

HUMOUR

(1927)

## DER HUMOR

### (a) GERMAN EDITIONS:

- 1927 *Almanach 1928*, 9–16.  
1928 *Imago*, 14 (1), 1–6.  
1928 *G.S.*, 11, 402–8.  
1948 *G.W.*, 14, 383–9.

### (b) ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

#### 'Humour'

- 1928 *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 9 (1), 1–6. (Tr. Joan Riviere.)  
1950 *C.P.*, 5, 215–21. (Revised reprint of above.)

The present translation is a corrected version of that published in 1950.

Freud wrote this paper in five days during the second week of August, 1927 (Jones, 1957, 146), and it was read on his behalf by Anna Freud on September 1, before the Tenth International Psycho-Analytical Congress at Innsbruck. It was first published in the autumn of the same year in the psycho-analytic 'Almanac' for 1928.

The paper returns, after an interval of more than twenty years, to the subject discussed in the last section of the book on *Jokes* (1905c). Freud now considers it in the light of his new structural picture of the human mind. Some interesting metapsychological points emerge in the later pages of the paper, and for the first time we find the super-ego presented in an amiable mood.

## HUMOUR

IN my volume on *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905c), I in fact considered humour only from the economic point of view. My object was to discover the source of the pleasure obtained from humour, and I think I was able to show that the yield of humorous pleasure arises from an economy in expenditure upon feeling. [*Standard Ed.*, 8, 236.]

There are two ways in which the humorous process can take place. It may take place in regard to a single person, who himself adopts the humorous attitude, while a second person plays the part of the spectator who derives enjoyment from it; or it may take place between two persons, of whom one takes no part at all in the humorous process, but is made the object of humorous contemplation by the other. When, to take the crudest example [*ibid.*, 229], a criminal who was being led out to the gallows on a Monday remarked: 'Well, the week's beginning nicely', he was producing the humour himself; the humorous process is completed in his own person and obviously affords him a certain sense of satisfaction. I, the non-participating listener, am affected as it were at long-range by this humorous production of the criminal's; I feel, like him, perhaps, the yield of humorous pleasure.

We have an instance of the second way in which humour arises when a writer or a narrator describes the behaviour of real or imaginary people in a humorous manner. There is no need for those people to display any humour themselves; the humorous attitude is solely the business of the person who is taking them as his object; and, as in the former instance, the reader or hearer shares in the enjoyment of the humour. To sum up, then, we can say that the humorous attitude—whatever it may consist in—can be directed either towards the subject's own self or towards other people; it is to be assumed that it brings a yield of pleasure to the person who adopts it, and a similar yield of pleasure falls to the share of the non-participating onlooker.

We shall best understand the genesis of the yield of humorous pleasure if we consider the process in the listener before whom someone else produces humour. He sees this other person in a

situation which leads the listener to expect that the other will produce the signs of an affect—that he will get angry, complain, express pain, be frightened or horrified or perhaps even in despair; and the onlooker or listener is prepared to follow his lead and to call up the same emotional impulses in himself. But this emotional expectancy is disappointed; the other person expresses no affect, but makes a jest. The expenditure on feeling that is economized turns into humorous pleasure in the listener.

It is easy to get so far. But we soon tell ourselves that it is the process which takes place in the other person—the ‘humorist’—that merits the greater attention. There is no doubt that the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest. As far as this goes, the process in the humorist must tally with the process in the hearer—or, to put it more correctly, the process in the hearer must have copied the one in the humorist. But how does the latter bring about the mental attitude which makes a release of affect superfluous? What are the dynamics of his adoption of the ‘humorous attitude’? Clearly, the solution of the problem is to be sought in the humorist; in the hearer we must assume that there is only an echo, a copy, of this unknown process.

It is now time to acquaint ourselves with a few of the characteristics of humour. Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two ways of obtaining pleasure from intellectual activity. The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. This last feature is a quite essential element of humour. Let us suppose that the criminal who was being led to execution on Monday had said: ‘It doesn’t worry me. What does it matter, after all, if a fellow like me is hanged? The world won’t come to an end because of it.’ We should have to admit that such a speech does in fact display the same magnificent superiority over the real situation. It is wise and true; but it does not betray

a trace of humour. Indeed, it is based on an appraisal of reality which runs directly counter to the appraisal made by humour. Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.

These last two features—the rejection of the claims of reality and the putting through of the pleasure principle—bring humour near to the regressive or reactionary processes which engage our attention so extensively in psychopathology. Its fending off of the possibility of suffering places it among the great series of methods which the human mind has constructed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer—a series which begins with neurosis and culminates in madness and which includes intoxication, self-absorption and ecstasy.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to this connection, humour possesses a dignity which is wholly lacking, for instance, in jokes, for jokes either serve simply to obtain a yield of pleasure or place the yield of pleasure that has been obtained in the service of aggression. In what, then, does the humorous attitude consist, an attitude by means of which a person refuses to suffer, emphasizes the invincibility of his ego by the real world, victoriously maintains the pleasure principle—and all this, in contrast to other methods having the same purposes, without overstepping the bounds of mental health? The two achievements seem incompatible.

If we turn to the situation in which one person adopts a humorous attitude towards others, a view which I have already put forward tentatively in my book on jokes will at once suggest itself. This is that the subject is behaving towards them as an adult does towards a child when he recognizes and smiles at the triviality of interests and sufferings which seem so great to it [ibid., 233–4]. Thus the humorist would acquire his superiority by assuming the role of the grown-up and identifying himself to some extent with his father, and reducing the other people to being children. This view probably covers the facts, but it hardly seems a conclusive one. One asks oneself what it is that makes the humorist arrogate this role to himself.

<sup>1</sup> [Cf. the subsequent long discussion of these various methods of avoiding pain in Chapter II of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930a), p. 77 ff. above. But Freud had already pointed out the defensive function of humour in *Jokes* (1905c), *Standard Ed.*, 8, 233.]

But we must recall the other, probably more primary and important, situation of humour, in which a person adopts a humorous attitude towards himself in order to ward off possible suffering. Is there any sense in saying that someone is treating himself like a child and is at the same time playing the part of a superior adult towards that child?

This not very plausible idea receives strong support, I think, if we consider what we have learned from pathological observations on the structure of the ego. This ego is not a simple entity. It harbours within it, as its nucleus, a special agency—the super-ego.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it is merged with the super-ego so that we cannot distinguish between them, whereas in other circumstances it is sharply differentiated from it. Genetically the super-ego is the heir to the parental agency. It often keeps the ego in strict dependence and still really treats it as the parents, or the father, once treated the child, in its early years. We obtain a dynamic explanation of the humorous attitude, therefore, if we assume that it consists in the humorist's having withdrawn the psychical accent from his ego and having transposed it on to his super-ego. To the super-ego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial; and, with this new distribution of energy, it may become an easy matter for the super-ego to suppress the ego's possibilities of reacting.

In order to remain faithful to our customary phraseology, we shall have to speak, not of transposing the psychical accent, but of displacing large amounts of cathexis. The question then is whether we are entitled to picture extensive displacements like this from one agency of the mental apparatus to another. It looks like a new hypothesis constructed *ad hoc*. Yet we may remind ourselves that we have repeatedly (even though not sufficiently often) taken a factor of this kind into account in our attempts at a metapsychological picture of mental events. Thus, for instance, we supposed that the difference between an ordinary erotic object-cathexis and the state of being in love is that in the latter incomparably more cathexis passes over to the object and that the ego empties itself as it were in favour of the

<sup>1</sup> [It may be remarked that in a footnote at the beginning of Chapter III of *The Ego and the Id* (1923b) Freud says that 'the system *Pept.-Cs.* alone can be regarded as the nucleus of the ego' (*Standard Ed.*, 19 28).]

object.<sup>1</sup> In studying some cases of paranoia I was able to establish the fact that ideas of persecution are formed early and exist for a long time without any perceptible effect, until, as the result of some particular precipitating event, they receive sufficient amounts of cathexis to cause them to become dominant.<sup>2</sup> The cure, too, of such paranoic attacks would lie not so much in a resolution and correction of the delusional ideas as in a withdrawal from them of the cathexis which has been lent to them. The alternations between melancholia and mania, between a cruel suppression of the ego by the super-ego and a liberation of the ego after that pressure, suggests a shift of cathexis of this kind;<sup>3</sup> such a shift, moreover, would have to be brought in to explain a whole number of phenomena belonging to normal mental life. If this has been done hitherto only to a very limited extent, that is on account of our usual caution—something which deserves only praise. The region in which we feel secure is that of the pathology of mental life; it is here that we make our observations and acquire our convictions. For the present we venture to form a judgement on the normal mind only in so far as we can discern what is normal in the isolations and distortions of the pathological material. When once we have overcome this hesitancy we shall recognize what a large contribution is made to the understanding of mental processes by the static conditions as well as by the dynamic changes in the *quantity* of energetic cathexis.

I think, therefore, that the possibility I have suggested here, that in a particular situation the subject suddenly hypercathects his super-ego and then, proceeding from it, alters the reactions of the ego, is one which deserves to be retained. Moreover, what I have suggested about humour finds a remarkable analogy in the kindred field of jokes. As regards the origin of jokes I was led to assume that a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision [*ibid.*, 166]. A joke is thus the contribution made to the comic by the unconscious [*ibid.*, 208]. In just the same way, *humour would be the contribution made to the comic through the agency of the super-ego.*

<sup>1</sup> [See Chapter VIII of *Group Psychology* (1921c), *Standard Ed.*, 18, 112–13.]

<sup>2</sup> [See Section B of 'Some Neurotic Mechanisms' (1922b), *Standard Ed.*, 18, 228–9.]

<sup>3</sup> [See 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917e), *Standard Ed.*, 14, 253–5.]

In other connections we knew the super-ego as a severe master. It will be said that it accords ill with such a character that the super-ego should condescend to enabling the ego to obtain a small yield of pleasure. It is true that humorous pleasure never reaches the intensity of the pleasure in the comic or in jokes, that it never finds vent in hearty laughter. It is also true that, in bringing about the humorous attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion. But (without rightly knowing why) we regard this less intense pleasure as having a character of very high value; we feel it to be especially liberating and elevating. Moreover, the jest made by humour is not the essential thing. It has only the value of a preliminary. The main thing is the intention which humour carries out, whether it is acting in relation to the self or other people. It means: 'Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children—just worth making a jest about!'

If it is really the super-ego which, in humour, speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this will teach us that we have still a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego. Furthermore, not everyone is capable of the humorous attitude. It is a rare and precious gift, and many people are even without the capacity to enjoy humorous pleasure that is presented to them. And finally, if the super-ego tries, by means of humour, to console the ego and protect it from suffering, this does not contradict its origin in the parental agency.