

Signification Humaine Du Rire
(The Human Meaning of Laughter)

BY FRANCIS JEANSON

Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1950, 1 volume, pp. 213.

Francis Jeanson's study is all the more interesting because for the first time in the history of the theoretical definition of laughter we find ourselves in the presence of an attempt to explain laughter from the phenomenological viewpoint. Indeed, Mr. Jeanson tells us this in the very first pages of his book: 'Man exists only in so far as he turns towards a future which repeats and transforms the meaning of his past, and "this being from afar", as Heidegger calls him, understands himself only according to the goal which he has set for himself, or which he has permitted to be forced upon him' (p. 12). After this declaration of faith, it is not surprising that Mr. Jeanson—who, in spite of what he may say, is fully aware of

the classic theories on laughter—taxes the theorists with wanting to define laughter rather than to understand it. Such methods, he says, must invariably lead to an account of laughter based on the comic element, that is, to represent man as being conditioned by his environment, one factor only among so many other factors. Bergson's theory setting forth a definition of the comic in order to explain laughter is a case in point. Such a solution is illusory for it would imply losing sight of the basic freedom of the 'for himself' (*pour-soi*) and would present its laughter as depending on that 'in himself' (*en-soi*) which is the comic factor. Freud's theory finds more favour with the writer, for, although Freud is not aware of it, it

implies an endeavour to understand the nature of laughter. Notwithstanding, Mr. Jeanson reproaches psychoanalytic theory as a whole with justifying behaviour in 'bad faith', in as much as it establishes an explanation of human conduct based on that other 'in himself' (*en-soi*) which is the stored-up past of man in the guise of psychic complexes.

In short, to the various attempts made to explain laughter, the writer opposes an endeavour to understand laughter. It is man as a whole with his values and his attitude to the world that is shown up in laughter. We must take man as he is wholly and we must look for the human meaning of laughter. In every phase of our laughter we express our concept of life: that is why—contrary to the beliefs of the classical theorists—laughter cannot be explained by the comic element but, as an expression of ourselves, lends either this or that meaning to the comic. Hence, there is a basic ambiguity in laughter, as in all other forms of human conduct. 'Freedom can . . . manifest itself in a negative attitude of refusal to laugh, as well as in the resigned acceptance of some impulse coming from the outside; yet it shows itself as well in a positive way by the act of laughter itself' (p. 16).

By a succession of penetrating phenomenological analyses, Mr. Jeanson shows that laughter in its most general form 'is an implied reproach against man's own cowardice in not assuming the actual role of subject' (p. 19). From that point of view, laughter as pure expression of feeling tries to give the laughing individual the illusion of an

easy and comforting existing of an 'in himself' (*en-soi*); while, on the other hand, laughter which wants to recoup its losses on the level of reflexion tries to give the laughing individual the impression, no less illusory (though reassuring) that he exists as pure mind. The role of psychology in all this is, according to Mr. Jeanson, precisely this: to give man 'the means of apprehending the situation in which he finds himself, of making it truly his, and holding himself responsible for the meaning with which it is endowed by him' (p. 17). His book closes with a chapter on 'Laughter and Liberty', in which, in contradistinction to the two aspects of laughter which we have sketched and which are only the snares and entanglements confronting human liberty—Mr. Jeanson discusses laughter which is to be a gesture of liberation—that is to say, laughter full of awareness of our responsibility as beings who give to the world its significance.

Such a short analysis can surely not give an account, except in mere outline, of Mr. Jeanson's book, abounding as it is in interesting observations of all kinds. Let us say, however, that the distinction between the definition and the understanding of laughter, as the author views them, seems to us somewhat too rigorous and only applies to a number of extreme cases. For, as M. Lagache has well shown in his work,¹ in psychology all definition worthy of that name carries with it understanding, and conversely, it is doubtful whether there can be true understanding without definition.

¹ *L'unité de la psychologie*, Paris: P. U. F., 1949.