling back into one of the well-established theories of the comic, of which there seem to be no more than three: they are the relief theory, the incongruity theory and the superiority theory. This is indeed the curriculum that Eagleton follows in his book *Humour*. The relief theory proposes that we laugh in order to reduce or discharge some kind of tension, cognitive or emotional. The incongruity theory proposes that we laugh at things that do not seem logical, rational, or properly aligned with the categories through which we see the world. The superiority theory (the least in favour among theorists who want to argue that laughter performs serious and therefore valuable work) is that we laugh at something we regard as defective or inferior, as in Thomas Hobbes's crisply quotable formulae duly quoted above. I have long suspected that there are really only two and a half explanations in this list, since what laughter affords relief from (or to), seems ultimately to be kinds of complexity or incongruity that without the catharsis of laughter might be intolerable, or just unpleasantly irritating. In fact, a determined be-all-and-end-aller might well want to claim that Hobbes's glory principle swallows both of the other goldfish in the bowl, since in discharging complexity one achieves a gratifying triumph over the difficulty it seems to propose, or at least the conception of that comfortable eminency.

All of these theories depend on the assumption that there is actually something funny (peculiar) about laughter that calls for explanation, and that explaining will not mean, as the word seems to promise it might, an unrolling, or spreading out, but rather a stripping back of laughter to the fulfilment or expression of some other necessity, that would be both essential to the laughter, yet also extrinsic to it, and so simpler and more primary than it. This is explanation by cancelling down, or the “*nothing-buttery*” that Peter Medawar sees as “always part of the minor symptomatology of the bogus” (Medawar 100). But the unlikelihood of getting any kind of story straight about comedy is suggested by the fact that, in his book *Humour*, Eagleton can sternly lay down the law that “The opposite of comedy is destiny” (55), having promised with equal certainty only a couple of pages before that “Comedy and fatalism are . . . in collusion” (50).

Eagleton’s work in the last twenty years has tended to make religious redemption the zero-degree prospect of reconciling body and spirit, with all other programmes of thought and belief—art, nationalism, culture, even Marxist politics are all in the frame—acting as substitutes or understudies for it. The surrogate metaphor does a great deal of work in *Culture and the Death of God*, the persuasive argument of which is that religion is a kind of Urtext of which other systems of thought are corrupted versions or imperfect trench-whisper transcriptions. This is perhaps a restaging of the brilliant act of conceptual lasso-work involved in *Literary Theory*, which managed both to provide handy travel-pack explanations of the various brands of literary theory that were at that time proving so gnawingly time-consuming both for students and their teachers, and also to guide its reader quietly, pleasantly and as it seemed irresistibly toward the hospitable clearing of accounts provided by a Marxist framework of understanding. Where Marxism was suggested in *Literary Theory* as a sort of esperanto of all the dizzyingly proliferating dialects of literary theory, Christianity seems to fulfil the same function for all the various ideological substitute-formations that have arisen over the last three centuries in Europe: “Reason, Nature, Geist, culture, art, the sublime, the nation, the state, science, humanity, Being, Society, the Other, desire, the life force and personal relations” (Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* 44).

Comedy sometimes appears, like the aesthetic discourses with which it has so many affinities, as I tried to argue in “Art, Criticism and Laughter”, to be one of these surrogates. Eagleton begins *Humour* with an acknowledgement of the many different forms that laughter, comedy, wit and humour can take, and the foolhardiness of attempting to cram them all into “a single formula” (xi). But his book ends nevertheless with an evocation of what seems unmistakably like the redemptive power of the form of comedy theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin in the form of carnival. Despite warnings about pinning

one's political hopes on carnival—the often-observed fact, in particular, that “carnival may be a fictionalised form of insurrection, but it also provides a safety valve for such subversive energies” (162), the final pages of *Humour* smoothly and assuredly outline the analogy between carnival and Christianity:

Carnival bathos lies at the core of Christianity . . . In the Eucharist as in carnival, flesh and blood become a medium of communication and solidarity between human beings . . . Like carnival, the gospel combines the joy of liberation with a certain violence and intransigence of spirit . . . There is also a vein of *comédie noire* in Christianity (163-164).

But what if religion were not the final instance, in the way that the economy used piously to be said to be among the Marxist faithful, but another kind of displacement, or stand-in? We should, I think, give ourselves leave to wonder if religious thought itself may be regarded as part of a vast variorum of vehicles and vicariances. At the heart of all the systems of thought reviewed in *Culture and the Death of God*, as it is at the heart of many accounts of religion, by believers and disbelievers alike, is the question of transcendence, a word which in its very etymology, *trans-*, across or beyond + *scandere*, to climb, seems to have a chuckley touch of Baron Munchausen about it. Indeed, the logic of the arguments of *Culture and the Death of God* is comic in that the most characteristic feature of the different religion-impersonating systems of thought reviewed in *Culture and the Death of God* is their Irish-bull incapacity to match or catch up with themselves, even as they depend on the gratifications offered by the ideal self-transcendence they posit.

There is indeed a very long history of reflexive acts of reasoning performed by minds fascinated by their own powers of extrapolation yet also made queasy by their own absurd susceptibility to such seven-league overreach. This reflexivity is distilled into 100% proof form by the famous ontological argument for the existence of God offered by St Anselm of Canterbury in his *Proslogion* of 1078. The fact that it is one of the most hilariously cock-eyed bits of cod-reasoning ever wakingly perpetrated has not prevented it from being solemnly debated back and forth by commentators apparently in full possession of their senses, from Descartes onwards, to this day. The argument is so well-known that many will still be able to pick out the tune from the following not altogether friendly paraphrase of chapter 3 of the *Proslogion*. I am able to conceive of a being than which no greater being can exist. But if I am just dreaming up such a being, it could not in fact really be the greatest thing going, since mere existence in the mind, or a *fortiori* on the tongue or fingers'-ends, is much less great than really existing. So if there really is a being than which no greater can be conceived, as the fact of my

being able to conceive it seems to indicate, God must, somewhere, somehow, outside my mind, really exist (Anselm 118-19). The logic here slips and slithers like a foot-high pile of assorted dinnerplates, but the principal objection to relying on the human mental capacity to conceive things as a proof of their extramental existence is simply stated: the human mind is full of shit, and never more so than when making an estimate of its own powers. The way I have just put it is a blunter form of one of the earliest rebuttals of the argument, which was offered in a text comically, or solemnly, one does not quite know how to tell, entitled “On Behalf of the Fool” (“Pro Insipiente”), by one Gaunilo, a Benedictine monk from Marmoutier Abbey. Gaunilo enquires with impressively mild reasonability “could I not say that all kinds of unreal things, not existing in themselves in any way at all, are equally in the mind?” (Anselm 157). Admittedly, Anselm seems to depend in part on this very recognition of the limits of human understanding, even deploying it as a trump card for his deduction that there must therefore be something that passeth it (“I know that there is a narcissistic maniac in my mind, or even perhaps that *is* my mind, but that knowledge is the very thing that allows me to set aside my narcissism and provides my passport to Absolute Knowledge”). But this extra turn of the screwiness of the argument must be sighingly passed over in silence.

Freud offers a characterisation of what is going on in the thought of thought's power to levitate itself beyond its limitations, in the formula “omnipotence of thoughts” (13.84), a phrase which he borrowed, with acknowledgement if not necessarily with permission, from one of his patients, who was actually rather unnerved by the magical power to effect harm that he thought his thoughts had. “We cannot think ourselves outside thought”, Eagleton reminds us (*Culture and the Death of God* 50), even as we equally seem not to be able to congratulate ourselves on being able to think that (or think we do, and so on). As a participant-observer in this charivari of vicarious forms of omnipotence, rather than seated securely in the gods above them, religious thought might be seen, not as the final and indubitable vanishing point for omnipotence surrogates, but as a sort of ultimate surrogate or universal equivalent for its own thinking.

So everything that is signified for Eagleton by “God” or the mechanisms of religious belief, may itself be a surrogate, or *proxime accessit*, at once substitute and vehicle, for a paradoxically self-propagating (propagating itself through the paradoxes it propagates) transcendence engine. I do not even think this would come as news to Eagleton, who seems to acknowledge it in his resistance to idolatrously positive conceptions of God, and his fiery vexation at literalist or fundamentalist accounts by celebrity atheists of what religious folk are supposed to “believe”. Eagleton repeatedly evokes in response the almost apophatic nature of the Thomist account of God, in a way that seems

to make it clear that God is not in any simple sense an external object of thought: "God for Judaeo-Christian theology is not an object, principle, entity, or existent being. He is rather what makes these things possible in the first place . . . Yahweh is—a peculiarly bruising, traumatizing sort of vacancy" (*Holy Terror* 42). God is somehow the knot intrinsic of the agonising absurdity of his own absence from the scene, or absconding self-concealment in it.

Nothing could be more of this world, which is perhaps why the materialist Eagleton (who once told me, as an undergraduate perplexed by it, that the term materialism must be understood as belonging to the lexicon of mysticism) should also have cloven so closely throughout his career to questions of divinity. Those of us working in what in almost living memory used to be called the arts, are more and more inclined to call ourselves the humanities (even if "humanists" is a step too far for non-American academics). In medieval universities, which perhaps all universities in a way still are, the humanities were so-called because they dealt with the residual bits left over from divinity. The cobwebby term *divinity* has always struck me as a better name for the systematic trying on, and out, by humanity, and in the humanities, of ideas of god-ness than the haughty and self-congratulatory *theology*, which has never come very close to providing bankable knowledge of God. In succeeding as well as he does and, I might add, as well as he has always done, in showing that, when it comes to humans, nothing could be more unignorably material or less otherworldly than divinity, Eagleton seems with every new book to come closer to recognising the cohabitation of *divina commedia* and *comédie humaine*. Unless it is just me.

Trapdoor

What, to make an end, if laughter were not only not susceptible of explanation by recourse to radical or final first principles, but also in no need of it? What if laughter were neither the concealment nor displaced expression of any kind of something-else? What if we laugh because we enjoy laughing, and enjoy laughing just because we enjoy enjoying ourselves, and in rather a lot of different ways? Rather than wondering what is essentially laughable, we might then be able to see laughter as an abstract will-to-enjoyment in search of occasions. This obviously conceals a reduction of its own, in the version of the pleasure principle on which it may seem to rely, but this can probably not be helped. Anyway, we can be helped out of it to a large degree by the suggestion that the nature of pleasure is not of a fixed and necessary kind, meaning that pleasure may be partly characterised by the desire to diversify, even to perversify,

its forms. One of the things we seem to take pleasure in (needless to say, please, not the only, essential or always necessary thing) is our capacity to take and find pleasure in so many different sorts of thing. Laughter seems materially to assist this process at times: giggling schoolgirls and bantering schoolboys enjoy getting into that metacomic condition, at once infantile and esoteric, in which nothing is safe from coming to seem ridiculous. The contagiousness of laughter (even dogs, in their efforts to pass as human, try to have a go at it) may be an indication that it is laughing, or perhaps the proof of the capacity to laugh, that we find fun, rather than the response to certain kinds of essentially and invariantly funny thing.

If this passes, it may be that, rather than being an expression of the meta-physical predicament (the hyphen doing the work here) of rational-corporeal existence, the comic impulse finds in that predicament a proto-comic set-up that is well adapted to the immanence-transcendence games we like to play, in pursuit of some of the many kinds of pleasure to which we are so hopelessly and willingly addicted, along with the pleasure of seeing what new kinds we can come up with. So we should not be too surprised when religious conceptions rhyme with comic operations, since they both respond to the complicated relation of dependence and delight we have to ideas of transcendence, and/or the transcendence of ideas. If this is right, we likely joke for the same reason as we pray, for the pleasure of getting above ourselves, which includes the gratifying prospect of seeing ourselves tumbling off the ladder, which might be a slapstick translation of the *felix culpa*, or fortunate fall. Once again, we would probably be wrong to see our meta-physical predicament as the explanatory origin both of our earthling taste for laughter and of our immortal longings, for if that predicament did not exist it would be necessary for the pleasure principle to invent it (which it often in fact seems to do anyway). So, versatile though it is, the body-mind problem is only necessary to comedy in the way that laws, logical categories, politeness codes, Irish people, spelling mistakes and biological males are, as apparatus apt to be turned to comic account, which is to say, put to work as play.

Eagleton's comedy seems meant in part to provide a salutary foretaste of the pleasure of what lies beyond embodiment, suffering and contradiction, like the life of the mind for Beckett's Murphy, which "gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word" (4). Eagleton's own critical manner is perhaps another kind of lieutenant for redemption, in its mingling of matter and manner, sense and sensibility, which might be thought of as a kind of down-payment on utopia. The funny, or possibly grim thing, depending, is that this anticipation never really gets an inch further forward, or back, on its path to the "happy garden" (Eagleton, *On Evil* 135), and even seems intent on

inventing excuses to dilly-dally on the way. Laughter may be a protest against misery, or a minor consolation for it, but cannot easily or reasonably be regarded as a mortgage on happiness. For this reason, though prospects of religious salvation, or religious prospects of political salvation, in this world or some other, may be compatible with comedy, as in the title of Dante's poem, it is hard to imagine that condition of bliss involving much angelic guffawing, as the lovably earthbound cast of much comedy might seem to indicate. Jack Dee, known as an "observational comic", once complained, as the compère of a comedy show, about having to share a dressing room with the acts lined up to follow him: "just imagine being stuck in a room with twelve observational comics, all *noticing* things". For what Beckett calls the "partisans of the trapdoor" (*Collected Shorter Prose* 163), heaven, like hell, would have to be other people, in the *huis clos* of the closed session.

Works Cited

- Anselm, St. *St. Anselm's Proslogion: With A Reply on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and The Author's Reply to Gaunilo*, translated and edited by M. J. Charlesworth. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. New York, Grove Press, 1959.
- _____. *Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980*. London, John Calder, 1984.
- _____. *Complete Dramatic Works*. London, Faber and Faber, 1990.
- _____. *Murphy*, edited by J.C.C. Mays. London, Faber and Faber, 2009.
- Connor, Steven. "Art, Criticism and Laughter: Terry Eagleton on Aesthetics". Steven Connor, 1998, <http://stevenconnor.com/artlaugh.html>.
- _____. "Ludicrous Inbodiment". Steven Connor, 7th April 2017, <http://stevenconnor.com/inbodiment.html>.
- Critchley, Simon. *On Humour*. London and New York, Routledge, 2002.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*. Malden MA and Oxford, Blackwell, 2002.
- _____. *Holy Terror*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- _____. *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009.
- _____. *On Evil*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2010.

- _____. *Culture and the Death of God*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014.
- _____. *Radical Sacrifice*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2018.
- _____. *Humour*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2019.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 24 vols, translated and edited by James Strachey et al. London, Hogarth Press, 1953-74.
- Herbert, George. *The Complete English Poems*. John Tobin (ed.), London, Penguin, 1991.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury. Vol. IV*. Sir William Molesworth (ed.). London, John Bohn, 1840.
- _____. *Leviathan: A Critical Edition*, edited by Sir William Molesworth. 2 Vols. London, Continuum, 2005.
- Jerrold, Walter(ed.). *The Big Book of Nursery Rhymes*. London, Blackie and Son, 1920.
- Lewis, Wyndham. *The Complete Wild Body*, Bernard Lafourcade (ed). Santa Barbara, Black Sparrow Press, 1982.
- MacLeish, Archibald. *Collected Poems*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1952.
- Medawar, P.B. "VI.- Critical Notice. *The Phenomenon of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin". *Mind*, vol. 70, 1961, pp. 99-106.
- Moffatt, James. "Aristotle and Tertullian". *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 17, 1916, pp. 170-171.
- Tertullian (Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus). *Tertullian's Treatise on the Incarnation*, translated and edited by Ernest Evans. London, SPCK, 1956.