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Nichols - Laughter as Gesture - JCRT 4.2
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*But one thing I do know,
 O Zarathustra: Whoever
 would kill most thoroughly, laughs.*

—Nietzsche

Recently I ran across an article on laughter that said it wanted to examine ‘uses of laughter in the literal sense of the word.’¹ The author clearly meant that he wanted to discuss the act of laughter, but that’s not what he said; and, however unconscious his choice of terms, ‘the literal sense of laughter’ was over-determined. Sense connotes ‘meaning,’ and it is precisely the meaning of laughter, meaning *in* laughter, not to mention *theories* of laughter that thinkers have been trying to pin down since antiquity.

- * And now they look at me and laugh: and as they laugh, they even hate me. There is ice in t
- * I would believe only in a god who could dance. And when I saw my devil I found him serious
- * Still is the bottom of my sea. Who would guess that it harbors sportive monsters? Impertur
- * And yet he has not learned laughter or beauty. Gloomy this hunter returned from the woods
- * Then laughter surrounded me. Alas how the laughter tore my entrails and slit open my hear
- * And as Zarathustra was speaking thus he laughed at himself in melancholy and bitterness.
- * Laugh, laugh, my bright, wholesome sarcasm. From high mountains cast down your glittering

Notes

S. 41 (1991), 279-296. * * *

3. At first blush, the issue seems trivial. As a common form of human articulation, laughter must have a meaning. Why *should* it differ from other forms of human expression? After all, though it doesn’t use the same patterns of sound as speech, it does use the same organs: the face, the mouth, the voice, the diaphragm, breath, and so on. How could it not have cognitive meaning, then? Well, but isn’t this one of the irritating things about laughter? We know precisely what we mean when we refer to it, at least we think we do, but faced with articulating that certitude, we can do little more than describe the act itself, not its signification. We are left with our experience of laughter, our dead certainty that we know what it is we’re referring to, while meanings, let alone any ‘literal meaning’ of the term hover just out of reach elusive, indeed, perhaps even delusive.
4. Laughter is crucially ambiguous, but also famously ambivalent. This loads a disturbing psychological dimension onto what is already enigmatic. A psychological dimension because hilarity is gregarious, rarely solitary. We usually laugh in social settings, a fact that raises issues of intention and implication. Am I laughing *at* or *with* someone? Is the laughter well-intentioned, mere harmless jest? Or does it veer towards derision or satire? Is it both of these

¹Stephen Halliwell, ‘The Uses of Laughter in Greek Literature,’ *Classical Quarterly*, N.

at once, and at different levels? Am I the butt of the joke? Or is it my interlocutor, and, either way, how should I interpret the witticism? We cannot escape the fact that laughter is both act and action, the more disconcerting because so frequently occurring suddenly, without warning. Most social acts are conventionalized, transparent. Laughter often is not. How, then, do we deal with an agency whose motivation and implications are rarely what they seem, and for which context frequently counts more than text, as it were?

5. Because people assume, indeed cannot help thinking that laughter has a message, perhaps even a meaning 'although one would be hard put to locate either in the formal sense' it sets the mind in motion. It makes one think, and more often than not, it leads unerringly to the ego. Laughter has the disconcerting habit, in short, of first evoking philosophy, and then deflecting it, towards subjectivity.² Or, rather, having raised the specter of cognition, it veers off into related spheres of mind-body dynamics that articulate various forms of non-rational expression via the body. The German critic Max Kommerell, cognizant of the close bond between humor and subjectivity, recognized the body as a crucial space for enacting what he calls a 'dialectics of gesture' that transforms the self 'both inner being and external appearance' into a stage on which to project scenarios that run the gamut from the sublime to the grotesque. In other words, he perceived the body as a sphere of unorthodox representation, which he characterized in terms of a subjectivity divided between mind and body where corporeal gesture signals a rupture between appearance and essence:

The beginning is a feeling of the 'I' that, in every possible gesture and especially in each of its own gestures, experiences something false, a deformation of the inside with respect to which all faithful representation seems a curse against the spirit. It is a feeling in which the 'I,' looking at itself in the mirror, discerns a pamphlet stuck to it, even incorporated into it, and, looking outside, laments himself, amazed to see in the face of his fellow men the fullness of comical masks... The disjunction between appearance and essence lies at the basis of both the sublime and the comical; the small sign of the corporeal points to the indescribable.³

6. We'll return to Kommerell's concept of 'gesture' [*Geb'rde*], and particularly 'linguistic gesture' [*Sprachgeb'rde*] in a moment. First, however, let's pursue some implications of the connection between fantasy or delusion in self-perception and innovative thinking that emerge from

²Nietzsche famously evokes the link between cognition and subjectivity in his 1873 essay, 'On Truth and Lying in the Moral Sense:' 'There is nothing in nature so despicable and mean that would not immediately swell up like a balloon from just one little puff of the force of cognition; and just as every bearer of burdens wants to be admired, so the proudest man of all, the philosopher, wants to see, on all sides, the eyes of the universe trained, as though through telescopes, on his thoughts and deeds.' Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Ed. By Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 141.

³'Der Anfang ist ein Ichgef'hl, das in jeder m'glichen, zumal in jeder eigenen Geb'rde ein Falsches, eine Verunstaltung des Innern erf'hrt, dem also gerade die treueste Darstellung den Geist zu l'stern scheint, und das in den Spiegel schauend ein ihm angeheftetes, ja einverleibtes Pamphlet auf sich gewahr wird, nach au'en blickend in den Gesichtern seiner Mitmenschen die F'lle komischer Masken klagend bestaunt. [Wenig bedurfte er also um die k'rperliche Parodie auf ihn selbst in eine geschriebene umzusetzen: er brauchte nur den Gegensatz seines Wesens verschweigend, das Zerrbildliche der Erscheinung mit verkehrter Mimik zu erf'hlen. Damit gewann er schon beinahe die erhabene Geste! Denn erhaben wei' sich das Ich in jener ersten Parodie, und der Gestaltung des Erhabenen musste die Entwertung der Geb'rde als eines guten Leumunds vorausgehen.] Das Missverh'ltnis der Erscheinung zum Wesen liegt dem Erhabenen wie dem komischen zugrund: das k'rperliche als das geringe Zeichen deutet auf das Unbeschreibliche.'" Max Kommerell, *Jean Paul*, 4th edition (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1966), p. 48. Quoted by Giorgio Agamben, 'Kommerell, or On Gesture,' in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, edited by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 79.

Kommerell's scenario. The *Ichgefh*, or experience of the ego at the core of gesture, contains a paradoxical mixture of subjective insight ' a perception of the impossibility of naming or describing the nature of one's essential being ' with empirical evidence suggesting a rupture between psyche and external images of self (one's own and those of others). Here again, he notes a discrepancy between the description one might want to give of oneself (the 'pamphlet' stuck to one's image reflected in the mirror), and what we actually perceive. The comic of such discordant gestures derives initially from the lack of congruence between mental percepts and empirical observation. But there's more to it than simple incongruity. In fact, our sense of superiority, of 'uniqueness' is at stake. The 'label' we imagine ourselves to merit in the hierarchy of humans turns out to be a most fragile and vulnerable construct. So much so, in fact, as to call into question, if not one's sanity in maintaining a self-image so much at variance with fact, then certainly one's grasp of reality. It's not so much the psychological insights that matter here, however, as the link between mental deviance from reality and the perception of new ideas or insights. In uncovering this link between delusion or fantasy and innovative thinking, 'gesture' functions as a kind of moral tutor, a censor, exposing what the self would much rather conceal.

7. Kommerell does not go as far as Nietzsche when he talks of the 'wilderness of bitterness and most superfluous agonies of soul in which probably the most fruitful men of all times have languished! To listen to the sighs of these solitary and agitated minds: 'Ah, give me madness, you heavenly powers! Madness that I may at last believe in myself!...'"⁴ Nor does he specifically make madness a precondition for new and deviate ideas: '...when new and deviate ideas broke out, they did so accompanied by a dreadful attendant: almost everywhere it was madness which prepared the way for the new idea, which broke the spell of a venerated usage and superstition.'⁵ On the other hand, we find in both Nietzsche and Kommerell the notion that voice and gesture ' *Stimme und Geb'rd*e, the body and involuntary actions ' confer awe and credibility on the insights revealed as though through 'the mask and megaphone of a divinity.' There is the same sense in each that the revelation of new insights via the *Ichgef'hl* of gesture provokes a 'reverence for and dread of' the unknown self, so revealed.⁶
8. The self so revealed inhabits a body whose potential for unimagined gestures and personae turns out to be as extensive as it is hidden. If the sudden discovery engenders a kind of dread and awe, the emotion is akin to the *ersch'tterung*, or shock experienced by the mind in the case of the quantitative sublime. Kant noted the overwhelming effect of sheer mass on the cognitive faculties. Such an experience, he argued, produces the effect of what he called the mathematical sublime. That is to say, the sublime that arises, as Neil Hertz notes, from 'sheer cognitive exhaustion' in the presence of something so overwhelming in its complexity and detail as to occasion 'a momentary checking of the vital powers faced with the prospect of having to 'think a totality that cannot be taken in through the senses.'⁷ "///////"

⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), I:14, p. 15.

⁵*Ibid.*, I:14, p. 14.

⁶‘Do you understand why it had to be madness which did this? Something in voice [*Stimme*] and gesture [*Geb’rde*] as uncanny and incalculable as the demonic moods of the weather and the sea and therefore worthy of a similar awe and observation? Something that bore so visibly the signs of total involuntariness [*Unfreiwilligkeit*] as the convulsions and froth of the epileptic, that seemed to mark the madman as the mask and megaphone of a divinity? Something that awoke in the bearer of a new idea himself reverence for and dread of himself and no longer pangs of conscience and drove him to become the prophet and martyr of his idea?’ *Ibid.*, I:14, p. 14.

⁷Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951, Reprinted, 1974), '23, p. 83.' Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line, Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985): 40.

9. Kant's examples of this cognitive experience are first the Pyramids. Too many stones. So many, indeed, that 'if we are very near, the eye requires some time to complete the apprehension of the tiers from the bottom to the apex, and then the first tiers are always partially forgotten before the imagination has taken in the last...' Then he evokes the monumental edifice, and more specifically, Saint Peter's in Rome, where the spectator, on entering the massive structure, feels the "inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, wherein the imagination reaches its maximum, and, in striving to surpass it, sinks back into itself..."⁸
10. Kant skews his examples in favor of cognitive perception, on the one hand, and, on the other, of esthetic values consonant with Enlightenment education. His sublime concerns the mind, rather than the body. Even the *Erschütterung*, or shock that causes the mind to shut down momentarily 'though it clearly implicates the nervous system' is rational, rather than corporeal. Indeed, one could argue that the whole point of Kant's cognitive sublime is to celebrate the pleasure that we experience in the double capacity to be overpowered by sense data, and then to recover and process what has just overwhelmed us. Kant's sublime celebrates the resilience and comprehensive powers of rational thought.
11. The convulsive *Erschütterung* invoked by the 'wilderness of bitterest and most superfluous agonies of soul,' or the madness that begets new and deviant thoughts, or the comic disjunction between appearance and essence, that is a very different matter. If the whole thrust of Kant's sublime affirms the capacity of the mind to impose unity on multiplicity, to find and follow Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of multiplicity so as to emerge with a coherent description and analysis of the disparate parts, the experience of gesture leads in the opposite direction. Multiplicity, rather than unity, emerges as the dominant motif. The encounter with mass in this case produces not a convulsion that will quickly be overcome by motion of the mind, but rather a dread and awe deriving from the conviction of the impossibility of *ever* finding one's way through the labyrinth of the body. It is not that the mind cannot aid us to perceive the scope of the multiples at stake, or even to conceive an ordering principle for the body's structure. But such efforts run up against the dynamism of corporeal gesture that continually reveals new, unsuspected dimensions of self. Nietzsche captures this cogently in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* when he says: 'The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd.'⁹
12. Indeed, the dialectics of gesture assures that unifying principles for the body can only be provisional because the unity of the body and the unity of the self are not only not the same, they are often at odds. As Alexander Nehamas writes:

On a very basic level the unity of the body provides for the identity that is necessary, but not at all sufficient, for the unity of the self. Nietzsche, quite consistently, holds that the unity of the body, like all unity, is itself not an absolute fact: 'The evidence of the body reveals a tremendous multiplicity' (*The Will to Power*, 518). ...And though...the 'I' always seems to refer to the same thing, the content to which it refers and the interests for which it speaks do not remain the same. It is constantly in the process of changing. This process may sometimes tend in the direction of greater unity. Such unity, however, which is at best something to be hoped for, certainly cannot be presupposed. Phenomena like *akrasia*, or weakness of will, and

⁸*Critique of Judgement*, '26, pp. 90-91.

⁹Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A Book for None and All*, Translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), '8, p. 34.

self-deception, not to mention everyday inconsistency, are constantly posing a threat to it.¹⁰

13. The body does not, then, engage the sublime in the same way as the mind because it confronts not static mass, but dynamic multiplicity that resists resolution into a coherent order, producing instead an image of _'clatement_', a sense of shattered or annihilated Being. The disjunction between body and self reveals the vulnerability of unity predicated upon so unstable a space. That instability at the juncture of self and body profoundly affects what and how we perceive. To understand why, we need only contrast it with the mathematical sublime. The latter allows us to grasp the principles that make up an organic whole while offering a reassuring sense of the mind's powers for aggregating, sorting, and classifying the most disparate quantities of data. It achieves this unity by replacing an initially disquieting sense of chaos with one of tranquility and wonder as the dissonant mass of the pyramid or the cathedral resolves itself into a coherent pattern, the more impressive for its colossal size. Gesture, however, produces the opposite result: a sense of the body as grotesque, as disconnected from the self, with the mind incapable of effective intervention' in essence, a kind of negative or anti-sublime.
14. How does this happen? For the beginning of an answer, let's return to the quantitative sublime. Or should we call it the 'loquacious sublime?' For, arguably, language and the mind's ability to articulate the progressive stages of the mental process involved in the sublime experience go far in determining the success of its compelling narrative. The experience of gesture, however, while not exactly a non-linguistic phenomenon, is pre-linguistic, occurring before, below, or behind language. Indeed, Kommerell conceives the closest of connections between language and gesture. 'Speech is originary gesture [*Urgeb'rd*], from which all individual gestures derive.'¹¹ Agamben continues the thought:
15. If speech is originary gesture, then what is at issue in gesture is not so much a pre-linguistic content as, so to speak, the other side of language, the muteness inherent in humankind's very capacity for language, its *speechless* dwelling in language. And the more human beings have language, the stronger the unsayable weighs them down, to the point that in the poet, the speaking being with the most words, 'the making of references and signs is worn out, and something harsh is born'violence towards speech'.¹²
16. Gesture's situation on 'the other side of language,' its paradoxical status as the 'speechless dwelling in language,' which yet retains the ability to convey Being in language, makes it the opposite of the sublime. For if the latter proceeds from speechlessness to a coherent, even involved narrative, gesture blocks such a development. Gesture, as the substitution of a vague gesticulation for speech 'a sign that conveys Being, but cannot provide an account of it' can be seen as:

always the gesture of being at a loss in language; it is always a 'gag' in the literal sense of the word, which indicates first of all something put in someone's mouth to keep him from speaking and, then, the actor's improvisation to make up for an impossibility of speaking. But there is a gesture that felicitously establishes itself in this emptiness of language and without filling it, makes it into humankind's most proper dwelling. Confusion turns to dance, and 'gag' to mystery.¹³

¹⁰Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 181-182.

¹¹Quoted by Agamben, 'Kommerell, or On Gesture,' p. 78.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 78. The embedded quotation is from Kommerell, *Jean Paul*, p. 42.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

17. With the gag and the impossibility of speaking, we come full cycle back to laughter and why it cannot 'mean' in the conventional sense of the term. Laughter shares with gesture 'undoubtedly because it is a kind of gesture' an originary relationship to language, on the one hand, and its impossibility of resolving itself as conventional speech, on the other. Agamben's evocation of the 'gag' in the double sense tellingly betrays the ludicrous or comic in gesture. For gag is both a device for preventing speech and a performative that substitutes bodily 'action,' the comic routine 'in effect, gesture' for speech. In the one case, gag as a physical restraint on the speech organ, in the other, the body itself intervening in place of speech. These examples of restriction and substitution show how easy it is to contain language without in the least impeding the body's capacity for gesture.
18. Aside from mime or silent films, we normally do not experience the body in the absence of language in this way. Yet it is just this ability of the body to signify via gesture without resorting to speech that has long been a staple of comic routine: the quintessential 'gag,' as it were. Kierkegaard evokes this characteristic brilliantly in *Repetition* (1843), where he discusses the leading comedian of the Berlin 'Posse' or farce, a certain Beckmann, 'a comic genius who ...frolics freely in the comic, one who does not distinguish himself by character portrayal but by ebullience of mood. ...He does not need the support of ...scenery and staging, precisely because ... he himself carries everything along.'¹⁴ And one way he does so, says Kierkegaard, is by the theatricality of his gait. He literally comes walking onto the stage as 'an incognito in whom dwells the lunatic demon of comedy, who quickly extricates himself and carries everything away in sheer abandonment.'¹⁵
19. Kierkegaard's description of Beckman's comic routine offers a brilliant analysis of how the body signifies as gesture without recourse to meaning in the linguistic sense. In stressing so strongly the singularity of pure corporeal gesture, Kierkegaard makes Agamben's point that 'gesture is always the gesture of being at a loss in language:'

In an art theater proper, one rarely sees an actor who can really walk and stand. As a matter of fact, I have seen only one, but what B[eckmann] is able to do, I have not seen before. He is not only able to walk, but he is also able to *come walking*. To come walking is something very distinctive, and by means of this genius he also improvises the whole scenic setting. He is able not only to portray an itinerant craftsman; he is also able to come walking like one and in such a way that one experiences everything, surveys the smiling hamlet from the dusty highway, hears its quiet noise, sees the footpath that goes down by the village pond when one turns off there by the blacksmith's where one sees B[eckmann] walking along with his little bundle on his back, his stick in his hand, untroubled and undaunted. He can come walking onto the stage followed by street urchins whom one does not see.¹⁶

20. Gradually possessed by a kind of lunatic frenzy, the comedian begins 'an incomparable dance.' 'What B[eckmann] ventures here is neck-breaking...He is now completely beside himself. The sheer lunacy of his laughter can no longer be contained in either forms or lines; the only way to convey the mood is to take himself by the scruff of the neck ...and cavort in crazy

¹⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling. Repetition*, translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings, vol. 6 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 163.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 163-164.

capers.¹⁷ Laughter is an integral part of antic gesture, a frenetic extension that rolls off the stage to engulf the public, who respond in kind: 'I rise up, look at Beckmann, and laugh so hard that I sink back again in exhaustion.'¹⁸ Arising at the height of Beckmann's antic frenzy, when only his comic genius prevents the action from being 'most repellent,' the manic dance sweeps the spectators along with it, making them sensitive to their bodies, so that they laugh not just passively from viewing his dance, but in full consciousness of their own vicarious performance: 'The individual recognizes very well the relief of doing something like that [i.e., Beckmann's dance], but to do it on stage that takes positive genius. That requires the authority of genius; otherwise it is most repellent.'¹⁹

21. Beckmann and the audience do not speak, they laugh. Their laughter really does convey a genuine pleasure at their collective participation in unbridled physical release. Their abandon is spontaneous and unfeigned. Yet laughter has the habit of turning back reflexively onto the laughing subject. In this case, as Kierkegaard's last remark indicates, laughter conveys the terrifying thought, 'what if it were I up there!' That is scarcely surprising since gestures are not simply transitive signs intended for another; they also implicate the gesturing subject. 'The sense of gestures, writes Agamben, 'is not exhausted in [performance]. However compelling it may be for an Other, gesture never exists only for him; indeed, only in so far as it also exists for itself can it be compelling for the Other.'²⁰ This is particularly true for laughter.
22. As a gesture of the body, laughter is extensive, rather than ostensive. It simply bursts out; those present witness it without being able to determine a referent with any certainty (which is one aspect of laughter's ambiguity and a source of social discomfort, since, in the absence of a designated addressee, we may take it personally as meant for ourselves). That is typical of gesture more generally, which, unlike speech with its ostensive devices for designating interlocutors 'I/you, je 'tu/vous, ich 'du/Sie, and so on ' rarely designates a specific addressee (except, of course, for gestures of endearment menace, and derision). As a gesture of the body, laughter appears external, cut off from the inner life of the laugher. And yet, precisely because it originates as embodied expression, it is *of* the body and thus participates in the enigmatic dialectic between self and body. If it is true that 'a corporeal gesture expresses at best the foreignness of the body to the I itself,'²¹ it is also the case, when the gesture is laughter, that the sense-of-self, the *Ichgef'hl*, figures in the equation of alienation that motivates the laughter as an attempt to avoid or expel an intolerable situation. In other words, laughter originates in the abyss that separates inner being from body. One of laughter's great paradoxes, in short, resides in the fact that while it appears other directed, an external gesture, it is inevitably more involved with self, then with others. Laughter gets us to the very center of human physiology, neurophysiology, and neuropsychology.
23. Indeed, scientists who have recently studied laughter and humor note the stringent physiological requirements needed for both. '...the right frontal lobe ...may be a kind of cerebral clearinghouse, a place where all the components of self-awareness'memory, logic, language, sensation, and emotion'come together. Understanding humor is a serious business. You need the ability to make an inference; you also need the ability to have a self-awareness concept.

¹⁷*Ibid*, p. 164.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 164.

²⁰'Kommerell, or On Gesture,' pp. 77-78.

²¹Paul Fleming, 'The Crisis of Art: Max Kommerell and Jean Paul's Gestures,' in *Gesture and Gag. The Body as Medium*, special issue of *MLN* 115, 3 (April 2000), p. 526.

Then you need the connectivity to your emotional reactions.²² Intensely subjective and personal, laughter arises from the most basic human anxieties, instincts, and attitudes: fear of death, aggression, sexuality, offensiveness or the flaunting of taboos.²³ This bi-directional thrust of laughter, probing deep within even as it pulses outward, accounts for the nastier underside of the phenomenon. The sense of unease with one's self translates into some of the anti-social elements we perceive as offensive, hostile, threatening in laughter. Nietzsche captured this aggressive thrust in some of his key aphorisms in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but he also makes clear the bi-directional dynamics of the aggression: self-hated and irony motivate laughter-as-gesture.²⁴

24. Clearly for Nietzsche, laughter is an external gesture revealing the multiplicity of life in the body, its refusal to resolve itself into a coherent unity. When he exhorts the reader to 'learn to laugh' and to dance higher and higher while wearing 'this crown laughter,' he is emphatically not offering us an experience of the sublime with multiple activities resolving themselves into an intellectually coherent and life-affirming unity.²⁵ The paragraph conveys the sense of lunatic laughter and frenetic dancing (in the manner of Kierkegaard's Beckmann) as a grotesque parody of crucifixion 'a dancing, laughing crucifixion. The scene is a purposefully grotesque deviation from conventional notions of the proper social conduct we are taught to internalize; it is also grotesque in the horror the reader feels in realizing that Zarathustra intends this script for him, not simply as vicarious participation, but an actual experience. Beyond that, it is grotesque in its assumption that this abject, excluded other, this lunatic laughter should be proposed as a model for ourselves. Each prescribes an undoing of the unity we carefully construct around us, as he intended.
25. Nietzsche's scenario, however original and powerful, is not without precedent. It harks back to an early cosmogonic myth that made laughter the principle force behind the creation of the world. The myth is significant not only because of persistent (and successful) efforts to counter it, but also because, unlike cosmogonic myths based on a rational and teleological conception of divine creation, and to the horror of those partial to such scenarios, this one suggests that not reason, but a kind of entropic hilarity engendered the world. In short, the excluded other, conscious of the absurdity of existence, simply erupted in a series of monstrous belly laughs that gave rise to the world.²⁶ I think it makes an appropriately enigmatic ending for this essay.
26. The seven gods who rule the world were born when God laughed. ...After he had burst out laughing, light appeared. ...He burst out laughing a second time: the waters were everywhere. At the third burst of laughter, Hermes appeared; at the fourth, creation; at the fifth, destiny; at the sixth, time. Then, before the seventh laugh, God had a tremendous inspiration, but he laughed so hard that he cried, and from his tears the human soul was born.²⁷

²²Eric Johnson, 'The Laughter Circuit,' *Discover*, May 2002, p. 25.

²³For a recent discussion of these issues in a popular venue see, Tad Freund, 'What's So Funny? A scientific attempt to discover why we laugh?' *The New Yorker*, November 11, 2002, 78-93.

²⁴Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A Book for None and All*, Translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978).

²⁵'So learn to laugh away over yourselves. Lift up your hearts, you good dancers, high, higher! And do not forget good laughter. This crown of him who laughs, this rose-wreath crown: to you my brothers I throw this crown. Laughter I have pronounced holy; you higher men, *learn to laugh*.' *Ibid.*; pp. 295-296.

²⁶'Ainsi s'exprime l'auteur anonyme d'un papyrus alchimique datant du troisi^eme si^cle de notre 're, le papyrus de Leyde. L'univers est n^e d'un 'norme 'clat de rire. Dieu, l'Unique, quelque soit son nom, est pris' on ne sait pourquoi ' d'une crise de fou rire, comme s'il avait soudain conscience de l'absurdit^e de son existence.' Georges Minois, *Histoire du rire et de la d'rision* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), p. 15.

²⁷' Dieu ayant ri, naquirent les sept dieux qui gouvernent le monde... Lorsqu'il eut 'clat' de rire, la lumi^re parut [...].

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Il 'clata de rire pour la seconde fois: tout 'tait eaux. Au troisi'me 'clat de rire apparut Herm's; au quatri'me, la g'n'ration; au cinqui'me, le destin; au sixi'me, le temps.' Puis, avant le septi'me rire, Dieu prend une grande inspiration; mais il a tellement ri qu'il en pleure, et de ses larmes na't l' 'me.' Minois, *Histoire...*, p. 15. He references Solomon Reinach, ' Le rire rituel, ' in *Cultes, mythes, religions* (Paris: Ernest Leroux 1912), vol. 4, pp. 112-113.