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SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
BATI DİLLERİ VE EDEBİYATLARI ANABİLİM DALI
İNGİLİZ DİLİ VE EDEBİYATI BİLİM DALI**

DOKTORA TEZİ

**DOUBTFUL FICTIONS:
THE SCEPTICISM OF HUMOUR IN
THE ENGLISH LITERARY CANON,
1379-1767**

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Abstract

This thesis aims at exploring the meaning(s) of humoristic scepticism in the English literary canon from the late middle ages to mid-eighteenth century in a literary nominalist context. The primary argument is that humour is a human capability, and accordingly the first chapter evaluates its ontological roots in Ionian philosophy, its medical reception in the Hippocratic doctors' writings, and its cognitive implications in Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian contexts. The second chapter abandons an essentialist approach to English humour and instead draws on the point that when approached as a cognitive capacity, humour particularly unfolds its sceptical potentials in the context of English humour which, it will be argued, implies a direct continuity between the English use of humour and sceptic thought and imagination. In accordance, the following chapters will examine the humorous meaning-making processes in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* and *Every Man out of His Humour*, and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. In these chapters, it will be maintained that these texts emerge as literary reflections upon the epistemological crises of their own times and that they reject, disregard, and dismantle cultural, social, and mental universals. By doing so, it will be argued that their multiply contingent, non-discursive, and unstable modes of narration portray an underlying epistemic scepticism and that they turn to humour to express this scepticism. In conclusion, it will be maintained that as a cognitive capacity, humour holds the potential to convey the sceptical tendencies of the human mind and that English humour develops this sceptical potential in humour from a consistently nominalist perspective. The importance of this point, it will be concluded, lies in the fact that English humour literature does not re-produce an essentialist position on English humour but produces humour's sceptical potentials in the unique context of the English literary canon. In other words, it is concluded that English sceptical humour showcases an

undivided attention to nominal particularities rather than looking up to universal abstractions to understand being and existence.

Keywords: Humour, Scepticism, Cognitivity, Capabilism, Literary Nominalism, Geoffrey Chaucer, Ben Jonson, Laurence Sterne



Öz

Bu tez, geç Ortaçağ'dan başlayarak on sekizinci yüzyıl ortalarına kadar gelişen süreçte İngiliz edebiyatında mizahın septik (kuşkucu) açılımlarını edebi nominalist bir perspektiften ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, mizahın bir insani olanak olduğu fikrinden yola çıkılarak birinci bölümde onun ontolojik, tıbbi ve bilişsel açılardan düşünsel kökenleri ele alınacaktır. Buradan hareketle Sokrates öncesi düşünürlerin doğa felsefeleri, Hippokratik tıp doktorları ile ardıllarının mizaç hakkındaki tıbbi belirlemeleri ve son olarak da mizaçın Aristotelesçi ve post-Aristotelesçi bağlamlarda nasıl bir bilişsel yeti olarak tanımlandığı ele alınacaktır. İkinci bölüm, İngiliz mizahına özcü bir yaklaşımı terk ederek, bunun yerine mizahın bilişsel bir yeti olarak ele alındığında, onun septik potansiyellerini en belirgin biçimde İngiliz mizahında kendisini gösterdiği düşüncesini savunacaktır ve bunun İngiliz mizah kullanımı ile septik düşünce ve hayal gücü arasındaki direct devamlılığı ele verdiği düşüncesi savunulacaktır. Bu bağlamda üçüncü, dördüncü ve beşinci bölümlerde sırasıyla Chaucer'in en önemli şiirlerinden olan *House of Fame*'i, Ben Jonson'un *Every Man in His Humour* ile *Every Man out of His Humour* isimli oyunları ve Laurence Sterne'ün *Tristram Shandy* isimli romanındaki mizahi anlam yaratım süreçleri incelenecektir. Bu bölümlerde, bu eserlerin her birinin kendi dönemlerinde cereyan eden epistemolojik krizlerin edebi ifadesi olduğu ve bu doğrultuda kültürel, sosyal ve düşünsel tümelleri reddedettiği, yoksaydığı, ya da yıkmaya çalıştığı düşüncesi savunulacaktır. Böylelikle, bu dört temel metnin olumsal, çıkarımsal olmayan ve tutarsız anlatımlarının/yapılarının altında aslında epistemik bir kuşkunun yattığı ve bu kuşkunun mizahi bir biçimde dile getirildiği düşüncesi savunulacaktır. Sonuç olarak, bilişsel bir yeti olarak mizahın insan düşüncesinin septik eğilimlerini ifade etme olanağını içinde barındırdığı ve İngiliz mizahının bu septik olanağı incelenen eserlerde tutarlı bir

nominalist perspektiften geliřtirdiđi dűőűncesi savunulacaktır. Varılan bu sonucun  nemi ise, İngiliz mizah edebiyatının İngiliz mizacının kendine i kin mizahını deđil, mizahın septik potansiyelini İngiliz edebiyat kanonun biricik bađlamında  retiler oluőu ve dolayısıyla bu septik mizahın var oluőu ve varlıđı anlamak i in t mel soyutlamalara deđil tikel var oluőlara kesintisiz bir bi imde dikkat  ekiyor oluőudur.

Anahtar S zc kler: Mizah, ő phecilik, Biliősellik, Olanaklılık, Edebi Nominalizm, Geoffrey Chaucer, Ben Jonson, Laurence Sterne



Preface

The text of Chaucer used throughout for quotation and reference is *The Riverside Chaucer* unless otherwise specified. Line numbers are given in the text.

The text of Ben Jonson used throughout for quotation and reference is *Ben Jonson*, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, vol. 3. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927. Line and page numbers are given in the text.

The text of Laurence Sterne used throughout for quotation and reference is *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne*, edited by Melvyn New and Joan New, vol.2. Gainesville: The University of Florida Press, 1978. Page numbers are given in the text.

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In his *Aphorisms*, Hippocrates introduces his reader to the undying concept of human finitude and says, “Ο βίος βραχύς, / ή δὲ τέχνη μακρή, / ό δὲ καιρὸς όξύς, / ή δὲ πείρα σφαλερή, / ή δὲ κρίσις χαλεπή.” Over the years, I have grown fond of thinking and talking things through with those whose presence I shall ever cherish and revere, knowing that learning the “craft” is a never-ending and occasionally painful process but also a blissful experience.

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This study is dedicated to Z; the first principle from which everything else follows. It is a cosmic irony that one's forlornness can be so suddenly remedied by the almost mythic force of benediction. I am grateful, *in aeternum*.

Selena Özbaş
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List of abbreviations

<i>CHBJ</i>	<i>The Critical Heritage: Ben Jonson</i> , edited by D.H. Craig. London and New York: 1990.
<i>CHGC</i>	<i>The Critical Heritage: Geoffrey Chaucer</i> , edited by Derek Brewer. 2 vols. London and New York: Routledge, 1978.
<i>CHHW</i>	<i>The Critical Heritage: Horace Walpole</i> , edited by Peter Sabor. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
<i>CHLS</i>	<i>The Critical Heritage: Laurence Sterne</i> , edited by Alan B. Howes. London and New York: Routledge, 1971.
<i>DK</i>	Hermann Diels und Walther Kranz, <i>Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker</i> . Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1960.
<i>EMIH</i>	<i>Every Man in His Humour</i>
<i>EMOH</i>	<i>Every Man out of His Humour</i>
<i>HF</i>	<i>House of Fame</i>

PCG

R. Kassel and C. Austin, eds. *Poetae Comici Graeci*. 8 vols. Berolini et Novi Eboraci: Walter de Gruyter, 1983.

TS

Tristram Shandy



Amis lecteurs, qui ce livre lisez,
Despouillez vous de toute affection;
Et, le lisant, ne vous scandalisez:
Il ne contient mal ne infection.
Vray est qu'icy peu de perfection
Vous apprendrez, si non en cas de rire;
Aultre argument ne peut mon cueur elire,
Voyant le dueil qui vous mine et consomme:
Mieulx est de ris que de larmes escripre,
Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme
(François Rabelais, *Gargantua*, c.1535)

Without wit and humour, reason can hardly have its proof or be distinguished.
(3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Sensus Communis*, 1709)

When a real piece of humour appears, entertainment becomes avantgarde: a supreme philosophical game. We smile because we feel sad for having discovered, only for a moment, the truth. (...) Humour is a *cold* carnival. (Umberto Eco, *Frames of Comic Freedom*, 1984)

INTRODUCTION:

“WHAT DO YOU FIND SO AMUSING DEMOCRITUS?”: COMEDY, THE ENGLISH *DUNAMIS*, AND THE POETICS OF SCEPTICAL HUMOUR

I.(Un)Taming of the Shrew: Humour, Comedy, and The Tragic Discourse

The study of humour is a paradoxical pursuit since the history of humour theory/criticism does not perfectly chime in with the individual history of humour. Better put, the development of humour theory and the development of humour itself serve two discursive ends which paradoxically do not necessarily embrace each other. For, humour theory is frequently promoted as an early modernist invention with a *fin de siècle* complexion¹ and this particular attitude implicitly declares the instrumentalisation of humour as a gorgonically shrewd form of literary expression. In agreement with this particularly modernist emotion, the rhetoric surrounding humour theory largely emanates from the

¹ For instance, John Morreall implies that although a plentiful of philosophers wrote on humour from Plato to Kant, Bergson's take on laughter and comedy grew out of his and his contemporaries' growing dissatisfaction with the domination of "abstract knowledge" that would only allow us to "handle our daily experience in a rigid, repetitive way, treating new events as mere instantiations of concepts." Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 8. For this reason, he pays specific attention to Bergson's *Laughter* as "the first book by a notable philosopher" since "Martian anthropologists comparing the amount of philosophical writing on humor with what has been written on, say justice, or even on Rawls' *Veil of Ignorance*, might well conclude that humor could be left out of human life without much loss." See Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 20 November 2012. Date of access: 10 January 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>.

precepts of the institution of criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth century academia which required the intellectual “to perform according to the rigorous rules of scholarship.”² Emerging as part of a metaphysical agenda which would now open new, mysterious vistas for the willing initiates,³ it is barely deniable that the tradition of modern humour theory mostly considers humour as an ideological extension of its intuitive politics and in this sense it is no wonder that the early academic critics of the early nineteenth century appear too eager to define humour as an instinctual social corrective, a critical attaché that antagonises the “liberal elites” who “elevated positivism to an unofficial credo.”⁴ In accordance, humour theory creates its own interpretative repertoire that looks forward to re-negotiating the bio-political status of humour rather than looking into the ontological basis of an eons-old human ability. It is in this respect that the fin de siècle intellectual’s prominent sense of ennui, disappointment, and “ineffable *élan vital* which is accessible only to intuition”⁵ had planted the seeds of a theoretically programmed attempt to understand the *raison d’être* of the phenomenon of humour in its philosophical, biological, and literary contexts. With slight or major differences, these theoretical contexts were expanded during the twentieth century by the hand of the semantic turn in linguistics,⁶ the advances in psychology and anthropology,⁷ and the cognitive neuroscience of humour which proclaimed the connection between the activities of the cerebral cortex and the human capacity for humour which “involves higher-order

²Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), 14.

³ Robert C. Grogin, “Henri Bergson and the University Community,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 2, no.2 (1976): 209-222; 210.

⁴ Kevin Duong, “The Left and Henri Bergson,” *French Politics* 18, no.4 (2020): 1-21; 3. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-020-00130-w>. Date of access: 10 January 2021.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, “The flight to the real,” in *Cultural Politics at The Fin de Siècle*, edited by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, 11-22. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17. Original italics.

⁶ The semantic-script theory of humour which has been introduced by Victor Raskin in his *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour* (Dordrecht and Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985) was a great influence as well as Salvatore Attardo’s *Linguistic theories of humour* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994).

⁷ For instance, see Paul E. McGhee’s emphasis on the use of humour in child behaviour in his *Humour: Its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1979) and Rod A. Martin’s *The Psychology of Humour: An Integrative Approach* (Amsterdam and Boston: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007) for a more unifying approach to the psychology of humour.

thinking, especially seeing things from multiple perspectives.”⁸ Philosophers of art and language writing in the analytical tradition considered the truth-conditions and the logical asymmetry of humour as well as the overlap between the aesthetic sphere of experience and the cognitive sphere of experience which granted humour “even more cognitive engagement than Kant allows.”⁹ Recent theoretical studies on humour with a more continental tone and approach tend to re-evaluate it under neo-Kantian terms where humour is “not noumenal but phenomenal, not theological but anthropological, not numinous but simply luminous.”¹⁰ However, most of these contemporary contexts appear to reserve the political need for explaining humour as a species of counter-metaphysicality that is apropos of their intellectual predecessors.

It would be utterly unfair to assume that the variety of these early modernist and *post*-modernist contexts have made little contribution to our understanding of humour. For, although it was not until the early nineteenth century that humour theory has managed to establish itself as a distinct category of interpretation and evaluation in literary aesthetics, the variety of these contexts have had a tremendous impact on our understanding of the socio-political functions of humour. On the other hand, though, these critical approaches mostly miss the vital point that despite its fairly late entrance into the critical imagination, humour emerges as an already autonomous human capacity in recorded human history which cannot be simply predicated of its functions or ideological attributes. For, humour theory as a turn-of-the-century enterprise (and by extension contemporary humour theory, in general) wishes to popularise humour as a favourable form of clairvoyant amusement. Even contemporary humour studies which promote humour as a concept that plays along the lines of irrationality and instinctiveness mostly take this late-nineteenth century attitude for granted without noticing that they mostly leave

⁸ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 79. A 2004 research revealed “increases in bilateral regions of insular cortex and the amygdala.” See Joseph M. Moran et. al. “Neural correlates of humour detection and appreciation,” *Neuro Image* 21, no.3 (2004): 1005-1060. A quite recent discussion of the relation between cognition, memory, and humour can be found at Sheila M. Kennison, *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Humour* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2020).

⁹ Alan H. Goldman, “The Broad View of Aesthetic Experience,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, no.4 (2013): 323-333; 326.

¹⁰ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 17.

humour theory ‘humourless’ in the sense that they treat it as an apparatus rather than as a distinct human capability. To a certain extent, even a quick glance at older humour traditions reveal a prejudicial position that is analogous to the modern and contemporary reception of humour. For instance, Socrates’s lack of self-knowledge in Plato’s *Philebus* offers a study in the laughability of not knowing thyself but humorously propels a violent sense of superiority over the ignorant individual. Horace’s painter who paints a coal-black fish with a human head in *Satires* attends to the humorous merge of logically irreconcilable physical and mental assets while Immanuel Kant’s notion of logical irreconcilability holds responsible the “strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing”¹¹ for the production of humour. Aristotle’s man, on the other hand, rushes for a moment of relaxation in the *Nichomachean Ethics*,¹² while Quintilian’s jokes in *Institutes* act in the capacity of a relief-bringer which humorously dispel melancholy in the audience, and Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury accentuates in his *Sensus Communis* the sense of freedom which entails humour since “the natural free spirits” of human beings will seek for psychological release “if imprisoned and controlled.”¹³ The entirety of these examples display the fact that the recurring philosophical interest in humour documents our persisting interest in it which has later led to the categorisation of humour’s separate functions as a) a violent form of expressing superiority, b) an onto-epistemic expression of the dissonance between object and reality, and c) as a means of neuro-psychological catharsis. But also, they point at the disparity between the legislative power of the institution of criticism and humour’s humanity.

Without resorting to the comfort of extremist interpretations it should be acknowledged that, to a certain extent, the act of theorising about humour leads to the conceptual confinement of its own subject of study. For, common practices in theory either situate humour as an antidote to positivism or define it as part of

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161.

¹² Especially see John Lippitt’s evaluation of Aristotelian humour as a source of moral wisdom in “Is a Sense of Humour a Virtue?” *The Monist* 88, no.1 (2005): 72-92.

¹³ Anthony Ashley Cooper, “*Sensus Communis*, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour,” in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, edited by Lawrence E. Klein, 29-70. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34.

human functionality which are altogether meant to define the humour-ness, the essence of humour although humour tends to persistently outshine the doctrinal creed. In connection with that point, it can be construed that this particular conceptual confinement is met by the hierarchical organisational structure of literary genres. For, humour is frequently viewed as a comedic device and the humour critic, whether ancient or modern, does not particularly deliberate a distinction between comedy and humour term-wise. Since it is not necessarily specified as an individual ability, it is only ironical to discover that despite our long-lasting engagement with it, humour still appears to suffer from a theoretical invisibility since theory barely ever asks questions about the separate meaning(s) of humour. It is simply known of its relational relevance to comedy and in some specific cases, to laughter. Theory functionalises humour but also standardises it as a symbiote. By doing so, the canon of literary criticism establishes an unavoidable reciprocity and interdependence between humour and comedy without taking into consideration that a reciprocity of this sort risks creating a conceptual void. As a result, humour's ontological status remains a mystery at large as it does not seem to be particularly known from its near-synonymy with comedy.

Ideally speaking, since we are faced with the conundrum of trying to find a way out of this oddity, it could have been a better starting point where we would have paid specific attention to humour as a concept that has a literary and culture life of its own as distinct from comedy. By way of doing so, we would avoid the trap of conceptual isonomy and could also respond to the possible meaning(s) of humour rather than its functions and fend off the modernist and postmodernist pressure on humour theory. Ironically enough, however, since the humoristic vision of the comic theorist instinctively assumes an innate parallel between comedy and humour, we would have to address first the taxonomically enigmatic situation of comedy as the lower form of literary genres so as to understand and conceptualise humour as a non-essentially comedic endeavour. Otherwise stated, to free humour of the ideological connotations of this ostensible exchangeability we would still have to counter comedy's banalisation and trivialisation at the hands of cultural and critical reception. To locate the philosophical coordinates of humour, then, I would like to make an argument in favour of the anti-banality of comedy and, in order to do so, would like to refer

to a specific moment in the mid-eighteenth-century which will require us to spend some time on the archaic binary opposition between laughing comedy and mournful tragedy.

On New Year's Eve, 1769, Horace Walpole wrote to his friend, who happened to be on a diplomatic mission in Italy—reporting on the Stuarts in exile—of the “ominous eggs”¹⁴ which the last year has laid. Walpole, a proponent and admirer of William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham's adept oratorical skills which to his thinking echoed “a self-consciously classical manner,”¹⁵ expressed a personal resentment of John Wilkes's egregious libertarianism which temporarily prevailed over Chatham's nationalistic interests whose political undertones, ironically enough, were considered to be in collision with the excessively coarse manners of the reigning monarch, George II.¹⁶ He acknowledges the vigour of the constitution which has been recently put to test by the anonymous Junius's epistolary attacks and finds comfort in the non-uniqueness of the situation as he illustrates the minutest details of the Távora affair;¹⁷ a technique in which he particularly took delight.¹⁸ The parallelism between the tumultuous Portuguese court scandal which was not only curiously preceded by the 1755 Lisbon earthquake but also possibly included Sebastião de

¹⁴ Horace Walpole, “Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 31 December 1769,” in *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, edited by W.S. Lewis, 163-166. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 163.

¹⁵ Jeremy Black, *Pitt the Elder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 246. Black gives a full description of the illustrious nature of Pitt's eloquent speech later elsewhere: “For a social order brought up on classical authors there was something very Roman about Pitt. Just as his hostility towards France during the Seven Years War echoed the theme of Rome versus Carthage, so Harris recorded of the Wilkes debate that Pitt, seemed to plan his eloquence upon the model of Caesar's in the Catilinarian conspiracy, as recorded by Sallust; (...),” 247.

¹⁶ Michael Schaich argues that the Hanoverians were considered “dull, dim-witted and boorish by British contemporaries and later scholars alike. Even their bodies were distorted in pictorial and verbal representations to match their assumed mental and intellectual backwardness (...).” See Michael Schaich, “Introduction,” in *The Hanoverian Succession: Dynastic Politics and Monarchical Culture*, edited by Andreas Gestrich and Michael Schaich, 1-24 (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 2.

¹⁷ When the reformer King José I was fatally injured during an assassination attempt in 1758, various members of the noble Távora family were executed in 1759 and possibly by the hand of the Marquis of Pombal, Sebastião de Melo who was wishing to seize power and expel the notorious Jesuits. For the connection with Jesuits see Francisco Malta Romeiras, *Jesuits and the Book of Nature: Science and Education in Modern Portugal* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 29.

¹⁸ Walpole, *Memoirs of King George II*, edited by John Brooke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), III.92.

Melo's hatred towards the power wielding aristocratic families, and the tempestuous political climate of Hanoverian England which appeared to be under constant literary and political attack, leads him to the following conclusion:

I have often said, and oftener think, that *this world is a comedy to those that think*, a tragedy to those that feel—a solution of why Democritus laughed and Heraclitus wept.¹⁹

Walpole's observation, at large, is a political pay-off in regard to his socio-cultural milieu since the formal onset of the text suggests a familiar Augustan sentiment in its epistolary realism.²⁰ It could also be considered that the reverberation of the aplomb and panache of Walpole's wit which often had made himself detested²¹ presents a largely political case in itself that is devoid of literary interests. In either case, however, the conclusion he reaches seems to have more literary consequences than political ones despite his purely political statement. For, contrary to expectation, it is telling of a literary disposition which takes sides with cerebral gaiety that furloughs the conventional attribute of low ridicule attached to comedy and allocates superfluous emotional distress to tragedy whose nature has been frequently located in the mimetic representation of technically complete and philosophically serious series of action(s). In addition, it adds to this set of literary binaries a philosophical duplexity which hideously insinuates the futility of Heraclitusean tragedy in the face of an ever-developing world, leaving little space for grief and a plenty of space for comedy.

¹⁹ Walpole, "Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 31 December 1769," 166. Italics are mine.

²⁰ Also, Cora E. Lutz maintains the idea that the comparison between Democritus and Heraclitus was "used extensively for political and satirical pamphlets" and continues: "An interesting example, published in London in 1723 is entitled *Democritus, the laughing Philosopher's Trip into England or Seven Days Amusements and contemplations; intermixt with uncommon reflections both serious and merry, on the Follies and Vices Daily committed by both Sexes of all Religions and vocations, in the city of London and Westminster*. It was 'Written by a banish'd Hermit, lately arriv'd from Foreign countries.' The Hermit was none other than Heraclitus turned Christian." See Lutz, "Democritus and Heraclitus," *The Classical Journal* 49, no. 7 (1954): 309-314; 313.

²¹ Peter Sabor considers Macaulay's indebtedness to D'Israeli for the metaphor of disease for Walpole's prose and adds: "for D'Israeli they are 'plants of sickly delicacy, which could never endure the open air'; for Macaulay they are the productions of 'an unhealthy and disorganized mind.'" See Peter Sabor, "Introduction," *CHHW*, 18-19.

In accordance, although Walpole's observatory remarks do not necessarily aspire to the status of literary theory and there is not any clear evidence that he favours comedy/Democritus over tragedy/Heraclitus, it is interesting to note that even seven years later in another letter addressed to Horace Mann he wrote:

To act with common sense according to the moment,
is the best wisdom I know; and the best philosophy,
to do one's duties, take the world as it comes, submit
respectfully to one's lot, bless the goodness that has
given so much happiness with it, whatever it is, and
despise affectation, which only makes our weakness
more contemptible, by showing we know we are not
what we wish to appear. Adieu!²²

Still, it can be maintained that Walpole's intellectual capriciousness does not necessarily assign him a missionary role with regards to his employment of a philosophically emblematic dichotomy as analogous to a literary binary. For despite his political tendencies and sagacious formulations, other poets with neoclassical tendencies were not oblivious to the competition between tragedy and comedy nor were they unappreciative of the emblematic relation between these two ancient philosophers. A specific moment in Dryden's *Tenth Satire of Juvenal* escalates the force of a preceding argument when the poet refers to the "pair of sages"²³ who, to his thinking, pursue the same end by different methods. This particular reference can be taken as a palpable allusion to Dryden's previous remarks on the rather peculiar points of dissimilitude between tragedy and comedy²⁴ but also it could be considered as an implied comment on Democritus's belittling laughter in the face of human folly and Heraclitus's tears in the face of unspeakable crime. Furthermore, the 'examiner' poet Matthew Prior summons the mirthful spirits of Democritus and the grief-stricken spirit of

²² Walpole, "Walpole to Horace Mann, 27 May 1776," in *The Yale Edition Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 209-214; 213.

²³ John Dryden, "The Tenth Satire of Juvenal," in *The Poems of John Dryden: 1693-1696*, vol.4, edited by Paul Hammond and David Hopkins, 96-132. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 100.

²⁴ Dryden, "An Essay of Dramatick Poesie," in *The Works of John Dryden: 1668-1691: An Essay of Dramatick Poesie and Shorter Works*, vol.17, edited by Samuel H. Monk and A.E. Wallace Maurer, 3-82. (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1971), 37-38.

Heraclitus to mourn humanity's "greater crimes"²⁵ while towards the dawn of the nineteenth-century, Henry Kirke White addresses his own unpredictable and indeterminate nature by referring to his daily veering "to all points of the compass" and the "laughing and pleas'd child" inside who could be effortlessly "vex'd to the soul with impertinent tattle."²⁶ Henry Fielding, on the other hand, in the prologue to his *The Author's Farce* considers the possibility of flying from Heraclitus's "sad rules" as he prefers to think of himself as one "bred in Democritus's schools."²⁷ In all four of these historically and textually unique instances, these poets and littérateurs appear to suggest a strict contrast between profane light-heartedness and literary mirth in opposition to philosophical moralism and universal tragicality in an identically Walpolean manner. Practicing 'poesy' within their own contemporary frameworks with the intention of referring to an ancient opposition, they emulate and re-popularise an "eternal cleavage" since

they saw in Heraclitus' tears only a magnified version of the ordinary, average man's sympathetic response to pain and evil, and in Democritus' laughter an enlarged facsimile of Everyman's tendency to be amused at the foolish antics of his fellow men.²⁸

In this respect, the non-uniqueness of Walpole's disposition seems to account for the late neoclassical (or early Romantic) cognisance of two different ancient

²⁵ Prior's affiliation with Jonathan Swift's *The Examiner* is a curious matter. Samuel Johnson in *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* notes that the political coordinates of early eighteenth-century and the growing Tory sensibility escalated the need for "writers who might convey intelligence of past abuses, and shew the waste of publick money, the unreasonable *Conduct of the Allies*, the avarice of general, the tyranny of minions, and the general danger of approaching ruin." If this is so, Prior's summoning sequence can be argued to have a partly political outlook as do Walpole's remarks. However, it does not rule out the possibility to consider them as literary observations given their indulgence in poetical affairs as well as in political ones. See Samuel Johnson, *Lives of The English Poets*, vol. II, edited by George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 187. Original italics. For Matthew Prior's "Democritus and Heraclitus," see *The Poetical Works of Matthew Prior Vol. I*, edited by Thomas Park (London: Stanhope Press, 1807), 123.

²⁶ Henry Kirke White, "My Own Character," in *The Complete Works of Henry Kirke White*, edited by Robert Southey, 22-23. (Boston: N.H. Whitaker, 1837), 22.

²⁷ Henry Fielding, *The Author's Farce; with a puppet show, called pleasures of the town* (1750). Rice University. <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/61601>. Date of access: 12 March 2020.

²⁸ Lutz, "Democritus and Heraclitus," 312.

metaphysical takes on being and its perception.²⁹ For his literary-philosophical blueprint that reproduces the established rivalry between tragedy and comedy vividly describes why the traditional confrontation between the laughing and the weeping philosopher appears to be a prevalent intellectual tactic among eighteenth-century poets who seem to be in favour of taxonomical solidarity over inter-categorical vitality by eventually seeking for a cantankerous division between tragedy and comedy. Correspondingly, it appears that Walpole puts so much effort into remaining neutral throughout the rest of the letter and yet eventually he seems to be enraptured by the allure of Democritean joy since the textual evidence becomes growingly suggestive of his literary and intellectual preferences. It is against this backdrop that looking back on his former correspondence, our suspicions appear to gain more ground since in a much earlier letter to George Montagu, 4th Duke of Manchester in 1761 he does not shy away from signing his letter as Democritus when he writes:

Well! how comfortable it will be tomorrow, to see my perroquet, to play at loo, and not to be obliged to talk seriously—the Heraclitus of the beginning of this letter, will be overjoyed on finishing it to sign himself. Your old friend, DEMOCRITUS.³⁰

Given Walpole's penchant for the laughing philosopher, a few particular points still remain unexplained. For instance, does Walpole genuinely wish to put to test the vernacularity of comedy against the decency of tragic discourse by insinuating an Aristotelian point of departure or does he, in fact, perceive Democritean comedy as an asset belonging with the cognitive faculties of the human mind contrary to traditional expectation?³¹ Most important of all, how could it be that the world is a comedy to those who engage in intellectual enquiry

²⁹ John L. Lepage names them emblematically "the hedonist and the grim weeper," 81. See Lepage, *The Revival of Antique Philosophy in the Renaissance* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2012), 81-135.

³⁰ Walpole, "Walpole to George Montagu, 25-30 March 1761," in *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, 347-351; 350.

³¹ Walter Kerr in his *Tragedy and Comedy* writes: "So far as we know, comedy never has come first. It is something like the royal twin that is born five minutes later, astonishing everyone and deeply threatening the orderly succession of the house. It is the mistake of nature." Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy* (London and Toronto: The Bodley Head, 1967), 20. Kerr's remark almost implies an intellectual backwardness, a cognitive mistake.

when “we should hesitate before clamouring to live in a non-tragic society, since it may have discarded its sense of the tragic along with its sense of value”?³²

Regardless of the conscious or unconscious effort put into it, Walpole’s statement and the tone of his letters uniquely put forward the idea that 1) judging from the contrast between literary and philosophical opposites, the history of humankind stands before the careful observer as an open field of boundless probabilities “showing the various ways in which men can contrive to be fools and knaves”³³ while more importantly, in our present comedic context, 2) it unfolds a common-sensical and cognitive approach towards worldly affairs that appears to stand as an excellent complement to Democritean comedy. Thus, by favouring comedy over tragedy, Walpole’s referential repertoire emerges as a bona fide interest in taking the world ‘as it comes’ and cutting down on the insincerities which render human beings frail. He sides with Democritean comedy as a rational and cognisant take on the condition of human beings as opposed to the maudlin sentimentality of the tragic discourse. Thus, his uniqueness lies in the fact that his emphatic remark about the cognitive value of comedy, compared to his intellectual forerunners and contemporary comedic commentators and his positioning of Democritean comedy as a force of human reason that is quite unlike the ethereal sublimity of tragedy, seems to hide a far superior critique of the mostly overlooked powers of comedy. In the end, it could be assumed that he invites his eighteenth-century recipient and contemporary reader to spend some time on the following questions: how is it that Heraclitusean tragedy has been considered a far more superior literary engagement which inspired Walpole to write in defence of comedy as a highbrow literary activity? Or even better, what is it that Democritus finds so ‘thoughtfully’ amusing which compellingly forces us to reconsider and re-evaluate the literary and philosophical value of comedy?

Any hasty answer which I might try to give here to either of these questions will be to draw a sweeping conclusion. Instead, we can hope to find some answers by going back to the ancient roots of comedy. For, a remarkable explanation remains unfolded in Timocles’s fourth-century *Women Celebrating*

³² Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 26.

³³ Walpole, *Memoirs*, 166.

Dionysia that appears to contain the answers for both questions evoked by Walpole's remarks. The play captures both the late classical audience's response to tragic drama which turned out to last longer than they could have ever imagined and makes a compelling case for the educative value of the genre and the virtue of suffering. In this context, it reflects on the belittlement of daily, temporary suffering in contrast with universal human suffering which eventually appears to allow a re-examination of one's own life.³⁴ This particular re-examination of Timocles's is broached as cathartic in essence with certain ethical implications that resonate with Aristotle's *eudaimonian* approach to good human life. In this particular sense, Timocles recognises the fact that indulgence in an emotional osmosis allows the tragic audience to be "led away from the excesses of his self-absorption in his own narrower experiences of suffering or sorrow to be more engaged in those of others."³⁵ The speaker, thus, comments on the sorrowful nature of humankind:

Listen, good sir, and see if I speak the truth.
 Man is by nature a creature born to suffer,
 And his life must endure many sorrows.
 And so, he has discovered these comforting distractions
 From his anxieties. For the mind, forgetting its own cares
 And entertained at someone else's suffering,
 Ends up pleased, and learning something to boot.
 Now, consider first, if you will, how tragic poets
 Benefit everyone. For someone who's poor,
 Once he's learned that Telephus was a greater beggar
 than himself
 Can endure his own poverty more himself.³⁶

To put it more simply, in Timocles's eyes, tragedy becomes a useful rhetorical device, a handy literary vehicle on the grounds that it situates itself as the maker of a "humanist cake"³⁷ and "tragedy of this kind is sublime in both humanist and psychoanalytical senses, -pleasurable, majestic, awe-inspiring, suggestive of

³⁴ An earlier discussion is present in Stephen Halliwell, "Learning from Suffering: Ancient Responses to Tragedy," in *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, edited by Justine Gregory, 394-413. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 394. Halliwell's discussion is echoed in Marina Berzins McCoy, *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 200.

³⁵ McCoy, *Wounded Heroes*, 201.

³⁶ Timocles, Διονυσιάζονταί, fr. 6, 1-11, in *PCG*, 758.

³⁷ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 176.

infinite capacity and immeasurable value.”³⁸ On a superficial level, Timocleus’s speaker quite successfully transmits the ancient social reception of tragedy “building on folk wisdom that life is hard.”³⁹ However, the dramatic irony here is that his quasi-philosophical (e)valuation of tragic agony and grandeur is transmitted to the audience, ancient and contemporary, in a genre of humorous slant and laughter. While the speaker shrewdly draws his audience into a verbal trap under the guise of dramatic appeasement which the hearer momentarily falls for, he also raises some doubt concerning the customarily “open, constantly expanding, exploratory, evolutionary”⁴⁰ status of the tragic plot. It conveys to the reader a certain sense of distrust concerning the row of adjectives which counter comedy as a finished form, as a minor poetic design where “the game is over; the jig is up.”⁴¹ In accordance, Timocles’s parodic argument⁴² which counters the public consensus on tragic conceptuality constitutes the backbone of a pro-comedic stance that not only “opens a comically oblique window on ideas of tragedy current in classical Athens”⁴³ but also originates and proliferates a ‘mindful’ evaluation of comedy. In this sense, the Walpolean re-evaluation of comedy appears to be primarily Timoclean in the sense that Walpole’s closing sentence in his letter to Mann stands as the culmination of a long-entertained kinship between mental prowess and laughter while also introducing the possibility to discuss comedy as a cognitive and serious field of discussion. Or, even better, it serves as a climactically Timoclean point in eighteenth-century literature which had been growingly giving precedence wit over farce in comedy where Dryden’s preface to *An Evening’s Love* facilitated a separation between low and high comedy in defence of noble comedy as reliant upon wit⁴⁴ and Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* praised wit over beauty in the fun-charged china

³⁸ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 176.

³⁹ Halliwell, “Learning from Suffering,” 395.

⁴⁰ Walter Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy*, 87.

⁴¹ Harry Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on The Theory and Practice of Comedy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 27.

⁴² Ralph M. Rosen touches on this point in his “Timocles fr. 6 K-A and the Parody of Greek Literary Theory,” in *No Laughing Matter: Studies in Athenian Comedy*, edited by C.W. Marshall and George Kovacs, 177-186. (London: Bristol Classics Press, 2012).

⁴³ Halliwell, “Learning from Suffering,” 396.

⁴⁴ John Dryden, “*An Evening’s Love*,” in *The Works of John Dryden*, vol.10, edited by Maximillian E. Novak and George R. Guffey, 195-314. (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1970), 202.

scene. Walpole's formulation, then, is the high expression of a cumulatively Timoclean attitude which propelled the slow ascension of wit comedy alongside the comedy of manners since it wishes to replenish comedy and comedy-criticism with a rejuvenating, cognisant outlook. In a certain sense, it explains to us that the traditional belittlement of comedy does not evade the fact that tragedy is to be held in check by the 'untamed' folly of reason; that Democritus does not simply find solace in laughter but also he is massively amused by the intellectual potential of comedy in a similarly Timoclean vein.

Evidently enough, though, to consider Democritean comedy as innately dismissive of Heraclitusean tragedy or vice versa would be a mistake since "there is nothing which does not have its tragic as well as comic aspect."⁴⁵ These two genres are akin to each other in the sense that they both emerged from connective religious ceremonies and rituals although the Ephesian philosopher held no other person responsible but himself for the development of his views, while the Abderite claimed that he was a complete stranger to everyone on his arrival to Athens.⁴⁶ In addition, if comedy is a constant re-assessment of actuality and tragedy is so of potentiality, it could be maintained that both present their audience with different aspects of a single ontological problem. In this respect, it is equally true that Walpole's epistolary demand for a 'thoughtful' evaluation of comedy points towards a knowing reference to the classical distinction between tragic *pathos* and comic *ethos* which finds its basis in the "noble fortitude" of the former and "shrewd nonchalance"⁴⁷ of the latter but wishes to overcome the limits of binarisation. This revisionist approach finds even further support among the various visual responses to the emblematic relation between Heraclitus and Democritus beginning from the late fifteenth century to mid-eighteenth century. Interestingly, barely do any of these visual representations reinforce the idea of comedic debasement nor do they serve a facetious, ready-made argument of virtuosity in favour of the tragic. The flaring red robe of Democritus as opposed to the blackness of Heraclitus's garments

⁴⁵ James Feibleman, "The Meaning of Comedy," *The Journal of Philosophy* 35, no.16 (1938): 421-432; 428.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), xiv. For Democritus's claim Ibid., 240.

⁴⁷ Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys*, 14.

and cheeks in Rubens' *Democritus and Heraclitus* (1603)⁴⁸ ironically highlights the former as a mentally vibrant figure. The jovial look of Egbert van Heemskerck's laughing philosopher darts in the face of his observer and daringly opposes the rather solemn appearance of Heraclitus.⁴⁹ Donato Bramante's much earlier painting dating from 1486 which shows the two philosophers in the midst of an argument does not sternly drive a rather fractious wedge between the ancients. And yet, the fair-haired Democritus emerges as a mentor, a teacher whose books lay before him as if too eager to suggest that there is an unbreakable connection between laughter and learning or wisdom whereas Heraclitus watches his companion in tears and pride, sitting in his aristocratic red robe with his hands clasped.⁵⁰ Johannes Moreelse's guileful and exceptionally youthful Democritus is rather cunning in his opposition to Heraclitus, if not anarchically dissentient.⁵¹ Even more so, Dirck van Baburen's Democritus who is painted against a disagreeing Heraclitusean background is represented as the herald of intellectual openness to experience and wisdom, an interpretation which coincides with his semi-revealing clothes, whilst in the background Heraclitus seems to woefully reject further debate on the ways of the world.⁵² In all of these paintings and more which depict Democritus alongside Heraclitus, there appears to be hardly a perceptive contrast between senility and youth which otherwise would have defined the physical outlook and clothing of the pair, granting its own connotations and trivialising comedy/laughter.⁵³ Contrary to expectation, they define indeed the comic as "the

⁴⁸ Peter Paul Rubens, *Democritus and Heraclitus*, 1603. Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid in Frances Huemer, "Rubens's "Democritus and Heraclitus," *Notes in the History of Art* 28, no.3 (2009): 25. Fig. 1. vi

⁴⁹ Egbert van Heemskerck, *Heraclitus et Democritus*, c.1683-1729. Mezzotint, 71/4 in. x 91/4 in. National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place, London. <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw61169/Heraclitus-and-Democritus>. Date of access: 13 March 2020.

⁵⁰ Donato Bramante, *Heraclitus and Democritus*, c.1486, Fresco transferred to canvas, 102 x 127 cm. <https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezione-online/opere/heraclitus-and-democritus/> Date of access: 14 March 2020.

⁵¹ Johannes Moreelse, *Democritus, the Laughing Philosopher*, c. 1630, Mauritshuis, The Hague. <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/explore/the-collection/artworks/democritus-the-laughing-philosopher-705/> Date of access: 14 March 2020.

⁵² Dirck van Baburen, "Heraclitus and Democritus," illustrated in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Trans. Pamela Mensch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 434-435.

⁵³ The remaining four are as follows: Hendrich ter Brugghen, *Democritus*, 1628, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (its complementary is *Heraclitus*, 1628 which is preserved

genius of thoughtful laughter”⁵⁴ which “laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; and it might be called the humour of the mind,”⁵⁵ accentuating the underlying wisdom of comedic amusement which has been long considered a symptom of mental distress and folly.⁵⁶ In that matter, it would be safe to maintain that Walpole offers a reformationist distinction-but not separation-between these two literary binaries where the cognitive value of the comedic *topos* can be hardly underestimated in the face of tragedy’s revered abstract introspectiveness. Thus, Walpole’s letters coincidentally unfold to its receiver in Italy a source of novel interpretation as their diction offers a refreshing argument in favour of the anti-banality and anti-frivolity of comedy, advocating the “intellectual affair” involved in the humorous acts of the *homo ludens* and identifying the “emotional affair”⁵⁷ in the excruciating labours of the *homo laborans*⁵⁸ although mid-twentieth century dystopianism would suggest otherwise.⁵⁹ In his literary revisionism, then, it could be inferred that Walpole’s intellectual intimacy with ‘thoughtful’ comedy allows him to make a refreshing

in the same museum side by side), Wenceslas Hollar, *Democritus laughing and Heraclitus weeping with a globe between them*, 1650-59, <https://wellcomeimages.org/indexplus/image/V0006667.html>, Jacques de Gheyn, *Vanitas Still Life*, 1603, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436485>. Bartholomeus Wilemsz, *De filosofen Herakliet en Demokriet met een wereldbol*, 1589-1626, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-P-1878-A-2574>. Date of access: 14 March 2020. I have mostly chosen Flemish painters as their interest in this theme is noteworthy which means that the visual material is not limited with the number of paintings mentioned above.

⁵⁴ George Meredith, “An Essay on Comedy,” *Comedy: An Essay on Comedy and Laughter by George Meredith and Laughter by Henri Bergson*, edited by Wylie Sypher, 3-61. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 33.

⁵⁵ Meredith, “An Essay on Comedy,” 47.

⁵⁶ See R.J. Hankinson, “The Laughing Philosopher and the Physician: Laughter, Diagnosis, and Therapy in Greek Medicine,” in *Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by Pierre Destrée, Franco V. Trivigno, 52-79. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁵⁷ Feibleman, “The Meaning of Comedy,” 429.

⁵⁸ The relation between human at labour and human at play has been largely commented on in Harry Levin’s *Playboys and Killjoys* esp. pp.16-18.

⁵⁹ In “The Poet and The City” W.H. Auden writes: “In our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act. So long as artists exist, making what they please and think they ought to make, even if it is not terribly good, even if it appeals to only a handful of people, they remind the Management of something managers need to be reminded of, namely, that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous numbers, that *Homo Laborans* is also *Homo Ludens*.” See Auden, “The Poet and The City,” *The Massachusetts Review* 3, no.3 (1962): 449-474; 468. Original italics.

connection between comedy and logicity; a connection indeed which aims at untaming the shrew of literary forms.

II. 'Dunamic' Encounters: Humour and Human Capabilities

It is a regrettable fact that to understand the meaning instead of the functions of humour, it is almost necessary to understand and revise our underlying conceptions of comedy. For, until the eighteenth-century philosophers, *littérateurs*, and public intellectuals who wrote about humour did not conceive it as an independent act of cognition and regrettably enough, until then only "*amusing, funny, and comic* used to mean *humorous*."⁶⁰ On that account, it would not be wrong to assume that the history of humour irresistibly follows the shape and form of the history of comedy due to the unexplored and underrepresented status of humour. Nevertheless, if it should be considered that the development of humour is coeval with the development of comedy regardless of its diminished role in the cultural imagination, it can be deduced that mending our conceptual relationship with comedy can also help us widen the semantic sphere of humour. In this regard, to appraise comedy as a primary asset of serious cognitive engagement would very likely alter our orthodox perception of humour as a species of non-serious verbal activity where humorous arguments or situations are considered extensions of human beings' play behaviour, employing "*look like* assertions" that "suspend ordinary rules of communication and give each other comic license to say anything, as long as the group enjoys it."⁶¹ By doing so, we would be able to consider it as something more than a playful instance which subverts our "bona-fide uses of language."⁶²

For more than obvious reasons, it can be anticipated that humour is indeed play or is a play function as it involves pleasure, enjoyment, deceit, and trickery. But, to argue that humour is primarily involved in the 'playful' art of subversive communication in the above-mentioned context puts certain limitations on it in that to consider humour as a caricaturised form of truth-statements and as an extension of play culture is to consider humour as a

⁶⁰ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 28. Original italics.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 36. Original italics.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 34.

cathartic but inconsequential trifling. If so, we could expect to see humoristic playfulness reduced to the level of a non-cognitive divertissement that is not necessarily teleological in character. In turn, an understanding of this sort would rob humour-and play-from its cognitive connotations. Another option would be to change our theoretical direction and follow Huizinga's modern interpretation of the play-element in human cultures where humour becomes allies with play since it flirts with "laughter, folly, wit, jest, joke, the comic"⁶³ and flatters the notion of becoming "a function of the living."⁶⁴ And yet, Huizinga's projection would still hinder our project of cognitivism since it would render humour as one of "the great archetypal activities of human society" that has "permeated with play from the start"⁶⁵ but would refuse to acknowledge the proximity of logic to humour and play when it can hardly be assumed that "the act of playing is merely a "blind" reflex response (...)." ⁶⁶

Taking into consideration the certain restrictions of these approaches, I would like to propose here an unorthodox glimpse into an anthropo-ontological framework for humour which derives its principle tenets from the Aristotelian scholar Martha C. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. In her *Creating Capabilities*,⁶⁷ Nussbaum explores the possibilities for a novel programme of social justice and public policy that bolster up concepts such as human dignity and the individual freedom to choose as directed by one's own practical reason. From this perspective, it seems to enforce a developmental, even normative, plan of action. However, Nussbaum's programme unfolds the ways in which individual people could achieve their own well-being by actualising their internal capabilities. In this respect, it stands in direct opposition to varying

⁶³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens (A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), 6.

⁶⁴ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 7. However, Huizinga does not necessarily make a humans-only attribution when it comes to the execution of play and also considers animals as being capable of play. For this point see especially pp.1-4. Even so, he tends not to overlook the fact that play is an unavoidable feature of human civilisation.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁶ Hector Rodriguez, "The Playful and the Serious: An approximation to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*," *Game Studies: An International Journal of Computer Game Research* 6, no.1 (2006). <http://gamestudies.org/06010601/articles/rodriges>. Date of access: 16 April 2020.

⁶⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Massachusetts and London: 2011), 33-34. An earlier sketch has been made in her *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

forms of moral and economical utilitarianism since, to paraphrase her, the GDP (gross domestic product) approach which is committed to measure the quality of human life under monetary terms and the Rawlsian resource-based approach which stands as a narrow expression of equal distribution of goods both run the risk of overlooking the differing needs of different individuals to function fully as human beings. On that account, her basic argument flows from the clear contention that while these economic and moral procedures lay claim to public or average wealth, they recklessly tend to bypass the need for individual development and growth. Or, in other words, these procedures sacrifice individual well-being at the expense of the greater good. In search of overcoming this pragmatic difficulty, she proposes a socio-economic programme which rises above the shoulders of an Aristotelian notion of virtuous action. Central to her argument is that an action which disregards freedom of choice would not help cultivate one's individual capabilities and would consequentially negate its own status as an action. If so, she argues, the wealth and healthiness of public life is commensurate with the plenitude of individual acts of virtuous choices. By arguing so, her humanitarian charter not only assigns a certain role to governments which should aim at "making people able to pursue a dignified and minimally flourishing life" with the satisfactory outcome of a "decent political order"⁶⁸ but also locates the nature of societal wealth in prioritising human growth, or flourishing. In this respect, she identifies ten central capabilities of human beings which should be secured by politicians to replace the pragmatic, and imprudent even, view of human life as a means of continuing public utility with an individual-based quality-of-life assessment. It is interesting to find out that the ten categories of human capability include humour (and play) as a distinct faculty among these categories of human capability, one of the non-relative and not culture-specific virtues as she states elsewhere, as "as Aristotle insists, some space for humour and play seems to be a need of any human life. Human beings are not identified as the "laughing

⁶⁸ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 33.

animal” for nothing; it is certainly one of our salient differences from almost all other animals.”⁶⁹

It can be inferred from the discussion presented above that Nussbaum’s anthropo-ontological approach carves a niche for humour as a uniquely human capability. Under these terms, humour becomes a potential (*dunamis*) residing in a human being by virtue of her/his nature⁷⁰ that is an integral element of individual well-being (*eudaimonia*). A ‘dunamic’ approach of this sort allows us the conclusion that human beings are inclined to humour or to humourise simply because humour is a human potential that leads to a good life. But what might be the connection between humoristic *dunamis* and individual *eudaimonia*, indeed? And how is it any related to the cognitivist case for humour that is advocated here? A short answer to these questions comes from the *Nichomachean Ethics*:

If the characteristic activity of a human being is an activity of the soul in accordance with reason or at least not entirely lacking in it; (...) then if this is so, and we take the characteristic activity of a human being to be a soul and actions in accordance with reason, and the characteristic activity of the good person to be to carry this out well and nobly, and a characteristic activity to be accomplished well when it is accomplished in accordance with the appropriate virtue, then if this is so, the *human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue*, and if there are several virtues, in accordance with the best and most complete life.⁷¹

Since Aristotle identifies well-being with reason and considers the use of reason as the prerequisite of human happiness, Nussbaum’s inclusion of humour as one of the ten components of a good human life directs us to the conclusion that humour is a rational force, an element of cognition involved in the acquisition of a rational, and therefore good life. It is a human capability that contributes to

⁶⁹ Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” in *The Quality of Life*, edited by Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, 242-269. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): 264-265.

⁷⁰ Nussbaum groups her “different levels of human capability (*dunamis*)” under “innate capabilities, developed internal capabilities and, finally combined capabilities.” *Creating Capabilities*, 126. Original italics.

⁷¹ Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*. Trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1098a10-25; 12.

human flourishing because it supports our ‘human’ claim to rational sentience. In this respect, the main argument of this study is built around the idea that humour is not only an important faculty of the mind but also a human potential, a cognitive act that is not simply “a complex neuro-physiological manifestation” but more importantly than that is “a mental phenomenon.”⁷² In other words, I defend the view that to grant a capabilistic status to humour is to renovate its traditional outlook and recognise it as a rational capacity of the human mind.

III. The English *Dunamis* and Humour

“Of all the people in the world the English have the least sense of the beauty of literature” says Lord Henry to Mr. Erskine in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, regretful of the fact that even if he had written a novel as delicate as a Persian carpet there would be “no literary public”⁷³ ready to embrace it. In expressing his disappointment for his contemporaries, elsewhere he also wishes to express how mistaken the “modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter are” since “we have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses.”⁷⁴ But also, it is important to identify here that Lord Henry adds a national dimension to his argument which can be read as a reflection on Wilde’s disdain for the English people’s insensitivity or indifference to aesthetic beauty since the English people, in his words, “like tediousness, and like things to be explained to them in a tedious way.”⁷⁵ Humour, on the other hand, does not seem to fit into the Wildean contention of English tediousness and disinterestedness. For, although aesthetic beauty might not have been of perennial importance to the English public as Lord Henry suggests, it can hardly be denied that humour is an indispensable part of the English literary imagination as the twentieth-century novelist and literary critic J.B. Priestley once demonstrated in his *English Humour*. He contends:

⁷² Attardo, *Linguistic theories of humour*, 10.

⁷³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, edited by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 39.

⁷⁴ Wilde, *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 29.

⁷⁵ Wilde, “To the Editor of the *Scots Observer*, 13 August 1890,” in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, 446-449. (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 448.

(...) we may call it that not merely because England must have her own share of the ludicrous just as she has of the birds or the flowers, the wind and the rain, not merely because there is laughter in London as well as laughter in Paris or Vienna; but because there is a humour that is not quite like any other.⁷⁶

Priestley's eloquent prose conveys a patriotic tone and in an effort to outline the characteristics of English humour, he retains throughout the entire first chapter the idea that there must be an essential connection between the English character and English humour. In this manner, he refers to the originality of the humour of the English people and claims that it differentiates itself from other separate cultures of joviality. Several like-minded critics also position English humour almost as a *de jure* ability as if there is a unanimous agreement on the singularity of English humour. For, as Terry Eagleton paraphrases from Harold Nicolson's *The English Sense of Humour*, the authenticity of English humour is usually considered to arise from its "tolerance, kindliness, sympathy, compassion, gentleness, affection, shyness and diffidence," while it is customarily "suspicious of both the intellectual and the extremist (...)." ⁷⁷

However, and despite the historical consciousness which grants English humour a considerable amount of cultural privilege, it is one thing to build an ethno-constructivist case for local humour(s) and another to state that English humour represents an exception in the history of humour. The former carries strong essentialist overtones which presupposes a form of national universalism and fails to explain the changing humoristic attitudes in the English literary imagination. For this reason, it would fail to explain the attitudinal differences between the early feudalistic humour of *Beowulf* that reinforces the value of a humorous congregation and downplays individual-oriented humoristic responses⁷⁸ and the collective humour of Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* that is the making of the paganistically "rustic chorus" which

⁷⁶ J.B. Priestley, *English Humour* (London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), 9.

⁷⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 129.

⁷⁸ Susanne Kries, "Laughter and Social Stability in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Literature," in *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*, v-x, edited by Manfred Pfister (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 7.

“provides the humour and the ‘humanity’ of the book.”⁷⁹ The point here is that counting on a corporeal thing-ness and relying on the imaginary presence of a metaphysical indigeneity mars our understanding of the historically changing faces of so-called national humour. But on the other hand, the latter provides a certain theoretical flexibility since it assumes a dynamic proclivity or a cumulative tendency. To turn back to the original argument, if humour is a human capability since it encompasses the entirety of the individual’s cognitive potentials, English humour would be a special case only under the condition that we accept it as a subspecialty, a local domain in the wide provincial sphere of capabilistic humour. To put it more correctly, if humour is a human capability that mirrors the individuals’ cognitive potentials, then it would be possible to acknowledge the noteworthiness of English humour to the extent that it professes itself as a particularistic dynamic capability.

In this vein, the second argument of the present study emanates from the hypothesis that the notability of English humour emerges from the notability of the cognitive potentials and the capabilities of the English mind, or the English mode of thinking. A position of this sort connotes and acknowledges the presence of a sufficiently distinguishable mental trademark within the wide sphere of humoristic capabilities and through this lens it becomes possible to identify the intellectual potentials of the English peoples’ cultural habits, political attitudes, and social behaviour. Although, to paraphrase from Andy Medhurst, it is nearly impossible to speak of English humour in sheer isolation from separate traditions of comedy and laughter and yet the statement that “humour is crucial in the English sense of nation” should be approached with suspicion just as the existence of the Loch Ness monster is a suspicious case,⁸⁰ trying instead to understand English humour as a dynamic potential lays bare the extent of the cognitive preferences or inclinations of this particular mindset. Therefore, the attempt to provide an exposition of English humour becomes “the attempt to understand the roles played by leisure, pleasure and popular culture

⁷⁹Lance St John Butler, *Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 32.

⁸⁰ I directly paraphrase this analogy from George Mikes, *English Humour for Beginners* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1983), 9.

in how people have made sense of themselves and the world they inhabit.”⁸¹ This, in return, not only facilitates a smooth interpretative transition from *Beowulf* to *Far From the Madding Crowd* but also exposes a cumulative tendency, or demand, for producing humorous contexts without ‘essentially’ Anglicising humour itself. Consequently, this interpretative smoothness entertains the very thought that English humour belongs with one of the many “veins of humour”⁸² and it rescues humour from the probable confinement that would result from conforming it to a geography-based narrowness; it opens up the possibility for conceptual diversity where one can treat English humour in the manner we “(...) treat laughter as texts, or as a language with so many regional accents.”⁸³

IV. English Humour and Scepticism: A Nominalist Trajectory

The long discussion presented above which generates from the small crevices that theory and practice have left unguarded, the difficulties encountered in identifying an independent history of humour, and the complications involved in trying to consolidate humour’s claim to cognitivity aims at building a new theoretical framework for humour. It recognises the fact that since humour is a concept whose roots are enshrouded in near-mystery, a novel programme for humour can be facilitated by recognising and establishing the fact that “comedy belongs to the intellect.”⁸⁴ In this respect, applying The Capability Approach to humour strengthens humour’s claim to rationality, teleologicality, and most important of all, to intellectuality. And yet, having positioned humour as a serious cognitive enterprise and a human capability and having determined that English humour is a stylistic variation of this cognitive capability, a few questions still appear to remain unanswered. For, what are the

⁸¹ Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 209.

⁸² I owe this metaphor to the title of one of Harry Levin’s closing chapters in his *Playboys and Killjoys*. I have freely used it here to identify English humour as a sub-species of humour that is a common trait of human beings and seek to retain Levin’s generic categorisation of humoristic variations.

⁸³ Eagleton, *Humour*, 19.

⁸⁴ Kathleen C. Keenoy, “The Nature of Humour,” *The Irish Monthly* 72, no.850 (1944): 140-147; 141.

defining features of this stylistic variation? Or, in other words, what potentiality does English humour exactly actualise?

English humour has been traditionally considered to actualise three potentials: self-mockery, brutishness, and understatement.⁸⁵ In doing so, it has been regarded as a “curious and dangerous phenomenon” which one should be prepared to endure “with manly and womanly fortitude.”⁸⁶ The notion of crudity in humour appear to stand for so powerful a discursive stance that it has come to represent and determine the English character and attitude. Without disregarding the presence of self-inflicted cruelty and underestimation, however, the present study aims at exploring the doubtful connotations of English humour in a literary nominalist context. Taking English humour’s non-dogmatic take on being and existence as a starting point which displays, to paraphrase from one of the humorous poems of the eighteenth-century poet William Cowper, how “The man who dreams himself so great / (...) Will learn in school of tribulation / The folly of his expectation,”⁸⁷ the present study identifies a doubtful capability that is affectionate of “wayward, nonconformist types.”⁸⁸ If so, it maintains, the sceptical potential of English humour professes the fact English humorous literature unfolds and reproduces forms of epistemic doubt where the nominalist search for semantic particularity is effectuated at the expense of dispelling metaphysically sublimated universal truth-statements. In accordance, after elaborating on the cognitive roots of humour and the uses of humour in the English literary imagination, from Chapter III and onwards I will try to excavate the textual encounters between the humorous and sceptical in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humour* and *Every Man out of His Humour*, and in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. It will be contended that these doubtful fictions develop and reinforce elements of narrative, experiential, and propositional doubt directed towards realist abstractions which result in the individuation and particularisation of fictional experience and narrative techniques. Through the enforcement of a sense of parallelism between humour

⁸⁵ For an extensive discussion of these features kindly refer to Mikes, *English Humour for Beginners*, 44-67.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁷ William Cowper, *The Works of William Cowper*, edited by John S. Memes (Edinburgh: Fraser & Co., 1835), 453.

⁸⁸ Eagleton, *Humour*, 130.

and scepticism, the view that they put on display an overall tendency in English humour literature that is characterised by a dislike of metaphysical transcendence and conceptual sublimity is defended. In this respect, it does not consider nominalism as a “direct source in the philological sense” attempting at unveiling a particularly “coeval philosophical superstratum,” nor does it wish to assert this paradigmatic impression as the “historical reassertion for prevalent modern/postmodern perceptions.”⁸⁹ Instead, it will be discussed that their narrative techniques which embody a contingent, non-discursive, experimental, and inconsistent form and shape encapsulate the literary powers of English humour and English humorous literature. To achieve this end, the following chapters seek answers for these following questions: a) how do these texts define humour? b) how do they integrate their sense of scepticism into their humorous ‘constructions’? With the aim of presenting an organic view of the possible meanings of sceptical humour in the English literary canon from late medieval to mid-eighteenth century, Chapter III elaborates on *House of Fame* as an Ockhamite response to the unreliability of realist truth-statements. Chapter IV is a development on that point and argues that two of Ben Jonson’s early plays depict the contingent and volatile form of human action in an individualistically Hobbesian manner. Chapter V discusses Sterne’s Humean attack on the so-called necessity of causality and other dogmas of empiricism/scientific rationalism. The anticipated conclusion draws on the point that the intellectual concerns of English literary humour catches the end of philosophical scepticism and correspondingly, it unveils a logico-literary sensibility in the English literary canon which borrows much from Democritus’s amusing but more importantly than that, doubt fomenting humour that can hardly abide by the changing faces of epistemological credo through the ages.

⁸⁹ Richard Utz, “Literary Nominalism in Chaucer’s Late-Medieval England: Toward a Preliminary Paradigm,” *The European Legacy* 2, no.2 (1997): 206-211; 208.

CHAPTER I

MINDFUL MIRTH: THE ONTO-MEDICINAL ORIGINS OF HUMOUR AND ITS COGNITIVE AFTERLIVES

I. The Ontological Argument

The Danish composer Carl Nielsen's Symphony, no.2 (1901-2) otherwise named *The Four Temperaments* is such an eloquently designed musical composition that Paolo Muntoni considers it a study in "empirical humanism."⁹⁰ Like his former and subsequent symphonies, *The Four Temperaments* signposts his audience in the direction of a characteristically early twentieth-century individual look into human nature. He is a musical observer; the symphony is a mellifluous reflection onto that personal observation. But both the symphony and its composer refuse to work within a traditional substructure where the core elements of human nature are pre-established, metaphysically *a prioritised*. In other words, "the composer's humanistic attitude is not the product of a pre-ordered system of values or a philosophy but a consequence of his observing, curious and searching attitude."⁹¹ In return, this modernist attitude largely resonates with his interest in humourism; a mostly medicinal categorisation of human personality that is dependent on empirical observation. Nielsen's humanism, then, concurs with a form of musical humourism that is not reliant on metaphysical givens which is reminiscent of the early Greek philosopher's search for "a more natural and impersonal explanation" where "the 'Father of gods and men' and his divine

⁹⁰ Paolo Muntoni, "Nielsen in The United Kingdom," *Carl Nielsen Studies* 5 (2012): 165-194; 192.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

family were dissolved into an impersonal ‘necessity’ an affair of natural laws and the interaction of ‘airs, ethers, waters and other strange things.’”⁹² His authentic *fin de siècle* take on the humours, then, not only resounds with ““a mighty, animating call from the North”” that draws inspiration from “Copenhagen, which considers itself the Mediterranean playground of Scandinavia,”⁹³ but also sustains in itself an implicit statement suggesting to look back into the ancient philosophical background of humour which relies on the powers of scientific observation to understand the dynamics, or preferably the *dunamis* of human nature.

It is interesting to find out that a considerable portion of humour studies devotes a special chapter to humour’s use in medicinal practice. However, since the study of humour not only necessitates a medical perspective—although it constitutes a large portion of the scholarly tradition—but also a philosophical approach, this chapter is divided into three parts and aims at presenting three inter-connected arguments: first, I propose to start with the ontological argument where the Ionian philosophers’ conception of nature inform the very identity of humour as a natural phenomenon. Second, I will discuss the medical argument by commenting on fifth-century Athenian medicine and its relation to the ontological argument of the Ionians. In doing so, it will be argued that the physicality of humour in Ionian philosophy catches the end of the rational confidence put in humour by the Hippocratic doctors. Thirdly, the final part of this chapter will be devoted to Aristotle’s conception of substance, Galen’s interpretation of humourism, and Avicenna’s humoristic argument for the intelligibility of form. By the end of the chapter, thus, I wish to have developed a unified argument for humour as a human capacity.

Before embarking on a conceptual journey, however, some time should be spent on the linguistic roots of humour. Two words appear to be specifically important in understanding the possible connotations of humour: *chulos* from Ancient Greek and *umeo* from Latin. Etymologically speaking, these words function slightly differently from each other in their respective language systems

⁹² W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 27.

⁹³ Michael White, “Classical: the other Scandinavian symphonist,” *Independent*, November 1998. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical-the-other-scandinavian-symphonist-1183516.html>. Date of access: 17 November 2020.

in the sense that *chulos* denotes the bodily fluid of an animal or a plant⁹⁴ whereas *umeo* is more characteristically aligned with moisture and wetness.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, it is important to note that both of them locate the essence of humour in physical nature. Whether a bodily fluid or an organic liquidity, linguistically speaking, these two words convey the idea that humour is to be primarily considered as a natural phenomenon proper to the physical functioning of a living being that should be in propriety with its nature. Under this view, humour becomes a vital component of a living entity and an elementary part of its nature. But if so, what is nature? What does it mean to have a certain nature?

The first account of the nature of natural existence manifolds itself in the fragments of the Ionian philosophers which distinguish them from the “nonphilosophical character of the early Greek poets” and expose “the largely nonpoetical character of the early Greek philosophers.”⁹⁶ The nonpoetical disposition of these fragments does not necessarily point towards a hostile, or perhaps antagonistic, relationship between the early Greek poets and philosophers. Instead, it refers to a point of bifurcation of human experience and observation; a point which has been later explicated by Aristotle as a terminological separation between “*mythologoi* and *theologoi* on the one hand and *physikoi* or *physiologoi* on the other.”⁹⁷ The early Greek philosopher, thus, begs to differ from the poet in her/his responses to nature and naturally differs from her/him who supposedly makes use of the mimetic discourse for fictional purposes however natural the cause of engaging with mimesis might have been identified later by Aristotle (*κατὰ φύσιν δὲ ὄντος ἡμῖν τοῦ μιμεῖσθαι καὶ τῆς ἁρμονίας καὶ τοῦ ῥυθμοῦ* (τὰ γὰρ μέτρα ὀτιμόρια τῶν ῥυθμῶν ἐστὶ φανερόν)).⁹⁸ This could also explain the calculated comparison between Homer and

⁹⁴ Greek-English Lexicon, edited by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, 7th ed. (New York, American Book Company, 1901), s.v. “Χύλος,” 1748.

⁹⁵ Oxford Latin Dictionary, edited by P.G.W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), s.v. “umeo,” 2088.

⁹⁶ Glenn W. Most, “The poetics of early Greek philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, edited by A.A. Long, 332-362. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 332.

⁹⁷ Most, “Poetics of early Greek philosophy,” 332. Original italics.

⁹⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*. Trans. Stephen Halliwell. Loeb Classical Library 199 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), IV.IV.1448b19-21; 38. It is interesting that Aristotle defines mimesis, however, as a natural capacity; one which derives from nature (*kata phusin*).

Empedocles where the former is released from the toils of scientific explanation⁹⁹ whereas the latter is named the natural scientist. It has also been suggested that since the Ionian philosopher seems to depart from an older understanding of the universe that is based on mythological explanation and seeks for instead an understanding of the natural forces that are involved in material and physical causation, not only is “the concept of nature ... a creation of Ionian science” in Pohlenz’s words¹⁰⁰ but also the Ionian philosopher’s understanding of *phusis* (nature) is a reflection on the endeavour to

find the *archē*, the principle, source of all things, that is to say, that which is immanent in all and whereby things are what they are, that immanent something which ultimately accounts for ‘the all’ having the characters which it does have.¹⁰¹

From this perspective, for the Ionian philosopher, an inquiry into the nature of the observable environment, the physical nature that surrounds human beings simply means exploring the underlying principles of nature from which living beings spring and emanate since *phusis* itself suggests an origin, a starting point. W.K.C. Guthrie notes that it denotes for the early philosopher “the real constitution or character of things, including the way they behave, though it could also mean ‘birth’ or ‘growth’”¹⁰² and adds to this point that Aristotle only partially agreed with them since, in his view, the nature of a living being is related to its capacity to generate and grow,¹⁰³ a point that has been apparently overlooked by his predecessors. By contrast, however, the Ionians’ interests

⁹⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, I.I.1447b18, 31.

¹⁰⁰ Max Pohlenz, “Nomos und Physis,” *Hermes* 81, no.4 (1953): 418-438; 426. Pohlenz provides quite a definitive statement with regards to the Ionian origin of natural philosophy: “Der Begriff der Physis ist eine Schöpfung der ionischen Wissenschaft, die in ihm ihr ganzes neues Weltverständnis zusammenfaßte. Der Terminus bezeichnete für sie nicht nur das organische Wachstum von Pflanze und Tier, sondern auch das Ergebnis dieses Prozesses, das durch diesen bestimmte Sosein, in dem sich das ‘Wesen’ vollendet, zugleich aber auch die Kraft, die nach strengen immanenten Gesetzen den Werdeprozeß regelt im einzelnen wie im großen Kosmos. Auf diesen Begriff gründete sie die Naturwissenschaft die dem Orient fremd war.”

¹⁰¹ Ivor Leclerc, *The Nature of Physical Existence* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972), 102. Original italics.

¹⁰² Guthrie, *History*, 82.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 82-83. I will later very briefly touch upon Aristotle’s theory of substance and its possible consequences for humour theory in this chapter.

appear to lie specifically in the primary elements which the material world is made out of rather than in the accentuation of a living being's material capacities. In this respect, they offer a preliminary discussion of nature and scrutinise it with the help of what can be called an archaic method of scientific explanation. The natural outcome of this methodological attitude is that an exposition of their understanding of nature can help us locate the ontological coordinates of humour since it elucidates "the origins of humours" as "enmeshed with the first accounts of the origins of life itself."¹⁰⁴ In doing so, I will first look into the cosmic arguments of the Ionians and try to show how they identify humour with the natural forces of the observable world since humour theory as we know it, generates from the natural philosophy of early Greek philosophy.

Thales who happens to be the "first founder of this kind of philosophy"¹⁰⁵ is also unanimously argued to have speculated first on the first cause of nature, the *archē* (ἀρχή).¹⁰⁶ Although Thalesian fragments deny the modern reader a full picture of his thought, later commentators argue that he presumed that water is the *archē* of nature. Aristotle's interpretation of this includes the following notion that he probably conceived water as a life-producing and nourishing liquid and thus, there should be a link between the "very warmth of life" as a "damp warmth."¹⁰⁷ Although some evidence have been provided with regards to the influence of earlier Greek and Babylonian mythology on Thales's conception of water as the primary element,¹⁰⁸ it has also been suggested that since moisture is a "nutritive element *par excellence*,"¹⁰⁹ it can hardly be a coincidence that Thales chose an aquatic framework to work within. His adoption of the idea that water is the founding principle of nature and Aristotle's supplementary remarks on Thales's conviction might seem "conjectural" as Barnes maintains and yet it is self-explanatory of the fact that in Thales's view

¹⁰⁴ Noga Arikha, *Passions and Tempers: A History of The Humours* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 40.

¹⁰⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Alpha, edited by Carlos Steel. Symposium Aristotelicum. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 983b20-4a5; 476- 477.

¹⁰⁶ Greek-English Lexicon, edited by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, 7th ed. (New York, American Book Company, 1901), s.v. "ἀρχή," 227.

¹⁰⁷ Guthrie, *History*, 61.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 67.

living creatures are far more prevalent than we ordinarily think; water is evidently necessary for their existence; water is not readily generated from any other stuff; hence water must be a basic constituent of the world.¹¹⁰

In contrast with Thales's perspective, however, Anaximander's take on the subject presents a rather equivocal argument with regards to the underlying principles of nature. In Simplicius's account of the Anaximandrian principle, it is evident that Anaximander does not consider water an *archē* of nature and offers instead an oblique concept which he defines as *apeiron* (infinity).¹¹¹ In Finkelberg's view, this does not mean that Anaximander "provided his *arche* with no qualification at all" as *apeiron* could connote boundlessness and infinity,¹¹² and yet the vagueness of the concept has received so much criticism that later doxographers blame him of conceptual ambiguity on the grounds that "he does not say what the Apeiron is, whether it is air, or water, or earth, or some other body."¹¹³ In this respect, from a humoral perspective, it could be misconstrued that Anaximander's contribution represents a weak case since *apeiron* has been considered as a concept steeped in incertitude. But on the contrary, it carries significant overtones of a natural/physical explanation from a humoristic perspective since *apeiron*'s timelessness out of whose body emanates the contrary forces of nature such as wet and dry, cold and hot, gravely contributes to the notion of cosmic balance which tells us that

The constant interchange between opposed substances is explained by Anaximander in a legalistic metaphor derived from human society: the prevalence of one substance at the expense of its contrary is 'injustice', and a reaction takes place through the infliction of punishment by the restoration of equality (...). Thus both the continuity and the stability of natural change were motivated, for Anaximander, by means of this anthropomorphic metaphor.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 8.

¹¹¹ Simplicius, *Phys.* 24, 13 qtd. in *DK*, 12 A 9; 83.

¹¹² Aryeh Finkelberg, "Anaximander's Conception of Apeiron," *Phronesis* 38, no.3 (1993): 229-256; 230. Original italics.

¹¹³ Aëtius, 1 3, 3, *DK* 12 A 14; 85.

¹¹⁴ G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 119.

It could be easily derived from here that Anaximander's conception of infinite motion in the universe translates itself into a conception which considers human activity as the sum of an ever-changing series of physical and mental processes. Humoristically speaking, it testifies to the fact he considers the humoristic constitution of human beings as in synonymy with the universe that is dynamic and ever in conflict although Guthrie construes that his conception of the first principle of nature can be perceived as a reflection on the need to explain physical existence by collecting nonphysical evidence or as a monist endeavour "seeking a unity behind the multiplicity of phenomena."¹¹⁵ And yet, it undeniably unfolds a physical explanation which not only aims at bringing an explanation for the origins of life but also, on a side note, explains the origins of human nature, or even better, humour.

Although he continues this particular streak of physical explanations and the insistence on finding the natural substance from which the observable world has derived, Anaximander's pupil Anaximenes, however, seems to be dismissive of his mentor's largely bleak *apeiron*. Disbanding the altruistic picture of Anaximander's boundless universe at large, Anaximenes returns to an alternate version of Thales's material monism where he replaces water with air as the governing principle of nature. Simplicius paraphrases Anaximenes's stance as follows:

Anaximenes of Miletus, son of Eurystratus, the companion of Anaximander, also posits a single infinite underlying substance of things, not however, indefinite in character like Anaximander's but determinate, for he calls it air, and says that it differs in rarity and density according to the different substances. Rarefied, it becomes fire; condensed, it becomes first wind, then cloud, and when condensed still further water, then earth and stones.¹¹⁶

Besides offering air as the primary matter, Simplicius's commentary yields another aspect of Anaximenes's understanding of nature where air informs the elementary status of earth, water, and fire. Interestingly enough, however, the

¹¹⁵ Guthrie, *History*, 78.

¹¹⁶ Simplicius, *Physica* 24. 26, DK A 5; 91.

connection with Anaximander's theory of opposites is not completely lost on Anaximenes as the rarity of air is linked with the hot and dry while density is linked with the cold and wet.¹¹⁷ In this manner, air as an *archē* appears to be subject to mutability since it can be altered and modified. If a quantitative change in the substance of air may be possible, then, it can be surmised that Anaximenes happily marries the "choice of an easily changeable matter (though not really satisfactory from Aristotle's point of view) with an attempt to explain its change."¹¹⁸ If so, he points towards the possibility of motion through which the material substance changes its form and by implication this possibility dictates that the fountain of life is to be found in a pneumatic source. Plutarch's evaluation of this particular explanation of nature elucidates further Anaximenes's breathing universe:

it is not unreasonably said that a man releases both hot and cold things from his mouth—for his breath is cooled when pressed and condensed by his lips, while if the mouth is relaxed the exhaled breath becomes hot by rareness.¹¹⁹

The transition from the Milesian thinkers and later philosophers is what can be described as a strident one since the strive for physical explanation appears to be gradually forsaken in favour of natural sublimity. For not only is Xenophanes of Colophon considered "a poet and rhapsode who has become a figure in the history of Greek philosophy by mistake"¹²⁰ but also it is determined that his poetry yielded much criticism of "poets for ascribing immoral acts and unworthy sufferings to the gods."¹²¹ In this regard, the theological repercussions of Xenophanes's thought seems to resonate with his conception of nature when he declares that earth is the *archē* but in a dissimilar context from that of his predecessors since in Barnes's opinion he happened to be "a monotheist, as the long tradition has it; and he was an *a priori* monotheist."¹²² In this regard,

¹¹⁷ Guthrie, *History*, 124.

¹¹⁸ C. Joachim Classen, "Anaximander and Anaximenes: The Earliest Greek Theories of Change?" *Phronesis* 22, no.2 (1977): 89-102; 102.

¹¹⁹ Plutarch, 7, 947 F, *DK*, 25 B1; 95.

¹²⁰ Guthrie, *History*, 361.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹²² Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 71. Original italics.

although he writes in “the grand tradition of Anaximander,”¹²³ his pseudo-philosophical agenda hardly follows an animistic pattern in contrast with Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes in that he can hardly be held responsible for looking for a physical *archē* since in Xenophanes there appears to be a “division between the objects of divine and human knowledge,”¹²⁴ a claim which also weakens his relevance to our humoristic view of nature.

Famously known as the weeping philosopher, Heraclitus of Ephesus was renowned for the near impenetrability of his diction and Plotinus complained in the *Enneads* IV.8 of his disinterestedness in being philosophically and philologically pellucid.¹²⁵ Not only that but his contempt for humankind¹²⁶ demonstrates the difficulty with which Heraclitus’s thought is embedded. Since Heraclitus considers himself to have come into contact with absolute truth that can be grasped by the other members of humanity but cannot be recognised due to some form of contagious state of ignorance, this might have led him “naturally to a prophetic rather than a dialectical mode of expression.”¹²⁷ Regardless of the opaqueness of Heraclitus’s diction, however, and however bewildering the nature of the Heraclitus’s style of expression might seem to be, his conception of *phusis* is still argued to have “a traditional Milesian ring”¹²⁸ although he differs from them in the sense that he asks for a recognition of

Logos, which is perhaps to be interpreted as the unifying formula or proportionate method of arrangement of things, what might almost be termed the structural plan of things both individual and in sum.¹²⁹

It is interesting to find out at this point that Logos as an abstraction is coterminous with fire as “the primary cosmic constituent,”¹³⁰ and in what appears to be a strictly modified instalment of Anaximander’s theory of

¹²³ Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 14.

¹²⁴ Guthrie, *History*, 396.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 411. Barnes, on the other hand, does not agree with this point. See Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 43-44.

¹²⁶ G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven use the phrase “extreme misanthropy.” See Kirk and Raven, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 183.

¹²⁷ Guthrie, *History*, 414.

¹²⁸ Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 46.

¹²⁹ Kirk and Raven, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 188.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 188.

opposites, Heraclitus does not comment on fire as a founding element of nature in contrast with, say, Thales's life-inspiring aquatic first matter. In a universe whose natural course is defined by a cyclical chain of alteration, fire emerges more as a "directive capacity"¹³¹ which is divine and expressive of the Logos than a purely natural cause of physical change. It is an orchestrational power commanding the relation between earth and sea which in turn contributes to the idea of harmony arising from a confrontation between opposing forces essentially different from each other in form and content.¹³² In the end, what we are left with is not an *archē* as a purely natural principle but instead a founding element out of which the cosmic universe is tailored. But it is still obvious that Heraclitus's conception of nature identifies an original force of life whose reference is still humoristic, and therefore, connected to the character of human constitution.

In our search for an ontological argument of humour, I will exclude here Pythagoras and the Pythagorean tradition which decidedly diverge from the scientific tradition of *physiologoi* as they mostly stand for "the magical, a primitive feature which sometimes seems hard to reconcile with the intellectual depth"¹³³ and in this respect, this tradition seems to be unlikely to form a healthy alliance between Pythagorean thought and the *archēic* nature-boundedness of humour. Excluding this specific Presocratic vein of philosophy, however, from an exposition and discussion of the Ionian philosophers' search for first principles in nature appears to yield important results with regards to a humoristic endeavour. First, although their thought appears to be pervaded by a sense of omniscience from time to time, since they value the inquiry into material substance and its workings and largely dismiss a predated, mythological or dogmatic sense of absolutism/abstraction, the Ionian philosophers deliver the importance of approaching nature as a rational living being that can be understood via sense-experience rather than via mystic ordeal. For, they understand by material cause "*that of which* all things that are consist,

¹³¹ Kirk and Raven, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 200.

¹³² It has been suggested in Guthrie that Aristotle was not fond of Heraclitus's violation of law of contradiction since at one instance he argues for the eternity of the cosmos and at another he defends the ever-changing status of it, and yet "he sometimes comes closer to Heraclitus's words." See *History*, 438.

¹³³ Guthrie, *History*, 182.

the first from which they come to be, and the last into which they are resolved”¹³⁴ and contend that physical objects/properties should be the making of their material causes. Thales’s water as an *archē*, then, should be a founding principle simply due to water’s ability to propagate life as much as Anaximander’s *apeiron*, Anaximenes’s air, Xenophanes’s earth, and Heraclitus’s Logoic fire is a founding principle which, when observed properly, hold the ability to propagate life.

It could be anticipated, however, that these early empiricists tacitly agree upon the continuity between *nomos* (law, convention) and *phusis* in the sense that the materiality of the physical world and its internal dynamics are presented as pseudo-normative natural laws. Another possible objection could be that, in their view, the physical *nomos* is on par with the internal dynamics of *phusis* since they were “dogmatists, not experimental scientists”¹³⁵ and in fact, offer philosophical outlines of a natural convention. When considered from this perspective, it is possible to argue that early Greek philosophers still acquiesce to mythological/theological forms of explanation to a certain extent since a study in trying to determine the first principle of *phusis* can also suggest an affinity between a dogmatic cosmogony and a doctrinal cosmology. In his *Epistle to Pythocles*, Epicurus would later express a similar doubt and say:

But when one fails to state one possible explanation and rejects another that is equally consonant with the data of sense, it is evident that one falls wholly outside the breastworks of science and lapses into *μῦθος*.¹³⁶

In some sense, it can be argued that the Ionians seem to be involved in an overtly casuistic enterprise with regards to explaining natural phenomena or even at times it might seem as if they are avoiding the concept of spontaneity and chance in nature that puts into risk the *archēic* objective of natural observation although

¹³⁴ Czeslaw Lejewski, “The Concept of Matter in Presocratic Philosophy,” in *The Concept of Matter in Greek and Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Ernan McMullin, 25-37. (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 26. Original italics.

¹³⁵ Robin Waterfield, “Introduction,” in *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xi-xxxiv; xvii-xviii.

¹³⁶ Diog. Laert. x. 667 A, qtd. in William Arthur Heidel, “Περὶ Φύσεως: A Study of The Conception of Nature among The Pre-Socratics,” *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 45, no. 4 (1910): 79-133; 90.

Aristotle thinks otherwise.¹³⁷ But more importantly than that, the Ionians' approach to physical existence might seem to tamper with a material understanding of humour since this, in turn, could denote that the dampness of *chulos* will be rendered as nothing but a life-creating force, an *archē* which nourishes and informs human nature only by virtue of its moist constitution. If so, for instance, how can Thales's aquatic principle help us spo(r)t a kinship between the question of *phusis* and the question of humour in an early Greek context?

A possible interpretation could be as follows: since the Greeks did not understand existence and being in the manner the modern scholar has come to realise it, or even, to quote Charles H. Kahn's extensive inquiry on the verb 'to be' in Ancient Greek philosophy, they "did not have our notion of existence,"¹³⁸ it is possible that nature and its *archē*, or humoristic forces do not represent an idealistic abstraction. For, from their perspective, being is known through "the most fundamental value of *einai* when used alone (without predicates)" and it does not mean "to exist" but "to be so", "to be the case, "or to be true."¹³⁹ As a further note, it can be inferred from Kahn's discussion that the Greek verb *einai* (to be) whose tenses are "formed directly from the single, present-durative stem"¹⁴⁰ could be suggestive of being's detachment from past and future presuppositions, or even prejudices. In light of this point, I derive from the Ionian understanding of nature that since the very notion of 'being' can be understood as freely from its past and future connotations in a Greek context, the Presocratic understanding of nature should not necessarily denote a metaphysically transcendent category nor as a dogmatic take on being. In accordance, it can be concluded that despite its monistic overtones, Ionian natural philosophy still displays an empirical strive for understanding the natural causes of physical existence whose principles derives from the 'present-durative stem.' In this particular sense, it can be inferred that the Presocratic evaluation of nature naturally conveys a sense of dynamism, the state of being in constant motion and

¹³⁷ Aristotle, *Physics: Books I and II*. Trans. William Charlton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), II.4, 196a5, 32.

¹³⁸ Charles H. Kahn, "The Greek Verb 'To Be' and The Concept of Being," *Foundations of Language* 2, no.3 (1966): 245-265; 248.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

activity. Consequently, the dynamism of their nature when combined with their logical empirical method presents us with a rationally dynamic view of humour whether understood as an anthropomorphic quality or a physical force in nature. The result is that the natural *archē* does not serve an epistemological belief system but rather provides us with an empirical view of nature that translates itself into an empirical rationalist understanding of human nature without resorting to otherwise what would have been an early form of Cartesianism. Thus, it expands the meaning of humoristic constitution as an ontologically intelligible phenomenon that borrows from the empiric intelligibility of nature.

II. The Medical Argument

The ontological argument for humour sketched out earlier presents in itself a unified theory of nature in its entirety. This, in return, brings into view the ontological coordinates of humour's slight 'wetness,' as the state of being moist necessarily relates to a thing's, or nature's, natural capacities that are characterised by change, conflict, and balance. In this regard, the Presocratics seem to attribute a cognitive, a knowing ability to nature and by implication, to humour. But also, to a certain extent, since it partially remains that their characteristically *archēic* endeavour gives them a monistic outlook where the source of a natural being's capacities is located in the nature of a singular force, we would still need to look beyond Ionian philosophy. At this juncture, then, the second argument I would like to make in favour of humour as a cognitive capability is emphatically medical and is related to the fundamentals of the newly emerging medical profession in fifth and fourth centuries in Ancient Greece.

Prior to the development of the quasi-professional medical experts, the philosophical character of the earlier doctors is striking. For instance, Alcmaeon of Croton who has been considered to be "already writing in the spirit of the Hippocratic treatise"¹⁴¹ much earlier than the Hippocratic doctors, defies the famous empirical *idée fixe* of his predecessors. In rejecting what F.M. Cornford

¹⁴¹ Guthrie, *History*, 344-345.

considers “the dogmatic method of the natural philosopher,”¹⁴² Alcmaeon favours sense-perception over philosophical supposition. To him, to stand on the territory of philosophical assumptions is to stand on a shaky ground where the truth-conditions of a sentence do not meet the standards of scientific methods of verification. In this respect, he is dismissive of the older supposition that intellect is akin to sensation and rejects the view that the seat of sensation is the heart in a farsighted manner.¹⁴³ By doing so, he not only locates the brain as the central organ of sensation and considers the impossibility of sense-perception without the powers of the brain. For, in Alcmaeon’s view, there are *poroi* (passages) which connect our sense-organs to the brain and it is through this cerebral information processing that sensory experience occurs. One particular result of this effort which is characterised by the need to marry sense-perception to understanding finds its way through the identification of sense-organs with particular senses: hearing occurs through the ears, seeing through the eyes, smelling through the nose, and tasting through the tongue.¹⁴⁴

As much as Alcmaeon insists on the cognitive aspect of sense-perception and appears to be disdainful of “airy hypotheses,”¹⁴⁵ it is a curious fact that his prognosis of health lies within a proportionate mixture of bodily powers which go in pairs such as moist and dry, hot and cold, bitter and sweet. He is particularly insistent on the point that balance is a determining factor in health and is eager to defend an equal amount of power distribution in human body. From here onwards, the shape of Alcmaeon’s writing purports a form of medical egalitarianism where health is a democratised site of communal welfare and disease is a monarchic manifestation of supreme power. In addition, the body politics employed in Alcmaeon’s medical writings put at display the salient features of a tension between what he calls *isonomia* and *monarchia*. In fragment B4, *isonomia* stands for equality of political rights and *monarchia* represents

¹⁴² F.N. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae: The Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 31.

¹⁴³ This view is to be found in Aristotle’s *De Partibus Animalium* II. 656a28 where he contends that “the region around the heart is the origin of the senses.” Aristotle, *On The Parts of Animals*. Trans. James G. Lennox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 36. In Michał Oleksowicz’s view, it points out that Aristotle considers the heart as “the centre of perceptual activity.” See Oleksowicz, “Aristotle on The Heart and Brain,” *European Journal of Science and Technology* 14, no.3 (2018): 77-94; 83.

¹⁴⁴ Theophrastus, *De Sensu*, DK, A5, 25f.

¹⁴⁵ Guthrie, *History*, 345.

monarchic supremacy.¹⁴⁶ By way of this political metaphor, the human body is likened to a governmental body where each bodily power represents a single individual. The balancing of bodily powers contributes to the preservation of health and it emphatically speaks for a politically peaceful settlement between these powers. Although Ionian philosophy shows a similar interest in cosmic balance and individual balance, in contrast with the early Greek philosopher's natural humourism, Alcmaeon's perspective heavily politicises the human body. To put it more correctly, his medical vision identifies the human body's inner workings with the labour division of the city state. In George Vlastos's view, Alcmaeon's notion of balanced bodily powers implies that "the normal constitution of the organism is the *krasis* of equal "powers"; the "monarchic" preponderance of any power is a diseased condition, destructive of the organism."¹⁴⁷ On the other hand, when considered from a humoristic point of view, bodily humours become a semi-political site of democratic negotiation and communal welfare all of whose teleological end is the preservation and elongation of individual health. Alcmaeon's view, then, renders humour a primarily physical phenomenon that is reminiscent of the Ionians' approach but unlike them does not necessarily attribute a cognitive ability to bodily humour.

It would be a mistake to think that medical humourism is born out of a technically independent tradition due to the fact that "the ideas and doctrines of the medical writers run parallel to those of the philosophers and form part of the same general development in the study of nature."¹⁴⁸ In accordance, there is very little evidence that documents the influence of Alcmaeon's humourism on his successors. For that reason, it is hard to detect his influence on Empedocles and even more so, since historians of Ancient Greek philosophy and medicine tend to agree on the point that Empedocles' writing consists of an amalgamation of "mumbo-jumbo and medical writing,"¹⁴⁹ it seems hard to determine the extent of his dependence on earlier philosophy and medicine. However, it is possible

¹⁴⁶ Alcmaeon, *DK*, B4 22; 215.

¹⁴⁷ George Vlastos, "Isonomia," *The American Journal of Philology* 74, no.4 (1953): 337-366; 363. Original italics.

¹⁴⁸ G.E.R. Lloyd, "Introduction," in *Hippocratic Writings*. Trans. J. Chadwick and W.N. Mann, 13-94. (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 63.

¹⁴⁹ Robin Lane Fox, *The Invention of Medicine: From Homer to Hippocrates* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 560

to infer from the remaining fragments that the quasi-medicality of Empedocles' thought contrasts itself with Alcmaeon's purely empirical science of medicine. For instance, fragment 112 not only reveals his boisterous personality where he speaks of the reverence shown to him whenever he enters a city but also discloses how the populace asks for all sorts of remedies in all sort of manners, namely religiously and proto-scientifically. Despite the intrusion of what can be called a 'sacred' character in Empedocles, however, it can be maintained that his thought still follows Alcmaeon's materialism in the sense he understands "each separate organic substance in terms of a mixture of these in a certain ratio."¹⁵⁰ For, in his view, the composition of organic tissues of living beings are due to mathematically balanced, or proportionate ratios of matter in the manner Alcmaeon speaks of counterbalanced bodily forces. The matter of proportionate mixture, in turn, diverts our attention to the rhizomatic pattern of Empedocles's theory of four elements which fits in the context of medicalised humour in fifth-century Ancient Greece.

At this point, it cannot be overlooked that stories surrounding Empedocles' alleged attempt of suicide by throwing himself to Mount Etna cloud an anticipation of his natural philosophy nor can it be denied that nineteenth-century poetry particularly transformed him into a Romantic hero whose tragicality lies in his dreadful act of self-harm by intensifying "the note of skepticism and melancholy" surrounding his death" which invents "a new motivation for the suicide."¹⁵¹ But also, the reception of Empedocles's heroic act is telling of his philosophical attire and particularly underlines the originality of his theory of four elements. For, "To the elements it came from," says Matthew Arnold's protagonist in *Empedocles on Etna*, "Everything will return. / Our bodies to earth, / Our blood to water, / Heat to fire, / Breath to air."¹⁵² Arnold's nineteenth-century treatment of Empedocles draws on the tragicality of this act which cannot be ameliorated by his friends Pausanias and Callicles,¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Guthrie, *History*, 313.

¹⁵¹ Walter E. Houghton, "Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna*," *Victorian Studies* 1, no.4 (1958): 311-336; 312.

¹⁵² Matthew Arnold, *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems* (London: B. Fellowes, 1852), 63.

¹⁵³ A similar treatment is to be found in Hölderlin's unfinished drama *Der Tod des Empedokles*. Véronique E. Fóti maintains that Hölderlin's treatment is a reflection on "the idea of the destinal sacrifice of an exceptional individual as demanded by an

but also it introduces the reader to the ‘elementary’ basis of Empedocles’s thoughts although his interest in the four elements of nature does not launch a new chapter in natural philosophy. The Ionian set of *archai* had already unearthed the ontological principles of nature. But they are frequently dedicated to the investigation of a singular force whereas in the hexameter verse of *On Nature*, Empedocles unveils a pluralistic system where water, earth, fire, and air stand at the root of everything in equilibrium. Each force has its own distinct character and when Strife intervenes, the four roots are alienated from each other whereas they are assembled when Love enters the scene as a unifying force in the universe. The underlying concept here is the cyclicity of these elements among which “apparent change is only rearrangement.”¹⁵⁴ Thus, the separation of fire from air, and earth from water and the mingling of each pair in return means that the cosmic cycle is capable of producing an infinite procedure of ‘elementary’ variety. Of specific importance here is that Empedocles pictorialises a universe made out of four elements all of which are cosmetically balanced in an isonomic fashion and are endlessly recycled that is fairly reminiscent of Alcmaeon. But also, his pluralism differs from Alcmaeon in the sense that his version of the four roots theory allows him seek a continuity between bodily humours and “differing natures in individual humans.”¹⁵⁵ Therefore, in our search of a consistent picture of humour theory, it can be said that for the first time in Empedocles, along with Alcmaeon, we have a direct continuum between bodily humours and humourism, between the nature that surrounds human beings and the nature of each individual as if humanistic humour borrows from the rational force of natural humours.

In this vein, judging from the examples of Alcmaeon and Empedocles, it appears that the notion of a proportionate mixture of physical elements seems to ignite a discussion on the proportioning of human character. In this manner, the pre-Hippocratic physician’s perception of nature relates to the Hippocratic doctor’s observations of individual patients. In other words, the physician’s natural observations largely inform the medical content of the Hippocratic texts

epochal transition or “turning of the times.” See Véronique E. Fóti, *Epochal Discordance: Hölderlin’s Philosophy of Tragedy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁵⁴ Guthrie, *History*, 148.

¹⁵⁵ Fox, *Invention of Medicine*, 559.

which, on the other hand, document the re-fashioning of humour in a decisively humanist regalia since the Ancient philosopher and medical doctors

alike shared a common intellectual background, subscribed largely to the same general assumptions and, to a considerable extent, adopted the same concepts, categories and modes of reasoning (...).¹⁵⁶

If so, it can be anachronistically observed that the general form of the Hippocratic corpus seems to share with the Ionians and the pre-Hippocratic doctors such as Alcmaeon and Empedocles the need for a rational explanation in explaining the humorous forces of nature. In this manner, a great portion of the Hippocratic texts are rife with counter-attacks on “witch-doctors, faith-healers, quacks and charlatans” who happen to be seemingly articulate in their diagnoses when actually they “pretend to be very pious and to be particularly wise.”¹⁵⁷ The anonymous author shows little patience with the pretentiousness of a medical impostor and rejects superstitious healing methods for, to his thinking, they represent a sum of “irreligious and impious”¹⁵⁸ acts. The narrative discourse is not particularly eager to exclude divine matters from its programme but is clearly against the wrong-doers whose so-called medical practices contaminate the profession and his scientific vision. Even more so, since the author considers that the human body cannot be contaminated by a deity who should be pure and solid, he loses faith in these faith-seekers. In this manner, the Hippocratic body of writing expresses a serious concern for overcoming the boundary between folk medicine and scientific medicine as “a genuine *technē*.”¹⁵⁹ But also in his introduction to the Hippocratic writings, G.E.R. Lloyd stresses the fact that since ancient medicine was lacking in legal recognition, this impatience is deeply embedded in the “insecurity felt by doctors about their own

¹⁵⁶ James Longrigg, “Presocratic Philosophy and Hippocratic Medicine,” *History of Science* 27, no.1 (1989): 1-39; 1.

¹⁵⁷ Fox, *Invention of Medicine*, 482.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 487. Although Philip J. van der Eijk maintains the idea that the Hippocratic writers do not completely reject the idea of divine healing but simply deny magic and a certain text “positively advocates prayer to specific gods in combination with dietetic measures for the prevention of disease.” See Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity: Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁵⁹ Lloyd, “Introduction,” 21.

position.”¹⁶⁰ The accentuation of the difference between a doctor and a commoner or a charlatan, then, is imbued with the desire to defend medicine against its doubters and also to prevent the potential flow of folk knowledge into the discipline which may corrupt it if it goes unchallenged by scientific methods. For that reason, it appears that the Hippocratic doctor is both challenged by the discursive dominance of divine causation and the lay demagogue’s self-proclaimed role as a physician. But secondly, it should also mean that the medical expert of the fifth-century is akin to the Ionian philosopher and the early physicians not only because he aims at discerning between the mythical and the logical but also because he takes an interest in finding the dynamics of nature. The author of *The Sacred Disease*, for instance, reflects on the “nature’ (*phusis*) of things, namely their origin, source of growth and identifying structure”¹⁶¹ and the author of Regimen I complements this position by defending the necessity to correctly understand the nature of human beings. In doing this, he reflects on a continued interest in the Ionian interest in nature, and particularly that of human beings, meaning that the inquiry into “most basic level of ‘principles’ (*archai*) or ‘elements’ (*stoichea*) of organic substances through anatomical structures”¹⁶² can be further traced in the Hippocratic writings which “stand at the beginning of systematic medical inquiry in Greece.”¹⁶³

These two anachronistic standpoints or takes on Hippocratic thought draw attention to the endurance of a scientific endeavour which emerges within the philosophical and medical traditions of early Greek thought. Nevertheless, since the Hippocratic understanding of nature is informed mostly by pragmatic concerns due to the technical status of the then-infantile profession, it also looks for a diagnostic programme which can also be, in return, considered as the forerunner of the ‘humanisation’ process of humour. Moving in the direction of an Empedoclean pluralism, the Hippocratic authors generally tend to deny physical theories which acknowledge the sovereignty of a singular force which, in their view, would hinder growth and generation. Instead, human body is said to be composed of the humours blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile which

¹⁶⁰ Lloyd, “Introduction,” 20.

¹⁶¹ Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy*, 19.

¹⁶² Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁶³ Lloyd, “Introduction,” 20.

“make up its constitution and cause its pains and health.”¹⁶⁴ They stand as causes of diseases or as products of diseases which run parallel to the four seasons and the four primary opposites. But more importantly than that since humours emerge as constitutive powers, it is interesting to find out that from time to time some writers offer their observations on human character in relation to the humours. The author of *Tradition in Medicine* arrives at a conclusion as such:

There exists in man saltiness, bitterness, sweetness, sharpness, astringency, flabbiness and countless other qualities having every kind of influence, number and strength. When these are properly mixed and compounded with one another, they can neither be observed nor are they harmful. But when one is separated out and stands alone it becomes both apparent and harmful.¹⁶⁵

Needless to say, as medical practitioners who stand in stark contrast with faith-healers, the prognostics of the Hippocratic doctor does not insinuate a metaphysical discourse on human nature and its operations. On the contrary, it purports an empirical approach to the causes of diseases and the maintenance of health. However, he cannot refrain from acknowledging the relation between bodily forces and human constitution. It should not be a mere coincidence that the author of *Airs, Waters, Places* spends considerable time on the influence of climate on human health but also clinches on an implicative, socio-biological argument with regards to human temperament and says:

Some men's characters resemble well-wooded and watered mountains, others a thin and waterless soil, others plains or dry bare earth. Climates differ and cause differences in character; the greater the variations in climate, so much the greater will be differences in character.¹⁶⁶

The implication here rests upon the notion that humours either contribute to health or cause disease. If health or sickness is dependent on the balance or the imbalance of humours, they can also affect or shape a human being's character,

¹⁶⁴ *Hippocratic Writings*, Trans. J. Chadwick and W.N. Mann (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 417

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

or temperament. The teleological end of medical expertise which is to preserve an individual's health and find out the causes of diseases, then, can also explain the forms in which the physiological character of the material body can inform the dynamics of human character. It assumes, then, a transitivity between the *corpus* and the *animus*. This implication is openly verified by the author of the *Airs* who towards the end of the text declares that “the chief controlling factors”¹⁶⁷ of human constitution is to be found in the nature of the land people inhabit. The soil's fertility and the seasons' favourableness produce weaklings with no keen eye for detail in craftsmanship while a barren soil and a rough seasonal cycle produces brave men and brave women who “are keener at their crafts, more intelligent and better warriors.”¹⁶⁸ If human beings are children of nature, he declares, natural forces do not only contribute to the regulation of their bodily humours but also to their mental dispositions, or in his preferred term, constitutions which gives away a changing attitude towards the evaluation of humour itself. In the Hippocratic context, thus, it becomes growingly apparent that humours in nature gain a more rational and cognitive outlook which can govern the humoristic condition of an individual human being.

III. The Cognitive Argument

The ontological and the medical arguments I have made in support of the philosophical evaluation of humour as a human capability earlier by drawing on the philosophers and doctors of nature—however different their spectrum of nature might be—can still be argued to subserve a partially essentialist framework to a certain extent. As an explanation of this point, it can be derived from the general picture of the early ontologists and medical practitioners that their philosophy of nature and humour partially essentialise both since they look back to nature as the sole source of generation and degeneration. Despite the dynamic frame of reference, humour slightly remains a force of nature equipoising elementary powers out in the natural world and inside human body. It is largely a biological power of the living beings residing in their anatomical

¹⁶⁷ *Hippocratic Writings*, 264.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

parts and the degree of cognitivism attributed to humour is mostly narrowed down to the rational/cosmetic powers of nature, viz. that nature works in harmoniously proportionate ways and so does the human body. An exception can be made for the author of *Airs* who appears to take the discussion a step further than the nature-bound theories of his predecessors and proposes a cognitive model of humour theory where nature informs temperament. He champions the Ionian and the early medical doctors' cause of a rationalised nature, and also, he outshines them in suggesting a causal connection between human constitution and natural powers. In other words, at this juncture the moistness of humour does not only refer to the rational capacities of nature or to its medical influence on the human body, but it is additionally robed with the power to define the mental trajectory and potential of human temperament.

Despite its certain shortcomings, the empiricist endeavour that has been examined so far supports our claim to humouristic capability since in transferring the physical powers of nature to human life, it capacitates humour as a rational force. Standing in stark contrast to this view, though, is the Platonic perception of humour and I would like to elaborate on it before introducing and discussing the cognitive argument. In *Critias* 115a, Plato narrates a tale of two cities, i.e. the story of a war which took place between ancient Athens and the kingdom of Atlantis which in Warman Welliver's opinion mirrors Plato's moralistic meditations as he "begins this work with Socrates's desire to see good men in action" and "ends Timaeus's monologue with a description of the reward awaiting the good and the therapeutic punishment awaiting the wicked."¹⁶⁹ In the above mentioned paragraph, Critias provides a geographical description of Atlantis and its wonders in an almost mesmerising manner:

And in addition to all this, it produced and brought to perfection all those sweet-scented stuffs which the earth produces now, whether made of roots or herbs or trees, or of liquid gums derived from flowers or fruits (χυλών στακτών είτε ανθών η καρπών).¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Warman Welliver, *Character, Plot and Thought in Plato's Timaeus-Critias* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), 40.

¹⁷⁰ Plato, *Critias*, in *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*. Trans. R.G. Bury. Loeb Classical Library no. 234 (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 115a, 285.

Here, in Plato's moral tale *chulos* is merely a linguistic expression of vegetative vitality and is used as a vivacious metaphor for the grandeur of "that hallowed island, as it lay then beneath the sun, produced in marvellous beauty and endless abundance" (ἀπαντα ταῦτα ἡ τότε πότε ον σα ὑφ' ἡλίου νήσος ιερά καλά τε καὶ θαυμαστά καὶ πλήθεσιν ἀπειρα εφερε).¹⁷¹ He does not treat *chulos* as a distinct material substance and neither does he devote a special chapter to it. In other words, vegetative life and physical existence are given an ancillary position against the Arcadian setting. This, in turn, is fairly reminiscent of Plato's dismissive attitude towards the intelligibility of the four elements. For instance elsewhere in *Timaeus*, while he defends the notion that intelligible cause is primary¹⁷² he also contends that "the four elements cannot remotely account for what is important in the design of mortal animals."¹⁷³ Hence, the totality of the text supposedly "embraces an extraordinary range of subject matter and style, ranging from macrocosm to microcosm, from the cosmically great to the clinically minute,"¹⁷⁴ and yet denies any sort of rationality to the four elements (and by implication to natural objects) as

Yet they are incapable of possessing reason and thought for any purpose. For, as we must affirm, the one and only existing thing which has the property of acquiring thought is Soul; and soul is invisible, whereas fire and water and earth and air are all visible bodies; and the lover of thought and knowledge must needs pursue first the causes which belong to the Intelligent Nature (...).¹⁷⁵

Plato's discourse heavily wounds the healthy bond created between nature, rationality, and humour by the Ionian philosophers and the Hippocratic doctors. In a sense, it not only looks down upon the physicality of physical existence but also rejects its intelligibility by offering instead an exposition of the transcendent

¹⁷¹ Plato, *Critias*, 115a, 285-287.

¹⁷² Plato, *Timaeus*, in *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*. Trans. R.G. Bury. Loeb Classical Library no. 234 (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 44e1-6, 98-100; 46c7-e6, 104-106.

¹⁷³ Sarah Broadie, *Nature and Divinity in Plato's Timaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 178.

¹⁷⁴ Broadie, *Nature and Divinity*, 1.

¹⁷⁵ Plato, *Timaeus*, 46d4-7, 105.

intelligibility of the spiritual. Plato's interpretation of the natural forces and humour, then, ironically departs both from nature and from the constantly changing face of the empirical world which heavily distances him from the scientificism of the Presocratics. In other words, his reception of nature represents an idealist interval between the Presocratics and the Aristotelian revival to which I will now attend.

In contrast to Plato, in Aristotle's zoological writings *chulos* appears as part of a physico-intelligibility attributed to living beings. In his view, a survey of nature requires the survey of its parts if "men and animals and the parts are by nature," and as he argues in *Parts of Animals* I.640b17-23,

Air and water are matter for bodies; that is, it is from such things that all the ancients constitute the nature of bodies. But if human beings, animals, and their parts exist by nature, one should speak about flesh, bone, blood, and all the uniform parts. Likewise too, about the non-uniform parts such as face, hand, and foot, one should say in virtue of what each of them is such as it is, and in respect of what sort of potential.¹⁷⁶

Aristotle's simple use of *chulos* as a component of parts of living organisms is continued elsewhere when he considers the fact that moisture is a life-defining supplier of animals. When deprived of it, regardless of the nature of the cause—as it can be either a natural or an artificial one—the absence of it results in death. He further elucidates the point that although all animals have a part in which moisture is contained, some have imperfect parts to contain it and the others preserve it in their blood and veins. In this specific context, since humour lends itself to empirical observation and emerges as part of a biological function of in an animal or a plant, it could be assumed that *chulos* aspires to the condition of a physical component of an animal or plant whereby we discover that particular living being's material cause. To illustrate this point, in *History of Animals* I.487a11-25 Aristotle emphasises the differentiation between animals based on their modes of existence, anatomical structures, and activities¹⁷⁷ and a few

¹⁷⁶ Aristotle, *On The Parts of Animals*, I.640b17-23; 4.

¹⁷⁷ Aristotle, *History of Animals I*, I. 487a11-25 in *Generation of Animals, History of Animals I, Parts of Animals I*. Trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis and Cambridge. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2019), 3.

passages earlier, in I.487a1-5 he uses *chulos* in relation to the composure of animal parts.¹⁷⁸ The taxonomical differences between animals, in his view, inform generic characteristics of animals and *chulos* helps define the biological property of soft and moist animals and argues accordingly: “And of the homoeomerous parts some are soft and liquid, others dry and solid (...)”¹⁷⁹ Thus, in an Aristotelian context, *chulos* is part of the matter of a living being from which the living being derives its anatomical structure and material attributes. This also denotes that “the elements in its composition which are basic to it” form part of “some principle by which it becomes intelligible in itself or to us.”¹⁸⁰ If so, could it be that a living being’s humour renders that particular being intelligible in our eyes or does *chulos* lend itself to intelligibility since it contributes to that particular being’s process of becoming what it is teleologically structured to become?

In *Physics* I.7,190a32-33, Aristotle introduces his reader to the impossibility of coming into being without any qualification, since coming-into-being not only denotes the multiplicity of forms of being but also a being’s subjection to physical alteration.¹⁸¹ If this is so, there can be two dimensions to a living being’s coming into existence which are matter and form and Aristotle forms an alliance between *hylê* (matter) and *morphê* (form) that is known as hylomorphism where matter is a constitutive part which perseveres in the face of gradual change and form stands for “what is gained or lost in an episode of change.”¹⁸² This should mean that beings are metaphysical complexes which are substantial compounds of material and formal existence and are subject to change. Correspondingly, a human being should also be a metaphysical complex whose matter consists of organic parts which s/he shares with the other members of humanity and her/his form is the beholder of these physical qualities which differentiate her/him from those members. In other words, “so much matter derived from the parents comes to realize the form of humanity, and grows,

¹⁷⁸ Aristotle, *History of Animals I*, I.487a1-5, 3.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸⁰ George K. Plochmann, “Nature and The Living Thing in Aristotle’s Biology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14, no.2 (1953): 167-190; 172.

¹⁸¹ Aristotle, *Physics*, I.7, 190a32-34; 16.

¹⁸² Christopher Shields, *Aristotle* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 55.

gaining matter subordinated to the realization of that form, over time”¹⁸³ which includes the ability to change, grow, and generate. Retrospectively speaking, for instance, at conception a human being already acquires human matter, but its form manifests itself gradually over time in accordance with its teleological end.

An explanation of this sort naturally dispels the merely formal explanation of the Ionian early scientists, the Hippocratic doctors, and the almost theological ekphrasis of Plato where matter informs the natural function of the natural element. This would explain, in accordance, the fact that Aristotelian substance is predicated from a being’s form which explains why a being, say X, comes-into-being as it does. In Wedin’s words, “this is achieved by the immediate connection between the logically heterogeneous components, form and matter.”¹⁸⁴ These two heterogeneous components form a unity in being and contribute to X’s coming-into-being as X. This should mean that as the matter of X persists change over time and form informs X’s intelligible attributes, X becomes whatever it is teleologically intended to become. If so, *chulos* should be part of a being’s matter which informs the humidity of its material body. But it is not simply responsible of a being’s humour, in the contemporary sense, which differentiates it from other material bodies that is the dynamically performative part of a being. *Chulos*, then, is not an intelligible attribute in isolation since it is part of matter whereas humour defines the intelligibility of a living form. But humour, in turn, cannot make a claim to intelligibility without its material potential. Under this view, the *chulos*-humour pair responds to Aristotle’s discussion on potentiality-actuality since it follows from here that “matter and form should be understood in terms of potentiality and actuality.”¹⁸⁵ Hence, the idea that a thing can exist either in potentiality (*dunamis*, δύναμις) or actuality (*energeia*, ἐνέργεια) denotes that Aristotle’s investigation of being has

¹⁸³ Shields, *Aristotle*, 57.

¹⁸⁴ Michael V. Wedin, *Aristotle’s Theory of Substance: The Categories and Metaphysics Zeta* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 438.

¹⁸⁵ Charlotte Witt, “Hylomorphism in Aristotle,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 84, no.11 (1987): 673-679, 673.

“an ontological purpose”¹⁸⁶ which also points towards a modal distinction.¹⁸⁷ For instance, in Kosman’s terminology, *dunamis* manifests the ability of a being while *energeia* gives away a being’s being-at-work or activity.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, X might have the physical ability to become a painter, but X will not count as a painter until s/he exercises the capacity to become a painter, or in other words, actually becomes one. An oppositional argument that contrasts *dunamis* and *energeia* then would dictate that X’s substance inheres the totality of human capabilities in its potential stage (and to a certain extent the passivity of these capabilities), and once X engages in a certain activity this should mean that s/he has actualised a set of *dunamic* capabilities in accordance with what her/his matter dictates and this *dunamic* capability is transformed into an *energeiac* activity.

In the larger context of humour, however, I derive from the complexity of Aristotle’s hylomorphism that there is not a modal distinction but a modal continuity between *dunamis* and *energeia* since humoristic activity could be understood as the actualisation of a proto-humoristic potential, that is *chulos*. Therefore, the formal capacities of a being help us understand that particular being’s relationship with change and mutation. Or, an understanding of this sort can address the problem why certain human beings are choleric or melancholic as, in line with this formal approach, it would be possible to consider that human beings are what they are due to the quantity of liquid excretions that are present in their anatomical parts. On this view, to be human would be to refer to the sum of a human being’s formal constitutive parts. Then, X should be X due to its compound nature which reserves the right to remain in potentiality or in actuality. For instance, a choleric person should be inhering the necessary

¹⁸⁶ Charlotte Witt, *Ways of Being: Potentiality and Actuality in Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2. However, Witt does not consider an inquiry into substance as related to the investigation of the meaning of being. She also does not share with Frede that *dunamis* is a concept of unity and instead offers a distinction between *dunamis* as power and *dunamis* as potentiality.

¹⁸⁷ This particular approach to the relation between *energeia* and *dunamis* has been grouped under the name The Modal States Hypothesis. For an exposition of approaches to *energeia* and *dunamis* see Mark Senteny, “Are Potency and Actuality Compatible in Aristotle?,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22, no. 2 (2018): 239-270. Here, I particularly refer to Aryeh Kosman and Michael Wedin for an interpretation of these two difficult concepts.

¹⁸⁸ Especially see Aryeh Kosman, *The Activity of Being: An Essay on Aristotle’s Ontology* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), 37-39.

excretions so as to be choleric, and yet it should be due to her/his capacity to exercise a choleric temperament that the potential is unlocked, and s/he actualises her/his choleric potentiality. In a similar manner, humour can also be perceived not only as a physical state of moisture which nourishes the parts of living beings, but also as a formal constituent of a substance which is subject to change and allows a human being to engage in an activity which already potentially exists in her/his matter. To put it more correctly, to consider humour as a potential and as part of a human being's matter is to accept that humour is a 'substantial' asset of a teleological programme as it stands for an anytime actualisable potential. It still shares with *chulos* a certain degree of potentiality and once it exercises its powers it becomes a potential in actualisation. In other words, as the humouristic potential, in general, strives toward actuality, it becomes a rational but more importantly a cognitive capacity of the human substance.

It is possible to contend that Aristotle's capabilistic programme is directly transmitted to the second-century Roman doctor Galen's commentaries of humour as much as the Hippocratic doctor's physical routine finds its way into his inquiries on the causes of diseases and health. In his *On The Elements According to Hippocrates*, Galen adopts the Hippocratic conviction that "blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile are the elements of the coming into being of all sanguineous animals (...)." ¹⁸⁹ He relates the four humours to the four qualities in the sense that "yellow bile is hot and dry in power, black bile dry and cold; blood is moist and hot, while phlegm is moist and cold." ¹⁹⁰ But Galen does not think that dryness or moistness can be efficient in defining health. Instead, he uses a familiar vocabulary when he speaks of a well-balanced mixture ¹⁹¹ and adds to it the concept of temperament (*krasis*) which results from a blend of the four qualities. In an Aristotelian sense, his introduction of temperament is crucial in the sense that it explains the teleologicality of humoral mixture. In *On the Natural Faculties*, he explains the connection between four humours and

¹⁸⁹Galen, *On The Elements According to Hippocrates*, in *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum*, edited by Phillip de Lacy (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), I.492-493.4; 138-141.

¹⁹⁰Galen, *Causes of Diseases*, in *Medicorum Graecorum Opera Omnia*, edited by Carolus Gottlob Kühn (Lipsiae Cnoblochii, 1824), VII; 21-22.

¹⁹¹ Galen, *On The Elements*, I.451.14-453-21; 94-98.

four qualities and says: “Nature does everything artistically (*technikôs*) and equitably, possessing certain *dunameis* by virtue of which each of the parts attracts to itself its appropriate fluid (...)”¹⁹² If so, humours should be attracted to particular qualities owing to the fact that each humour facilitates a specific activity in a uniform part, or an organ which contributes to the organism’s generation. In this sense, humour becomes a faculty, “an active cause” which capacitates the organ to be activated in accordance with its function. For instance, if the digestion creating faculty in the stomach is hotness, it facilitates the stomach’s capacity for digestion. By doing so, not only does this particular humour and its corresponding quality contribute to the generation of the animal’s organ but also, they allow the organ to perform its activity according to its function (*chreia*) which is the chemical breakdown of food. The cognitive element of this whole act, on the other hand, seems to be hidden in the fact that the constitution of the body should be responsible of the constitution of the soul, or alternatively speaking the intellect. As he argues in *The Faculties of the Soul Follow the Mixtures of the Body*, the soul cannot be incorporeal

for how could the soul be driven into an unnatural state as a result of its association with a body, unless it were some quality of a body, or some form, or some affection, or some power of a body?¹⁹³

Under these circumstances, diseases of the mind would be inevitably related to diseases of the body, or in reverse, a healthy body would produce a healthy mind which R.J. Hankinson considers a proclamation of “anti-Cartesian intuitions.”¹⁹⁴ Galen’s medicinal metaphysics, thus, manifests in itself the indivisibility of the living organism where its organic unity is safeguarded by an uninterrupted ebb and flow between mind and body. It is non-divisive in the sense that the workings of the body effect the workings of the mind, or in an Aristotelian sense, the matter effects the form. In accordance, it assumes that the inner mechanics

¹⁹² Galen, *On the Natural Faculties* in *Galen Scripta Minora*, 11; 29-30, qtd. in R.J. Hankinson, “Philosophy of nature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Galen*, edited by R. J. Hankinson, 210-241. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 223.

¹⁹³ Galen, *Quod Animi Mores Corporis Temperamenta Sequuntur*, IV.788, qtd. in R. J. Hankinson, “Galen’s Anatomy of the Soul,” *Phronesis* 36, no.2 (1991): 197-233; 203.

¹⁹⁴ Hankinson, “Galen’s Anatomy of the Soul,” 203.

of mental temperament (or activity) is defined by the chemical processes of the corpus (potentiality).

The general shape of Galenic medicine in the context discussed above is imbued with the idea that the logistical communication between the intellect and the physical body gives rise to the likewise emergence of individual human character. A more riveting account of this idea is to be found in Avicenna's *Compendium on the Soul* where the Galenic (and Aristotelian)¹⁹⁵ understanding of humour reaches a climactic point:

Now it has become clear in the physical sciences that personal qualities and habits follow the temperament of the body, in the sense that the dominant characteristics of a phlegmatic (a person whose temperament is dominated by phlegm) are sedateness, dignity, and forbearance, a choleric (he whose temperament is dominated by yellow bile) anger, and a melancholic (he whose temperament is dominated by black bile) ill disposition.¹⁹⁶

The special chapter Avicenna devotes to the humoral constitution of the body and its influence on the intellect differs from Galen in the sense that he speaks of the acquisition of “divine effluence” through the interconnection of the rational soul with “the corporal entity [*jirm*].”¹⁹⁷ Through knowledge, he argues, human beings can come into contact with the “active intellect” which allows in them “a certain similarity to the celestial bodies.”¹⁹⁸ Earlier criticism has argued that Avicenna saw in the active intellect an all-encompassing force which almost situated the individual who came in contact with divine effluence as “the vicar of God on earth.”¹⁹⁹ However, Dimitri Gutas asserts that Avicenna follows a strictly Aristotelian path and that there are certainly only little traces of

¹⁹⁵ Dimitri Gutas maintains the position that “Avicenna follows the order of the discussion in Aristotle's *De anima*, but for the most part the organization and specific treatment of individual questions are relatively unprecedented in the extant Aristotelian tradition.” Gutas, *Avicenna and The Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 86.

¹⁹⁶ Gutas, *Avicenna and The Aristotelian Tradition*, 72.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 73. Original italics.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 73.

¹⁹⁹ Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5.

divineness in the concept of divine intellection. Instead, he maintains that there is “a deeply ethical aspect to Avicenna’s philosophical project”²⁰⁰ which openly comments on the Aristotelian concept of human activity which tries its hand at equating material potentiality with formal activity. Therefore, he appears to take from Galen, and by implication from Aristotle, the very idea that tending to the communication between bodily humours and mental temperament ensures the preservation of mental and bodily integrity since he construes that human beings should

tend to the body by all means, behavioural (religious practices, ethical conduct) and pharmacological, to bring its humoral temperament to a level of equilibrium that will help the function of the intellect.²⁰¹

In accordance, Avicenna’s ethical stance not only stresses a “humanist ethics dictated by a scientific view of the world,”²⁰² but also emphasises the vital importance of balancing bodily humours to regulate our mental character, or intellectual powers. As a consequence of that, humour as a human capability has yet to wield enormous power over our immaterial presence through which it yields an essentially cognitive attire.

The three arguments that are presented throughout Chapter I depict that humour has had a life of its own in various biological, medical, and philosophical contexts beginning from Ionian philosophy and onwards. First, its moistness and physicality relate *chulos*, or *umeo* and to the early philosopher’s interest in the nature of physical world where it becomes part of a larger ontological discussion. Second, the rise of the medical profession in fifth-century Greece appears to define humour as a corporal force which contributes either positively or negatively to the patient’s health-condition. Third, Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian traditions in Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and medicine secure a combined sense of humoristic understanding where the *archēic* and medicinal senses of the word along with the inter-relationality between matter-form, potentiality-actuality present a rational view of the dynamics of human nature. However, the third argument distinguishes itself from the two earlier

²⁰⁰ Gutas, *Avicenna and The Aristotelian Tradition*, 379.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 379.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

discussions on the subject in the sense that it discloses a definitively cognitive response to humour which had been earlier viewed as a physical or physiological phenomenon. It still recognises humour as a principle element of nature that is endowed with causal powers. Nevertheless, it re-situates humour as an onto-cognitive force, providing it with a cognitive afterlife where it is responsible of human temperament. From Aristotle and onwards, then, humour stands out as a bio-cultural (and by implication a socio-cultural) force which is responsible of the constitution of human intellect. In accordance, since intellect becomes a bio-psychological extension of humoral constitution the implication is that humour re-emerges as a cognitive regulator of human activity. If so, the cognitivisation of humour at the hands of the successors of the Ionians and Hippocratic doctors resounds with an archaic ‘technology of the self’ which allows individuals

to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and soul, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.²⁰³

The philosophical and cultural transformation of humour into a rational and later into a cognitive power dictates that the realm of the mental and the realm of the physical should not suggest two separable planes of existence. On the contrary, it challenges the separability of these two assets. In accordance, it is a notion looking back to the Aristotelian sense of selfhood where the self is an actualised expression of bodily, or material potentiality, implying that selfhood is a capacity which constantly strives to aspire to the condition of actuality. For, as Juha Sihvola construes, Aristotle’s philosophy of self was constructed in terms ofhylomorphism in which the soul of a human being is the form or the structure of the human body or the human matter.”²⁰⁴ Thus, to have a human soul, or intellect, means to have a human body which disregards the otherwise hyperbolic contention that an animal’s body can harbour a human soul or a

²⁰³ Michel Foucault, “Technologies of The Self,” in *Essential Works*, vol.1: *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 223-251. (New York: New Press, 1997), 225.

²⁰⁴ Juha Sihvola, “Aristotle on the Individuality of Self,” in *Ancient Philosophy of the Self*, edited by Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola, 125-139. (New York: Springer, 2008), 125.

human body can entertain an animal soul. In *De Anima* II. 414a19 Aristotle endorses the view that the body, or form, is “an ensouled thing”²⁰⁵ and in II.414a25-27 he reaches the conclusion that “the actuality of each thing comes about naturally in what has it in potentiality, that is in its appropriate matter.”²⁰⁶ If so, it can be inferred that the potential powers of bodily humours that inform the actualisation of mental activity and the physical, physiological, and psychological aspects of humour that have been examined so far coalesce into a single body of an interpretative discursive act in early Greek thought and subsequent philosophical traditions. Under this view, then, the cognitive argument for humour inherits from the modal continuity suggested earlier in between *dunamis* and *energeia*, form and matter in its Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian contexts. By considering the conclusion that humour is a form of dunamic capability, it will be anticipated in the following chapter that English humour derives its unique character from this modal continuity and ‘finalising’ argument.

²⁰⁵ Aristotle, *De Anima*, Trans. Christopher Shields (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016), II. 434b12; 71.

²⁰⁶ Aristotle, *De Anima*, II. 414a25-27; 26.

CHAPTER II:

“O HUMOUR, THOU WHOSE NAME IS KNOWN / TO BRITAIN’S FAVOR’D ISLE ALONE”: THE MATTER OF *L’HUMOUR ANGLAIS* AND SCEPTIC UPHEAVALS

I. The English Vein of Humour

In his lyrical ode *The Manners* (1746), the sound of the pre-Romantic poet William Collins’s poetry echoes an adieu to the neo-classical temple which signals at a passionate inquiry into human nature. “Farewell, for clearer Ken design’d / The dim-discover’d Tracts of Mind,”²⁰⁷ he says, filled with uncertainty, doubtful of the abstract character of the age of sovereign reason. The tone of the poem is mostly elegiac in the sense that it harbours a resentful mode. But also, it employs an ironically unassertive vantage point which helps him dig his way out of what he considers to be the dead-end empiricism of the Enlightenment. It is not without a particular reason that he hints at a natural bond between reason and doubt when he says: “Porch, whose Roof is seen / Arch’d with th’ enlivening Olive’s Green,” and continues accordingly:

Where Science, prank’d in tissued Vest,
By Reason, Pride, and Fancy drest,
Comes like a Bride so trim array’d
To wed with Doubt in Plato’s Shade!²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ William Collins, *The Poetical Works of William Collins* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1853), 54.

²⁰⁸ Collins, *Poetical Works*, 54.

Although it has been noted that Collins's "style and ostensible theme are pseudo-classic,"²⁰⁹ it has also been recognised that he writes within the spirit of a palpably "romantic intent."²¹⁰ He wishes to defect to the realm of the emotional, the sensible, and the imaginative in order to "read in Man the native heart."²¹¹ In its entirety, the ode represents "the pessimistic view of his own poetic age," enclosing "Collins' preoccupation with and lack of confidence in his own poetic role."²¹² But also, it is telling of a revering attitude which looks back to the older modes of composition in a praising manner. Thus, he concludes:

Thou by the Passions nurs'd, I greet
The comic Sock that binds they Feet!
O Humour, Thou whose Name is known,
To Britain's favoured Isle alone:
Me too amisdt thy Band admit,
There where the young-eyed healthful Wit,
(Whose Jewels in his crisped Hair
Are plac'd each othe's Beams to share,
Whom no Delights from Thee divide)
In Laughter loos'd attends thy Side!²¹³

It is an interesting fact that the respectful nod that Collins gives to the poets of an earlier time period entails his fascination with English humour. In Collins's late neo-classical, or alternatively speaking, early Romantic context, then, his appraisal of English humour—and comedy—conveys the gist of the semi-conservative attitude of an eighteenth-century poet who looks up to the national models of literary excellence from a bygone period.²¹⁴ An endeavour of this sort is akin to the neo-classical fascination with earlier literary exemplars which not only "elevated Milton and even Spenser to the ranks of classical poets worthy of

²⁰⁹ Alan D. McKillop, "The Romanticism of William Collins," *Studies in Philology* 20, no.1 (1923): 1-16, 16.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

²¹¹ Collins, *PW*, 55.

²¹² Martha Collins, "The Self-Conscious Poet: The case of William Collins," *ELH* 42, no.3 (1975): 362-377; 365.

²¹³ Collins, *PW*, 56.

²¹⁴ Philip D. Marion locates the cultural coordinates of Collins's politics of "appraisal" in the invocative tradition dating back to Spenser and Milton which stands as an "ideal for the poet" as it is the "portrayal of the poet's attempt to reach this ideal" transmitted through "the recurring despair of success." Philip D. Marion, "A Poetry of Invocation: A Study of The Poem of William Collins and Their Tradition." Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Florida, 1976, p. 32.

imitation”²¹⁵ but also served “to realize an intuition of eternal validity in the great persons’ concerns.”²¹⁶ But also, it also acknowledges the existence of a buoyant tradition of humour and humour literature in England, one which even made Dryden feel in company with “all the Pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales,” as if he had “supp’d with them at the Tabard in Southwark.”²¹⁷

Collins’s contention that humour’s name is only known to the favoured isle of Britain might strike the reader as a hyperbole, and yet it signifies a commonplace practice. It is a prevalent tactic throughout the English literary canon to arrest the reader’s attention by intentionally pointing out the long tradition of humour in the British Isles. In a certain manner, it registers the need for claiming the English superiority over other cultures of humour. Thus, it reflects on, as Daniel Wickberg holds in his *The Senses of Humour*, the imaginative fact that “to some extent, it makes no difference whether humor was or was not distinctively or uniquely English; what is important is that so many Englishmen clearly thought it was.”²¹⁸ For instance, the seventeenth century politician and essayist William Temple construes that

But with all this, our Country must be confest, to be what a great Foreign Physitian called it, The Region of Spleen, which may arise a good deal from the great uncertainty and many suddain Changes of our Weather in all Seasons of the Year: And how much these Affect the Heads and Hearts, especially of the finest Tempers, is hard to be Believed by Men. (...) This makes us unequal in our Humours, inconstant in our Passions, uncertain in our Ends, and even in our Desires (...).²¹⁹

²¹⁵ James Sambrook, “Poetry, 1660-1740,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol.4: The Eighteenth Century, edited by H.B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson, 75-117. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 115.

²¹⁶ G. Wilson Knight, *The Poetry of Alexander Pope: Laureate of Peace* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 201.

²¹⁷ John Dryden, *The Preface to The Fables*, edited by W.H. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 9.

²¹⁸ Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humour: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 42.

²¹⁹ William Temple, “Of Poetry,” 322. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A64321.0001.001/1:6?rgn=div1;view=fulltext;q1>. Date of access: 7 April 2021.

Temple's reference to the climatic and seasonal differences between geographical regions and their influence on human character is evocative of the Hippocratic doctor's reference to the varying natures of land and their corresponding 'national' characters.²²⁰ Accordingly, he uses this Hippocratic formulation to perpetuate the notion that humour is the making of the English soil which casuistically informs the English character. Similarly, William Congreve writes to his fellow critic and dramatist John Dennis about the unchangeableness of humour and agrees with him on the point that humour is an "English Growth." He adds:

at least, it does not seem to have found such Encrease on any other Soil: and what appears to me to be the reason of it, is the great Freedom, Priviledge [*sic*], and Liberty which the common People of England enjoy.²²¹

Similarly, George Farquhar in *A Discourse upon Comedy* notices in a Templesque manner that the English play is designed for the English audience who are

not only separated from the rest of the world by situation, but different also from other nations as well in the complexion and temperament of the natural body as in the constitution of our body politick.²²²

The 'body politick' that Farquhar explicitly touches upon is an apparent display of the notion that humour is an English invention that defines the English character. The underlying assumption here is that the exceptionality of the

²²⁰ In fact, Temple mentions Hippocrates's name among those who "were the first mighty Conquerors of Ignorance in our World, and made greater progresses, in the several Empires of Science, than any of their Successors have been since able to reach." See Temple, "An Essay upon the Ancient and Modern Learning," 30. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A64321.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext;q1>.

Date of access: 7 April 2021.

²²¹ William Congreve, "Mr. Congreve, to Mr. Dennis. Concerning Humour in COMEDY," 85.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A65151.0001.001/1:13.21?rgn=div2;view=fulltext;q1>. Date of access: 10 April 2021.

²²² George Farquhar, *A Discourse upon Comedy, The Recruiting Officer, and The Beaux Strategem*, edited by Louis A. Strauss (Boston and London: D.C. Harth & Co., Publishers, 1914), 22.

environment contributes to the exceptionality of the English constitution and as a result the exceptionality of English humour. Hence, it documents the fact that from the Early Modern period and onwards, there happens to be an instinctive need to eulogise the in-built ability of English humour which also emerges as a defining element of English literary criticism; a prejudicial vein of aesthetic judgement whose influence still appears to shine upon the critical and cultural consciousness of the contemporary sphere.²²³

Nevertheless, it is a curious fact that there happens to be an overarching tendency among historians of humour to think that the development of humour cannot be attributed to the makings of a single nation or group of people. In 1878, A.G. K. L'Estrange underlined in his *History of English Humour* the fact that the capacity of humour belongs with human beings. He alluringly defines humour as a faculty of the mind which “comes forth like Minerva fully armed from the brain.”²²⁴ J.B. Priestley took a more a patriotic approach in his observations on English humour and yet he also could not deny “the common ground of the laughing and the laughable, the universal guffaw,”²²⁵ while Louis François Cazamian defended the view that humour cannot be perceived as “the privilege of any country or any time” since it is “an aspect of thought, or an aesthetic category”²²⁶ which is “essentially concrete” and “has its roots no less, and more, in the originality of national groups, than in the faculties of the abstract human being.”²²⁷ Similarly, contemporary humour theory/criticism cannot resist the allure of defining the universality of humour, or laughter. Alenka Zupančič in her Lacanian take on the subject investigates the truth-conditions of a universal concept and arrives at the conclusion that the universal

²²³ There are an impressive number of newspaper columns which, either explicitly or implicitly, devote special time to the investigation of English humour as a hereditary asset. For instance, a 2008 newspaper article suggests that British humour is “linked to genes found in British men and women, but not shared, for instance, by Americans.” See Roger Dobson, “Joking Aside, British really do have unique sense of humour,” *Independent*, 9 March 2008. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/joking-aside-british-really-do-have-unique-sense-humour-793491.html>. Date of access: 10 April 2021.

²²⁴ A.G.K. L'Estrange, *History of English Humour*, vol. 1 (London: Hurst and Blackett, Publishers, 1878), 6.

²²⁵ Priestley, *English Humour*, 9.

²²⁶ Louis François Cazamian, *The Development of English Humour* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1965), 15.

²²⁷ Cazamian, *Development*, 1.

should be able to embrace the particular or vice versa since she describes the “universal nonsense as the presupposition of all sense.”²²⁸ In accordance, she thinks that comedy and jokes resist a metaphysical definition although they represent “the concrete labor or work of the universal itself,” which leads to the conclusion that “*comedy is the universal at work*.”²²⁹ In a related but no so similar vein, Terry Eagleton rejects a metaphysical attribution to humour, as he argues that laughter is spoken of in multiple ways; an argument that gravely contradicts Samuel Johnson’s contention that human beings have laughed in the same way²³⁰ and yet resembles in the sense that humour is a universal human ability. For, Eagleton takes as his starting point for his extensive examination of humour the idea that human laughter is “a universal phenomenon” although it does not mean that it is “a uniform one.”²³¹ In declaring so, however, he still insists on the commonality of humour as a distinct human capability. Given the commonplace practice of ratifying the cultural and historical abstractedness of humour, it is hard to imagine a sub-divisional category within it. By all accounts, then, these critics recognise the fact that it is not hard to imagine that a particularity can emanate from the seemingly universal body of humour and yet under these views, humour still becomes a “part and parcel of the moral life and mental progress of a people,” an end-product of “a mental attitude”²³² that transcends the authenticity of particular individuals.

It is possible to identify here a certain duality. The former camp of critics, it appears, emerge as strict defenders of the English constitution. They take an individualist approach whereas the latter camp prefers emphasising the universal dimension of humour. Contrary to expectation, however, it appears that some of these historians and critics of humour that belong with the latter group *do* also allow exceptions whenever the nominal existence of a particular tradition outgrows the fame of the others. For instance, Priestley’s discussion starts with an allowance of this sort as he sets out to define English humour via an analysis

²²⁸ Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (London and Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 144.

²²⁹ Zupančič, *Odd One In*, 27. Original italics.

²³⁰ Samuel Johnson, “The Difficulty of Defining Comedy,” in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 1, edited by Arthur Murphy, 217-218. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854).

²³¹ Terry Eagleton, *Humour*, 12.

²³² *Ibid.*, 17.

of the English character. Priestley's narrative throws the English character into sharp relief in a dialogic manner in that he holds up a mirror to the nature of Englishness. To do that, he makes use of the observatory remarks of the foreign visitor on English soil. The Frenchman, in his view, has almost always considered the English as melancholic, grim, and as "a whole nation fog-bound in its wits."²³³ But he is forgiving for he purports the idea that "life in France is leavened by wit, and life in England is leavened with humour"²³⁴ and considers that it is only natural for the outsider to believe that the English race is bereft of laughter, and is replete with tears when the outsider can only spot surface appearances.²³⁵ In this regard, the French is at a loss at fully conceiving the so-called moroseness of the English people as the former lives off the pleasures of public gaiety whereas the latter is badly off for privacy. For these reasons, English humour, he maintains, is sculpted out of this need for privacy and this is the rationale behind the jokes of the English people who "have walls and hedges round them,"²³⁶ a certain quality that escapes the ears of the foreigner. But also, apart from the superficial vision of the non-English person, Priestley believes that English humour deserves a distinct category due to "the weather in his soul"²³⁷ which quite often blows hot and cold. Thus, at the heart of English humour stands an incongruity, a "mean point between intelligence and obtuseness, which must produce the most abundant and happiest crop of humour."²³⁸ It is the English people's capacity for enjoying eccentricity, heresy, and usual mounting on hobby-horses which playfully irons out the borderline between the rational and the irrational, giving English humour its distinctively incongruous flavour. By association, this might be the rationale behind Malcolm William Wallace's statement in his *English Character and The English Literary*

²³³ Priestley, *English Humour*, 4.

²³⁴ Ibid., 5.

²³⁵ The medieval Latin proverb reads as follows: "Anglica gens est optima flens et pessima ridens." qtd. in Priestley, *English Humour*, 2. A slightly different version of the proverb exists in Liber Tertius of *Ethice vetus et sapiens* (1590), by Michaelis Neandri Sorauiensis. "Rustica" and "sed." See: <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/0003/bsb00033105/images/index.html?id=00033105&groesser=&fip=xsqreayayztseneayawfsdreayayztsxs&no=84&seite=309>. Date of access: 15 April 2021.

²³⁶ Priestley, *English Humour*, 4.

²³⁷ Ibid., 13.

²³⁸ Ibid.

Tradition where he acknowledges that he has “no intention of making an exhaustive catalogue of the elements which combine to form English character” and yet he cannot escape from the fact that should he have had wanted to do so, he “should have called attention to the widespread sense of humour which contributes so much to the readableness of English novels and essays.”²³⁹

A similar idea is developed by Cazamian’s take on humour which shows a certain insistence on the point of universality and objectivity. He does not necessarily believe that humour is the making of the Englishman/woman and that they own “a monopoly of humour.”²⁴⁰ Furthermore, he denies an easy-going relationship between the English character and humour. If it had not been the case, he asks the reader, how can we explain the disturbing intrusion of French influence on medieval English humour?²⁴¹ Nonetheless, he cannot help but acknowledge the fact that “they evince in their constitution a somewhat special affinity with the temper of humour”²⁴² which renders humour as “one of the major features of the modern British genius.”²⁴³ In this vein, Cazamian’s narrative allows that when it comes to humour the English are so exceptionally gifted. He maintains that it is “their faculty of withholding the normal flow of their impressions, their cool-blooded taciturnity, the subdued tone of their outward life”²⁴⁴ which has struck even those who are foreigners to the English character; a critical position which runs parallel to the English diplomat Harold Nicolson’s contention that the English comic mood shows “recognizable qualities and defects of temperament”²⁴⁵ although his treatment of the matter shows elaborate signs of a class-conscious but anti-totalitarian post-war rhetoric²⁴⁶ that seems to be in conflict with his libertarian politics.

²³⁹ Malcolm William Wallace, *English Character and the English Literary Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952), 62.

²⁴⁰ Cazamian, *Development*, 7.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴⁵ Harold Nicolson, *The English Sense of Humour and Other Essays* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1956), 32.

²⁴⁶ Eagleton believes that it is “indeed a cogent argument against abolishing extreme inequalities of wealth that it is likely to bring wordplay and witticisms grinding to a halt, and one which leftists should doubtless take to heart.” Eagleton, *Humour*, 143.

It should be evident by now that critical approaches to English humour present an amphibious discourse. Even more so, early twentieth-century approaches do not seem to be able to produce a balanced discourse with regards to it. First, there appears the need to state the universality of humour as belonging with the human species. But second, these approaches cannot overlook the fact that the English host a lively tradition of gaiety. While their formulations attest to the fact that humour is a human ability and should be recognised as such, the whole body of English humour, in their opinion, represents an Arcadian destination and stands as the pinnacle point of humoristic innovation that is encircled by an ocean of sapiensian merriment. In their view, English humour is an exception, an irregularity if I may, which claims to survive on both the universal terrain of humour and the particular territory of the British Isles. Thus, the entire bulk of this critical tradition, in a manner of speaking, appears to be a nostalgic back-reference to William Collins's "favor'd isle alone"; an idea whose intellectual beans were deeply sown in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. This particular sense of nostalgia, it can be argued, also looks back to an older understanding of humour in the ontological, medical, and cognitive arguments that have been presented earlier. But also, this back-reference carries implicit undertones of an understanding which cannot make up its mind whether the universal or the particular should come first. It seemingly realises and recognises a largely essentialist conception of humour where the individual existence of beings bears its imprint on immaterial, intangible human activity but cannot escape the temptations of a nationalistic case.

Despite the dichotomic difficulties which loom over past and present English humour criticism, on the other hand, still it is hard to detect a hard-headed deterministic standpoint where nature informs structure, or form in the blind casuistic manner Collins speaks of it. For, to nationalise humour would be to throw it into a snake pit of interpretative discursion, as Andy Medhurst maintains, which would imply an acceptance of the false assumption that

it is founded on the 'binding and marking of symbolic boundaries' (...) it is a 'specific enunciative strategy' (...), it is intimately related to 'modalities of power' (...), it works ceaselessly to draw lines of 'difference and

exclusion' (...), and it allows those inside any given identity category to shore up their sense of self by enabling them to use laughter 'to leave out, to render "outside", abject those perceived as occupying contrasting or challenging identities.'²⁴⁷

Medhurst's appropriation of Stuart Hall's non-inclusive remarks on identity and identity formation through humour shows that an attempt at defining the limits of national humour "fits Hall's arguments like a glove."²⁴⁸ Once humour is held responsible of national identity formation, the sooner it implicates a myriad of rigidity, discursive independence and aggressive inclusiveness when humour/comedy should be "an invitation to belong."²⁴⁹ Under this view, not only should there be more room on the outside than on the inside when it comes to humour (or comedy, in this context) but also since the nation must be understood as "a ... lived experience in a relationship between social structures and subjectivity."²⁵⁰ If not, it would have been almost impossible for instance, to concur with the "cult of congeniality" of "the Gaelic fringes of nation"²⁵¹ or to empathise with Richard Steele's "stereotypically Irish qualities of liveliness, good humour and jovial companionship."²⁵²

It can be concurred that the general outlook of humour theories presents an obvious polarity between universals and particulars.²⁵³ A similar division appears to occur with regards to English humour. Starting from the eighteenth-century, the particularistic camp appears to side with the localness of English humour which functions as a "cultural insider-knowledge"²⁵⁴ whereas more recent studies tend to focus on the universal capacity to humourise by refusing to meta-narrativise a specific culture of humour, isolating it from the others. A third option, however, could be to understand English humour as a specific capability since humour itself is a capability. This is not to say that our perception of humour should aspire to a stance that is situated on a middle

²⁴⁷ Medhurst, *National Joke*, 19.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Anthony Easthope, *Englishness and National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 8.

²⁵¹ Eagleton, *Humour*, 121.

²⁵² Ibid., 123.

²⁵³ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 66.

²⁵⁴ Critchley, *On Humour*, 67.

ground between the universalist and particularist camp. And yet, since this study does not offer a study in humour as a cultural construction that is in constant dialogue with members of various social, economic, and political strata, it does not aim at responding to the symbolic universes which legitimise institutionalised social structures.²⁵⁵ Nor does it aim at excavating an inclusive sense of humour that is necessarily unique or unapologetically authentic to the English people. On the contrary, I would like to take up the very possibility that English humour could instead refer to the sum of historically recorded humorous instances which have been traditionally identified with what has come to represent the distinctive character of the English mode of thinking. To put it more correctly and clearly, I aim at describing the English *ethos* under the banner of a common (and not universal) sense of humour which belongs with humanity in general as a mental capability.²⁵⁶ In other words, it can be concurred that English humour has no intrinsic value other than its being the accumulation of a certain cognitive predilection. But to elaborate more extensively on the cognitive potentials of English humour, now I will turn to a sister concept, that is, scepticism which it will be argued to lie at the heart of this particularly humoristic *ethos*, or better put, *dunamis*.

II. Sprouts of Doubt: English Humour and Scepticism

The affinity between the praxis of English identity and the humoristic potential of the English is an established one in the cognitive senses that I have discussed so far. In light of the present streak of interpretation, the *dunamic* capabilities of the English have a fundamental role in determining the limits of their *energeiac* activities. English humour, then, is a mental reflection on individual choices and tendencies. Hence, the cognitive capacities of the individual, it can be maintained, is a perambulatory clause that foreshadows the

²⁵⁵ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 113.

²⁵⁶ I borrow this conceptualisation from Simon Critchley's *On Humour* which links *ethos* with *ethnos* only in the sense that "a sense of humour is often what connects us most strongly to a specific place and leads us to predicate characteristics of that place, assigning certain dispositions and customs to its inhabitants." Critchley, *On Humour*, 68. But, respectfully, I do not concur with the conceptual kinship between these two terms.

humorous capabilities of the English people. But how do these humorous capabilities manifest themselves? Former criticism pinpoints a vast array of activities that are stereotypically connected to eccentricity, melancholy, moroseness, and the urge for privacy. Instead, I would like to add to this list the sceptical potential of English humour which has been infrequently mentioned in criticism despite the general agreement that humour/laughter “liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power.”²⁵⁷ The fundamental question here is that, even though humour criticism rarely touches upon the scepticism of English humour, if laughter is renowned for its liberating force which fends off fear, how are humour and scepticism related? And how does the affinity between humour and scepticism, if there is found to be one, relate to English humour?

To answer this question, it might come in handy to recount a famous scene in *The Name of The Rose* which groups together these two historically disliked concepts: humour and scepticism. After a failed attempt to murder William of Baskerville who investigates the mysterious deaths at a Benedictine monastery in Northern Italy, “The spirit is serene,” says Jorge de Burgos, an unusually accomplished and revered monk of the monastery, “only when it contemplates the truth and takes delight in good achieved, and truth and good are not to be laughed at. This is why Christ did not laugh. Laughter foments doubt.”²⁵⁸ William begs to differ and openly engages in a discussion with the blind librarian about the human need for occasional doubt. He believes in an openly Aristotelian manner that “laughter is proper to man, it is a sign of his rationality”²⁵⁹ while Jorge’s Platonic charter of fear-imposing legislation does not simply allow a harmonious marriage between humour and rationality, and by implication scepticism. Speaking of the second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics* Jorge declares:

Laughter, for a few moments, distracts the villain [*sic*] from fear. But law is imposed by fear, whose true name is fear of God. This book could strike the Luciferine spark that would set a new fire to the whole world, and

²⁵⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 94.

²⁵⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Name of The Rose* (New York: Warner Books, 1986), 80.

²⁵⁹ Eco, *Name of The Rose*, 79.

laughter would be defined as the new art, unknown even to Prometheus, for cancelling fear.²⁶⁰

At this point of the novel, the reader and William are already disclosed the fact that Jorge was primarily involved in the murders which has been haunting the monastery for a while. He is not the executioner and he is not the holder of the knife. But he gives his victims enough rope to hang their selves and by way of large implications it is also disclosed that the motive behind Jorge's master plan is to kill humour along with scepticism itself. Two of the subjects of these murders are especially interesting: Adelmo of Otranto is shown to have been an illuminator who used to have a talented hand in comical illustration, while Venantius of Salvemec is a translator of Aristotle's treatise on comedy. These monastic scholars who entertain the idea of a comedic exit out of the Benedictine programme of indoctrination die horrible deaths. But more importantly, their deaths symbolise the aggrandisement of religious authority at the expense of humour/laughter and scepticism.

Jorge's fear of humour/laughter is not an unprecedented one. It is representative of an anti-laughter (and anti-humour) tradition which has had repeatedly tried its hand at suppressing a potentially reactionary mode of expression. It has philosophical connections to Plato's disdain for laughter on the grounds that he perceives it as a bodily response which "overrides rational self-control."²⁶¹ In the meantime, he also poisons the pages of the Aristotelian treatise with arsenic for fear that his subjects may feel pleasure through laughter; a notion which he inherits from Plato's *Philebus* where Plato succumbs to the pleasureability of laughter and yet denies it since he contends that when a person laughs at the misfortunes of a comic character or of a friend in real life, s/he will be overcome by malice that s/he cannot control. Under this view, pleasure derived from humour/laughter, and pleasure in general, is ruled out for the sake of presenting a "refutation of hedonism" and deciding "which pleasures do, and which do not, belong in the good life."²⁶² Similar attitudes are to be found later

²⁶⁰ Eco, *Name of The Rose*, 277.

²⁶¹ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 4.

²⁶² Donald Davidson, *Plato's Philebus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 20.

in John Chrysostom's writings which identifies laughter with foul discourse²⁶³ just as the Puritan William Prynne's *Histrion-Mastix*; or, *The Actors Tragedie* (1632) acknowledges that a good Christian can never be "immoderately tickled with meere lascivious vanities" and that laughter is certainly a "secular jollity."²⁶⁴ Even as late as in 1877, George Vasey defined the Aristotelian contention about human beings as laughing animals as the product of "popular ignorance" and "childish credulity which is ever the handmaid of ignorance."²⁶⁵ He formulates that smiling and laughter differ from each other in respect of their level of social respectability. In his view, one's smiling is a more acceptable form of laughing rather than one's bursting into gales of laughter since the former suits the educated mind whereas a person who is roaring with laughter would easily form an effortless ensemble with criminality, savagery, and idiocy.²⁶⁶ In his Victorianism that is "puritanical" which offers a "class-conscious revulsion from laughter,"²⁶⁷ Vasey debases audible laughter and offers modest smiling as a substitute. However, he still would like to imagine a world which does not include laughter and claims that his work is an elegy for "a utopia of a laughless world."²⁶⁸ Or, in other words, his work stands for a dystopic congregation of misogynelasts who adamantly feel the need to defend both the individual and society against the profane pleasures of mirth and gaiety.

It is one thing to say, however, that the intellectual precursors of Jorge de Burgos are united in their killjoyness and it is another to realise how they associate humour/laughter with scepticism. In *Laws*, Plato does not make a

²⁶³ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood: Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on the Statues*, vol.9. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, edited by Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1889), 442.

²⁶⁴ William Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix; or, The Actor's Tragedie*, 293. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A10187.0001.001/1:7.7.11?rgn=div3;view=fulltext>. Date of access: 25 April 2021. Sammy Basu contrasts the Puritanical position with the Levellers' "need for social movements of democratic dissent against various aspects of the given status quo." See Sammy Basu, "A Little Discourse *Pro & Con*": Levelling Laughter and Its Puritan Criticism," *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007): 95-113; 113.

²⁶⁵ George Vasey, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling* (London: J. Burns, 1875), 43.

²⁶⁶ Vasey, *Philosophy of Laughter*, 109.

²⁶⁷ Malcolm Andrews, *Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 130.

²⁶⁸ Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 2010), 54.

direct reference to the doubt-inducing force of laughter but by extension he insinuates that those who engage in the comic business should not be allowed to lure good, truthful citizens into the convivial trap of comedy. Besides, he decides that comedic representations can only be “left to slaves or hired aliens” only on the condition that “they receive no serious consideration whatsoever.”²⁶⁹ In Prynne’s *Histrion-Mastix*, the word “secular” occurs thirty-eight times and in nearly all of these instances it is used either in relation to comedy plays or laughter. The eleventh scene of the fifth act goes so far as to say that secular laughter should be turned into mourning and “carnall iollity into weeping and heaviness”²⁷⁰ by following the example of Christ and turning away from the sinful examples of Epicurus and Democritus. Likewise, Vasey locates the distinction between smiling and laughter in the degree to which they evoke doubt as a smile harbours a specific feeling of self-assurance while laughter portends a doubtful disposition, or temperament. On this note, laughter is nothing but a suspicious, undependable mode of reaction. But also, in Anca Parvulescu’s words, since “the mouths opening to laugh them are often missing at least one tooth, a function of their aesthetic deficiency”²⁷¹ it makes an additional statement concerning the fissure between mannerist preciousness and mutinous impulsiveness. Hence, it can be surmised that the anti-laughter tradition fixes its eyes on a particular area in human knowledge which assumes a synonymy between doubt and humour.

In an Ecoean context, the affinity between humour and scepticism is an undeniable one since to humorise means to overrate or underrate the characteristics of any given thing and rob the object of humour of its habitual semiotic signification. In this regard, it naturally evokes suspicion since suspicion emerges as a natural extension of humour’s mental picture. At a climactic point in his conversation with Jorge, William fiercely defends the significance of laughter and openly accuses Jorge of anti-humorism/humanism:

You are the Devil. (...) the Devil is the arrogance of the spirit, faith without smile, truth that is never seized by

²⁶⁹ Plato, *Laws*. Trans. Trevor J. Saunders (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1970), 309-310; 816e-817a.

²⁷⁰ Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix*, 294.

²⁷¹ Parvulescu, *Laughter*, 56.

doubt. The Devil is grim because he knows where he is going, and, in moving, he always returns whence he came.²⁷²

In this sense, Eco explicitly addresses the issue that humour cannot be simply understood as a verbal or literary agent of amusement. It is, in Simon Critchley's words, "an exemplary practice" which "invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives."²⁷³ It "returns us to common sense; by distancing us from it, humour familiarizes us with a common world through its miniature strategies of defamiliarization"²⁷⁴ since in humour, there is a

sound form of human understanding because it helps us to maintain a sceptical distance from all forms of knowledge. Via defamiliarization it takes us back to the common ground we share with our fellows.²⁷⁵

One important conclusion to be derived from here is that the mutiny of humoristic expression leans towards the status-challenging force in intellectual suspicion. Or, in other words, humoristic discourse represents a leap of doubt instead of faith. In this sense, the present study does not use the term scepticism as it was understood by the Academic sceptics of Ancient Greece who made a major argument in favour of the impossibility of achieving knowledge. It does not situate doubt itself as a doubtful matter to the extent that it suspends judgement under whose terms "all discourse, all action would cease, and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence."²⁷⁶ Nor does it make an invocation to an anti-realist tradition which in Bertrand Russell's words leads to "dogmatic doubt."²⁷⁷ Instead, it makes a primary statement with regards to scepticism as a philosophical

²⁷² Eco, *Name of The Rose*, 279.

²⁷³ Critchley, *On Humour*, 18.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁷⁵ Christian Pentzold, "'Make truth laugh': The Novels of Umberto Eco in the Context of his Thought," *Le rire européen*, edited by Alastair B. Duncan and Anne Chamayou, 401-420. (Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 2010). <https://books.openedition.org/pupvd/3224>. Date of access: 1 May 2021.

²⁷⁶ M.F. Burnyeat, "Can The Sceptic Live His Scepticism?," in *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology*, edited by Malcolm Schofield, Myles Burnyeat, Jonathan Barnes, 20-53 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 20.

²⁷⁷ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1945), 234.

enterprise which questions the unquestioning or unquestioned consensus that fideistically disparages reason.²⁷⁸

Of specific importance here is the idea that humour as a human capability inspires a certain contempt for unchallenged epistemological concurrences and the English interval can hardly go unnoticed and requires private attention. To refer once more to *NR*, it is not without good reason that the minacious kinship between laughter and scepticism is delivered through the image of an Englishman, William of Baskerville, whose name might be a reflection on the mid-fourteenth century empiricist philosopher William of Ockham. Nor should it be any coincidence that he could also be the literary embodiment of the mixture of “the logic of Aristotle, the theology of Aquinas, and the cognitive empiricism of Roger Bacon”²⁷⁹ as argued elsewhere. Even more so, his devotion to the empirical method and his formidably inquisitive mind chimes in with Arthur Conan Doyle’s “hero-detective acting specifically as the champion of empirical science, facing its crucial challenge, the challenge of the seemingly supernatural.”²⁸⁰ The English potential of the sceptical philosopher or the scepticism of the English philosopher in *NR*, in this sense, denotes a specific mode of understanding which in Kenneth Matthews’s view is characterised by “common sense, dislike of complication, a strong preference for the concrete over the abstract and a certain awkward honest of method in which an occasional pearl of poetry is embedded.”²⁸¹ In this sense, English humour and scepticism become allies in that the former’s capabilistic status allows the latter to prosper since humour as a supreme cognitive capacity expresses its mental prowess in the form of philosophical doubt in the English context which results in the consistent cycle of epistemological crises and its representation in English humour literature. For this reason, in the following chapters I will not only try to uncover the sceptical potential of English humour but also look at the humorous

²⁷⁸ I have in mind here the “rational noetic structures” Alvin Plantinga speaks of where “there is a set of beliefs taken as basic—that is, not accepted on the basis of any other beliefs.” See Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 16-93 (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 72.

²⁷⁹ Adele J. Haft, Jane G. White, and Robert J. White, eds. *The Key to The Name of The Rose* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 28.

²⁸⁰ James Kissane and John M. Kissane, “Sherlock Holmes and The Ritual of Reason,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 17, no.4 (1963): 353-362; 356.

²⁸¹ Kenneth Matthews, *British Philosophers* (London: William Collins, 1943), 7.

testimonials of epistemological crises from late-medieval to mid-eighteenth century in the English literary canon which deliver sceptical expositions of *le spirit anglais*.



CHAPTER III:
“CERTAYNLY WE BEN DECEYVED!”:
OCCHAMITE SCEPTICISM AND TRAJECTORIES OF POETIC
HUMOUR IN CHAUCER’S *HOUSE OF FAME*

In *Medieval Scepticism and Chaucer*, Mary Edith Thomas piquantly describes the possible points of intellectual communication between Chaucer and the sceptical ideas of those whose “studie but was litel on the Bible”²⁸² in late fourteenth-century England. First, due to “a lifetime of experience in the service of his king, at home and abroad” she argues, Chaucer must have had come into contact with “the talk of the time”²⁸³ which was responsible of a certain insecurity felt towards religious piety and commitment with which the mostly Catholic people of England had been brought up. Second, since he was the son of a wine merchant he must have had come into contact with people from diverse walks of life—as the general narrative structure and technique of the *Canterbury Tales* suggests—and must have listened to the public’s growing feeling of distrust against the Church which led to the fearsome revolt in 1381 on Corpus Christi Day.²⁸⁴ Third, since he emerges as a historical figure who was

²⁸² *Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue, The Physician’s Tale, I.438; 30. Sheila Delany contends that *PT* is “generally conceded to be one of Chaucer’s least interesting and least successful efforts” since it is comprised of “flat characters, a rather incompetent narrative flawed by irrelevant digressions, a plot exceedingly improbable and -unlike The Clerk’s or the Man of Law’s Tales without redeeming symbolic depth.” See Sheila Delany, “Politics and the Paralysis of Poetic Imagination in The Physician’s Tale,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 47-60; 47. However, there is also the possibility to view *PT*’s incompetent narrative and irrelevant digressions as extensions of a sceptical attitude.

²⁸³ Mary Edith Thomas, *Medieval Scepticism and Chaucer* (New York: William-Frederick Press, 1950), 85.

²⁸⁴ Margaret Aston, “Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and The Peasant’s Revolt,” *Past & Present* vol. 143 (1994): 3-47; 9. Aston does not think that the rebellion

also an avid reader with a particular interest in philosophy and natural sciences, “he might naturally have been alert to any skeptical ideas that were circulating by word of mouth or in the written page.”²⁸⁵ If so, she concludes, Chaucer’s triumphant poetic career gives away his intellectually versatile habit of composition that derived from his interest “not only in the world men but the world of ideas.”²⁸⁶ In bringing together his experience in the social, civic, and intellectual spheres, he leans towards the vernacular not only in a linguistic context but also adopts and adapts the notion of vernacularity as a means of dissidence or as a potentially dissident mode of thinking and poeticising. Despite the fact that Chaucer’s poetic career has been largely informed by various cultural forms and forces which induce incredulity, by material implication it can be quickly noticed that Thomas’s account of Chaucer’s worlds of influence cannot accommodate him the role of an erudite scholar whose mind was sharpened by the curricula offered at Oxford or Cambridge. Instead, and as is habitual in Chaucer criticism, her account seems to reserve him the role of a merely curious mind with multiple interests and it seems to be a position that heavily relies on strict categorisation between the poet and the philosopher. But at the same time, the eclecticism of her approach reflexively supports the idea that droplets of fourteenth-century heresy leak into the Chaucerian text inasmuch as Chaucer tends to show symptoms of intellectual sympathy towards the “anti-formal elements in his society.”²⁸⁷ At one hand, then, it should be acknowledged that Chaucer’s dialogic relationship with scepticism is a historically validated phenomenon. The urban spatial politics of fourteenth-century London, for instance, definitively relocate him as a London poet whose actual audience was a combination of top-tier and mid-tier “circle of gentlemen and clerks”²⁸⁸ or in Derek Pearsall’s words, “a ‘clubby’ kind of male coterie audience” to which he adroitly presented “scepticism about the high idealism

broke out on a feast day for no particular reason. She asks: “Is it not inherently likely that there was some element of choice, not simply chance, in the focusing of events round this feast?” *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸⁵ Thomas, *Medieval Scepticism*, 87.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁸⁷ Derek Brewer, *The World of Chaucer* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 50.

²⁸⁸ R.T. Lenaghan, “Chaucer’s Audience,” *Literature and History* 5 (1977): 26-41, qtd. in Paul Strohm, “Chaucer’s Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual,” *The Chaucer Review* 18, no.2 (1983):137-145, 143.

and sighs and langours of love, of wearily cynical understanding of the thinness of that veneer of idealism.”²⁸⁹ In agreement with this point, then, it would not be hard to imagine how the Chaucerian narrative would naturally borrow from late fourteenth-century London’s cultural image as “a place of cultural conflict, jostling rivalries, and incompatible interests” as well as from its emergence as “a profoundly split and antagonistic location.”²⁹⁰ On the other hand, owing to the ardent literary activities of the members of this so-called Chaucerian circle, it is little wonder that Chaucer, the admirer of antithetical expressions “made the acquaintance of several of the Lollard Knights—Clifford, Vache, Stury, Clanvowe, Nevill—in the 1379s and early 1380s”²⁹¹ since his social connections “appear to have encouraged horizontal ties based upon common interest.”²⁹² If so, another careful assumption can be made about the common interests of the reformist Wycliffite text and the vernacular interests of Chaucer himself although it has been argued that it is hard to definitively consider him an anarchist²⁹³ or to label Lollardy either as an inherently vernacular movement or a uniquely English heresy.²⁹⁴ But also, varying interpretations of this intersectionality point out to the limits that are put on Chaucer’s authorial decision-making. For, it is interesting to note that fairly conservative approaches to Chaucer tend to defend the view that he was a devout Catholic who “at the hour of death (...) would have been disturbed, if he had missed absolution, unction, and the viaticum”²⁹⁵ and these views refuse to popularise the image of a dissenter national poet. Instead of acknowledging the liberal spirit in Chaucer, these approaches tend to promote an “understanding of a world permeated with

²⁸⁹ Derek Pearsall, “*The Canterbury Tales* and London Club Culture,” *Chaucer and the City*, edited by Ardis Butterfield, 95-108. Chaucer Studies 37 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 99.

²⁹⁰ Marion Turner, “Greater London,” *Chaucer and the City*, edited by Ardis Butterfield, 25-40. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 25.

²⁹¹ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 45.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁹³ Brewer, *World of Chaucer*, 50.

²⁹⁴ Although there are some views on the inherent Englishness or the importance of English book production of the Wycliffite movement. For instance in Anne Hudson, “Lollardy: The English Heresy?” *Studies in Church History* 18 (1982): 261-283.

²⁹⁵ J.S.P. Tatlock, “Chaucer and Wyclif,” *Modern Philology* 14, no.5 (1916): 257-268; 268.

sacred possibilities”²⁹⁶ in his body of writing which almost leaves out the exigent demands of his poetry. Nevertheless, even for these critics it appears to be difficult to retract the element of scepticism—and in some cases Wycliffism²⁹⁷—or “the attitude of doubt”²⁹⁸ in Chaucer’s writing. As a result, it seems nearly impossible to discuss Chaucer’s heartfelt scepticism as the sole historical outcome of a pre-Protestant culture without discussing the repercussions of authorial deliberation which evokes a recalcitrant parallelism between “the reformer’s club and the poet’s rapier.”²⁹⁹ In this regard, that there is an undeniable tension between these two positions is a reflection on the point that Chaucer’s social, cultural, and intellectual milieu makes a significant contribution to his poetic style which aids him in debunking the onto-metaphysical arguments of the Catholic faith and the non-materialist, abstractionist cultures of his own age. The difficulty here is that there still could be some problems with trying to read the entirety of the Chaucerian corpus into the sceptical tradition. For, as Charles Muscatine has construed earlier, the encounter of the “validation of the historical truth of Chaucer” with his poetic strategies can be swiftly—and recklessly—considered to be “in tune with an earlier and securer phase of medieval culture.”³⁰⁰ Under this view, the particularity and the exemplariness of the Chaucerian narrative would be overwhelmed by an ambitious endeavour to overtly historicise authorial self-fashioning. The underlying motive, in this manner, would be the insistence on acclaiming an archaic image of an author and we would be only half-heartedly acknowledging new streaks of poetic innovation.³⁰¹ However, another way to look at Chaucerian doubt could be trying to pronounce and evaluate the possible implications of Chaucer’s acclaimed verism not simply as an assertion of the

²⁹⁶ Laurel Broughton, “Chaucer and the Saints: Miracles and Voices of Faith,” in *Chaucer and Religion*, edited by Helen Phillips, 111-131. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 131.

²⁹⁷ For instance in Andrew Cole’s *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 79-81.

²⁹⁸ Tatlock, “Chaucer and Wyclif,” 262.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁰⁰ Charles Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis in The Age of Chaucer* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), 31.

³⁰¹ For this point see Derek Brewer, *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 19. He construes that Chaucer’s modernism is only relatable in the sense that the Neoclassical writer stood for the “idiosyncratic amalgam of the old and the new.” *Ibid.*, 20.

historical context of late-fourteenth century England but instead as a large part of his poetic innovation, the outcome of a deliberate decision-making where he reveals his sceptical standpoint as a crucial segment of an underlying philosophical stratum.

It has been already established by criticism that Chaucerian poetry rubs shoulders with doubtful dispositions. For instance, the conventionality of the traditional poet's guide is eliminated in his earliest major work *Book of The Duchess*, providing leverage for the mental states of separate individuals and inserting

a distinctly unauthoritative narrator, to the reader, who must perforce make connections between the three figures according to the clues that Chaucer has left, and thereby devise knowledgeable explanations of the predicaments that face them.³⁰²

The fact that Chaucer not only downgrades the Virgilian companion but also the anti-authoritarian narrator of *BD* puts special emphasis on the individuality of stories stresses the importance of the readerly experience as an individual effort, suspending the methods of readerly conventions. By doing so, *BD* establishes Chaucer's scepticism of cultural abstractions. Elsewhere in the Chaucerian canon, Helen Cooper implicitly refers to this use of paroxysmal doubt by alluding to the fact that *The Canterbury Tales*, both form and content-wise, makes a strong case for cancelling official cultures that is irreverent of "courtly politeness and religious asceticism" which is by-passed by "joyous burlesque."³⁰³ In a similarly irreverent manner, *Anelida and Arcite* stands for its creator's "scepticism about the availability of a legitimizing originality" in the context of literary production" which signals at the "danger of becoming nothing more than an impersonator standing at an alienating distance from the sources of Western writing."³⁰⁴ Moreover, the "blynde entencioun" (I.211) of *Troilus and Criseyde* speaks not only for the abundance of akratic multiverses under the

³⁰² Peter Brown, "The Idea of a Chaucer Companion," in *A Companion to Chaucer*, edited by Peter Brown, 1-8. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 2.

³⁰³ Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 96.

³⁰⁴ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 65.

Trojan roof but also underlines the deliberate departure from poetic teleology that willingly deviates from the ‘well-wrought urn.’ But also, it can be argued that as much as this presents a convincing project trying to find the elements of doubt in Chaucer, to simply acknowledge the doubtful re-mappings in Chaucerian poetry does not clearly expand the meaning of textual revolt. A more important question to be asked at this point could be as follows: what might be the intellectual motives behind Chaucer’s eagerness to indulge in and sail through the more or less troublesome waters of suspicion?

Out of all the critical responses to Chaucerian doubt, the literary nominalist paradigm has opened up a new space of interpretative repertoire since it has identified Chaucer’s scepticism as the fruit of a literary debate over universals (a set of mind-independent, abstract, and transcendent entities) and particulars (individual objects).³⁰⁵ This paradigm which looks back to the medieval problem of universals and has been characterised by a tension between Platonic realism and Aristotelian empiricism has propelled a fresh collection of interpretative habit in Chaucer studies which address the nature of Chaucerian poetry’s relation with the debate. In this respect, Chaucer’s position has been insistently identified as nominalist. For instance, in his 1978 article “Chaucer and The Nominalist Questions,” Russell A. Peck argues that Ockham’s empiricist charter which takes a special interest in the limits of linguistic representation runs parallels to his grave interest in the “phenomena of experience”³⁰⁶ with only slight differences. A few years later, Rodney Delasanta would propose a middle way interpretation between Neoplatonism and nominalism as informative of the commonplace ambiguity and irony in Chaucer’s work³⁰⁷ while Helen Ruth Andretta likemindedly speaks of “a subtle harmonizing of philosophical speculation and theological revelation”³⁰⁸ whereas she gives credence to the idea that Chaucer often responds to Ockhamism and it

³⁰⁵ An introductory read with regards to the universalism-nominalism (the problem of universals) debate in medieval philosophy can be found in Kenny, *Medieval Philosophy*, 115-155.

³⁰⁶ Russell A. Peck, “Chaucer and The Nominalist Questions,” *Speculum* 53, no.4 (1978): 745-760; 745.

³⁰⁷ Rodney Delasanta, “Chaucer and the Problem of the Universal,” *Mediaevalia* 9 (1986): 145-163.

³⁰⁸ Helen Ruth Andretta, *Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde: A Poet’s Response to Ockhamism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 1.

vocalises his desire to voice the “the nature of human happiness, the spiritual aspects of earthly love, the attainment of knowledge, and the conflict between God’s foreknowledge (or necessity) and man’s free will (...).”³⁰⁹ Other interpretations of Chaucerian nominalism, on the other hand, tend to reject to maintain a mild position and consider the Ockhamite influence on Chaucer as the sub-species of a literary nominalist attitude which, in Richard Utz’s words, works as a “preliminary paradigm”³¹⁰ inaugurating a

transition from medieval realist toward early modern nominalist positions, thereby establishing this transition from symbol to sign as one of the decisive factors underlying the formation of modern Europe.³¹¹

Despite the literary nominalist paradigm’s major interpretative benefits, however, it should be observed that these responses to Chaucer either show signs of a need for the assertion of nominalist drives or of an implied need to combine a contemporary (or modern/postmodern) dislike for abstractions with a late fourteenth-century form of logical scepticism which, in their view, would reserve Chaucer the role of a semi-philosophical poet. These views, thus, risk throwing Chaucerian scepticism under the bus when it would be more beneficial to identify “the nature of Chaucer’s interest in philosophy (including logic),” and try to evaluate “the consequences of that interest for critical readings of Chaucer.”³¹²

In this context, I would like to make a major argument for one of Chaucer’s earliest dream visions, *House of Fame* as an exceptional piece of writing which in Kathryn L. Lynch’s words mirrors “Chaucer’s increasing ambition to carve out a foothold for a literary text in more philosophical territory”³¹³ or to recall Robert M. Burlin’s analogy, his ambitious internal rhetoric which runs parallel to that of Francis Bacon’s “lofty flight” from the

³⁰⁹ Andretta, *Poet’s Response*, 6.

³¹⁰ Richard Utz, “Literary Nominalism,” 206.

³¹¹ Ibid., 206.

³¹² David Philip Baker, “Literature, Logic, and Mathematics in the Fourteenth Century,” Unpublished PhD Thesis, Durham University, 2013, 22.

³¹³ Kathryn L. Lynch, *Chaucer’s Philosophical Vision* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 61.

realm of poesy to “the clear air of Philosophy and the Sciences.”³¹⁴ In this respect, it will be argued that the textual harmonics of *HF* purports an Ockhamite rhythm which feeds off Chaucer’s stoic potential, conveying his cynical distrust of realist abstractions. In conformity with this point, the unique sceptical quality of *HF*, it will be maintained, stands out as the most bizarre expression of this authorial uncertainty and cautiousness which gives Chaucer’s humour its uniquely sceptical flavour.

It has already been established by criticism that the entirety of *HF* builds up an eerie tone, consistently revering the overtly conscious rhetoric which is built around the idea of narrative ebbs and flows. It narrates the story of a bookish and a possibly insomniac narrator³¹⁵ speculating on the nature of dreams and he promises to narrate a wondrous dream that he had that is a luring statement after which he falls asleep. The dream narrative that consists of a loosely connected tripartite structure leads most critics to the conclusion that it is so powerful a parody of Dante’s magnum opus, *Divine Comedy*, that “one can almost reconstruct the major conventions of that genre by working backwards from Chaucer’s poem.”³¹⁶ Therefore, the poem represents in itself an amalgam “of raised and dashed expectations”³¹⁷ with regards to the traditional precepts of the classic dream vision. Lynch has identified that the abandonment of the commonplace seasonal motif of the dream vision genre that is the springtime is accompanied by an inversion with “the tenth day now of Decembre” (I.63). In addition, although the dreamer and the guide are the unique markers of the literary vision genre, it contains a certain feeling of “scepticism about aspects of Dante’s vision”³¹⁸ which reverses the roles of the dreamer and the guide. Hence,

³¹⁴ Robert B. Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 45.

³¹⁵ Originally, these traits belong to the narrator of the *Book of The Duchess*. But, they also partially apply to *HF*’s ‘hesitant’ and ‘learned’ narrator since his breadth of knowledge and identification of “dysordynaunce,” (I.27), melancholy, sickness, “prison-stewe” (I.26), and great distress as several of the causes of dreams allow the conclusion that the narrator of *HF* might be suffering from the consequences of bad sleeping habits, or is at least suffering from extreme fatigue. He also later confesses to it when he says: “As he that was wery forgo / On pilgrimage myles two (...)” (I.115-118).

³¹⁶ Lynch, *Chaucer’s Philosophical Vision*, 61-62.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

³¹⁸ Steve Ellis, “Chaucer, Dante, and Damnation,” *The Chaucer Review* 22, no.4 (1988): 282-294; 282.

when *HF* stands out as a seminal example of the Italian influence on Chaucer which has been considered by some critics as a poetic adulation of the Dantesque demeanour in dream vision, it also contains an implicit argument with regards to Chaucer's divergence from that tradition as he prefers to spoon-feed his reader with a parody of "Dante's vatic pretensions"³¹⁹ which surreptitiously looms over the text. However, to consider the challenging status of the poem as solely the product of a deliberate transgression (or regression) renders it adjunct to Chaucer's poetic intention to break with the conventions of a literary tradition that is dominated by the vivid memories of Italian and French writers. But the sceptic suspension of belief and orthodoxy that is served to the reader under the guise of poetic transgression or regression does not primarily derive from the technical unconventionality of the poem. Its unconventionality also emanates from its poetic acquisition from what Sheila Delany in her *Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* dubs as "the tradition central to Chaucer's *House of Fame*" which "is a critical and skeptical tradition, rooted in the awareness of coexistent contradictory truth (...)." ³²⁰ In other words, it is a poetic spectacle of "the cleavage between reason and faith, characteristic of post-Ockhamite thought."³²¹

The vantage point of pointing towards a cleavage of this sort is that it reminds the reader of a central clash within *HF*. The very first line of the poem chimes with undertones of writerly affection when the narrator benevolently says "God turne us every drem to goode!" (I.1). And yet, it later turns out that it is only an early invitation to a rhetorical trap that adroitly asks his reader about the causes of dreams and says:

To my wyt, what causeth swevenes
 Eyther on morwes or on evenes,
 And why th'effect folweth of somme,
 And of somme hit shal never come;
 Why that is an avision
 And why this a revelacion,
 Why this a drem, why that a sweven,
 And noght to every man lyche even;
 Why this a fantome, why these oracles
 I not. (I.3-12)

³¹⁹ John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven, 1979), 43.

³²⁰ Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 13.

³²¹ Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis*, 22.

At first sight, it appears that the narrator evokes the dream variations which had been laid out earlier by Macrobius in the *Commentary on The Dream of Scipio* where he discusses dreams according to their origin and significance, “sometimes with reference to the soul and its powers.”³²² The tone of the introductory remarks, however, is supposedly evocative of the narrator’s ignorance since he seemingly finds it hard to locate the exact nature and origin of dreams. He pretends not to know the generic differences between nightmare (*insomnia/enypnion*), apparition (*visum/phantasma*), oracular dream (*oraculum/chrematismos*), prophetic dream (*visio/horama*), and the enigmatic dream (*somnium/oneiros*). In this manner, the discourse on not knowing the categorical differences between various types of dreams presents the reader with an inverted summary of the *Commentary*’s entire second chapter of Book I.³²³ To complicate things even further, in the following lines the oddity of the initial recount is elongated, and the narrator goes on to make excuses for not knowing the causes of dreams and “hir signiffaunce” (I.17):

Or why this more then that cause is—
As yf folkys complexions
Make hem dreme of reflexions,
Or ellys thus, as other sayn,
For to gret feblenesse of her brayn,
By abstinence or by seknesse,
Prison-stewe or gret distresse,
Or ellys by dysordynaunce
Of naturel acostumaunce. (I.20-28)

The Macrobian equivalent of these lines provide exact explanations of the causes of dreams—for instance, it identically describes the fact that nightmares are said to be caused by mental or physical distress or anxiety about one’s future—³²⁴ that one could refer to the original source and solve the mysterious tone which the narrator hard-headedly chooses to keep. Nevertheless, it is so fragile but also

³²² Alison M. Peden, “Macrobius and Mediaeval Dream Literature,” *Medium Aevum* 54, no.1 (1985): 59-73; 59.

³²³ Ambrosii Theodosii Macrobiani, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, edited by Iacobus Willis (Stuttgartiae: Lipsiae Teubneri, 1970), I.2.20-25; 8.

³²⁴ Macrobiani, *Commentarii*, I.2.4-6. It reads: “est enim enypnion quotiens cura oppressi animi corporisve sive fortunae, qualis vigilantem fatigaverat, talem se ingerit dormienti (...),” 9.

a conspiring inversion of the original source that one could easily disprove the defendant narrator's argument by also referring to the Latin grammarian's explanation of dreams. From this perspective, the narrator's inability to decide whether a dream is caused by deliberate physical abstinence, spiritual grief, or a corporal dysfunctionality leads us to think that the poem "denies blueprinting,"³²⁵ denouncing his authorial responsibility to secure a firm textual context for the audience. Thus, he introduces himself as a seemingly confident narrator who only shows confidence in confidentiality *au contraire* and refuses to offer a solution to the question he posits in the first place. By the end of the proem, he multiplies his references to his lack of knowledge (I.52, I.55), leaving it to the care of the "grete clerkys" (I.54) and spends time in the ineffectual activity of notifying the reader of his illiteracy in this matter. Finally, he makes a cyclical back-reference to his cordial salutation in the very first line:

For I of noon opinion
 Nyl as now make mensyon,
 But oonly that the holy roode
 Turne us every drem to goode! (I.55-58)

The semi-anxious, not daring, and seemingly unknowledgeable narrator of the proem foreshadows the fact that he "is scarcely portrayed as a dignified figure"³²⁶ and that the poem has a keen eye for issuing "a shifting and unresolved sense of what it is about."³²⁷ The text, it appears, is either conscious of the medieval writer's "ultimate inadequacy of their own inventions" or handpicks "a deliberate flaw in the Chinese vase."³²⁸ Either way, though, it is evident that the narrator refuses to provide the reader with a satisfactory resolution about the origins and causes of dreams. Instead, he makes a reference in haste to a dream he recently had and diverts our attention elsewhere immediately:

For never sith that I was born,

³²⁵ William A. Quinn, "Chaucer's Recital Presence in *The House of Fame* and The Embodiment of Authority," *The Chaucer Review* 43, no.2 (2008): 171-196; 171.

³²⁶ David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 74.

³²⁷ Larry M. Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), 35.

³²⁸ Douglas Kelly, *The Conspiracy of Allusion: Description, Rewriting, and Authorship from Macrobius to Medieval Romance* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 259.

Ne no man elles me befor,
Mette, I trowe stedfastly,
So wonderful a drem as I (I.59-62)

And ironically enough, in the following part, that is the invocation, he asks his reader to trust him well (I.66) since he makes a solemn promise:

I wol make invocacion,
With special devocion,
Unto the god of slep anoon,
That duelleth in a cave of stoon (...). (I.67-70)

The transition from the proem to the invocation is an unexpected one as he denies forming a contract between the author and the reader. But more importantly than that, it leaves us alone with an unresolved semantic mystery in the confusing and almost distractive opening of the poem. There is little doubt that it is a “rhetorical *dubitatio*,”³²⁹ a rhetorically doubtful extrapolation where the persuasive powers of the narrator undermine writerly sovereignty over the text. But also, it suddenly leaves the reader off the hook, leading her/him instead to an aporetic tunnel of logical disjunction where her/his role in the act of reading is re-configured as a figure “*in a deliberate poetic construct*.”³³⁰ The minor clash in the proem, then, is one which occurs between the traditionally defined poetic signification of a writer and reader and the dubious role that Chaucer assigns to them. Or, in other words, the enigma is defined by the unusual narrator’s suspicion of writerly presence and readerly passive consumption. Nevertheless, it does not suspend the possibility for discourse production on the author’s side and discursive reception on the reader’s side. On the contrary, it introduces a major clash which seems to hide a larger epistemic and semantic crisis. It pretends to illustrate a world of empty signifiers but, in fact, by breaking the writer-reader agreement, it raises a charitable, or amicable, discussion concerning linguistic signification. In other words, the hesitancy of the narrator functions as a means of textual levelling only to test the limits of epistemic knowledge as the prefatory act of the narrator that is built around the

³²⁹ Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity*, 36. Original italics.

³³⁰ Robert O. Payne, “Chaucer’s Realization of Himself as Rhetor,” in *Medieval Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric*, edited by James J. Murphy, 270-287. (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1978), 275. Original italics.

hesitation to determine the “significance” of concepts and terms such as dreams, authority, and readership. By doing so, it denounces traditional aetiology and seeks for a replacement. But, how does this relate itself to a crisis of knowledge? To answer this question, I will have to turn to Ockham’s semantics.

In *Summa Logicae*, Ockham introduces his theory of mental language where he tries “to avoid recourse to extramental universals and at the same time to maintain the objectivity of knowledge and its relation to reality.”³³¹ For, his epistemology and logical method is one which contravenes “the realist *via antiqua*, “the old way” of doing logic, science, philosophy, and theology in the late Middle Ages” which devotes special effort to answering “the old *metaphysical* question “What are the common natures signified by our common terms and how are they related to the singulars?”³³² Instead, he introduces, in Gyula Klima’s view, “the nominalist *via moderna*, the “modern way”³³³ and offers a semantic substitution. For, he rejects the *Via Antiqua*’s view that terms and concepts are denominators of a common entity representing a common essence. In the middle of a discussion about concrete and abstract names that are not synonyms, he elucidates:

In the third mode concrete and abstract names supposit for distinct things, neither of which is a subject or part of the other. This can happen in many ways. Thus, the things signified might be related as cause and effect, as when we speak of a project as being human but not a man; or they might be related as sign and thing signified. Thus, we say that *the difference of man is an essential difference, not because it is the essence of man, but because it is a sign of some part of man’s essence.*³³⁴

³³¹ Claude Panaccio, *Mental Language: From Plato to William of Ockham*. Trans. Joshua P. Hochschild and Meredith K. Ziebart (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 191.

³³² Gyula Klima, “The Nominalist Semantics of Ockham and Buridan: A “Rational Reconstruction,” in *Handbook of the History of Logic*, vol. 2: Mediaeval and Renaissance Logic, eds. Dov M. Gabbay and John Woods, 389-431. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008), 389. Original italics.

³³³ Klima, “Nominalist Semantics,” 389. Original italics.

³³⁴ William of Ockham, *Ockham’s Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae*. Trans. Michael J. Loux (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974) I.5; 57. Italics are mine.

Under this view, for instance, to say that X is known through its *X-ness* means to attribute a universal essence to X. If so, the individual existence of X would have to be predicated from the abstraction of *X-ness*. On the other hand, the nominalist alternative of Ockham suggests that a term, or a concept is verified through “the actuality, i.e., actual existence of this *significatum*.”³³⁵ The semantic function of the individualised subject, then, would be that its status as a term can only be predicated upon the properties which contribute to X’s material or objective existence. It follows from this argument that the Ockhamite interpretation of semantic signification is not only dismissive of the abstractionist charter of realist semantics but also it is inherently critical of the fact that “their semantics left the question of the distinctness or identity of these items open.”³³⁶ From this perspective, the almost annoying ignorance which facilitates the narrator’s rhetoric of scepticism contributes to the meaning of this semantic hole, or better put, opening. For it rejects to ascertain a universal essence to dreams, authorship, or readership but instead proposes to concentrate on the varying actualities of individual dreams, authors, and readers due to “the speaker’s arrogantly independent stance of “non other auctor alegge I.”³³⁷ In this respect, it focuses on the individuality, or singularity, and certainly not the universality of human experience, saving it from the shade of a permeating ontology where individual distinctness and difference is eliminated. The multitude of dream variations he evokes, the transgressive power that he bestows upon the reader, and the dialogic but reductionist posture of his all contribute to the point that it is a call for individualised poetic signification. On that account, the semantic hole which the narrator’s reluctance has implemented at the heart of the text becomes an illusory one which veers away “from the general toward the particular” through which we can see additional signs of a follower of the *Via Moderna*” due to the fact that “in the manner of Ockham, understanding is first a matter of an intuitive perception of a singular individual thing.”³³⁸ In the end, the nominalist semantics of Chaucer’s narrator strengthen the poem’s

³³⁵ Klima, “Nominalist Semantics,” 398.

³³⁶ Ibid., 406.

³³⁷ Jacqueline T. Miller, “Writing on The Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*,” *The Chaucer Review* 17, no.2 (1982): 95-115; 95.

³³⁸ Laurence Eldredge, “Chaucer’s *House of Fame* and The *Via Moderna*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71, no.1 (1970): 105-119; 110.

doubtful attitude and confirm his inimical siding with nominalist scepticism since the narrator's constant hesitation seems to follow "the skepticism of the adherents of the *Via Moderna*."³³⁹ And yet, the remaining—and most important—question of all is this: how is any of this related to Chaucer's humour?

First, the nominalist stratagem of the narrator which is verified by the 'significative' delay creates a humorous instance. Or better put, it is the comic timing that rules out abstractive stativity and promotes instead the dynamic law of human experience that produces humour. In a sense, it anachronistically evokes a Beckettian form of poetic artisanship that is made up of "a series of temporal arrhythmias, caught between a slow hyperactivity and a hyperactive slowness."³⁴⁰ Or, to borrow from Malcolm Andrews's trajectory, it depends on "the feedback loop between [comedian] and each individual audience" where timing becomes "as a near instinctual sensitivity in the performer to the mood and responsiveness of this audience."³⁴¹ Second, and more importantly than the first argument, this stratagem adds up to a certain sense of incongruity in the poem. For, the sceptical reform of Chaucer which bears a family resemblance to Ockham's nominalist revival in linguistic signification brings our attention back to the cleavage between reason and faith in Ockhamite and post-Ockhamite thought of which Muscatine reminds us. The cleavage in the narrative connotes the contrast "between the character and the profession which demands those qualities the character lacks" and also the contrast "between qualities in character" that juxtapose "callousness allied with sudden flashes of tenderness, tolerance linked with a fitful shrewishness."³⁴² The unreliability, the narrative mood that swings between charitable friendship and nervous ignorance, then, creates a sense of unexpected disjunction/incongruity and it is from this

³³⁹ Eldredge, "Chaucer's *Hous of Fame*," 110.

³⁴⁰ Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 159.

³⁴¹ Andrews, *Dickensian Laughter*, 51. Andrews borrows this idea from the Saturday Night Live guest comedian Greg Dean and continues: "I mean *this* audience: this particular audience, on this particular evening, in this particular venue. Tomorrow night—same place, same performer, much the same material, but a new audience—the dynamic will have to be reworked all over again as the comedian negotiates a new relationship." *Ibid.*, 51-52. Original italics.

³⁴² Jean W. Skelton, "The Humour of Chaucer," Unpublished Master's Thesis, The University of British Columbia, 1932, 20.

disjunction that the poet's sense of humour arises. In this regard, Chaucer's humorous narrator in *HF* quickly becomes the centre of a contemplative force which reflects on the "strained expectation" involved in humour as delineated by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*:

*Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing. This very reduction, at which certainly understanding cannot rejoice, is still indirectly a source of very lively enjoyment for a moment. Its cause must consequently lie in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reciprocal effect of this upon the mind. This, moreover, cannot depend upon the representation being objectively an object of gratification, (...) but must rest solely upon the fact that the reduction is a mere play of representations, and, as such, produces an equilibrium of the vital forces of the body.*³⁴³

That the narrator reduces our expectations to nothing, furthers his advancement in the nominalist territory and thus, unlocks the sceptical function of humour is further exemplified by his functional appropriation of dreams in *The Aeneid* in the following parts of Book I. Firstly, on the tenth day of December, he says, he "fil on slepe wonder sone" (I.114), "As he that wery was forgo / On pilgrimage myles two / To the corseynt Leonard (...)" (I.115-117) and the pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Leonard that is erected in memory of the patron saint of the imprisoned, signifies a personal search of meaning rather than as a Christian act of communal journey. The content of the dream, in accordance, is not a site for prophetic revelation; it does not claim to contain the preserved, the 'imprisoned' meaning. On the contrary, it 'unprisons' it and accordingly the pilgrimage no longer represents part of a communal appointment but rather it stands for an individual experience. Because in an Ockhamite sense it reduces similarity between two things, it is now a reference to the dissimilarity between X and Y as representative of two different modes of signification since "the relation of similarity, like that of distinction, identity, and so on, depends entirely on the nature and mode of being of the things (...)." ³⁴⁴ In accordance, it postpones the

³⁴³ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 161. Original italics.

³⁴⁴ Joshua Rayman, "Ockham's Theory of Natural Signification," *Franciscan Studies* 63 (2005):289-323; 293.

politics of the closed text and replaces it with the provocative, manipulative poetics of the open text which according to Umberto Eco leaves the door open “to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli.”³⁴⁵ Thus, we are both invited to observe the narrator’s personal interpretation of a Christian, or better put realist abstraction which forces the reader “to *make the work* together with the author.”³⁴⁶ The fact that later on he chooses to narrate the terminous relationship between Dido and Aeneas out of all the stories narrated in the Virgilian original, also emerges as a development on this point. Since the narrator seems to be suspicious of the narrative grandeur of the Roman legend, he decides instead to focus on Dido’s woeful lamentation upon Aeneas’s unexpected leave and exclaims:

And after grave was how shee
 Made of hym shortly at oo word
 Hyr lyf, hir love, hir lust, hir lord,
 And dide hym al the reverence
 And leyde on hym al the dispenche
 That any woman myghte do
 Wenyng hythad al be so
 As he hir swor; and herby demed
 That he was good, for he such semed.
 Allas! What harm doth apparence,
 Whan hit is fals in existence! (I.256-266)

The emphasis on Dido’s tears and the falsehood of Aeneas’s epic cause is a consequence of the narrator’s “persistent intrusions” which “distance us from the legendary content” and “interfere with our natural desire to hear a story (...).”³⁴⁷ But, the real emphasis lies elsewhere: it is a cynical take on the language of epic stories which the narrator doubts that contains a “a del of trouthe” (I.331). Therefore, throughout the remainder of Book I, we listen to the disparity, or for the sake of familiarity, the ‘cleavage’ between appearance and reality, the signifier and the signified, the universal story and the particular segment because he doubts that the human mind could conceive universality “in

³⁴⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Role of The Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 63.

³⁴⁶ Eco, *Role of The Reader*, 63. Original italics.

³⁴⁷ Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity*, 38.

an experiential way.”³⁴⁸ It is the particularity of Dido’s storyline that the narrator and the reader can identify with since it humanises, or particularises, pain and humorously mocks the epic fate of Aeneid who is destined to find a new city. To quote from Eldredge, “the narrator shows a skeptical bent” although it is doubtful that he looks for “something which his skeptical orientation actually precludes—namely, an idea of love general enough to encompass his experience”³⁴⁹ since he secretly hides it in the narrative gaps that such an endeavour is bound to be incontinent one, and as a result, a humorous one. Since he knows that it is an unattainable task, he manufactures a poetic play-thing and a smirky laugh out of an unattainable and fragile (“But as I slepte, me mette I was / Withyn a temple ymad of glas” (I.119-120) transcendentalism which, in my opinion, does not represent the outcome of “a conflict of which Geffray himself is at best only dimly aware”³⁵⁰ but instead one which he is highly cognisant of. Another possible way to look at it is that this heart-wrenching segment of Dido in this artistically engineered version of the Virgilian original reminds the reader that “Hyt is not al gold that glareth” (I.272). In stating so, he makes a cyclical statement in favour of the signficatory line of flight from the culturally engineered rationale of epic masculinity, fate construction, and heroic sacrifice. Hence, Book I ends with a powerful invocation to Christ:

“O Crist,” thoughte I, “that art in blysse,
 Fro fantome and illusion
 Me save!” And with devocion
 Myn eyen to the hevene I caste. (I.492-495)

A little later, the narrator’s prayer to heaven is humorously intervened by the entrance of an illustrious Eagle on the brink of Book II:

Hyt was of gold, and shon so bryghte
 That never sawe men such a syghte,
 But yf the heven had ywonne
 Al newe of gold another sonne;
 So shone the egles fethers bryghte,
 And somewhat downward gan hyt lyghte.
 (I.503-508)

³⁴⁸ Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity*, 18.

³⁴⁹ Eldredge, “Chaucer’s *Hous of Fame*,” 111.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

The expectation is that the glittering figure of Jove's Eagle will hopefully illuminate the narrator and the reader, one which will make "the inconclusiveness of the first part of the poem immaterial."³⁵¹ But the journey to the House of Fame which is supposed to be by Jove's grace and "In som recompensacion" (II.665) of the narrator's labour in love, turns out to be, at large, a metaphorical one with little signification. The glittering image of the Eagle quickly dissolves into thin air:

I gan beholde more and more
To se the beaute and the wonder;
But never was ther dynt of thonder,
Ne that thyng that men calle fouder (...). (II.532-535)

If it should be accepted that the narrator is "rather a self-caricature, and the prime elements of that caricature are bookishness and thickheaded naïveté,"³⁵² it becomes apparent that his priorly formed notion of *eagle-ness*, a notion which he has acquired from his bookishness does not meet the disappointment of his first-hand experience with a real one. He is obviously "an earnest scholar, overtaken with scraps of knowledge but starved of comprehension."³⁵³ We never have an honest account of whether he has ever encountered a real eagle or not. What we have at hand here is again a play on the Ockhamite distinction, or incontinence, between abstractive and intuitive cognition where "intuitive cognition is clearly an attempt to ground all human knowledge in our sensory experience of individual objects in the world"³⁵⁴ and contrarily abstractive cognition is responsible of forming

an intellectual habit in the soul, disposing the individual
to experience subsequent abstractive cognitive acts of
the object and of its qualities, regardless of the current

³⁵¹ Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity*, 39.

³⁵² David M. Bevington, "The Obtuse Narrator in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Speculum* 36, no.2 (1961): 288-298; 290.

³⁵³ Bevington, "Obtuse Narrator," 290.

³⁵⁴ H. Francie Roberts, "What do I see when I see this lion? Intuitive Cognition and Concept Formation, according to William of Ockham," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales* 76, no.2 (2009): 335-364; 336.

presence or existence of the originally encountered object.³⁵⁵

In Katherine Tachau's view, "Ockham accepts with qualification the description of abstractive cognition as "indifferent to existence"³⁵⁶ whereas intuitive cognition is dependent on sense experience and "an object's presence and existence (*res presens et existens in se*)."³⁵⁷ In accordance, the narrator appears to be abashed in the face of the abstractions he has formed about the eagle. The tone of the narrative directs our attention to the fact that inexperience in worldly affairs is a matter to be treated suspiciously. It is in this sense that he somehow feels the urge to illustrate the Eagle in as much detail as he can:

And with hys grymme pawes stronge,
Withyn hys sharpe nayles longe,
Me, fleyng, in a swap he hente,
And with hys sours ayen up wente,
Me caryng in his clawes starke
A lightly as I were a larke (...). (II.541-546)

Once more again, the clash between his abstractions of the chimerical bird and the actual sensory experience he has, fuels a sense of fright, a "humorous negativity" due to "the persona's frank fear of flying, and of falling."³⁵⁸ The humorous timidity which stems from the intimate exposition of the journey is quite relatable in this sense that he is absolutely amazed and confused by the complexity of this individual experience:

For so astonyed and asweved
Was every vertu in my heved,
What with his sours and with my drede,
That al my felyng gan to dede,
For-whi hit was to gret affray. (II.549-553)

³⁵⁵ Roberts, "What do I see when I see this lion?," 338.

³⁵⁶ Katherine Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology and The Foundations of Semantics, 1250-1345* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1988), 117.

³⁵⁷ Tachau, *Vision and Certitude*, 119. Original italics.

³⁵⁸ Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity*, 40.

Shockingly enough, though, there occurs an Aesopian intervention out of nowhere and the Eagle starts speaking “in mannes vois” (II.556), urging the narrator to be more confident:

(...) “Awak!
And be not agast so, for shame!”
And called me tho by my name. (II.556-558)

The irony here is that the narrator leads us to think that it is the Eagle’s especially second “awak” that brings him back to his senses (II.560-564) when it is all about the Eagle’s gentle words that sooth him and manage to treat him for the shock he had been experiencing. Sensory experience via sensory stimuli is one thing, but the use of human language by a volitant animal is another. What we have at hand here is again a kind of humour that is born out of incontinence, a sceptical evaluation of the Eagle. At first, he finds comfort in the mythical creature’s comforting words (II.572) but later on, once the eagle assures the narrator of his good intent, suspicion, our old friend enters the scene. After listening to the Eagle’s comforting words, he thinks to himself:

“(...) Let see! Darst thou yet loke now?
Be ful assured, boldely,
I am thy frend.” And therwith I
Gan for to wondren in my mynde.
“O God,” thoughte I, “that madest kynde,
Shall I noon other weyes dye? (II.580-585)

It is this specific scene which delivers the idea that not only is the narrator inexperienced and the eagle incontinent but also the narrator is an incontinent agent who can never be rest assured. For, if it was the inexperience that caused his hesitancy in Book I, what is his excuse for being anxious now? Could it be that he has a certain inclination to doubt which is also why he appeals to the senses of the English speaking and understanding people at the very beginning of Book II when he says “Now herkeneth every maner man / That Englissh understonde kan” (II.509-510)? Is he a habitual doubter? As an extension of these questions, in the following scene, we see him trying to, or not able to, understand why Jove has sent him an eagle for education, “for thy lore and for thy prow” (II.579):

“Or what thing may this sygnifye?
I neyther am Ennok, ne Elye,
Ne Romulus, ne Ganymede,
To hevene with daun Jupiter,
And mad the goddys botiller.” (II.587- 592)

Leaving aside the possibility that the narrator is asking a rhetorical question about his insignificance as a human being in the larger macrocosmic scope of existence, there appears to be a blind spot in the narrator’s mind here where he succumbs to the individual’s limits of consciousness. The Eagle’s tone is now more accusative than gracious and encouraging:

For when thy labour doon al ys,
And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
In stede of reste and newe thynges
Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,
And, also domb as any stoon,
Thou sittest at another book
Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;
And lyvest thus as an heremyte,
Although thyn abstynence ys lyte. (II.652-660)

The narrator is forced by the Eagle to become someone more than the “myopic and recalcitrant passenger”³⁵⁹ that he is whereas our narrator is frightened to pay a visit to the House of Fame on the grounds that he is not ready to see more “wonder thynges” (II.674) than “Loves folk moo tydynges” (II.675) which are, in his view, beyond the grasp of his wits (II.701-702). This newly acquired position of the narrator is a funny one; it is not complimentary of his earlier anxiety. But still, it is an act of humorous incontinence. The clash in Book II is now a self-centred one since he doubts the significance of dreams, poetic authority, and the role Jove assigns him with but at the same time he—only seemingly—tries to resort to the sanctuary of abstractions. He is obviously reluctant to gain new experience or in other words, is doubtful that he will learn anything new from this semi-mythical creature since he is still unable to understand why a divine being would send a messenger to teach him the worth

³⁵⁹ Bevington, “Obtuse Narrator,” 294.

of individual experience. The Eagle, on the other hand, is persistent in his Aristotelian toil and continues:

Geffrey, thou wost ryght wel this,
That evey kyndely thyng that is
Hath a kyndely stede ther he
May best in hyt conserved be;
Unto which place every thyng
Thorgh his kyndely enclynynge. (II.729-734)

The long silence of Geoffrey the narrator whose name we have only very recently learned, is a disturbing one. As the Eagle continues his lecture on the natural inclination of beings since “every thing, by thys reson, / Hath his propre mansyon” (II.753-754), he also analogously comments on the natural function of human beings. If a river is, by virtue of its nature, teleologically inclined to flow, then, all human beings should be inclined to know as Aristotle maintains in the first sentence of his *Metaphysics*.³⁶⁰ Interestingly enough, however, rather than commenting on the Eagle’s observations, the intrusive character of Geoffrey now becomes the epitome of quietude. The only answer he can produce in response to the Eagle’s long speech is a mere “Yis” (II.864). Funnily enough, he later also seeks comfort in the moderate realism of Boethius (II.972-978)³⁶¹ which has led few Chaucerian critics to think that “the self-reflexive moment of the *House of Fame* keeps opening outward toward the realm of the abstract, universal, celestial”³⁶² although they usually wish the narrator would maintain a middle ground between the concrete and the abstract. But I respectfully decline this view. Geoffrey’s silence contains in itself a moment of doubt that functions as an extension of his doubtful character and narrative so far, since he is cautious of the Eagle’s assignment of a universalist understanding of nature whose underpinnings can be easily read into the realist tradition. In this sense, Geoffrey’s silence is a cautious re-modelling of the Eagle’s discourse where humour takes

³⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Alpha, I.980a21-22; 467. The original text reads: “πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει.”

³⁶¹ Anthony Kenny delineates that Boethius did not consider corporeality as part of species and genera and that they represent “a similarity abstracted from particulars” but “for purposes of formal logic it is not necessary to rule out the Platonic thesis of universals existing in separation.” Kenny, *Medieval Philosophy*, 121.

³⁶² Steven F. Kruger, “Imagination and The Complex Movement of Chaucer’s *House of Fame*,” *The Chaucer Review* 28, no.2 (1993): 117-134; 128.

over the entire speech that follows from here. He does not seek for help from abstractions and only parodically calls out the names of Martianus Capella and Alan de Lille as sources of poetic truth since he has declined for roughly nine-hundred lines to declare the dominance of any poetic authority including, to a certain extent, himself. It could be argued, that the narrator's mock-invocation of Capella and de Lille is a childish protestation of the Eagle's essentialist wisdom, absent-mindedly arguing that he chooses to side with prominent figures of poetic authority:

And than thoughte y on Marcian,
And eke on Antecaudian,
That sooth was her description
Of alle the hevenes region,
As fer as that y sey the preve;
Therefore y kan hem now beleve. (II.985-990)

Larry Sklute maintains that “this belief in the truth of literary representation stands in direct contrast to the fear expressed earlier in the poem” and that “the contrast between prior skepticism and current belief suggests a distinction of literary kinds that creates the different responses.”³⁶³ It is true that there is a self-reflexive contrast between the initial attitude of the narrator and his later response to the Eagle. However, if *HF* is a parody, to re-evoked Lynch's prior statement, it does not make absolute sense to succumb to Geoffrey's word of mouth concerning his denial of further experience (II.994). In contrast, it emerges as a point of culmination in the development of the poem's humour since as James Beattie, the contemporary of Kant and proponent of the incongruity theory of humour, argues in his *Laughter and Ludicrous Composition*:

Humorous amplification will generally be found to imply a mixture of plausibility and absurdity, or of likeness and dissimilitude. (...) and hence the seeming relation between the pretended effect and the cause. And an additional incongruity presents itself, when we compare the seriousness of the speaker with the absurdity of what is spoken.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity*, 41.

³⁶⁴ James Beattie, *On The Nature and Immutability of Truth, in opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (Philadelphia: Hopkins and Earle, 1809), 175-176.

Beattie further describes the nature of incongruous humour and puts forward the idea that there is “a sort of ironical reasoning”³⁶⁵ involved in it. In this respect, even if we accept that Geoffrey emerges first as a fierce nominalist sceptic and later matures into a realist man of faith, we would have to accept that this contrast does not suggest that *HF* describes a world full of ambiguity or one that is devoid of signification. On the contrary, it does appeal to Ockhamite doubt because it feeds on this ‘ironical reasoning’ which lampoons the ignorant individual’s need for clinging to abstractions in the face of the excitement and fear that sensory experience brings *ad infinitum*. This should also be why at the invocation of Book III, Geoffrey addresses Apollo, the god of “science and lyght” (III.1091) to learn with certitude what in his “hed ymarked ys” (III.1103). At the very beginning of the final book, the reader encounters a narrator who is actually transformed by the experience he had and who is mature enough now to understand the meaning of this vision. Despite the painful steepness of the high rock upon which the temple is built (III.1116), he is now eager to climb it with the intent to describe its shape in detail (III.1112-1113). His “ententyf” is to see the temple for himself (III.1120) and observes in disappointment that its rock is made of ice and not of steel:

But at the laste aspied I,
And found that hit was every del
A roche of yse, and not of stel. (III.1128-1130)

It is a grave disillusionment on both Geoffrey’s and the reader’s part to see that the journey to the House of Fame leads nowhere but to a monument erected on a “feble fundament” (III.1132). The sense of disappointment, however, is not a source of melancholy or does not have a melancholic effect since Geoffrey notices that the names of the once “famous folkes” (III.1137) that were once engraved on the walls are barely readable now. So, he asks to himself and to reader: “What may ever laste?” (III.1147). In an Ockhamite fashion, the narrator accepts, if he does not know already, that temporality and temporal relations cannot be

³⁶⁵ Beattie, *On The Nature*, 169.

considered as a *res absolutae*. In this context, there is a difference between claiming that the narrative strategy of *HF* erodes the possibility of semantic signification and the fact that the dynamism of temporal relations cannot be understood under universal terms but only under particular terms. R.G. Wengert explains this relation with an analogy:

But suppose it is true that Socrates will exist tomorrow. If that temporal relation of ‘going to be tomorrow’ were a *res absolutae* like whiteness, it would ever afterwards—even before tomorrow—be necessary that Socrates will exist tomorrow. Even God could not make Socrates not to exist tomorrow. Ockham thinks this consequence is absurd and thinks the way to avoid it is to deny that temporal relations are *res absolutae* existing in their subjects.³⁶⁶

The temporality of fame which appals Geoffrey, then, is only a matter of individuated meaning rather than an ultimate law of time and being. Only those who have passed the test of time and have achieved great fame have their name intact. But this is not because they have an intact fame that is universally recognised. Instead, it is simply—and ridiculously—because they are not exposed to heat and their “olde tyme” (III.1155) virtue was a habit which “is generated from antecedent habits.”³⁶⁷ The inside of the temple, on the other hand, is more appalling than the outside and presents a waggish view of the futility of fame. Once our narrator steps inside the building, he is welcomed by the deafening sound of a rising crescendo:

There saugh I sitte in other seës,
Pleyinge upon sondry gleës,
Whiche that I kan not nevene,
Moo than sterres ben in hevene (...). (III.1251-1254)

And this image will soon conjoin with the image of an ensemble of tricksters:

Ther saugh I pleye jugelours,
Magiciens, and tregetours,
And Phitonesses, charmeresses,

³⁶⁶ R.G. Wengert, “Necessity of The Past: What is Ockham’s Model?,” *Franciscan Studies* 47 (1987): 234-256; 249. Original italics.

³⁶⁷ Wengert, “Necessity of The Past,” 251.

Olde wicches, sorcerresses,
That use exorsisacions,
And eke these fumygacions. (III.1259-1264)

It is a curious thing however, that following Geoffrey's exit, he sees the castle of Fame and another glittering image welcomes us:

But Lord, so fair yt was to shewe,
For hit was al with gold behewe. (III.1305-1306)

And later on, he meets Fame sitting on the throne in an almost bestial manner since her head almost touches Heaven, she has countless eyes and ears, feathers like partridges, and a curly hair (III.1375-1392). Her features are not only strikingly similar to that of the Eagle in the sense that Geoffrey admires her glamorous presence. But, as it was with the Eagle, the narrator immediately suspects her grandeur for not blessing the members of an approaching company with fame and being unjust with her decisions. The narrator suspects now the truth value, the signification of her judgements:

What her cause was, y nyste.
For of this folk ful wel y wiste
They hadde good fame ech deserved,
Although they were dyversly served;
Ryght as her suster, dame Fortune,
Ys wont to serven in comune (III.1543-1558)

It is important to notice that, Geoffrey's suspicions are verified by Fame's contradictory logic that matches her frivolous outlook. Since she is so facetious a being, she risks illogicality and exclaims: "As thryve I," (...) "ye shal faylle!" (III.1615). She continues:

Good werkes shal yow noght availle
To have of me good fame as now.
But wite ye what? Y graunte yow
That ye shal have a shrewed fame,
And wikkyd loos, and worse name,
Though ye good loos have wel deserved. (III.1616-1621)

Fame's reasoning is a difficult one to interpret. For, if she can bestow good fame on wrong-doers and ill fame to the virtuous, where is the logical consistency in it? It could be argued that Chaucer's diction prefers not to "devolve into

certainties,”³⁶⁸ but certainly he manufactures a calculated attack on the inconsistencies in human reasoning. However, as readers “we admire the persona’s integrity”³⁶⁹ at this point once we hear him respond to Fame in an internal monologue:

“Allas,” thoughte I, “what adventures
Han these sory creatures!
For they, amonges al the pres,
Shul thus be shamed gilteles.
But what, hyt moste nedes be. (III.1631-1635)

The coming and going of eight more companies and Fame’s inconsistent judgements strengthen the idea that both the narrator and the reader is disgusted with the unrelatable logic of hers. The conversation between him and a stranger, asking him why he has come here clears many readerly misunderstandings we may have concerning Geffrey’s position:

“Nay, for sothe, frend,” quod y;
“I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,
For no such cause, by my hed!
Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
That no wight have my name in honde. (III.1873-1877)

For, much to our surprise, he declares that he has come here for new experiences:

“That wyl y tellen the,
The cause why y stonde here:
Somme newe tydynges for to lere,
Somme newe thinges, y not what (...). (III.1884-1887)

Unfortunately, though, we hear that this temple has not met his expectations as there are “no suche tydynges” (III.1894) here:

“Noo?” quod he.
And I answered, “Noo parde! (...).” (III.1895-1896)

In hope of learning new things, this stranger suggests that they go to another place where his friend in distress possibly can hear and learn “withouten drede”

³⁶⁸ Lynch, *Philosophical Vision*, 78.

³⁶⁹ Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity*, 44.

(III.1913) a few things. Geffrey looks up to the Eagle outside the House of Fame and is immediately brought to the House of Rumour whose labyrinthine architectural design suggests yet another semantic trap:

And eke this hous hath of entrees
As fele as of leves ben in trees
In somer, whan they grene been;
And on the roof men may yet seen
A thousand holes, and wel moo,
To leten wel the soun out goo. (III.1945- 1950)

The holes on the roof, the countless entrances of the temple, and the density of the sound inside allows him the following conclusion about those people who are speaking about the others:

And somtyme saugh I thoo at ones
A lesyng and a sad soth sawe,
That gonne of aventure drawe
Out at a wyndowe for to pace;
And, when they metten in that place,
They were achekked bothe two,
And neyther of hem moste out goo. (III.2088-2094)

Eventually, the final disappointment of our narrator saddens us although he was unwilling to embark on a journey of this sort at first. For, how is it possible for falsity to follow from truth?³⁷⁰ Or, how can “fals and soth compuned” (III.2108)? Temporal relations and their non-absoluteness were not cause for concern for him, but now we see something which transcends, in a negative manner, the non-absolute temporality of being. As much as falsity is conjoined with truth, the narrator loses one foot in the empirical realm of experience which would render him foot-loose and prone to cutting down on empirical evidence that is irreverent of the varying or differing modes of being and instead fetters our conception of reality and truth with shackles of *simulacric* illusions. The tone of the narrative induces an overwhelming sense of melancholy now and he refers to the inhabitants of the House of Rumour as sailing men and women who are lost in the wider ocean of existence:

³⁷⁰ A similar question can be found in William of Ockham, *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*. Trans. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990), 93.

And, Lord, this hous in alle tymes
Was ful of shipmen and pilgrimes,
With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges,
Entremedled with tydynges,
And eek allone be hemselve.
O, many a thousand tymes twelve
Saugh I eke of these pardoners,
Curours, and eke messagers,
With boystes crammed ful of lyes
As ever vessel was with lyes. (III.2121-2130)

But, a little later, we are suddenly amazed again by the sudden *exeunt* of our narrator where he comically leaves us to the care of “a man of gret auctorite” (III.2158) without making a final statement about this open work of art. In return, we are given a vision of “a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of the incoming stimuli.”³⁷¹ It is a mostly dismaying but also an awakening trick that has been played by the narrator who humorously reveals that for lines after lines we had also been looking for an abstractive solution which would totalise our bizarre poetic experience. In doing so, he is quick to point a finger at us, to the humorously incontinent reader whom he has obviously never trusted from the bottom of his heart.

Lynch rightfully argues that *HF* “parodies the logical systems that attempt to organize and give meaning to worldly diversity.”³⁷² But it is doubtful whether it “returns again and again to the many, multiplying rather than simplifying truth, possibilities and perspectives.”³⁷³ This is due to the fact that *HF* presents us with a study in Chaucer’s individual search for poetic, linguistic, epistemological, and ontological meaning which strives for simplicity in multiplicity. It is a position that does not rule out the multiplicity of being, but it definitely doubts the human agent’s universalist, or essentialist, tendency in defining the coordinates of beings. In this manner, as much as *HF* emerges as a bleak text with its acclaimed inconclusiveness, its bleakness purports the idea that the human agent’s relation with being and existence is an incontinent one which renders it humorous. Thus, it is the inability to form a simplistic relationship with the world that is not in synonymy with the dictum famously

³⁷¹ Eco, *Role of The Reader*, 63.

³⁷² Lynch, *Philosophical Vision*, 64.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, 64.

known as Ockham's razor which dictates that being should be understood in simplistic terms, that evokes humour. In this sense, it is open to debate whether Chaucer wishes to further the nominalist cause of Ockham, but it is certainly true that he wishes to simplify this relationship between the human agent and the outer world of endless experiences. One remaining question needs to be asked: what is the function or innovation of Chaucer's nominalist humour and how does it contribute to our understanding of one of Chaucer's most philosophical poems? I infer from the long discussion presented so far that the innovation of *HF* is to be found in Chaucer's sceptical narrator whose concoction of humour is predominantly born out of the conceptual incongruity he creates on deliberation. Larry Sklute construes that the doubtful disposition of the poem "humorously establishes a skeptical persona."³⁷⁴ But, it could be added to this statement that the 'skeptical persona' is also reversely responsible of baring the incongruity and accordingly the humorous account of multiplicity in homonymy throughout the poem. Or, in other words, it is the sceptical persona who establishes the poem's sense of humour by ridiculing the search for universal definitions in the wide ocean of human experience. In its entirety, it can be concluded that *HF* unearths Chaucer's rationale of scepticism which does catch the end of the poem's humorous design. Doubt, in *HF*, flies under the humorous radar of the poem only to support Chaucer's tongue-in-cheek take on the representation of truth and the acquisition of knowledge. Therefore, it is inconclusive in the sense that it does not ascribe to a single, but not singular, description of truth and knowledge. But it is not inconclusive in the sense that it makes considerable fun of our habitual need for abstractive cognition which can be remedied only by caring for the individual identity of each and every poem, dream, act of reading, and journey. It is a humorous warning against the possible deception which awaits us if we receive, as Dido complains, truth-statements at face value which mostly happen to aspire to the condition of universal truths.

³⁷⁴ Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity*, 36.

CHAPTER IV:

“THE BLACKE POYSON OF SUSPECT”:

HOBBSIAN TRANSITIONS IN BEN JONSON’S *EVERY MAN IN HIS HUMOUR* AND *EVERY MAN OUT OF HIS HUMOUR*

If Chaucer was “our English Homer”³⁷⁵ in Roger Ascham’s words who was Elizabeth I’s tutor in Greek and Latin prior to her coronation, Ben Jonson was dubbed “our English Horace.”³⁷⁶ Identically speaking, where Chaucer thrives as an ancient poetic *exemplar* Jonson emerges as his Roman counterpart in Jacobean England since the former poet’s merit is based on his ability to illustrate the “nature of persons not onely for the outward shape of the body: but also for the inward disposition of the mynde”³⁷⁷ while the latter shows equally exceptional diligence in giving “number, weight, and measure to every word, to teach the reader by his industries (...).”³⁷⁸ However, the identification of Jonson with Horace in seventeenth-century England is primarily due to the fact that he was the translator of Horace which unlike Chaucer made him a master of poetic imitation.³⁷⁹ In imitating Horace and ancient models of poetic composition, he wishes to declare the value of studying the “fullness and variety of all excellent precedents before he distils their essence.”³⁸⁰ The assumption here is that true poetic authority and invention comes from fully comprehending the glaring

³⁷⁵ Roger Ascham, *Toxophilus*, Sig. E 11 b in *CHGC*, 100.

³⁷⁶ Henry Chettle, *Englandes Mourning Garment* (1603) in *CHBJ*, 71-73.

³⁷⁷ Ascham, *Toxophilus*, 101.

³⁷⁸ Anonymous, *Sir Thomas Smithes Voiage and Entertainment in Rushia* (1605) in *CHBJ*, 81.

³⁷⁹ Chaucer himself was the translator of Boethius, but it has been argued by Paul Beekman Taylor that Chaucer’s translations “constitute an interpretative appropriation of other’s texts.” Paul Beekman Taylor, *Chaucer Translator* (New York and Oxford: University Press of America, 1998), 14.

³⁸⁰ Ira Clark, “Ben Jonson’s Imitation,” *Criticism* 20, no.2 (1978): 107-127; 112.

glory of the past. But also, Jonson's Horatian excellence is not only a matter of fully comprehending the ancient masters of poetry since he also desperately wishes "to associate himself with the stability of the classical tradition."³⁸¹ The first aspect of his Horatianism, then, heavily relates to his alleged loyalty to the ancient paragon of poesy. On the other hand, his identification with Horace is also due to his constant search for freedom, or better put, poetic autonomy. For, in Victoria Moul's words, the imitative force in Ben Jonson's career carries "a moral as well as aesthetic force"³⁸² which contributes to the growth of the Jonsonian persona. Ironically enough, this means to recognise the "liberating and evolutionary"³⁸³ nature of following the ancient *exemplar* although the Horatian transcendence of Jonson's literary persona in the early seventeenth-century was an often mocked one. It seems fair to argue, then, that it must have been this puzzling sense of liberality in Jonson which dazzled most of his critics. For instance, Thomas Dekker accuses him of "untrussing" Horace to the point that he believes "an Inquisition should be taken touching this lamentable merry murdering of Innocent Poetry."³⁸⁴ Elsewhere, Dekker also criticises him for making a

false flourish here with the borrowed weapons of all the
old Maisters of the noble Science of Poesie, and to keepe
a tyrannicall coyle, in *Anatomizing Genius*, from head
to foote (...).³⁸⁵

But in the end, however responsible Jonson might have been of murdering 'innocent poetry' it does not annul the fact that he had a vision of emancipatory power in the writings of classical authors as much as he defended the sacredness of their literary status which might give away his half-revolutionary, half-

³⁸¹ John Mulryan, "Jonson's classicism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, 163-174, edited by Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart, 163-174. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 163.

³⁸² Victoria Moul, *Jonson, Horace and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

³⁸³ Clark, "Ben Jonson's Imitation," 112.

³⁸⁴ Thomas Dekker, *To the World* in *CHBJ*, 51.

³⁸⁵ Dekker, *The Magnificent Entertainment: Given to king James... 15th March, 1603* in *CHBJ*, 75. Original italics.

conservative standpoint, or better put, his position “that was at once conservative and potentially revolutionary (...).”³⁸⁶

If Jonson’s literary position possibly allows a certain sense of revolutionism/reactionarism regardless of the amount of criticism with which his work had been received back in his own day, it would be a little surprise to see that contemporary criticism also puts special emphasis on the second aspect of his antiquarianism. For it is considered that Jonson’s imitation of Horace is not simply a means to strive for Horatian mirror resemblance or excellence. Instead, it is construed that the anachronistic relationship between the Roman poet and his Jacobean admirer is telling of a certain attitude, one which is centred around the notion that the Horace in Jonson is a “powerful and sustained response to the complexities and compromises of Horatian ‘libertas,’ the problem of freedom in a climate of patronage (...).”³⁸⁷ In this sense,

Jonson used Horace, and his relationship to the Roman poet, to model his own self-conscious poetic ‘authority’ (a well-established *topos* of Jonsonian criticism), to mark his laureate role as a poet of courtly panegyric, and to insist upon his artistic freedom despite the network of patronage and financial dependence within which he was compelled to operate.³⁸⁸

The synonymy between the internal mechanics of his poetic creation and its time-bound political environment into which it is born verifies the double-nature of Jonson’s artistic motives and purposes. Leaving aside Jonson’s literary aspirations as a translator, then, it appears that the second sense of Jonson’s Horatianism cannot be simply read as an extension of his avid interest in classical literature. For, to paraphrase from Felix E. Schelling, where Sidney is considered an empirical follower of the ancients, Jonson is the assimilative classicist³⁸⁹ who seemingly seeks sheer verisimilitude to ancient poetry only to

³⁸⁶ Joseph John Kelly, “Ben Jonson’s Politics,” *Renaissance et Réforme* 7, no.3 (1983): 192-215; 193. Kelly defines seventeenth-century England as hosting “a complex mainstream of political thought (...)” and Jonson himself as a literary figure who “shared the ambivalence of his countrymen, who, a few years after his death, engaged in civil war.” *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁸⁷ Moul, *Jonson*, 12.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3. Original italics.

³⁸⁹ Felix E. Schelling, “Ben Jonson and The Classical School,” *PMLA* 13, no.2 (1898): 221-249; 226.

the effect of creating hostility among his contemporaries who strongly disliked his “vaunted classicism.”³⁹⁰ Jonson’s boastful attire which produced great enmity indicates his need for furthering his own poetic agenda by defending his classicist precepts with “a liberality of spirit and a sense of the need of the adaptation of ancient canons of art to changed English conditions.”³⁹¹ On this point, his assumed classicism emerges as the author’s will to power with a tinge of seventeenth-century flavour which diverges from the sensibilities of the classicist tradition in England that came before him. That being the case, the main focus of his use of Horace and the classics seems to be hidden in his act of poetic deliberation in terms of authoritative liberty. Or, in other words, Jonson implements his classicist (or neo-classicist) background in his works as a by-word for poetic freedom to solidify his position as an independent poet figure. In connection with this point, and however ironical it might sound, then, it is little surprise that he openly voices his admiration of his patron William Cavendish, 1st Earl of Newcastle since Cavendish happened to be

a generous patron of literature, and his indulgent temperament appears to have offered encouragement while opening up possibilities of expression and allowing some degree of licence, rather than narrowly dictating terms of approach.³⁹²

Cavendish might have been trying to rehabilitate his Royalist self from the military loss at the Battle of Marston Moor in 1644 by assuming the role of a Jacobean Maecenas as has been suggested by Lisa T. Sarasohn.³⁹³ For this very specific reason, it is also possible that Ben Jonson might have not entirely enjoyed the career of a playwright and poet who has megascopic freedom under Cavendish’s patronage. However, Jonson’s manner of praise reveals a graceful nod to the intellectual liberty with which he has been granted. More importantly

³⁹⁰ W. David Kay, *Ben Jonson: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 41.

³⁹¹ Schelling, “Ben Jonson,” 248.

³⁹² Nick Rowe, “My Best Patron”: William Cavendish and Jonson’s Caroline Dramas,” *The Seventeenth Century* 9, no. 2 (1994): 197-212; 197.

³⁹³ Lisa T. Sarasohn, “The Role of Honour in the Life of William Cavendish and the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes,” in *Authority, Authorship, and Aristocratic Identity in Seventeenth-Century England*, 196-215, edited by Peter Edwards and Elspeth Graham (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 204.

than that, it perfectly contextualises his obsession with the Horatian problem of liberty which corresponds to, in return, his authorly anxiety of intellectual freedom. And yet, even a quasi-egalitarian approach of this sort which is mainly the making of contemporary criticism does not entirely explain why Jonson would so passionately unfold a cause for freedom in his craft. For, if he was a classicist who was keen on ‘transliterating’ ancient poetry and drama, would it suffice to say that he had an anxiety-ridden personality? And if not, what might have been the motive behind his ‘libertine’ behaviour that pushed him so hard to seek novel forms of narrative authority?

It is not an unusual statement to make in Jonsonian criticism that he had obsessive tendencies as a writer. By association, as has been famously exemplified by Edmund Wilson in his “Morose Ben Jonson,” earlier interpretations of Ben Jonson usually purport the image of a literary figure whose over-indulgence with poetic autonomy is “compulsive in the neurotic sense about his constant citing of precedents.”³⁹⁴ Likemindedly, it has been continuously advocated that he tends to self-promote the image of a high-hat poet who demands that he be given carte blanche to pedantise, parsimonise, and persist in autarchy. However, all of these approaches are loaded with the strong Freudian overtones of Wilsonian criticism and they mostly antagonise Jonson’s poetic achievements. On top of it, even if we accept that Jonson’s anal retentiveness is a major cause of his obsession, evidently the problem of artistic freedom can hardly be argued to manifest itself as a single-layered issue. For, his issue with freedom rather emerges as a *problématique* in Jonson’s literary career. It is a complex of multiple forces that are in tune with the political forces of a country on the brink of civil war. Since the preference of individual power over Maecenean patronage³⁹⁵ signals at a tide of change in seventeenth-century England where the “primarily oral, aristocratic, amateur, authoritarian, court-centered” establishment “was swept away at this time and gradually replaced by a new

³⁹⁴ Edmund Wilson, “Morose Ben Jonson,” in *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Jonas A. Barish, 60-75. (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 64.

³⁹⁵ Gaius Maeceneas was an advisor and patron of letters during the reign of Emperor Augustus. He had set the standard for patronship and supported Augustan poets such as Virgil and Horace so much so that Horace fully respected him while he was also discontent with “the gentle pressure from the man who gave him literary independence.” Kenneth J. Reckford, “Horace and Maecenas,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 90 (1959): 195-208; 202.

print-based, market centered democratic literary system,”³⁹⁶ it is hardly surprising that he had developed a habitual need for “advancing his own agenda” along with the need to promote “new definitions of his own authority as a writer.”³⁹⁷ In addition, his individual cause of poetic liberation which borrows from the Horatian first example unfolds a larger criticism concerning the role of the author and it means that his libertarianism is naturally meant to oppose the traditionally distinguished role bestowed upon the institution of authorhood. In other words, his self-advanced image of a liberal author opposes the conventions pertaining to authorhood since the latter functions only to the effect of producing an outer image of an ideological construct. From this point of view, although Jonson himself was revering of the older modes of composition he is also resentful of the conventions of the ‘old market’ where not only authorhood as a concept but also individual authors themselves become human extensions of this imaginary construct and are conditioned to preserve “the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning”³⁹⁸ which un-individualises the author and reduces her/his status to the protector/defender of the mainstream discursive act. In his demand for freedom, then, Jonson’s interpretation of the ancient models stands as a supreme act which breathes life into the usualness, or conventionally defined standards of normalcy with regards to artistic authority.

Although it can be considered that the dual-vision of Jonsonian freedom unearths the underlying individual and cultural motives which partially pave the way to understanding his enigmatic resistance, still, it is not entirely clear whether or not a mode of obsession or a specific historical condition should entail a form of authorly protestation. After all, what we have at hand here is a major implication of Jonsonian freedom which tells us that it is characterised by, individually and societally speaking, a demanding internal crisis as well as by the urgent need to defend a proto-form of Cavalier virtue from corruption.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ Alvin Kernan, *Printing Technology, Letters and Samuel Johnson* (Princeton: 1987), 4 qtd. in Richard Dutton, *Ben Jonson: Authority Criticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), 1. Dutton argues that Kernan’s actual reference to Samuel Johnson and his period is quite relatable to Jonson’s Jacobean context.

³⁹⁷ Dutton, *Ben Jonson*, 4.

³⁹⁸ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 101-121. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 118.

³⁹⁹ Although Nicholas McDowell asserts that Andrew Marvell would later become “the most acute and iconic commentator on the Cavalier corruption of the Jonsonian values of moderation and measured judgement.” Nicholas McDowell, “Classical Liberty and

Another implication is that Jonson's own version of artistic freedom expresses a mode which swings between "humanist optimism that society might be reformed by an educated elite and an underlying pessimism that the political and social order was incurably corrupt."⁴⁰⁰ But even so, to approach the Jonsonian *problématique* of freedom as the sole outcome of psychological, historical, and economical determinants does not guarantee an inside out examination of the intellectual forces involved in it. In this respect, rather than commenting on how Jonson's literary career responds and corresponds to the political, economic turmoil in seventeenth-century England or to the mechanics of his inner psyche, I would like to further the idea that it is also possible to read his fervent defence of liberty as a symptom of his scepticism. But how do we know that Jonson was a sceptic, at all?

Unfortunately, there is not an established literary culture that connects Ben Jonson to a certain sceptical tradition which is very much unlike Chaucer. Besides, not only is scepticism a rarely pronounced phenomenon of his career but also Jonson criticism says very little about 'our English Horace's' sceptical attitude. This particular avoidance of Jonsonian scepticism and the relative silence on the matter appears to be a curious case since it has been diagnosed recently that he shares with Horace "a scepticism sometimes verging on cynicism."⁴⁰¹ Even more so, rare instances of contemplation where relatively recent interpretations of Jonson's scepticism are considered, offer alternative ways to approach the matter but they do so only to the effect of uniting his medium, that is theatre, with his scepticism. By doing so, they tend to refer to the sceptical potential of theatre itself but almost risk leaving Jonson's scepticism out along with his act of self-deliberation in expressing this scepticism.⁴⁰² Still, I would like to argue that a much safer route that can be followed here could be to take an instant look at his comedies and his use of

Cavalier Poetics: The Politics of Literary Community in Caroline London from Jonson to Marvell," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 44 (2014): 120-136; 125.

⁴⁰⁰ Kay, *Ben Jonson*, 74.

⁴⁰¹ David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in The English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 171.

⁴⁰² For this point see Mathew R. Martin, *Between Theater and Philosophy: Skepticism in the Major City Comedies of Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 16.

comedic elements. For, it is interesting to note that the “less cosmic”⁴⁰³ comic plots of Jonson usefully express his sceptical intentions that he might have felt towards the validity of universalist precepts. It could be argued that for this specific reason the comic plots of Jonson usually lack a metaphysically transcendent morale which usually create a deviancy from casuistic narration. In this context, “the action of Jonson’s plays (...) bursts, subsides, meanders; given the multiplicity and autonomy of the actions, this is the most appropriate rhythm.”⁴⁰⁴ The larger-than-life structure of his comedy does not conform to the Aristotelian unities of chronological, spatial, and actional casuistry more than it conforms to the individuation of stories to the extent that his comedy becomes “a fantastic project or magnetic center that draws together an assembly of individuals who have no other commonality or collective purposes.”⁴⁰⁵ To put it more correctly, in Ben Jonson’s hands, comedy becomes a largely non-conformist project which claims to match up to the dramaturgical standards of Old Comedy but fails to do so at large not because its originator is lacking in merit but rather because “his comedies are grounded in the streets of Renaissance London as those of Aristophanes were in the agora of ancient Athens.”⁴⁰⁶ By valuing the individual, the particular, and “the working out of a series of permutations with a fixed number of constants and one variable,”⁴⁰⁷ Jonson’s comedy seems to ensure a realist resuscitation that resists abstractionism. Or alternatively speaking, it refuses not to be in tune with reality itself which points towards the individualistic and atomised comedic action of Jonson. Therefore, although it might be hard to identify his mission of proto-textual democratisation with the principles of a certain sceptical tradition, it can be maintained that his comedy of particulars speaks for his doubtful disposition.

⁴⁰³ L.A. Beaurline, “Ben Jonson and The Illusion of Completeness,” *PMLA* 84, no.1 (1969): 51-59; 51.

⁴⁰⁴ Renu Juneja, “The Unclassical Design of Jonson’s Comedies,” *Renaissance et Réforme* 4, no.1 (1980): 74-86; 85.

⁴⁰⁵ Martin Butler, “Jonson’s London and its theatres,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, edited by Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart, 15-29. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21.

⁴⁰⁶ R.V. Young, “Ben Jonson and learning,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, edited by Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart, 43-57. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48.

⁴⁰⁷ Beaurline, “Ben Jonson and The Illusion of Completeness,” 51.

If Jonson's comedy is a reflection on his doubts concerning the limits of artistic freedom, textual influence, and the organic work of art which he substitutes with, to use Zoë Sutherland's term, self-given laws of interpretation,⁴⁰⁸ this should mean that his comedy inseminates the possibility of an epistemological crisis. In a way, it represents an individually hermeneuticised moment of interpretation far more than it represents an appropriation of a handful of literary concepts. In doing so, it points towards a widening margin between the individual and the universal, the particular and the general. Definitively speaking, out of the cracks between a nominalist trend and a universalist creed arises the authentic character of Jonson's doubt and also, inevitably, the character of his humour. In line with this argument, the doubtful powers of Jonson's comedy are best illustrated by one of his earliest comedy of humours, *Every Man in His Humour* which perfectly captures this mode of scepticism as part of the corresponding epistemological crisis. Narrating basically the tension between an intrusive father and his secretive son and in the subplot the mindless jealousy of a merchant who, along with all of the supporting characters, are all redeemed of their humours in the end, the play is characteristic of Jonson's accentuation of the importance of microscopically analysing the particular in the sense that it brings about "the vitality that comes of his familiarity with the daily lives and language of a broad cross-section of the men and women of Elizabethan/Jacobean England (...)." ⁴⁰⁹ This might sound as an odd statement to make since sixteenth and seventeenth-century English comedies have been frequently mentioned as successors to the Medieval morality play and yet as Alan C. Dessen maintains:

In spite of the admitted morality legacy bequeathed to Elizabethan drama, however, relatively little attention has been paid to the morality play after 1560. The reason for this neglect are clear. The fifteenth-century moralities, (...) were "mainly intent upon grasping human nature in some form of abstraction standing for mankind as a whole," but in the sixteenth century "the

⁴⁰⁸ Zoë Sutherland, "Self-given law: Individualism as an ethics of interpretation in Ben Jonson." Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of St. Andrews, 2019.

⁴⁰⁹ Young, "Ben Jonson and learning," 47.

protagonist tends to lose the abstract quality of *Humanum Genus*.⁴¹⁰

Although by implication Dessen conveys the idea that one should be cautious in face of an argument which tries to disband Elizabethan and Jacobean drama's ties with the Medieval morality play,⁴¹¹ it is undeniably obvious to the careful eye that late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century morality plays "represent a degeneration of "the original metaphor" and underlying regularity of structure" of the pristine fifteenth-century form."⁴¹² Not surprisingly, the prologue to *EMIH* starts with a discourse on art's theoretical responsibility to "sport with humane follies," (24) although its main reference is to the "deedes, and language, such as men doe vse, / And persons, such as *Comoedie* would chuse" (21-22. Original italics). It seemingly addresses the universal quality of human error but in fact it functions as a prefatory speech on the importance of paying attention to the singularity of each and every instance of human action. Conceptually speaking, it builds a morality play-like frame of reference by employing allegorical characters who represent abstract qualities. However, one would only need to scratch beneath the surface of the whole play as it simultaneously prepares the reader to meet its author's self-interpretation of the morality play and by doing so Jonson goes against the Elizabethan "consciousness of the representative nature of all action."⁴¹³ In this respect, narrating two different storylines which will overlap only towards the end of the play, the first act opens in senile Kno'well's London house where Kno'well bids his servant Brayne-worme to send for his son Edward. But much earlier before he meets him, Kno'well sets up on a tedious lecture on the futility of his son's "dreaming on nought but idle *poetrie*" (I.I.17. Original italics) since he believes

⁴¹⁰ Alan C. Dessen, *Jonson's Moral Comedy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 9.

⁴¹¹ He says: "Such diversity of purposes is another indication that the modern reader should hesitate before agreeing with Farnham that the Elizabethan morality was "near the end of its service as a literary form." Still these plays with few exceptions do fail to attain that "unification in a central character" which he found to be typical of the earlier tradition. But is such unification a requisite feature of a morality play?" Dessen, *Moral Comedy*, 12.

⁴¹² Dessen, *Moral Comedy*, 10.

⁴¹³ Hardin Craig, "Morality Plays and Elizabethan Drama," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 1, no.2 (1950): 64-72; 71.

that it is a “fruitlesse, and vnprofitable art” (I.I.18) although he was once a student of poetry and deemed it to be “the mistresse of all knowledge” (I.I.20). At first sight, it seems like Kno’well’s anger is typical of the exasperation of *senex iratus*’s (the angry father) of Ancient Greek and Roman comedy and it belongs with the very usualness and stockness of the aging male parent. In accordance, he seems to be very much interested in the moral development of his son, fearful that he might err (I.I.13-14). The aging parent’s fear conveys a universal emotion; but it is so much of a permeated sentiment that it laughs at the universalisation and even humorously mocks the stereo-typicality. However, it is interesting to find out that his infuriation by the stock characterisation of his son by “our *uniuersities*” (I.I.11. Original italics) appears to be a very private emotion. A little sooner, the sudden interruption of his cousin Stephen and his inquiry about whether his uncle has a “a booke of the sciences of hawking, and hunting” (I.I.32) arises a similar objection:

You are a prodigall absurd cocks combe Goe to
Nay neuer looke at me, it’s I that speake
Tak’t as you will sir, I’ll not flatter you. (I.I.54-56)

Kno’well’s feverish protestation continues when Stephen asks what his uncle would have him do and how he can possibly attain his seemingly hopeless dream of becoming a gentleman:

Learne to be wise, and practise how to thriue,
That would I haue you doe and not to spend
Your coyne on euery bable, that you phansie,
Or euery foolish braine, that humors you. (I.I.66-69)

Practicing gentility and engaging in the practicalities of everyday life, Kno’well argues, is a major constituent of achieving wisdom which cannot be fulfilled by dreaming of hunting and hawking as Stephen counter-argues (I.I.40-42). To Kno’well, wisdom is an exponential practice which requires indulging in practical wisdom. The idea(l) of wisdom, in this sense, is a minacious concept which can consume its admirer and lead him into idleness just in the manner he fears that Edward might be led into it. After all, what is the point of neurotically

pretending to be a gentleman or trying to become one if one should not practically try his hand at it? He continues:

Not, that you sayle be bigger than your boat
But moderate your expences now (at first)
As you may keepe the same proportion still
Nor, stand so much on your gentilitie,
Which is an aerie, and meere borrow'd thing,
From dead mens dust, and bones and none of yours
Except you make, or hold it. (I.I.83-89)

Needless to say, Stephen is an arch-representative of Jacobean frivolity since he “is oblivious to the irony of the situation” and “he wishes London society to see him as a melancholy gentleman.”⁴¹⁴ He is blind to the fact that he is “a mechanically serving man” (I.II.27) although he claims that he does not stand upon his gentility (I.II.25). Hence, it is possible to say that there is a certain economy here on Kno’well’s part which reduces and miniaturises the value of feudal honours and titles along with masculinity itself. Instead, it proposes a self-interpretation of both. It reiterates that neither the poetic ideal nor abstractions which revolve around the legality of peerage or virility can stand the test of an active life unless they are practised and re-produced on a daily basis. Under this view, it stands as an opening lecture on the nominalist value of intellectualism and nobility by way of signalling at a ‘friendly’ association with one of Ben Jonson’s most famous friends. In the fifth chapter of *Human Nature*, Thomas Hobbes writes:

The Universality of *one Name* to many Things, hath been the Cause that Men think the *Things* are themselves universal; and so seriously contend, that besides *Peter* and *John*, and all the rest of the Men that are, have been, or shall be in the World, there is yet something else that we call *Man*, viz. *Man in general*, deceiving themselves, by taking the universal, or general Appellation, for the Thing it signifieth.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁴ Leona Dale, “Jonson’s Sick Society,” *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 24, no.2 (1970): 66-74; 70.

⁴¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature* in *The Moral and Political Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London, 1750), 10. Original italics.

Stewart Duncan contends that Hobbes's nominalism is different from Ockham's since Hobbes puts a special emphasis on particulars "that do that representing are words, not concepts or anything else that exists in the mind."⁴¹⁶ But it is possible to consider that, like Ockham, Hobbes insists on the intelligibility of nominal words because universal names are simply names, signifying nothing. In giving weight to the non-signifying weight of universal names, he also declares that he strictly opposes the realist delusion about the intrinsically universal value of names as much as Kno'well doubts that poetic universals and the universality of a good name are all-encompassing semantic containers. The next scene where Kno'well rebukes Stephen for a verbal fight with a servant validates this argument:

What would you doe, you peremptorie gull?
 If you can not be quiet, get you hence
 You see, the honest man demeanes himselfe
 Modestly to'ards you, giuing no replie
 To your vnseason'd, quarelling, rude fashion
 And, still you huffe it, with a kind of cariage
 As voide of wit, as of humanitie. (I.II.30-36)

The ontologically parsimonious attitude here guarantees for a moment that Kno'well will not approve of realist delusions. He declares that he will not meddle with his son's need for "experiencing life for himself."⁴¹⁷ In the following scene, he lays his hands on a letter sent to Edward by a friend of his, that is Well-Bred who almost implores Edward to leave his "vigilant father, alone, to number over his greene apricots, evening, and morning, o' the north-west wall (...)" (I.II.75-77), and makes a promise:

I am resolu'd, I will not stop his iourney,
 Nor practise any violent meane, to stay
 The unbridled course of youth in him for that,
 Restrain'd, growes more impatient, and, in kind,
 Like to the eager, but the generous grey-hound,
 Turnes head, and leapes vp at his holders throat.
 (I.II.122-128)

⁴¹⁶ Stewart Duncan, "Hobbes, Universal Names, and Nominalism," in *The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Stefano Di Bella and Tad M. Schmaltz, 41-62. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 43.

⁴¹⁷ Dale, "Jonson's Sick Society," 69.

Leaving aside Kno'well's own version of poetic blindness which derives from his partial stock-mindedness,⁴¹⁸ not only do we see that Kno'well is against cultural and semantic abstractions in a Hobbesian manner but also there is ample proof that he refuses to accept that "(...) universal ideas, or universals *in rerum natura*, must be mistaken."⁴¹⁹ Much to our surprise, though, he concludes:

Force workes on seruile natures, not the free
He, that's compell'd to goodnesse, may be good.
(I.II.131-132)

However, we are instantaneously taken aback by the seemingly essentialist argument that he makes since this would not only negate his earlier discourse on the particularity of human experience but also it would negate what has been considered by the commentators of Hobbes as negative freedom where rational or irrational agents seem to be "at liberty to the extent that their actions remain unimpeded by external obstacles."⁴²⁰ However, Kno'well does not necessarily spend considerable time on explaining the nature of things. Instead, he speaks of the inclinations of beings and makes a spot-on analysis of the tendencies of a variety of human natures. In turn, this should still mean that "we can explain the phenomena of language with reference to only the things that everyone already agreed existed, without needing to suppose or appeal to extra things."⁴²¹

At this point, it is important to note that the portrayal of microcosmic individuals in the context of Hobbesian materialism safely ensures the doubtful character of Jonsonian humour. For, the irreconcilability of the essential with the accidental directs our attention to the fact that "the characters are more important in Jonson than the plot."⁴²² In creating this diversion, from its very early stages the play creates a humorous tension between the culturally abstract and the individually tangible. Accordingly, it is hard not to be drawn to Edward,

⁴¹⁸ Dale, "Jonson's Sick Society," 69.

⁴¹⁹ Duncan, "Hobbes, Universal Names, and Nominalism," 47. Original italics.

⁴²⁰ David Van Mill, "Hobbes's Theories of Freedom," *The Journal of Politics* 57, no.2 (1995): 443-459; 443.

⁴²¹ Duncan, "Hobbes, Universal Names, and Nominalism," 47.

⁴²² Wallace A. Bacon, "The Magnetic Field: The Structure of Jonson's Comedies," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 19, no.2 (1956): 121-153; 127.

the rebellious son since the humorous tension is elongated when we observe Edward's momentary eagerness to pursue a form of Kno'wellian materialism. He openly accuses Stephen of not performing his official duties and falling prey to universalist melancholy again:

A gentleman of your sort, parts, carriage, and estimation,
to talke o' your turne i' this companie, and to me, alone,
like a tankard-bearer, at a conduit! (I.III.108-110)

As much as he is the angry young man, it does not erase the fact that he is much concerned with the individual power of performativity as opposed to attaining to abstract givens. We hear in his voice a certain doubt, a certain sceptical element that he obviously inherits from old Kno'well although he would like to prove the contrary. He continues with his doubtful tone which shows him to be distrustful of Stephen's proclaimed idealism:

Come, wrong not the qualitie of your desert, with
looking downeward, couz, but hold vp your head, so and
let the *Idea* of what you are, be pourtray'd i' your face,
that men may reade i' your physnomie, (...). (I.III.122-
125. Original italics)

Up until here, we seem to have a consistent tone and even a monotonous interpretation of the early modern individual who would like to discover the world for himself. On a larger scale, then, it is certainly true that the play prepares us to a more discreet understanding of the traditional morality play, introducing the sceptical individual as humorous debutantes. Unexpectedly, however, the scene changes in a flash as does the plot and we are no longer in the London house of Kno'well. The plot is gradually flattened out when it is supposed to thicken. Speaking of his ancestry, a water-bearer named Cob explains his mock-lineage to Matthew, a town gull:

Why sir, an ancient linage, and a princely. Mine
ance'trie came from a Kings belly, no worse man and yet
no man neither (by your worships leaue, I did lie in that)
but *Herring* the King of fish (from his belly, I proceed)
one o' the Monarchs o' the world, I assure you. The first
red herring, that was broil'd in ADAM, and EVE's

kitchin, doe I fetch my pedigree from, by the Harrots
bookes. (I.IV.10-16. Original italics and capitals)

Cob's explanation is not only humorous but also is doubtfully humorous in the sense that he depicts not only a 'fishy' peerage but also ridicules the grand narrative of creation by illustrating his conception in a culinary context. It is a vernacularised version of the Scriptures and a personal interpretation of biblical grandeur that directly opposes the dignified state of the nativity of Jesus. It is this sort of vernacularity which amazes Matthew when he makes an inquiry about the whereabouts of a certain Captain Bobbadill. In speech, Matthew addresses him as a gentleman and yet Cob feels the urge to correct him:

I will not giue it him, though, sir Masse, I though somewhat was in't, we could not get him to bed, all night. Well, sir, though he lye not o' my bed, he lies o' my bench an't please you to goe vp, sir, you shall find him with two cushions vnder his head, and his cloke wrapt about him, as though he had neither wun nor lost, and yet (I warrant) he ne're cast better in his life, than he has done, to night. (I.IV.46-52)

Richard E. Flathman maintains that Hobbes's understanding of individuality is a realisation of fact that a "politically organised society is a necessary but inherently dangerous supplement to prudence/morality."⁴²³ If so, he argues:

It is necessary because our fated individuality makes it difficult for us to remain faithful to our prudence/morality. It is dangerous because we can establish and maintain it only by departing from what is arguably the fundamental premise and principle of that prudence/morality, the premise that by nature we are roughly equal and the principle that we should mutually acknowledge and respect that equality. *If the state is weak and inactive, it does not protect us against those who violate prudence/morality. If it is weak but active, it provokes resistance and destroys itself. If it is powerful and ambitious, it impedes or prevents individual felicity and self-enactment.*⁴²⁴

⁴²³ Richard E. Flathman, *Thomas Hobbes: Skepticism, Individuality, and Chastened Politics* (New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 164.

⁴²⁴ Flathman, *Thomas Hobbes*, 164. Italics are mine.

In accordance, if Cob's house can be synonymised with the state, the politically organised shelter which is supposed to provide for its wandering citizen, then, it is an active but a weak one since it can host Captain Bobadill and provide him with a bench. But, it cannot provide him with a proper shelter. Cob's house, as his caricaturised ancestry, does not meet our ubiquitous expectations from a home. Nor does it attain to our, and Bobadill's, usual expectations from hospitality. The emphasis is elsewhere:

By St. GEORGE, the foot of PHARAOH, the body of me as I am <a> gentleman, and a souldier such daintie oathes and withall, he dos take this same filthy roguish *tobacco*, the finest, and cleanliest it would doe a man good to see the fume come forth at's tonnells. Well, he owes mee fortie shillings (my wife lent him out of her purse, by sixe-pence a time) besides his lodging. (I.IV. 83-90. Original italics and capitals)

As the play growingly furthers its mission of reflecting on the epistemological crisis it has earlier unfolded, it simultaneously forces us to form feelings of scepticism towards the political, the metaphorical, and most important of all, the literary construct. The loose connection between the scenes creates a serious diversion leading the reader to think that the plot grows more and more irrelevant. In doing so, however, the play becomes character, and consequently individual-centric than ever. Or, to put it more correctly, the more this sense of individualism gains ground the more the reader is convinced to ratify the fact that the narrative structure of *EMIH* infuses "an illusion of a conventional narrative line (...)." ⁴²⁵ By ensuring the continuation of this illusive and elusive narrative construction, then, we are awakened to the narratologically humorous incongruity between the play's aspiration to become a well-made play and the dysfunctionality of such sublimity when faced with the divisibility of polymorphic human experience. It cannot be a mere coincidence that Act II starts with scene in a Jewish neighbourhood and once more the change in setting comes with certain consequences. We eavesdrop on Kitley, a merchant, and hear him praising one of his men, Thomas Cash for being the "iewell" (II.I.15) that he is:

⁴²⁵ Juneja, "The Unclassical Design of Jonson's Comedies," 77.

I tooke him of a child, vp, at my dore,
 And christened him, gaue him mine owne name,
 THOMAS,
 Since bred him at the Hospitall where prouing
 A toward impe, I call'd him home, and taught him
 So much, as I haue made him my Cashier,
 And giu'n him, who had none, a surname, CASH
 And find him, in his place so full of faith,
 That, I durst trust my life into his hands.
 (II.I.16-23. Original capitals)

In a Jonsonian context, it can be hardly maintained that Jewishness itself proclaims itself as a catch-word for untrustworthiness as

the revival of interest in the ancient language and literature of the Jews naturally induced a milder attitude in regard to them, and the references that occur at this period are characterized by a far more friendly spirit.⁴²⁶

If that was the case and Jonson was not as harsh as his predecessors with regards to the Jewish community, there is the possibility to think that Jonson disguised his anti-Puritanical feelings under a Jewish cloak just as the English dissenters reproduced “their role as the Jewish bogeymen behind the mask of Puritan sedition.”⁴²⁷ Regardless of Jonson’s motives, however, the Jewish intrusion expands the established episodicity of the play which entails an already burgeoning sense of narrative unreliability. Our readerly doubts are confirmed by the hand of Kitley himself the minute we understand that his high praise of Cash is only a perambulatory speech act through his encounter with Downe-righte:

DOW: What need this circumstance? pray you be direct

KIT: I will not say, how much I doe ascribe
 Vnto your friendship, nor, in what regard
 I hold your loue but, let my past behaiour,
 And vsage of your sister, but confirme

⁴²⁶ Charles B. Mabon, “The Jewish in English Poetry and Drama,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 11, no.3 (1899): 411-430; 415-416.

⁴²⁷ Nicholas McDowell, “The Stigmatizing of Puritans as Jews in Jacobean England: Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon and the “Book of Sports” controversy,” *Renaissance Studies* 19, no.3 (2005): 348-363; 363.

How well I'ave beene affected to you— (II.I.32-38)

The rhetorical *Bildung*, however, continues under the guise of tediousness unlike Downe-righte falsely observes (II.I.39) and Kitley finally gives him a whole spill about the disrespectful behaviour of Downe-righte's brother Well-bred:

Then (without further ceremonie) thus
My brother WELL-BRED, sir, (I know not how)
Of late, is much declin'd in what he was,
And greatly alter'd in his disposition.
When he came first to lodge here in my house,
Ne're trust me, if I were not proud of him
Me thought he bare himselfe in such a fashion,
So full of man, and sweetnesse in his carriage,
And (what was chiefe) it shew'd not borrowed in him.
(II.I.41-49. Original capitals)

And, the full disclosure continues:

But, now, his course is so irregular,
So loose, affected, and depriu'd of grace,
And he himselfe withall so farre falne off
From that first place, as scarce no note remaines,
To tell mens iudgements where he lately stood
Hee's growne a stranger to all due respect, (...).
(II.I.53-58)

What does Kitley's complaint signify? Is it supposed to be taken simply as an extension of his wish to unburden his troubles to his dearest friend, or is it in fact a narrative manoeuvre which sums up our reading experience so far? Either way, it does not overrule the fact that the play digs a semantic hole much like the hesitant narrator does in *House of Fame*. For, we understand a little later that Kitley is utterly consumed by feelings of false judgement and is convicted that Well-bred or one of Well-bred's friends and his wife Dame Kitley must have committed adultery. His complaint, then, is anything but a complaint. It is only revelatory of his hallucinatory state of mind. Kitley's illusion turns out to be as much as illusive as the entire plot structure. In fact, it is at this very moment that the play explains the trick that it has been playing on the reader since Kitley's blindness along with the reader's form the centre of the semantic hole and he thinks to himself:

My presence shall be as an iron barre,
'Twixt the conspiring motions of desire
Yes, euery looke, or glance, mine eye eiects,
Shall checke occasion, as one doth his slaue,
When he forgets the limits of prescription. (II.III.29-33)

Surely, Kitley's—and the reader's—blind confidence in his ability of holding the semantic centre of the play is proven humorously wrong since the 'iron barre' of meaning dissolves into thin air. While he feigns sickness to hide his jealousy, he understands that the seemingly unshakable castle of semantic perseverance cannot withstand or "be free from the blacke poyson of suspect" (II.III.69). Finally, in an effort to soothe his husband, Dame Kitley strikes the final blow: "MVSSE, keepe you warme, *good truth it is this new disease.*" (II.III.45-46. Original capitals. Italics are mine)

Should it be considered that the 'good truth' is an implication of multiplied meanings and the pluralisation of truth-statements, it seems possible to argue that the play furthers a nominalist mission where names and concepts are simply names and concepts that do not convey universal essences. The problem is that names and concepts evoke what Hobbes calls "equivocation":

The *Equivocation* of Names maketh it *difficult* to recover those Conceptions for which the Name was ordained; and that not only in the Language of other Men, wherein we are to consider the *Drift* and *Occasion*, and *Contexture* of the Speech, as well as the *Words* themselves; but also in our Discourse, which being derived from the Custom and common Use of Speech, representeth unto us not our own Conceptions. It is therefore a great Ability in a Man, out of the Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language, to deliver himself from *Equivocation*, and out the true Meaning of what is said: and this it we call *Understanding*.⁴²⁸

Hobbes seems to be quite cautious of the potential dangers of an extravagant nominalism although Leibniz later recalled him as a "super-nominalist" who thought that "the truth of things itself consists in names and what is more, that it depends on the definitions of terms, and definitions depend on the human

⁴²⁸ Hobbes, *Human Nature*, 10. Original italics.

will.”⁴²⁹ But it is interesting to find out that Hobbes accuses human will for equivocation and ambiguity in meaning. The intervention of human will in the meaning-making process perfectly suits the ultra-suspicious behaviour of Kately when he unknowingly creates an ambiguity and suspects the truth value of his arguments of suspicion. In this manner, he reaches a point where Hobbes points at: since he cannot deliver himself from the nasty trap of equivocation his individual vision/version of truth becomes a schizophrenic creation. This should be also why Dame Kately considers ‘good truth’ a symptom of a disease, or the disease itself. Unlike Chaucer’s hesitant narrator who is torn between a hard-headed universalism and a moderate realism, in Kately we witness how the early-modern individual reaches an *impasse* when scepticism brings about only more scepticism, and individual divisibility produces only more fragmentation. But as much as the play concentrates on this semantic hole, it is not elegiac in tone. It is humorous in the sense that it laughs at the epistemological crisis from which Kately and other characters suffer. Some are torn between the abstractionist requirements of Jacobean society and their private desires, and some cannot bear the tautology that are brought upon them by private instances of meaning. When the reader welcomes Brayne-worme to the stage who is sent by Old Kno’well to spy on Edward under the guise of a wounded soldier, the humour of incongruity reaches its apex:

S’Lid, I cannot choose but laugh, to see my selfe translated thus, from a poore creature to a creator, for now must I create an intolerable sort of lyes, or my present profession looses the grace and yet the lye to a man of my coat, is as ominuous a fruit, as the *Fico*.”
(II.IV.1-5. Original italics)

And it is interesting to note that Brayne-worme ‘translates’ himself not only into a soldier but also into one “Captayne CAESAR”:

If I can but get his cloke, his purse, his hat, nay, anything,
to cut him off, that is, to stay his iourney, *Veni, vidi, vici*,

⁴²⁹ Gottfried Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Trans. Leroy E. Loemker. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1969), 128. Other critics of Hobbes, however, accuse him of being a conformist, of formulating “a marvellous witty invention to befool his followers withall (...).” For this point and more see Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (London: 1659), 133-134.

I may say with Captayne CAESAR, I am made for euer,
ifaith. Well, now must I practice to get the true garb of
one of these *Lance knights*, (...). (II.IV.16-21. Original
italics and capitals)

The scepticism is clear as Brayne-worme knows that he only has a “borrowed shape” (II.IV.8) and by way of knowing so, he understands that his outer garments that his master has provided him with simply reproduce a traditional unit of meaning. But since he is aware that the lies he is about to manufacture are part of a larger “conspiracie” (II.IV.11), the comedic device of disguise transcends its ideal function and creates a new unit of meaning although he knows that in his current shape he stands as the expression of a cleavage between form and content. This is so, because he knows that he cannot help the equivocation that is imposed on him by his master and in accordance he skilfully creates a self-interpretation of the situation by assuming the role of Julius Caesar. He produces an admirably fictionalised account of his military successes and makes fools of Stephen and Edward:

May it please you, sir, in all the late warres of *Bohemia*,
Hungaria, *Dalmatia*, *Poland*, where not, sir? I haue
beene a poor seruitor, by sea and land, any time this
fourteene yeeres, and follow’d the fortunes of the best
Commanders in *christendome*. (II.IV.58-62. Original
italics)

Using the disguise motif that is essential to comic incongruity, Brayne-worme’s personal adjustment of the truth instantly makes a fool of Stephen. He sells Stephen a sword of low quality, pretending it to be a fine Toledo when it is actually a Fleming as Bobadill would later explain to him (III.I.165). But by doing so, the servant is no longer a representative of his servitude. He instantly bends the very essence of it and becomes a rhetorical master. Or, to put it more correctly, after Stephen acknowledges his own foolishness and Brayne-worme replies “at your seruice, sir” (II.IV.100), he pluralises the singular meaning of servitude and attempts at deceiving others while he can. For, he later yearns for “the price of two cannes of beere” (II.V.79-80) and “a small piece of siluer” (II.V.88) in the hope that he will play the same trick upon Kno’well since he does not recognise Brayne-worme. After he is rejected the small favour, Brayne-

worme verbally makes fun of him and tells him that his name is “FITZSWORD” (II.V.122) and manages to convince Kno’well to take him as his servant. Interestingly enough, it seems as if he enjoys seeing the continuation of this trickery and the discrepancy between the original orders given by his master as a servant and his performance as a wounded soldier negates the abstractive notion of servitude. In the end, the negation of an ideal serves as a humorous counter-argument which is doubtful of the sharp lines that define names and concepts.

Unusually enough, the convention at the tavern which brings about Brayne-worme, Well-bred, Bobadill, Edward Kno’well, and Stephen comes at the beginning of Act III and breaks with the deception that has been going on so far although it does not fall far away from the nominalist process of meaning-making. Once Brayne-worme humorously reveals the incongruity between fact and fiction and confesses that he is in fact the servant of Edward’s father who asked him to follow his son (III.II.35-38), it becomes clear that he is not only capable of producing a false identity but also speaking the truth in that he might have also been suspicious of Kno’well’s essential belief in a social environment’s capacity to spoil his son. In this regard, the transmutability of the servile body is explanatory of the fact that the concept of humanity, if there is found to be one, cannot be attached to a single universal idea since human beings can choose to perform benignity as well as malignity. In a Hobbesian sense, just as “there is no universal image that resembles men in general, without resembling any particular one,”⁴³⁰ it seems nearly impossible to attach any essential role to human nature. This creates a brilliant contrast with another episodic jump in the storyline where in the third scene of Act III, Kately almost appears as a lost cause. He needs to leave his house to complete a money transaction but cannot since he fears Well-bred will come and attack his property as well as his wife and sister: He says to Cash:

I am a knave, if I know what to say,
What course to take, or which way to resolve
My braine (me thinkes) is like an houre-glasse,
Wherein, my’ imaginations runne, like sands,
Filling vp time, but then are turn’d, and turn’d

⁴³⁰ Duncan, “Hobbes, Universal Names, and Nominalism,” 45.

So, that I know what to stay upon, (...). (III.III.47-52)

This is a very crucial moment in the play since an excessive form of nominalist suspicion and dependence on pluralised human experience fails to function efficiently. Where Brayne-worme manages to find his way through people from different walks of life as a character who shows the ability to diversify the meaning of his role in society and in the text, Kitley suffers from the consequences of an extreme nominalism which risks becoming another universal ideal. In other words, where Brayne-worme is the mild nominalist who rejects the conventions attributed to linguistic units and performs his own version of human-ness, Kitley is immobilised by his suspicion upon suspicion. Where Brayne-worme is a collector of particular human experiences, Kitley is the mirror image of Hobbes himself as an ultra-nominalist whose overt scepticism will only lead him to lose touch with reality itself. Therefore, in Kitley's case, the humour does not arise from the scepticism felt towards the problem of universals. Instead, the humour is born out of a harsh nominalism that converges upon dogmatic realism which is doomed to transcend the boundaries of empirical evidence. He seems to be the "free master of mine owne free thoughts" (III.VI.20) and yet the paranoid image of Kitley invites us to spend some time on considering the limits of suspicion although the humour remains intact since Jonson asks his audience to suspect the deceitful consistency of this paranoia and exposes yet another humorous incongruity.

Out of all the characters in *EMIH*, however, Kitley stands out as Brayne-worme's non-identical but associative *Doppelgänger*. Although Kitley's epistemological extravagance is portrayed as a precarious matter, it still proves useful in understanding Jonson's sceptical humour. He is hardly performative in the sense Brayne-worme seems to be, but he still holds the power (or alternatively weakness) to enjoy and perform his own version of reality which leads to delirium. And yet, I believe it is safe to think of this under individualistic terms since this theme is repeated elsewhere in Act IV. In an effort to woo Mistress Bridget, Kitley's sister, Matthew recites a few poems which as Bobadill observes "abuse the expectation of your deare mistris" (IV.II.31-32). The importance of this abuse is that through the image of Matthew as the fraudulent poet, Jonson parodies Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (IV.II.42-45).

In this regard, Jonson's poetic counterfeit emerges as yet another symptom of scepticism which humorously mocks the Marlovian theological understanding of evil whereas Jonson believes that evil "is not a force external to humankind, for which other powers can be blamed; it comes from within, and is subject to control by human will."⁴³¹ In understanding Matthew's fraudulent behaviour as the outcome of a certain non-externalism, as well as Kitley's, it becomes clear that these characters represent a distinct form of individualism which breaks with the tragic hero's redemptive behaviour. In their hope to self-evaluate truth and poetic practice, they fall prey to the ideal of individualism and yet, ironically enough, they still present comically fragmented selves. To rephrase this argument, Jonson laughs at the thriftless relativists who can "be a little less inflexibly universalist in their opinions"⁴³² and appreciates the discursive nature of individual existence and performativity since it narrates a story of self-imposed harm without referring to the innateness of evil and depravity; a story which is reminiscent of Hobbes's individual will since in Well-bred's words:

a tall man is neuer his owne man, till he be angrie. To keepe his valure in obscuritie, is to keepe himselfe, as it were, in a cloke-bag. What's a musitian, vnlesse he play? what's a tall man, vnlesse he fight? (IV.VIII.9-12)

Not unexpectedly, the fifth act's sense of trial and the major debut of Clement Justice stems from the need to balance up the emotional lop-sidedness as well as the textual, and narrational dissymmetry. He is in Lawrence L. Levin's words, the "normative agent"⁴³³ who is firmly determined to "clense the aire" (V.V.29). At his implicative bidding, Brayne-worme uncloaks himself and reveals his true identity, Edward marries Kitley's sister Mistress Bridget and therefore his forlornness is resolved of. Stephen is implored to return the cloak to Downe-righte while Kitley, Kno'well, and Downe-righte are entreated to put away their

⁴³¹ Ian Donaldson, "Marlowe, Jonson, and the origins of evil," *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* 15 (1997): 11-26; 19. <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/1137>; DOI :<https://doi.org/10.4000/shakespeare.1137>. Date of access: 9 March 2022.

⁴³² Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, xv.

⁴³³ Lawrence L. Levin, "Clement Justice in *Every Man in His Humour*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 12, no.2 (1972): 291-307; 291.

discontent since “hornes i’ the mind are worse then o’head” (V.V.74). Also, Matthew is condemned for his parodical take on poetry and is challenged by Clement himself who turns out to be a poet (V.V.11-14). He orders Edward, Well-bred, and Bridget to search Matthew’s pockets for bits and scraps of rebellious poetry (V.V.19) for the “pocket-*muse*” (V.V.16.Original italics) that he is and teaches Matthew a lesson about how poets “are nor borne euerie yeere, as an Alderman” (V.V.38-39). Kno’well is properly criticised for his punitive parenthood (V.V.71) as Bobadill is condemned for his unsoldierly cowardice that prevents him from defending himself against Downe-righte’s “filthie humour of quarelling” (V.II.10). He only spares Brayne-worme on the grounds that he “has done, or assisted to nothing” (V.III.112) and should be instead “pardon’d for the wit o’ the offence” (V.III.113-114). However, as much as Clement Justice “reinforces his identification with the comic dramatist-poet who attempts to create social order out of confusion,”⁴³⁴ his clemency creates a puncture in the play the minute he announces that “wee’ll dedicate to friendship, loue, and laughter” (V.V.84-85). This puncture, in accordance, allows him to become more than “the justice of the peace as a dull-witted foll”⁴³⁵ and reminds the reader of Jonson’s poetic instinct for “experimenting with his materials and forging his own particular brand of play.”⁴³⁶ In consequence, Jonson’s final touch in the play which experiments with notions of justice, law, and order, creates a humorous vacuum where abstractions lose their original senses and are born anew in a humanistic context. The clemency of Clement Justice, then, is a reflection on Jonson’s free mind which cannot simply place its faith in older versions of knowing. In other words, it could be concluded that the play pretends to aspire to harmony and unity when in fact it portends “the special isolation each character has selected for himself,”⁴³⁷ parodying the well-made play.

The argument that I present here with regards to *EMIH* which anticipates that Jonson’s use of humour favours the individual, the particular, the dynamic act of existence that is doubtful of the general, the static, and the stereotypical

⁴³⁴ Levin, “Clement Justice,” 305.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 305.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 306.

⁴³⁷ Gabriele Bernhard Jackson, ed., *Ben Jonson: Every Man in His Humour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 14; qtd in Kathleen Parks, “Every Reader out of His Humour,” *Modern Language Studies* 8, no.2 (1978): 34-39; 38.

has its own difficulties. For, many instances in criticism tend to re-assure its readers of the fact that Ben Jonson is a blueprint poet who dismisses unorthodoxy and is an intransigent classicist who was a closed-off literary figure. For instance, as late as in 1906 Edward K. Graham argued that Jonson's comedies "present certain types acting under the influence of a dominant characteristic. The man existed to exhibit the characteristic; his identity was lost in it."⁴³⁸ But, can we possibly deny the fact that Jonson's self-interpretation of humoristic morality play characters envisages a poetic creation which runs counter to Jacobean conventions? Is it possible to rule out the fact that his humour takes tradition on for the sake of defending his individual talent? And most important of all, can we test this little argument of ours elsewhere in the Jonsonian canon to verify the argument that Jonson's humour is born out of a sceptical desire to understand the existential practices of particular individuals which propels its author's adventurous urge to assess the virtues of textual episodicity and inorganic plot organisation that jettisons classicist conformity?

In order to answer these questions, I would like to continue with *Every Man out of His Humour* which was written as a sequel to *EMIH* although it turned out to be a less successful play on stage. Formally speaking, these two plays differ from each other since the Italian names evoke

politic schemes, poisonings and other sensational murders, and the craving for revenge that combines both scheming and violence all carried strong Italian associations for the Elizabethans.⁴³⁹

Accordingly, the Italian names in *EMOH* befit a play which intends to depict people *out of* their humour, and not *in* it. But also, there still appears the possibility to argue that Jonson used the Italian borrowings as a front for his poetic designs which "were only permitted when they could be fitted into his scheme and transmuted into poetry."⁴⁴⁰ If so, it does not seem entirely correct to look for grand points of departure between *EMIH* and *EMOH* since it appears

⁴³⁸ Edward K. Graham, "Ben Jonson and the Character-Writers," *The Sewanee Review* 14, no.3 (1906): 299-305; 300.

⁴³⁹ Robert C. Jones, "Italian Settings and The World of Elizabethan Tragedy," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 10, no.2 (1970): 251-268; 260.

⁴⁴⁰ Enid Welsford, "Italian Influence on the English Court Masque," *The Modern Language Review* 100 (2005): 75-90; 90.

that scheme-wise they share similar concerns. For, as a conceptual extension of *EMIH*, it derives from its prequel a familiar sense of nominalist plurality and suspicion; a feature which is again propelled by the ‘humour’ of the play. From this perspective, the semiospheric structure of *EMOH* differs from *EMIH* only in the sense that it recycles the powerfully built image of Italianism to make an extraordinary claim for the dangers of an excess in humours which also means it is ample evidence of the reproduction of *EMIH*’s doubtful humour.

Apart from the fact that Jonson continues to work within a humoristic context, the humour in the play is opened up by Macilente’s questioning of the Stoic contention that discovering

the fullest of human potential means (...) not only that one becomes able to control or channel the emotions but that one actually ceases to experience emotions as we know them.⁴⁴¹

He unfolds the uncontrollable state of his emotions and says:

Viri est, fortunae caecitatem, facilè ferre
Tis true, but, Stoique, where (in the vast world)
Doth that man breathe, that can so much command
His blood, and his affection? well I see,
I striue in vaine to cure my wounded soule,
For euery cordiall that my thoughts apply,
Turnes to a cor’siue, and doth eate it farder
There is no taste in this Philosophie, (...). (I.I.1-8. Original italics)

If, he reasons, human beings possess the power to govern their passion as the Stoic philosopher argues, he cannot be categorically considered a human being. After a while, he expresses his disdain for the Cynic philosopher’s assumption about impoverishment as the sole source of happiness (I.I.12) and finally mocks the accentuation of the mentally abstract as opposed to the corporally concrete: “*My minde to me a kingdome is, / When the lanke hungrie belly barks for foode*” (I.I.14-15). Certainly, Macilente is the scholar who is immobilised by his “enuious apoplexie,”⁴⁴² but due to his reference to his own self as the

⁴⁴¹ Margaret R. Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 35.

⁴⁴² Ben Jonson, *Every Man out of His Humour*, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson. Vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 423.

“vnproportion’d frame of nature” (I.I.28) in light of the apparent dysfunctionality of these theories of human nature and happiness, the reader is introduced with an already familiar cleavage between the inner mechanics of a quintessential human-*ness* and the inner dynamics of the actual human being. The irreconcilability between these two camps is certified once he pronounces the fact that he has been singled out by nature as a malfunctioning creature from whose ungoverned body flows a stream of uncontrollable passions. Likewise, he is aware of the fact that however spectacular a scholar he might be, he cannot lead an intellectually proper life without satisfying his culinary desires. Indeed, Macilente’s words echo Hobbes’s anti-Cartesian materialism which openly denies a mind-body dualism. In the ninth chapter of *Human Nature*, Hobbes writes:

The Appetite which Men call *Lust*, and the Fruition that appertaineth thereunto, is a *Sensual* Pleasure, but *not only* that; there is in it also a Delight of the Mind: for it consisteth of two Appetites together, to *please*, and to *be pleased*; and the Delight Men take in delighting, is not sensual, but a Pleasure or Joy of the Mind consisting in the Imagination of the Power they have so much to please.⁴⁴³

It is interesting to find out that very much unlike Descartes, Hobbes refuses to consider sensual pleasure a corporal capacity of human beings as distinct from our mental capacities. He already defines pleasure and passions as a material consequence of the human mind; a notion which nullifies the Stoic and Cynic tendency to consider passions as defects of the human soul. The epistemological dilemma of Macilente is built around the idea that to consider passions as imperfections in human nature necessarily entails the notion that by dividing passions from mind, these tasteless philosophies force an ideal of human-*ness* which cannot allow the existence of an ‘unproportioned frame of nature’. Since he does not fit in the mold, which anachronistically speaking is an early comment on the French materialist philosopher Julien Offray de la Mettrie’s machine-man who cannot be known *a priori* but only *a posteriori*,⁴⁴⁴ he earnestly doubts the

⁴⁴³ Hobbes, *Human Nature*, 20. Original italics.

⁴⁴⁴ The original text reads: “L’homme est une machine si composée, qu’il est impossible de s’en faire d’abord une idée claire, et conséquemment de la définir. C’est pourquoi

validity of these tasteless philosophies which look for the authentic form of things but ironically miss the temporal, the dynamic, and the existential. In this sense, Macilente's materialism sets the tone of the play and appears to be entangled with the materialism of Jonson himself which shows a considerable amount of disbelief in an *eidolon*, a phantasmic fiction of universal essences. Accordingly, the humorous procedure of this incongruity is explained to the reader by a break in the scene (I.I.36). The choric group, Grex (Mitis and Cordatus) "help the audience in arriving at the proper comic assessment of action, of motive, of character"⁴⁴⁵ and the answer is clear:

CORDATUS: This alludes well to that of the Poet,
Inudus suspirat, gemit, incutita dentes,
Sudat frigidus, intuens quod odit.
 (I.I.33-35. Original italics)

In *EMOH*, the humorous disparity between the apparent and the ideal is much more visible to the critical eye whereas in *EMIH* the collision between these two camps tends to be more hidden. From the end to the beginning, the reader is served with doubtful characters who create the humorous *suspirium* which is also the reason behind the swiftness and directness of the play. The characters quickly respond to incompatibilities in the form of witty repartee. In the following scene, Sogliardo, a clown, boasts of his gentleman-like status to a fellow jester, Carlo Buffone and says:

SOGLIARDO: Nay looke you CARLO this is my
 Humour now! I haue land and money, my friends left me
 well, and I will be a Gentleman, whatsoeuer it cost me.

CARLO: A most gentleman-like resolution.
 (I.II.1-4. Original capitals.)

toutes les recherches que les plus grands philosophes ont faites à priori, c'est à dire, en voulant se servir en quelque sorte des ailes de l'esprit, ont été vaines. Ainsi ce n'est qu'à *posteriori*, ou en cherchant à démêler l'âme comme au travers les organes du corps, qu'on peut, je ne dis pas découvrir avec évidence la nature même de l'homme, mais atteindre le plus grand degré de probabilité possible sur ce sujet." See Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *Man a Machine* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1912), 17. Original italics.

⁴⁴⁵ James E. Savage, "The Formal Choruses in The Comedies of Ben Jonson," *Studies in English*, 11 (1971): 11-21; 12.

And a little later, Cordatus guffaws at Sogliardo's longing for becoming a member of the gentry:

You must endeouour to feede cleanly at your Ordinarie,
sit melancholy, and picke your teeth when you cannot
speake and when you come to Playes, be humorous,
looke with a good startch't face, and ruffle your brow
like a new boot, laugh at nothing but your owne iests, or
else as the Noblemen laugh. That's a speciall grace you
must obserue. (I.II.55-61)

This theme of humorous disparity continues when a scene later, Carlo, Sogliardo, and Macilente quickly engage in a conversation on the precepts of gentleman-hood and bring up the matter of possibly paying a visit to a vainglorious knight named Puntarvolo. But more importantly than that, Sordido, "a hob-nail'd Chuffe"⁴⁴⁶ arrives at the scene and is seen reading an almanac trying his hand at weather forecasting. He tries to convince Macilente—and the reader—that "nature is set in tables, columns, calendars, and calculations."⁴⁴⁷ He praises his almanac as a perennial source of wisdom:

Since in it, is contain'd the very life,
Bloud, strength, and sinnewes of my happinesse
Blest be the houre, wherein I bought this booke,
His studies happy, that compos'd the booke,
And the man fortunate, that sold the booke. (I.III.58-62)

Not only is Sordido the avid reader-trickster who is consumed by his reading habits but also, he is indifferent to the needs of people in need. The Machiavellian humour that he is, he carelessly remarks: "He that will triue, must thinke no courses vile" (I.III.145).⁴⁴⁸ In Sordido, as in Macilente, Sogliardo, and

⁴⁴⁶ Ben Jonson, *Every Man out of His Humour*, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy Simpson, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 425.

⁴⁴⁷ Terrance Dunford, "Consumption of the World: Reading, Eating and Imitation in *Every Man Out of His Humour*," *English Literary Renaissance* 14, no.2 (1984): 131-147; 134.

⁴⁴⁸ The Machiavellian inheritance of Ben Jonson is certainly a contribution to the Hobbesian suspicion of universals that is presented here. Although Machiavelli implies "the universal sameness of humanity and its experience in all civilized places and in all epochs of history" as Daniel Cliness Boughner observes, it does not sacrifice Jonson's intentions to create "a more flexible structure" in his plays as the "*dramatis personae*

Carlo so far, we have a frivolously widening gap between aristocratic ideals and vernacular desire. Uncoincidentally, then, even Macilente sneers at Sordido's despondent metaphysics:

Is't possible that such a spacious villaine
Should liue, and not be plagu'd? or lies he hid
Within the wrinckled bosome of the world,
Where heauen cannot see him? Sbloud (me thinkes)
'Tis rare, and strange, that he should breathe, and walke,
Feede with disgestion, sleepe, enjoy his health,
And (like a boist'rous whale, swallowing the poore)
Still swimme in wealth, and pleasure is't not strange?
(I.III.67-74)

It is the dubious humour of the play that brings about the sense of readiness and swiftness which matches the intellectual disbelief. But also, it causes formal distraction. For, the already established sense of suspicion perfectly fits the episodcity of the play and as the plot progresses it snowballs into a structural crisis. Without the observatory remarks of the Grex, the play does not have a relational centre apart from the fact that the characters are tied with each other only based on their overriding humours. In accordance, this overlooming sense of epistemological crisis is intensified and predicated of the growing structural crisis; a feature which also intensifies the incongruent humour. The second act opens with a gentlemanly conversation between Sogliardo, Carlo, and a Fastidivs Briske who holds himself in high regard as the ideal courtier who in Cordatus's opinion "looks like a fresh salmon kept in a tub" (II.I.94). The hobby-horsical pretentiousness is climactically expressed by Fastidivs himself when he expresses his wish to learn about the ways Puntarvolo treats his wife and ironically asks Sogliardo: "Why, but doe you remember no particulars, Signior?" (II.I.155-156). The particular individual's need for delving deep into the particularities of everyday life, then, destroys the shape of the theatrical form since it does not exactly generate a well-developed storyline. On the other hand, it does indeed develop a story of particularity that is in constant denial of literary abstractiveness since individual stories evoke a Popean fallacy in the manner

of "Bawd, squire, imposter, many persons more" is an extension of the cast recommended by the Italian." See Daniel C. Boughner, *The Devil's Disciple: Ben Jonson's Debt to Machiavelli* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1968), 15; 161. Original italics.

Puntarvolo reminds his audience: “Pardon me. *Humanum est errare*” (II.II.17. Original italics). It is so powerful a fallacy that Carlo later mocks Puntarvolo for likening his wife to a “*brighter starre then VENVS doth appeare!*” (II.III.31. Original capitals). He parodies this hyperbolic expression for being “a tedious chapter of courtship, after sir LANCELOT, and queene GVEVENER?” (II.III.67-68. Original capitals) as is the case with Macilente who cannot possibly take Deliro seriously since he is blind to his wife’s imperfections and believes that “no man can be worthy of her kindnesse” (II.IV.31). In the end, the ludicrous gesture of the “translated gallant” (II.IV.167) as Cordatus discerns, does not only direct the reader’s attention to the deceptive illusion that a metaphysicality of this sort produces. But also, it awakens us to the fact that it overlooks the primary semiotic value that human beings attribute to certain ideals at the expense of creating a semantic void which provides Jonson the classicist with a malleable fabric that can be beaten into any shape he would like. The suspicious humour of the play, to put it better, even transforms theatrical speech into something “more than a medium of the drama” since “the drama of *Every Man Out* is its speech”⁴⁴⁹ and “it does not advance plot or inform the audience of the dramatic situation.”⁴⁵⁰

It is one thing, however, to argue that the semi-progressive, semi-linear, and semi-rational framework of *EMOH* echo the dynamism of individual existence and the non-conformity of Jonson’s theatrical and dramaturgical politics. But to state the function of this non-conformity is another. For, as new characters enter the scene, the play becomes a conversational piece where the gathering of ‘humorous’ personalities create a cacophonous meeting. It becomes more and more apparent that the storyline becomes less and less inter-connected as if the play targets at creating a gossip place for would-be gentlemen, apathetic weather forecasters, and superficial virtuosos. Interestingly enough, we are reassured of our readerly expectations, once the third act introduces Shift, a “thred-bare Sharke” who “liues upon lendings”⁴⁵¹ and Clove and Orange, the “Twins of foppery”⁴⁵² in the middle of Old St. Paul’s Walk. The importance of the image

⁴⁴⁹ Dunford, “Consumption of the World,” 137.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁵¹ Jonson, *Every Man out of His Humour*, 426.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 426.

of St. Paul's lies in the fact that it encapsulates this nondramatic but conversationalist—and certainly not conservatist—sense of dynamism and temporality that travels beyond the limits of quotidian stativity. For, as Martin Hürlimann writes in his *English Cathedrals*, the English consider their cathedrals as creations of Continental Europe and they instead

point to the parish church, which more clearly than the pompous monumentality of the cathedrals represents the kind of architecture expressive of the country and the people.⁴⁵³

But in the case of Old St. Paul's walk (see fig. 1), the extravagant architecture of the cathedral is imaginatively reconstructed as a large meeting place which facilitates the comings and goings of a plethora of 'humors' as would be later mentioned by the mid-nineteenth century novelist William Harrison Ainsworth in his historical romance, *A Tale of the Plague and the Fire*:

before ten o'clock, Paul's Walk, as the nave was termed, was thronged by apprentices, rufflers, porters, water-carriers, higglers, with baskets on their heads, or under their arms, fish-wives, quack doctors, cut-purses, bonarobas, merchants, lawyers, and serving-men (...).⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ Martin Hürlimann, *English Cathedrals* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1950), 9.

⁴⁵⁴ William Harrison Ainsworth, *Old Saint Paul's: A Tale of the Plague and the Fire* (London: Hugh Cunningham, 1841), 324.

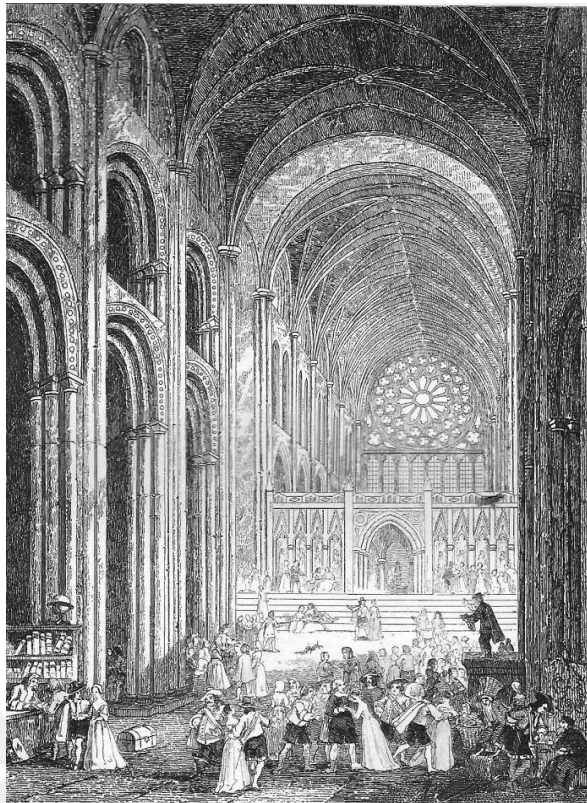


Figure 1. Old St. Paul's walk in William Harrison Ainsworth's historical romance *Old Saint Paul's: A Tale of the Plague and the Fire* (London: Hugh Cunningham, 1841), illustrated by John Franklin.

The inner dynamics of St. Paul's Walk in *EMOH*, then, resembles to that of Ainsworth's. For Jonson, like Ainsworth, puts at display the very fact that by purporting a formal distraction, the semantic void is filled with conversationalism and congregationalism. What can be considered a distraction now facilitates the emergence of the novel narrative technique which doubts the so-called dramatic unity of poetic *exemplars*. It does not propose epistemological or structural fragmentation but does indeed seek for a replacement of older forms which adumbrates the idea of a "self-destructive theatricality."⁴⁵⁵ In accordance, to the above-mentioned argument can be annexed the idea that Jonson's employment of St. Paul's walk signals at a potential desacralisation since "everything seemed to be going forward within this sacred place, *except devotion*."⁴⁵⁶ It appears that the congregation of

⁴⁵⁵ Dunford, "Consumption of the World," 147.

⁴⁵⁶ Ainsworth, *Old Saint Paul's*, 325. Italics are mine.

individual bodies at St. Paul's Walk not only desacralises feelings of religious devotion but also a literary devotion to the classics. The larger-than-life characters who are supposed to represent a morality play-like banality, come to represent the Janus-faced variety in human action that cannot bear with metaphysical humdrum and uneventfulness. In their conversationalism, they ridicule the *mimetic* imitation game by desanctifying the traditional value of an aesthetic ideal that emanates from Jonson's "awareness of the potential of urban space, not only as a writable, controllable text, but as a stage for contests of performative, dramatic authority."⁴⁵⁷ This is exactly what happens when we witness the allegedly scholarly exchange between Clove and Orange where they act out with doubtful humour the part of an amaurotic classicist's dogmatic take on the value of Ancient Greek philosophy and beyond. By way of doing so, they desacralise the past ideal of scholastic thought:

CLOVE: Monsieur ORANGE, yond' gallants obserue
vs, pr'y thee let's talke fustian a little, and gull 'hem
make 'hem beleue we are great-schollers.

ORANG: O lord, sir.

CLOVE: Nay, pr'y thee let's, beleue me, you haue an
excellent habit in discourse.

ORANG: It pleases you to say so, sir.

CLOVE: By this church, you ha'la nay, come, begin
ARISTOTLE *in his Daemonologia*, *approues*
SCALIGER *for the best Nauigator in his time and in his*
Hypercritiques, *he reports him to be*
Heautontimorumenos you vnderstand the Greeke, sir?

ORANG: O god, sir.

MACIL: For societies sake, he does. O, here be a couple
of fine tame parrats. (III.IV.6-20. Original italics and
capitals)

⁴⁵⁷ James D. Mardock, *Our Scene is London: Ben Jonson's City and the Space of the Author* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 22.

In mocking the overriding humour of the bookish communities with the aid of the image of a vernacularised cathedral, Jonson carefully merges the individualist interests of *EMOH*'s structural and epistemological crises. He diligently comments on the importance of looking into the particularity of human experience rather than arriving at totalising arguments both in drama and in everyday life. Categorically speaking, then, the sceptical humour of *EMOH* stands as a literary commentary of Hobbesian nominalist understanding of human nature since

Forasmuch as all *Knowledge* beginneth from *Experience*, therefore also *new Experience* is the Beginning of *new Knowledge*, and the Increase of Experience, the Beginning of the Increase of Knowledge.⁴⁵⁸

And Jonson's Hobbesian inheritance is verified in his own words where he defends the plurality of forms and denies any sort of 'naturalism' or indoctrination in his *Timber, or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter*. He writes:

In the difference of wits I have observed there are many notes; and it is a little maistry to know them, to discern what every nature, every disposition will bear: for before we sow our land we should plough it. There are no fewer forms than of bodies amongst us. The variety is incredible, and therefore we must search. Some are fit to make divines, some poets, some lawyers, some physicians; some to be sent to the plough, and trades. There is no doctrine will do good where nature is wanting.⁴⁵⁹

Under these circumstances, it might be difficult to interpret what Jonson means when he speaks of a 'wanting' nature. But, when considered in light of Jonson's fascination with the diversity of dispositions and humours, it is barely possible not to think that he speaks of the pluralistic dynamism of nature. If there is any sort of universalism to be found in *EMOH*, it can only be argued that he would paradoxically make an Aristotelian universalist—if there is one—who

⁴⁵⁸ Hobbes, *Human Nature*, 21. Original italics.

⁴⁵⁹ Jonson, *Timber, or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter*, edited by Felix E. Schelling (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1892), 23-24.

meticulously studies the biological and physionomical parts of every individual since

Aristotle was the first accurate critic and truest judge, nay, the greatest philosopher the world ever had; for he noted the vices of all knowledges in all creatures, and out of many men's perfections in a science he formed still one art.⁴⁶⁰

Despite the universalist charges brought against Jonson which accuse him, or alternatively approve him, of retaining the “mystery of things” against “a purely quantitative universe,”⁴⁶¹ the relation of the parts to the whole is clearly stated in Jonson's nominalistically-minded dramatic world. In conformity with this point, in *EMOH* he rejects yielding to any sort of doctrine which allows Jonson's comedic vision to embrace and to host people from various walks of life, as does St. Paul's Walk. But does it also suggest a sort of disarray? It certainly does. To a certain extent, it can even be argued that this is a “failure of integration” since “no moral order appears to pervade this universe.”⁴⁶² Even more so, this disarray quite naturally directs our attention to what Alan C. Dessen terms as a “tension” which “clearly exists between Jonson's literary aims and the basic demands of the theater, a tension which results in elaborate and often confused scenes.”⁴⁶³ But this tension, I would like to maintain, does not even come close to becoming a Pyrrhic victory, a “brilliant and original failure”⁴⁶⁴ as has been argued earlier. Rather, the play turns out to be a triumphant success under Jonsonian terms since the disorganised narrative mostly disbands plot management and introduces “the discovery of self” which can be read as “theater's response to the oracular *Nosce te ipsum*.”⁴⁶⁵ This discovery which is promoted by Jonson's sceptical humour even finds its way into the Grex's discussion on comedy. For, we learn of Mitis's

⁴⁶⁰ Jonson, *Timber*, 78.

⁴⁶¹ Pat H. Fredeman, “The Way of Ben Jonson's Dramatic World.” Unpublished MA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1963, 3.

⁴⁶² Fredeman, “The Way,” 79.

⁴⁶³ Dessen, *Jonson's Moral Comedy*, 51.

⁴⁶⁴ Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 104.

⁴⁶⁵ Lawrence Danson, “Jonsonian Comedy and the Discovery of the Social Self,” *PMLA* 99, no.2 (1984): 179-193; 179.

objection to the standard forms of *Comoedie* and his inquiry into other possible forms of comedic composition:

MIT: I tiauell with another obiection, signior, which I feare will bee enforc'd against the author, ere I can be deliuer'd of it.

COR: What's that, sir?

MIT: That the argument of his *Comoedie* might haue beene of some other nature, as of a duke to be in loue with a countesse, and that countesse to bee in loue with the dukes sonne, and the sonne to loue the ladies waiting maid some such crosse wooing, with a clowne to their seruingman, better then to be thus neere, and familiarly allied to the time." (III.VI.191-201. Original italics)

Just as the discovery of the individual is furthered by the suspicious humour of the characters, the maieutic method of the Grex is also connected to the dramatical hotchpotch. For, out of the textual body of disarray comes out a fully deliberated inability to present a fully integrated universe which stands in stark contrast to the moral vision of a well-knit universe. By doing so, it takes it a step further and attempts at breaking with comedic conventions which can be read as an extension of Jonson's authorial concerns and his need for making a statement, "a literary manifesto."⁴⁶⁶ It flattens, in a familiarly Pirandellian manner, the traditional dough of comedy to its own advantage. Or, to put it more correctly, when the play's humour which arises out of the cracks of scepticism or vice versa reaches its height and the comic action "approcheth neerest the life," it regains its verisimilitude to nature as Cordatus responds to Mitis:

COR: Why, therein his art appears most full of lustre, and approacheth neerest the life especially, when in the flame, and height of their humours, they are laid flat, it fills the eye better, and with more contentment. (IV.VIII.166-169)

⁴⁶⁶ Paul D. Cannan, "Ben Jonson, Authorship, and the Rhetoric of English Dramatic Prefatory Criticism," *Studies in Philology* 99, no.2 (2002): 178-201; 190.

Clearly, there is some literary and intellectual midwifery that is going on out here as the metaphysics of *mimetic* action crumbles in the face of an unsentimentally common sensical approach. The genre is born anew as the characters and towards the very end of the play, Macilente tells Fastidius Briske that there is a change (V.XI.54). He happily observes that all of the humorous characters are “rak’t vp in their repentant ashes” (V.XI.59). Similarly, at the end of the play, Cordatus tells Mitis that they are “done censuring” (V.XI.67) since he asks the audience to watch out for actors offstage and says:

“COR: Mary, because wee’le imitate your actors, and be out of out Humours. Besides, here are those (round about you) of more abilitie in censure than wee, whose iudgements can giue it a more satisfying allowance. Wee’le refer you to them.” (V.XI.70-74)

The ending of *EMOH* is more daring than *EMIH*. Where Justice Clement humanistically looks for the restoration of law and order in *EMIH*, in the epilogue to *EMOH*, Macilente eulogises Elizabeth I’s virtuosity as “our strongest wall.”⁴⁶⁷ But we are not sure whether this is a mock epilogue or a biting satire that targets at the audience. We simply understand that it does not fit in the disharmony of the play. Or else, why the emphasis on “her perfections”⁴⁶⁸ when the play is far from being a perfection? In this respect, it is entirely understandable why *EMOH* turned out to be less successful a production than *EMIH*. The confusing storyline, the episodicity, and the inorganicism are key points of mutual interest and yet *EMOH* is more “an audacious formal experiment”⁴⁶⁹ than *EMIH* although it can hardly be denied that *EMIH* is the predecessor to that experiment, an intellectual forerunner to Jonson’s humorous scepticism.

It is slightly hard to discern with full certainty whether Jonson was a full-fledged individualist as “seventeenth-century individualism, at least in England,

⁴⁶⁷ Jonson, *Every Man out of His Humour*, 600.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 599.

⁴⁶⁹ Danson, “Jonsonian Comedy,” 184.

lacks formal shape.”⁴⁷⁰ Furthermore, Jonson has been seldom considered an appropriate candidate for the individualist camp since

Jonson was immensely hostile to the bourgeoisie, among whom the new individualistic ideology appeared, and therefore could not locate his need for self-definition within that emergent system.⁴⁷¹

Furthermore, more evidence has been brought to the attention of the critical eye with regards to Jonson’s didacticism which cannot possibly allow a break from tradition. For instance, Charles Read Baskervill in his “English Elements in Jonson’s Comedy” insists on the point that Jonson “is a product of the English didactic school” due to his “employment of direct rebuke and preaching, its bluntness and downrightness⁴⁷² and in insisting so, he speaks for past and present Jonson criticism which desperately needs to build a figure who is a strict follower of poetic convention as a renowned classicist. The problem here, however, is that the “blackest poison of suspect,” to paraphrase Stephen Greenblatt, is a “service to power”⁴⁷³ which reveres the individual and disdainfully overlooks the universal regardless of Jonson’s classicist intentions. Therefore, his search for the multiplicity of being and his desire to understand the universe under simplistic terms wreaks havoc on textual continuity and harmony. By way of doing so, it concretises the outlines of his humour which is strictly materialist. For, the doubtful character of it suspends “the just rules of cause and effect,”⁴⁷⁴ and turns to the non-metaphysical and the contingent which both aspire to the elasticity of non-necessity. Conclusively speaking, Jonson’s humour not only denies the “supersession of a miraculous order”⁴⁷⁵ but also it allows the reader to discover the individual self who, when allowed the freedom of expression, eternally re-creates herself/himself in its own dynamic context of contingency. Hence, even if we accept that Jonson was not an individualist in

⁴⁷⁰ E. Pearlman, “Ben Jonson: An Anatomy,” *English Literary Renaissance* 9, no.3 (1979):364-394; 374.

⁴⁷¹ Pearlman, “Ben Jonson,” 375.

⁴⁷² Charles Read Baskervill, “English Elements in Jonson’s Comedy,” Published PhD Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1911, 31.

⁴⁷³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 253.

⁴⁷⁴ Danson, “Jonsonian Comedy,” 190.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

the contemporary sense, it is undeniably true that the humour of *EMIH* and *EMOH* side with the living, the multifarious, and the experiential. It promises the growth of a nominalist stratagem which likens their structure to a travelogue where the travelling self cannot help but constantly collect bits and pieces of first-hand experience in a Hobbesian manner. They end up being transitional pieces which ensure the safe delivery of humour's sceptical powers into the early modern period which, as will be explored in the following the chapter, unswervingly informs the hobby-horsical form and content of the sentimental novel.



CHAPTER V:

FAREWELL TO REASON:

HUMEAN SCEPTICISM AND THE CONTINGENT HUMOUR OF

LAURENCE STERNE'S *TRISTRAM SHANDY*

Eve Tavor in her *Scepticism, Society, and The Eighteenth-Century Novel* contends that the critical body of twentieth-century literary criticism held up the embryonic novels of the eighteenth-century as “the great reservoir of forms and techniques for the nineteenth and twentieth century novel.”⁴⁷⁶ But more importantly than that, she expresses the fact that the novels which the twentieth-century critic held in high regard had all grown out of the “eighteenth-century sceptical tradition” since the sceptical tradition which derives from the works of “Locke, Mandeville, Hume and to some extent by Shaftesbury, determines the incipient novel’s range of concerns and, more important, its distinctive formal features.”⁴⁷⁷ Her emphasis on scepticism certainly centralises it as a central concern of eighteenth-century novelistic discourse. In accordance, the underlying notion here is that there is a vertical relationship between the discourse of literature and the discourse of philosophy. Hence, it assumes that in the mutuality of their sceptical interests they run parallel to each other in their verticality and the sceptical tradition in eighteenth-century English novel is a continued form of philosophical scepticism. It entails that philosophy, as the traditional authority, has both the moral and the intellectual high ground and although it claims not to subtract from the literary value of the eighteenth-century novel, it simply allows literature to thrive on some borrowed time that is obtained from the chronological durability of its quasi-counterpart. It “awards

⁴⁷⁶ Eve Tavor, *Scepticism, Society, and The Eighteenth-Century Novel* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 242.

⁴⁷⁷ Tavor, *Scepticism*, 1-2.

philosophy,” in Richard Shusterman’s words, “the privilege of defining literature.”⁴⁷⁸

To think that the sceptical tradition in eighteenth-century fiction is simply the outcome of a sceptic tendency in philosophical discourse represents one end of the discussion. The other end is commonly situated at the historical context which coincides with the emergence of the novel genre itself. For it is habitually maintained that as “the narration of news begins to detach itself from the ballad form and to take on the aspect of a distinct discursive entity,”⁴⁷⁹ the claim to linear and organic historicism declines. In accordance, literary criticism is prone to identifying a historical-epistemological pattern where “the naive empiricism of the claim to historicity purports to document the authentic truth” while “the extreme scepticism of the opposing party demystifies this claim as mere “romance.”⁴⁸⁰ In other words, it is a commonplace practice in the theory of the novel to ascribe to the resolution that the sceptical novel of the eighteenth-century was historically born into “the conflict between naive empiricism and extreme scepticism, between progressive and conservative ideologies.”⁴⁸¹ Ironically enough, in an effort to identify the novelistic form with a non-circular and a non-linear rhetoric stemming from the new age’s democratic vernacular,⁴⁸² criticism’s own historicist aspirations produce a circular argument in favour of the sceptic tradition in the English novel where the scepticism of Haywood’s *Anti-Pamela* or of Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* is historically conditioned to be antithetical to Richardson’s virtuous mode of narration. For, it has been considered that the sceptical novel cannot bypass the ‘virtuous’ novel’s maverick mindset and yet the body of novel theory insistently produces and re-produces a conformist historical story around the emergence of the novel. History, as in the

⁴⁷⁸ Richard Shusterman, “Philosophy as Literature and More than Literature,” in *A Companion to The Philosophy of Literature*, edited by Garry L. Hagberg and Walter Jost, 7-22 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7.

⁴⁷⁹ Michael McKeon, *The Origins of The English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 47.

⁴⁸⁰ McKeon, *Origins*, 48.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁸² I borrow this phrase from J. Michael Sproule where he uses it to denote “the story of how modern English idioms for everyday use emerged after the later 1600s under the auspices of rhetoric (...).” See J. Michael Sproule, *Democratic Vernaculars: Rhetoric of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Criticism since the Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 13.

case of philosophy, claims to stand head and shoulders over literature as an epistemic informant. Naturally, it is not hard to attest to the fact that both of these approaches to the sceptical tradition in eighteenth-century fiction look for ways to locate the nature of this sceptical attitude in a certain abstract tradition through which the reactionary mode in novel can be explained with much critical ease and benefit. Even more so, they tend to comment on this sceptical tradition as the expression of an epistemological crisis which literature derives from either philosophy or history in the hope of discovering a universal pattern.

The problem here is that the strive for identifying the philosophical and historical conditions which had influenced the formation of the sceptical element in eighteenth-century fiction eventually implies that the novel form is a take on narrative and literary dogmatism. Paradoxically enough, however, it claims that the novel, for the literary neologism that it is, is the Enlightenment's own child. Or, better put, it offers such an all-encompassing generalisation with regards to the formation of novel that it reduces the novel to a historically and philosophically conditioned "self-conscious extension of empiricism."⁴⁸³ But if novelistic scepticism wishes to invert the unnatural orderliness of the pre-novelistic period, how can it possibly wish to subscribe to the standard experimentalism of the eighteenth-century? For, the vantage point here is that both philosophical empiricism and historical reactionism ironically create a pair of interpretative dogmatisms which necessitate the identification of linearity, historicity, and predeterminism with an older mode of thinking. The natural outcome of it, as expected, is to brand the sceptical novel as repugnant of the *Via Antiqua* and describe it as a new literary form which acquires its Herculean build from the historical empiricism of its own century. But, in turn, it dictates that the sceptical eighteenth-century novel signals at a paradigm shift where the theological worldview dissolves into thin air in the face of a growing experimentalism. Hence, the novel becomes the medium of a specific era which "from beginning to end was marked by fictional experiment," tending to "the exhilarating sense of possibility attending the absence of established rules."⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸³ Roger Maioli, "The Empirical Ambitions of the Eighteenth-Century Novel," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2015, 25.

⁴⁸⁴ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 18.

From these aspects, the mandates of philosophy and history impose on the novel a progressive doctrine. For, it typically starts with “the criticism of romance,” and moves towards “the naive empiricism of “true history,” to a final orientation of extreme skepticism.”⁴⁸⁵ In this sense, it defines novelistic scepticism as a perennial source of new age wisdom and as a solvent for what Terry Eagleton dubs as the “moral astigmatism”⁴⁸⁶ that is considered to be characteristic of the pre-novelistic period. However, the progressive overtones attributed to novelistic scepticism reiterate yet another form of moral astigmatism. In manipulating the major concerns of mimetic verisimilitude in literature, the newly developed novelistic abandonment of romance-related metaphysicality is forsaken for the sake of a new species of pluralistic and individualist representation which cannot ascribe to any sort of orthodoxy other than the one that is delivered by our five senses. As a result, the allegedly empirical and experimental quality of the novel persists in enforcing an empiricist dogma⁴⁸⁷ when it should be working in the opposite direction. The secular precincts of the novelistic labyrinth, then, hide yet another form of interpretative orthodoxy as if empirical human experience must follow the precepts of a positivistic and naturally reductionist charter. In challenging theological dogmatism, then, the sceptical *poiesis* (imaginative making) of the eighteenth-century novelistic imagination cannot avoid its creator’s newly developed taste for standardising *phusis* (nature) under pluralistic terms.⁴⁸⁸

It is only ironical that in burdening the sceptical tradition in novel with the role of a handmaiden to the Enlightenment’s fundamentally empiricist precepts, the critical tradition becomes so lenient with acknowledging the

⁴⁸⁵ McKeon, *Origins*, 73.

⁴⁸⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 10.

⁴⁸⁷ It is hard not to remember W.V.O. Quine’s extensive treatment of the two dogmas of empiricism where he openly criticises the logical-positivist cleavage between analytic and synthetic truths and linguistic reductionism. See W.V.O. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *The Philosophical Review* 60, no.1 (1951): 20-43.

⁴⁸⁸ I have in mind here Plato’s discussion on the two kinds of *aitia* (cause) in *Timaeus* where he identifies the *noetic* cause with the harmonious, reasonable creation of the *demiourgos* (the craftsman) and identifies the unreasonable cause as the bringer of disorder and chaos. Whichever the case, however, they both imply that nature and the natural order is the result of an imaginatively causational chain since there is “no suggestion that the random result referred to at 46e5 is not also necessitated by its cause.” For this point see Thomas Kjeller Johansen, *Plato’s Natural Philosophy: A Study of the Timaeus-Critias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 74.

entrance of this theology of reason into the novel form and it puts a certain limit at novelistic creativity. For, it devotes so much energy in justifying this teleological and cognitivist position by establishing the novel (and its scepticism) as an antithetical component of a growingly industrial, urbanised, and secular world that contrasts itself with the thetical pre-modern era that novels which do not follow this empiricist scheme are effortlessly dismissed from the sphere of rationality, labelled as ex-centric, and are argued to belong to a “fantastic-prophetical axis.”⁴⁸⁹ In terming them as such, the overtly sceptical element in novel is criticised for situating itself beyond the reach of rational empiricism which again philosophically and historically accuses it to fly over the pre-determined boundaries of the genre. Or, at best, it is considered that novelistic realism is “calculated contingency”⁴⁹⁰ which again is to unquestionably yield to the fact that the poetic maker is responsible of falsely manufacturing, or better put, constructing an incalculably contingent worldview when its excess stems from the new standard set for human experience.

It is a noteworthy fact that a certain tradition within the sceptical eighteenth-century novel largely breaks with this authoritarian claim to empiricist rationality. Interestingly enough, the sentimental novel which has been suggested to have been born out of the “cult of the “man of feeling”⁴⁹¹ and out of the sweeping but short-lived concept of sentimentalism, manages to dig a hole in the fervent empiricist’s collection of sense experiences all but to its own advantage. Although earlier critics tend to view the intrusion of sentimentalism into the cultural sphere as a remedial course in “humanitarian homiletic”⁴⁹² and as a pretextual response to the Puritan belief in the innateness of evil,⁴⁹³ it appears that the entire picture of sentimentalism in eighteenth-century England aims at curing the positivist strictness of its mechanistic understanding of human

⁴⁸⁹ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 102. Forster continues: “What does fantasy ask of us? It asks us to pay something extra. It compels us to an adjustment that is different to an adjustment required by a work of art, to an additional adjustment.” *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁹⁰ Eagleton, *English Novel*, 8.

⁴⁹¹ R.S. Crane, “Suggestions Toward A Genealogy of the “Man of Feeling,” *ELH* 1, no3 (1934): 205-230; 206.

⁴⁹² Crane, “Genealogy,” 212.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 220.

and nature. Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, the intellectual forerunner of ethical sentimentalism, writes in his *Characteristicks of Men*:

You must allow me, PALEMON, thus to bemoan *Philosophy*; since you have forc'd me to ingage with her at a time when her Credit runs so low. (...) We have immur'd her (poor Lady!) in Colleges and Cells; and have set her servilely to such Works as those in the Mines. Empiricks, and Pedantick Sophists are her chief Pupils. The *School-syllogism*, and the *Elixir*, are choicest of her Products.⁴⁹⁴

Shaftesbury does not only define the empiricist hold on philosophy as anything but liberating. In addition, he implies that it denies the thinking mind the right to “study MAN *in particular*, and know the Creature, as he is in himself, before we consider him in Company.”⁴⁹⁵ Another implication here is that the ‘Empiricks’ reduce our impression of human action to a series of rationally organised causal chain reactions when he especially looks for a commonality but not an essence. At this point, he introduces sentimentality as a companion concept to reason and gives precedence to “rational Affections.”⁴⁹⁶ In this sense, Shaftesbury admits the impact of feelings on the formation of human action or in Henry Sidgwick’s words “takes psychological experience as the basis of ethics.”⁴⁹⁷ His introduction of feelings, emotions, and sentiments into the ethical and the cognitive sphere is a reminder of the fact that reason should be held in check by our passions. The emphasis on sentimentality, then, stems from the desire to “make clear the normal operation of Intellect in the action we call reasonable.”⁴⁹⁸

It would not be an exaggeration to state that the sentimental novel is a literary take on the anti-mechanical dynamics of sentimentalism. This is not to say that it “returns to a pre-enlightenment world of sublunary chaos” and that it

⁴⁹⁴Anthony Ashley Cooper, *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit*, vol. 2 (Birmingham, 1773), 184. Original italics and capitals.

⁴⁹⁵Cooper, *Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, 185. Original italics and capitals.

⁴⁹⁶Ibid., 36.

⁴⁹⁷Henry Sidgwick, *Outlines of The History of Ethics* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1906), 190.

⁴⁹⁸Sidgwick, *Outlines*, 5.

chooses “contingence over logics and wit over the rational mind.”⁴⁹⁹ On the contrary, it has “a structure of *observation* or *perception*” but documents “the codification of a kind of reception aesthetic.”⁵⁰⁰ It expresses a certain scepticism felt towards the automatic, unemotional, non-psychological, and non-*eudaimonic* politics of a strictly sense-experience based value-system. In doing so, it definitely emerges as an “antibildungsroman”⁵⁰¹ which “challenges “not only the methods but the goal of conventional education”⁵⁰² of the eighteenth-century in a manner which clearly takes after Shaftesbury. Therefore, in its sentimentality, it seeks for denial and the sense of scepticism flows from its body without the least effort. The scepticism of the sentimental novel, then, is not one which seeks to grapple with the religiosity of the pre-Enlightenment or its predestinatory and pre-designatory way with the world. Rather, it underlines the peculiarities and shortcomings of a rationally catalogued version of truth and attempts “to rescue that individual from isolation and selfishness.”⁵⁰³

In playing “a public role which he did not abandon for the rest of his life,” the entire shape of Laurence Sterne’s literary career which is full “with ambiguities and unanswered questions”⁵⁰⁴ takes after the course of the sentimental novel. Both show signs of a commitment to trespassing the boundaries of the realism of eighteenth-century novel and in doing so, it is very much possible to argue that they maintain a shared level of scepticism which

⁴⁹⁹ Walter Göbel, “The Suppositional Structure: Tristram Shandy as a Playful Inquiry Into Human Nature,” *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 13 (1988): 155-181; 155.

⁵⁰⁰ David J. Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and The Social Order in France, 1760-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4. Original italics. Denby speaks of the sentimental narrative in the Enlightenment period France and yet his observation seems to be applicable to the English context as well.

⁵⁰¹ G.A. Starr, “Sentimental Novels of the Later Eighteenth Century,” in *The Columbia History of The British Novel*, edited by John Richetti, 181-199 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 181.

⁵⁰² Starr, “Sentimental Novels,” 189.

⁵⁰³ John Mullan, “Sentimental novels,” in *The Cambridge Companion to The Eighteenth Century Novel*, edited by John Richetti, 236-255 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 248. Also, see Jessica Riskin, *Science in The Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of The French Enlightenment* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 284. She writes: “(...) the charges of sentimental empiricists against the sciences of their day must surely have contributed to our belief that the history of modern science has been the straightforward unfolding of an impersonal, dispassionate way of knowing the world.”

⁵⁰⁴ Alan B. Howes, “Preface,” in *CHLS*, 7.

both react to the sublime object of the Enlightenment ideal. For, although Thackeray, the great realist, considers Sterne's sentimentalism a false one which does not fit the precepts of manliness that require the elimination of high spirits,⁵⁰⁵ in the above-mentioned context, Sterne's artistic versatility in employing the narrative techniques of sentimentalism is telling of how doubtful he appears to be of the cult of experience which in "post-Galilean 'classical' science," is considered to be "illustrated by simple and eye-catching procedures," while "it is given the appearance of stability through a method of interpretation that aims at, and succeeds in, concealing all change."⁵⁰⁶ In accordance, by trying his hand at the sentimental novel, Sterne finds the necessary means to veer away from the dogmatic, and from the undisputable, or even better he looks at the sentimental in an attempt for re-defining the reasonable, wishing to express his discontent with the "theological methods of casuistry," and making "an ethical defense of the individual against tyrannical norms."⁵⁰⁷

Sterne's magnum opus, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* that is famous for breaking with the experiential linearity of the novelistic discourse and "has become a landmark of narrative literature despite its flagrant breach of this convention"⁵⁰⁸ follows a familiarly sentimental path which plays along the lines of scepticism. Or, better put, it constricts the semantic gap between sentimentalism and scepticism by presenting its reader with the multifacetedness of human action which barely fits "into pigeon-holes."⁵⁰⁹ In accordance, *TS* locates the nature of its own sentimentalism in the doubtful character of the narrative which eventually gains ascendancy over it.

⁵⁰⁵ He declares accordingly and says: "And so the writer's jokes and sentiment, his ebullitions of feeling, his outbreaks of high spirits must not be too frequent. One tires of a page of which every sentence sparkles with points, of a sentimentalist who is always pumping the tears from his eyes or your own." See W.M. Thackeray, *English Humorists of The Eighteenth Century and Charity and Humour*, edited by Edgar F. Harden (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 197.

⁵⁰⁶ Paul Feyerabend, *Problems of Empiricism*, Philosophical Papers, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34.

⁵⁰⁷ Josephine Donovan, *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 5.

⁵⁰⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy*. Trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1.

⁵⁰⁹ John M. Stedmond, *The Comic Art of Laurence Sterne: Convention and Innovation in Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 3.

For, where its sentimentalism makes a plea for the divergent and the anomalous, the sceptical tone establishes the anomalous as the centre of gravity in the novel that runs up against the teleological, the rational, and the casuistic. In other words, it parodies the teleologically virtuous form of the realist novel to the effect of proposing a non-teleological construct, or better put, an alternative teleology. It is little wonder, then, the first chapter opens up with Tristram's mother's "silly question"⁵¹⁰ which not only causes a *coitus interruptus* but also displays the fact that she is "more than a vegetal existence in Shandy Hall."⁵¹¹ Following this scene, our friendly narrator procures a semi-emotional excuse for the creation of the Homunculi:

The Homunculus, sir, in however low and ludicrous a light he may appear, in this age of levity, to the eye of folly or prejudice;—to the eye of reason in scientific research, he stands confessed—a *Being* guarded and circumscribed with rights.—The minutest philosophers, who, by the by, have the most enlarged understandings (their souls being inversely as their inquiries) show us incontestably that the Homunculus is created by the same hand,—engendered in the same course of nature,—endowed with the same locomotive powers and faculties with us.⁵¹²

The Homunculus, which is defined by its deformity and prematurity, is a reflection on the narrator's untimely and unnatural birth. S/he emerges in the text as a horrendous casualty induced by a momentary interruption. In accordance, the excuse itself, the one that our narrator makes for this abomination of nature, is simply a response to the "excellent natural philosopher,"⁵¹³ his Newtonian father's perception of natural orderliness. The arch empiricist that he is, we understand that he has never really recovered from the tragic experience he had which led to Tristram's birth since he "oft and heavily complained of the injury."⁵¹⁴ The exact implication is that the suspension of the causal procedure is not only a traumatic experience but also an anomaly in the natural process to

⁵¹⁰ *TS*, II, 2.

⁵¹¹ Ruth Marie Fautot, "Mrs. Shandy Observed," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 10, no.3 (1970): 579-589; 589.

⁵¹² *TS*, II, 2. Original italics.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, III, 3.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Tristram's father so much so that the narrator considers himself nothing but the pitiful outcome of meddling with the mechanical order of the universe and he pleads for readerly justice and compassion. However sentimental his narration might be, on the other hand, through the image of the Homunculus, the reader is prepared for an antagonistic story which counters the father's "extreme exactness"⁵¹⁵ and the source of antagonism is hidden in the denizens of a *contra*-causalism. For, there is a sentimental mutiny in the narrator's tone that goes against a naturalist transcendentalism but also, connected to it, there is a narrative tone which hides a highly sceptical position against the concept of causal necessity. But clearly, the scepticism gains precedence over his sentimentality once he acknowledges that the Homunculi possess the same cognitive powers of a fully developed human being. This particular vindication of Homunculan rights is reminiscent of what is known as the sceptical challenge to the 'problem of induction' that is attributed to the Scottish philosopher David Hume. He contends in *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

Upon the whole, necessity is something that exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us to ever form the most distant idea of it, consider'd as a quality in bodies. Either we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes, according to their experienc'd union.⁵¹⁶

Hume's conflict with the inductive method arises from the fact that nature, to his thinking, does not necessarily display the power to necessitate. Or, in other words, necessity is a fiction of the human mind. Surely, as Barry Stroud maintains, in defining causality as an impression of the mind, Hume does not defend the idea that he observes causality as a non-existent concept or as a trivial phenomenon. On the other hand, Hume refers to our habit of ascribing "power, efficacy, or causal force to objects even though nothing exists in those objects

⁵¹⁵ TS, IV, 5. However, I do not think that "our narrator conceives chaos as a dynamic, creative force not to be avoided (...)" since an anomaly in the causal chain need not be necessarily considered a handmaiden to chaos. See John Freeman, "Delight in The (Dis)order of Things: *Tristram Shandy* and The Dynamics of Genre," *Studies in the Novel* 34, no.2 (2002): 141-161; 141.

⁵¹⁶ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), I.III, 165-166.

answering to that idea (...).”⁵¹⁷ But in this regard, the production of a Homunculus would not be an error of nature but rather of what Tristram calls “the continual sport of what the world calls Fortune.”⁵¹⁸ In being so, the narrator clearly professes his scepticism of a strict understanding of causality dictated by the natural philosopher. He heavily doubts the naturalist’s methods which assume—and diligently expect—that objects and living beings hold an internal power to create causally induced procreational processes that yield mechanically impeccable results, e.g. the delivery of a healthy offspring. In this context, we are reminded by Tristram that it would be impossible to understand human action by using the inductive method since:

there is a fatality attends the actions of some men: order them as they will, they pass through a certain medium, which so twists and refracts them from their true directions,—that, with all the titles to praise, which a rectitude of heart can give, the doers of them are nevertheless forced to live and die without it.⁵¹⁹

The fatality of human action lies in the fact that it holds the power to deviate from the mechanistic path projected unto it. This idea is continued elsewhere in Tristram’s introduction of Yorick, the great descendant of the Yorick family which “had been transplanted into England as early as in the reign of Horwendillus.”⁵²⁰ For, he intentionally directs our attention to the workings of nature in “this unsettled island” where she “is most whimsical and capricious.”⁵²¹ The image of the British Isles as an unsteady *topos* combined with its disorderly inhabitant perfectly captures the sense of deviancy which begs to differ from the mechanistic path of the natural philosopher and the narrator completely directs our attention to the fact that nature, contrary to what the hard-headed naturalist tends to believe, can find some other ways to operate within rather than following a text-bound or mind-bound lot of principles. It is hardly a surprise to

⁵¹⁷ Barry Stroud, “Hume and the Idea of Causal Necessity,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 33, no.1 (1978): 39-59; 44.

⁵¹⁸ *TS*, V, 6.

⁵¹⁹ *TS*, X, 17.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, XI, 18.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, XI, 19.

see, then, Yorick does not seem to have “one single drop of Danish blood in his whole crasis” since he shows no sign of having “cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense and humours”⁵²² as one would expect to see in an individual of Danish origin. Not only does Yorick diverge from the generalised account of the stereotypical Scandinavian but also, his physical appearance in itself is an attack on one of the culturally centralised symbols of empiricist science:

In the naked temper which a merry heart discovered, he would say, there was no danger,—but to itself:—whereas the very *essence of gravity* was design, and consequently deceit:—‘twas a taught trick, to gain credit of the world for more sense and knowledge than a man was worth.⁵²³

In Yorick’s opinion, attributing an essence to nature is not only misleading but also a sign of hypocrisy in the sense that it means to credit nature with a transcendental metaphysics, a sort of stability which, in fact, does not belong to nature. It is with this heart-breaking knowledge of being tricked into believing in an abstract standard attributed to nature that Yorick breathes his last. It is even a much greater heart-breaking moment on the reader’s part, but it is an exceptionally illustrious fact that even in his deathbed he utters a few words “with something of a Cervantic tone”⁵²⁴ which resist the naturalism-rationalism of his contemporaries. In doing so, the heart of the matter is revealed in a black page that stands for the moment where the whole lot of rational calculations and laws of nature become centrifugal pieces which are hardly in accord with the resistant and doubtful imagination of *TS*. For, it expresses in itself an attack on the metaphysics of causation and the over reliance on reason since in Hume’s words:

There is no Algebraist nor Mathematician so expert in his science, as to place entire confidence in any truth immediately upon his discovery of it, or regard it as any thing, but a mere probability. Every time he runs over his proofs, his confidence increases; but still more by the approbation of his friends; and is rais’d to its utmost

⁵²² *TS*, XI, 19.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, XI, 20. Italics are mine.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, XII, 24.

perfection by the universal assent and applauses of the learned world.⁵²⁵

In suggesting that the human agent's relationship with reality is hardly a well-established one and that the natural scientist's belief in necessity and causation is, in fact, implanted in the repeated observation of natural events that leads her/him to universal conclusions about that particular event, Hume notices that the human agent easily misses the possibility for the various potentials of nature and human action. The inductive method, then, becomes a dangerous *modus operandi* for the empiricist who fails to see that

Our foregoing method of reasoning will easily convince us, that there can be no *demonstrative* arguments to prove, *that those instances, of which we have had no experience, resemble those, of which we have had experience*. We can at least conceive a change in the course of nature; which sufficiently proves, that such a change is not absolutely impossible. To form a clear idea of any thing, is an undeniable argument for its possibility, and is alone a refutation of any pretended demonstration against it.⁵²⁶

The difficulty here is that however repeated that particular experience might be, it does not follow that the observable object and the human observant will remain unchanged as Hume emphasises. Thus, Tristram's father and his fellow empirical essentialists who struck a nerve in Yorick's cranium suffer exactly from the *a priori* assumption that the experiences they have not yet had must resemble the course of their prior experiences under the false assumption that the object that is observed and the subject who observes is unaffected by the forces of time and space. Tristram almost ridicules his father for it:

Will not the gentle reader pity my father from his soul? to see an orderly and well-disposed gentleman who though singular, yet inoffensive in his notions,—so played upon in them by cross purposes—to look down upon the stage, and see him baffled and overthrown in all his little systems and wishes ! to behold a train of events perpetually falling out against him, and in so

⁵²⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, I.IV, 180.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, I.VI, 89.

critical and cruel a way, as if they had purposely been planned and pointed against him, merely to insult his speculations.⁵²⁷

Through the image of his father, the narrator ridicules and also accuses the ‘empirick’ community in all their epistemic shortcomings. By doing so, Tristram humorously pokes fun at the artificial distinction between mental and physical events that is developed by systematic philosophers who fail to decry the so-called virtue(s) of scientific reasoning. Following this scene, and in a slightly similar manner, he mocks his uncle, Sir Toby Shandy for lamenting the fact that his cousin was born a half-wit and a misfortunate boy. However, his uncle differs from his father in the sense that Uncle Toby emerges as an example of “unparalleled modesty” while at another instance we also read about the details pertaining to the wound he received to the groin at the siege of Namur “owing to a blow from a stone.”⁵²⁸ Apparently, his physical impediment retracts not only from his masculinity but also from his empiricism to the extent that Tristram appears to be more sympathetic towards his uncle. Uncle Toby’s groin injury, then, overlaps with Hume’s concerns with the inductive method as it hurts the systematic causal chain in nature which leads Tristram to the following conclusion:

This contrariety of humours betwixt my father and my uncle, was the source of many a fraternal squabble. The one could not hear the tale of family disgrace recorded;—and the other would scarce ever let a day pass to an end without some hint at it.⁵²⁹

The sense of scepticism that *TS* gradually builds revolves around the idea that the use of scientific reason alone which puts its faith in a rule-bound, necessity-bound understanding of nature cannot hope to achieve much in the face of an ever-changing and dynamic mode of existence. The dynamism of the text, then, suspends and suspects the transcendental aesthetics of novelistic realism and philosophical empiricism. In this regard, the digressions in the novel subserve Sterne’s dynamic mode of expression which non-standardises both his

⁵²⁷ *TS*, XIX, 44.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, XXI, 51.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

narration and substitutes narrative virtue with narrative pluralities. The text emerges as a living being that showcases human experience in the entirety of its frailties and fragilities. It is a stance against abstractionism, stability, and unchangeability since

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;—they are the life, the soul of reading!—take them out of this book, for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them;—one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer;—he steps forth like a bridegroom,—bids All-hail; brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail.⁵³⁰

Surely, the digressive ink on the page establishes the doubtful demeanour of the text. But it is not exactly the means through which our readerly appetite is awakened because it is vitally important to note that the reigning feature of Sternean scepticism resides in *TS*'s emblematic use of humour. For, on one hand, in R.F. Brissenden's words, "there comes a point at which reason and logic—the power to systematise and order things and ideas—seem to break down,"⁵³¹ and the guests of Shandy Hall cannot seem "to grapple intelligently and reasonably both with the unpredictable universe of things" and with their "own irrationality."⁵³² On the other hand, out of this unintelligence the text propagates a "comedy of human imperfection and limitation."⁵³³ In directing our attention to an epistemic blindness that reaches a mechanical impasse which "seems at odds with the organic,"⁵³⁴ as Sternean criticism rightfully observes, the narrator explores the disparity, the humorous incongruity between fact and fiction. This, in turn, stems from the fact that

⁵³⁰ *TS*, XXII, 55.

⁵³¹ R.F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974), 193.

⁵³² Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress*, 193.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵³⁴ Judith Hawley, "Tristram Shandy, learned wit, and Enlightenment knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, edited by Thomas Keymer, 34-49 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 36.

the form of the comic forces it to be critical of reason, because reason, usually if not always, is “single frame” thinking, and the comic insists on more than one.⁵³⁵

In this respect, by “thinking aside” and focusing on “an aspect of the problem, which was previously ignored, or only present on the fringes of an awareness,”⁵³⁶ the narrator of *TS* offers a humorous critique of human reason which is prone to creating hypotheses that assimilate “every thing to itself, as proper nourishment” since “from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by everything you see, hear, read, or understand.”⁵³⁷ Narrating the multiple discussions between Walter Shandy, Dr. Slop, and Uncle Shandy with regards to the methods which will be used to deliver the ‘untimely’ baby, that is Tristram, the narrator humorously exposes his father:

—Mr. Shandy, my father, sir, would see nothing in the light in which others placed it,—he placed things in his own light;—he would weigh nothing in common scales;—no, he was too refined a researcher to lie open to so gross an imposition. (...) In a word, he would say, *error was error;—no matter where it fell—whether in a fraction,—or a pound,—’twas alike fatal to Truth;*—and she was kept down at the bottom of her well, as inevitably by a mistake in the dust of a butterfly’s wing,—as in the disk of the sun, the moon, and all the stars of Heaven put together.⁵³⁸

Truth, for Walter Shandy, is an abstract phenomenon. It represents a standard; it is the safest of sanctuaries designed for a reserved reality. It needs to be upheld at any cost and protected from the erroneous, the fallacious, and the inexact. Tristram’s humour, on the other hand, challenges this refined version of truth although it does not exactly achieve this end in a chaotic manner.⁵³⁹ On the contrary, it manages to find a line of flight from the “the laws of nature” which

⁵³⁵ George Goodin, “The Comic as a Critique of Reason: *Tristram Shandy*,” *College English* 29, no.3 (1967): 206-223; 214.

⁵³⁶ Arthur Koestler, *Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1964), 93.

⁵³⁷ *TS*, XLIV, 117.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 113. Italics are mine.

⁵³⁹ Wayne C. Booth, “The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction before *Tristram Shandy*,” *PMLA* 67, no.2 (1952): 163-185; 185.

“will defend themselves.”⁵⁴⁰ Or, better put, the sceptical humour of our narrator promotes itself as an error which “creeps in through the minute holes and small crevices which human nature leaves unguarded.”⁵⁴¹ But the error stands for, in fact, a non-erroneous event in the sense it represents a different interpretation, another way of seeing and observing things. For this particular reason, Tristram calls himself the “sport of small accidents.”⁵⁴² Error in nature is nothing but the outcome of a chance incident. It is an accident which breaks with causal necessity. Thus, Tristram has ample reason to doubt that truth (or the casuistic method we use to reach truth) is an ultimate destination to be arrived at since our relationship with reality is not only problematic but also a humorous one. It is problematic because, the sentient beings that we are, we cannot help ourselves desiring to spot a rational pattern in nature. It is humorous because the dynamism of the outer world does not always bother adapting itself to our cognitive patterns. For, as much as the universe unfolds itself as an orderly design it also includes a great deal of contingency and probability. In this respect, the narrator’s skilful use of the sceptical potential of humour unearths the difficulties that manifest itself in our use of human reason. Likewise, the argument over untying the knot of Dr. Slop’s medical bag which contains the forceps to deliver the baby results in the excommunication of the doctor and the servant, Obadiah⁵⁴³ and this scene feeds off our readerly request of cathartic contingency (due to the fact that we feel pity for poor Tristram) or probability rather than dysfunctional mechanism. But also, and ironically enough, it looks to the reader with a discerning humour only to remind us that we overlook “*contrariety* in our experience and observation.”⁵⁴⁴ By evoking laughter during the mock excommunication scene, the narrator throws a withering look at the reader since

’Twoud be very happy for men in the conduct of their lives and actions, were the same objects always conjoin’d together, and we had nothing to fear but the mistakes of our own judgement, without having any reason to apprehend the uncertainty of nature. But as ‘tis

⁵⁴⁰ *TS*, XLIV, 114.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, LII, 127.

⁵⁴³ Although Walter Shandy does not even allow Dr. Slop to read the form of excommunication alone on the grounds that it is “contrary to treaty.” *TS*, LV, 133.

⁵⁴⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, I.II, 131. Original italics.

frequently found, that one observation is contrary to another, and that causes and effects follow not in the same order, of which we have had experience, we are oblig'd to vary our reasoning on account of this uncertainty, and take into consideration the contrariety of events.⁵⁴⁵

What we have at hand here is a contingent humour that follows from a sceptical take on the dissonance between human experience and reality for he acknowledges that he hates “dissertations,” and the habit of darkening “your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opaque words (...).”⁵⁴⁶ But the breadth of the narrator’s argumentative vision seems to be even broader than the reader expects since Tristram deduces that human beings not only often fail in their relationship with nature itself but also have a hard time describing and defining their own nature. He writes:

—Inconsistent soul that man is!—languishing under wounds, which has the power to heal!—his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!—his reason, that precious gift of God to him—(instead of pouring in oil), serving but to sharpen his sensibilities,—to multiply his pains, and render him more melancholy and uneasy under them!—Poor unhappy creature, that he should do so!—Are not the necessary causes of misery in this life enough, but he must add voluntary ones to his stock of sorrow?—struggle against evils which cannot be avoided!”⁵⁴⁷

In defining human beings as inconsistent beings who cannot come to terms with reality, Tristram responds again to an alternatively capricious sort of causality which he has earlier associated with Englishness since he believes that the inconsistent climate produces “so strange an irregularity in our characters.”⁵⁴⁸ But also, take this local experience of Tristram’s and adapt it to humanity itself and we will find out that to be human means to be irregular and inconsistent since the entirety of human action presents a contingent picture. From this point

⁵⁴⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, I.II, 131.

⁵⁴⁶ *TS*, LXIV, 154.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, LXV, 157.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, XXI, 48.

of view, he veers away from “the Platonizing mathematician”⁵⁴⁹ who cannot explain the anomalies in a causal chain and distantly flirts with

the common Augustan understanding of chance not as the unpredictable or uncaused but as that which issues from mechanical, *non-intelligent* causes (Sterne’s “blind agents”), no matter how rule-governed that mindless pattern of causation may be.⁵⁵⁰

In *TS*’s humorously contingent context, however, perhaps it should be added to Patey’s argument that irregularity does not grow out of the body of mechanical causality but from the body of non-sequential causality. For, Tristram constantly makes complaints about the semantic gap between human experience and objective reality but also proposes that human action, judgement, and discernment are contextually conditioned concepts that are originally subject to mutation and change. Therefore, for Tristram it is hard for the human subject to wrestle with the ever-changing face of existence. But this, again, unveils a sceptical attitude since in the following chapters, the theme of contingent humour in a contingent world seems to be elongated by the long discourse on the idea of succession through which

we estimate the existence, or the continuation of the existence of ourselves, or anything else, commensurate to the succession of any ideas in our minds, the duration of ourselves, or any other thing co-existing with our thinking:—and so, according to that *pre-conceived*.⁵⁵¹

If, reasons Tristram, causal succession is a physical event that exists in nature as independent from human mind, how can it be that his grandfather would often boast “that the Shandy Family ranked very high in king Harry the VIIIth’s time; but owed its rise to no state engine,—he would say,—but to that

⁵⁴⁹ Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth Century England: A Study of The Relationships Between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 52.

⁵⁵⁰ Douglas Lane Patey, *Probability and literary form: Philosophic theory and literary practice in the Augustan age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 69. Original italics.

⁵⁵¹ *TS*, LXII, 147. Italics are mine.

only” and would eventually feel “the turn of the wheel, and had never recovered the blow of my great-grandfather’s nose” that caused “an uninterrupted succession of six or seven short noses.”⁵⁵² If nature has a mechanical impetus and a nose cannot bleed without “a succession of drops”⁵⁵³ as the logician observes in a tale composed by Hafen Slawkenbergius, the authoritative writer on noses, how is it possible that “the events of this world lay open to us” a “chapter of chances”⁵⁵⁴ and that Tristram once received a wound to the nose at his birth? On top of it, not only causal succession but also memorial succession seems to advance in a non-successive manner in Tristram’s opinion. For, the minute Mrs. Shandy’s maid Susannah holds the baby in her arms and rushes to Sir Walter Shandy to name the child as soon as possible, Walter tells Susannah he would like his son to be named after the great Trismegistus. However, after Susannah takes her leave of Sir Walter Shandy’s presence and speeds “along the gallery,”⁵⁵⁵ the reader is informed how the narrator got the name that he has today:

Susannah got the start, and kept it.—‘Tis Tris—something, cried Susannah.—There is no Christian name in the world, said the curate, beginning with Tris—,but Tristram.—Then ‘tis Tristramgistus, quoth Susannah.

—There is no gistus to it, noodle!—‘tis my own name, replied the curate, dipping his head, as he spoke, into the bason; Tristram! Said he, etc. etc. etc. etc.:—so Tristram was I called, and Tristram shall I be to the day of my death.⁵⁵⁶

At a first glance, the “leaky vessel”⁵⁵⁷ that is Susannah, in Sir Walter Shandy’s words, encapsulates the aristocratic male violence directed at the female working class members of Shandy Hall. But, it also directs our attention to the contingency of memorial recollection. Since memory itself can also be likened to a leaky vessel which is tied to the chance element involved in matters of remembering a past experience, the name of the child ends up being a

⁵⁵² *TS*, LXXVII, 172.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, LXXXVI, 202.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, XCV, 219.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, C, 225.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

grammatical re-assortment, or better but, a semantic hotch-potch. Furthermore, since the curate's reductionist rational mind which cannot accept the fact that Trismegistus *can be* a Christian name and his remark on the subject stands merely as a corrective force without knowing that he is correcting an incorrect sign unit of remembrance, the child's name becomes a product of the chance element in the novel. In this fashion, memory becomes an associate of uncertainty in a Humean sense which goes against the Kantian "certainty that there are psychological laws governing the phenomena of inner sense."⁵⁵⁸ For, when decayed by "a long tract of time" memories can transform into imaginative recollections of past experience which leads Hume to the conclusion that

These faculties are as little distinguish'd from each other by the arrangement of their complex ideas. For tho' it be a peculiar property of the memory to preserve the original order and position of its ideas, while the imagination transposes and changes them. (...) The more recent this memory is, the clearer is the idea; and when after a long interval he would return to the contemplation of his object, he always finds its idea to be much decay'd, if not wholly obliterated. We are frequently in doubt concerning the ideas of memory, as they become very weak and feeble.⁵⁵⁹

And accordingly, if our memory fails us, we would have to succumb to the fact that "an entity of the sort Hume takes the mind to be (complex, dynamic, ever-changing) can be thought of as an active agent in the formation of our beliefs about everything."⁵⁶⁰ In being so, memory does not necessarily build itself upon the strictest of sense impressions as it is subject to alteration in continuum. If so, memory is nothing but the compilation of singular instances of sense experience which can either present a uniform picture or not. It cannot assume a universal role where the causal recollection of events *must* produce universally acclaimed

⁵⁵⁸ Gary Hatfield, "Empirical, rational, and transcendental psychology: Psychology as science and philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, edited by Paul Guyer, 200-228 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 223.

⁵⁵⁹ Hume, *Treatise*, I.III, 85.

⁵⁶⁰ John Biro, "Hume's new science of the mind," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, edited by David Fate Norton, 33-64 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 50.

effects which is also why Tristram cries out to his reader in a mock-Shakespearean manner as follows:

—Unhappy Tristram! child of wrath! child of decrepitude! interruption! mistake! and discontent! What one misfortune or disaster in the book of embryotic evils, that could unmechanize thy frame, or entangle thy filaments, which has not fallen upon thy head, or ever thou camest into the world! What evils in thy passage into it!— what evils since!—produced into being, in the decline of thy father’s days,—when the powers of his imagination and of his body were waxing feeble,—when radical heat and radical moisture, the elements which should have tempered thine, were drying up; and nothing left to found thy stamina in but negations!⁵⁶¹

It should be acclaimed that Tristram’s conception of non-necessity and non-universalism pays homage to Sterne’s nominalist agenda in the sense that it refuses to attribute necessity to nature and to the cognitive powers of human beings. In other words, it is a commentary on probable anomalies in the causal chain and advises us to “doubt wisely,”⁵⁶² in a manner which very distantly alludes to the paradoxical and heterogenous style of John Donne, the Newtonian automaton by sniggering at the treacherous universalism of empiricism. Tristram’s mode of scepticism, then, humorously exposes the mistake “to confound a fact about experience with a fact about extramental reality.”⁵⁶³ Better put, his scepticism tears apart the metaphysical joke that is played upon his family and himself because, to draw an analogy, once he takes the lid off of the mechanistic container, he explores nothing but the transcendental ideal of a tuna fish, so to speak, which is not truly in synonymy with the real one that wanders in the Pacific Ocean. In accordance, his humorous fork dives into the container and reaches for an anatomic autopsy of the canned creature in the hope of understanding being and its relationship with reality in all of its uncertainties,

⁵⁶¹ *TS*, CV, 232.

⁵⁶² John Donne, “Satyre III,” in *The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters*, edited by W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 13.

⁵⁶³ Deborah Brown, “Hume and the nominalist tradition,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 42, no. 51 (2012): 27-44; 29.

contingencies, and probabilities. It is very interesting to note that Sterne plays the role of a literary surgeon since he acknowledges that

True Shandeism, think what you will against it, opens the heart and lungs; and, like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely through their channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round.⁵⁶⁴

The medical aspect to Tristram's humour is not only revelatory but also explanatory of the nominalist context that is mentioned above in the sense that it conveys the narrator's interest in probing into the particulars which make us human. But also, it represents the culmination of an individualistic endeavour which yearns for inspecting the limits of human experience for its own sake and not for the sake of another ideological agenda. For, the narrator does not consider being and existence as necessarily ideological entities but definitely thinks that the ratiocination of being and existence requires an ideological motive from an empirically deterministic point of view. Therefore, the scepticism of Tristram's humour looks for the "the sauces of life"⁵⁶⁵ in Uncle Shandy's words who mourns along with Walter the death of Tristram's brother, Bobby and, in his opinion, the sauce of life cannot be contained in mechanical casuistry but rather can be tracked down in the contingently dynamic modes of *be-ing*. Bobby's death, then, which coincides with Tristram's birth tells us a simple a story of contingency that is deprived of necessary causal relation. After all, life is a "delicious mixture"⁵⁶⁶ which cannot rest upon a single causal principle and however cyclical a pattern Tristram's birth and Bobby's death might represent, it appears that the so-called pattern is in fact solely built upon a series of contingent timing.

Towards the end of the novel, the novel's ex-centric method of non-causality which is facilitated by its sceptical humour appears to be pronounced more heavily than ever. Not being able to recover from his firstborn son's loss, Sir Walter Shandy starts investing in his second son's future by starting to

⁵⁶⁴ *TS*, CXVIII, 268.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, CXXI, 280.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, CXXVII, 297.

compose the *Tristapedia*, “after the example of Xenophon.”⁵⁶⁷ He looks up to the example of *Cyropaedia*, where the Ancient Greek military leader and philosopher Xenophon produces a pre-Machiavellian manual for the education of the ruler by outlining the character of the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus the Great and accordingly Sir Walter Shandy seeks for solace in the idea that he might be able to put an end to his misfortunes by forming “an INSTITUTE for the government” of Tristram since he believes that “he had been unfortunate in his three first great casts”⁵⁶⁸ for him that are “my geniture, nose, and name!”⁵⁶⁹ However, Tristram notes the difficulties with which his father encounters. He seems to devote a great portion of his time trying to finish his encyclopaedic mission but eventually the reader is informed of the fact that

the first part of the work, upon which my father had spent the most of his pains, was rendered entirely useless;—every day a page or two became of no consequence.⁵⁷⁰

Accordingly, it is not a surprise to learn that the encyclopaedia does not turn out to be a great educative handbook as Xenophon’s and also to learn that the writing process suffers from futility and slowness in composition. The inability to proceed from the model of the Ancient Greek *exemplar*, then, points towards the fact that Sir Walter Shandy is driven by the old historicist emotion that wishes for the continuation of linear progress when he tragically overlooks “the human factor” that is “the ultimately uncertain and wayward element in social life and in all social institutions.”⁵⁷¹ Not only is he blind to the fact that the intellectual context of the eighteenth-century differs from the Ancient Greek context but also

⁵⁶⁷ *TS*, CXXXIV, 294.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 294. Original capitals. Maurice Cooper writes in his preface to *Cyropaedia*, dedicated to Lady Elizabeth Harris that “The treatise of the institution of Cyrus in undoubtedly fabulous. The Iliad and Odysseid of Homer are fables likewise, though of another kind. And there is certainly no more pretence to truth of fact, in this of Xenophon, than those of Homer: yet the whole of it is so true to nature, that it may be said to be almost as natural as if it were really fact; and, of consequence, is instructive, and, perhaps, more instructive than what is called real history.” See Xenophon, *Cyropaedia; or, The Institution of Cyrus*. Trans. Maurice Ashley Cooper (London: Vernor and Hood, 1803), 28.

⁵⁶⁹ *TS*, CXXXIV, 294.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁵⁷¹ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 224.

he cannot manage to understand the source of the difficulty he faces in composing the *Tristrapedia* since “his pen was a little retrograde.”⁵⁷² The composition takes so long and to so little use that Tristram declares:

I began to live and get forwards at such a rate, that if an event had not happened,—which, when we get to it, if it can be told with decency, shall not be concealed a moment from the reader,—I verily believe, I had put by my father, and left him drawing a sundial, for no better purpose than to be buried under ground.⁵⁷³

The task of history-writing, like literary composition, is necessarily sequential for a hard-headed, mechanical empiricist like Sir Walter Shandy meaning that it comprises of a constant series of causally connected sequences. If Xenophon managed to compose the *Cyropaedia*, then why not assume that history should causally repeat itself and he should be able to write a guidebook for his own son? However, with his usual humour, the narrator lays bare before the eyes of the reader that history-writing and its transmission to the next generation becomes an almost impossible task where a uniform understanding, or better put, of history suddenly collapses. It presents us with the view that a holistic approach to history which defines human nature as a constant and its relationship with time as a study in uniformity, represents a logical fallacy in itself. For, with reference to Hume, “all causes are not conjoined to their usual effects with like uniformity.”⁵⁷⁴ Tristram’s sceptical take on the subject, then, not only depicts the humorous incongruity between the illusory view of historical causality and the non-sequential shape of history itself but also it underlines that the entirety of human action can be understood only and simply under nominal terms. As if too eager to prove this point, the following scene portrays the absurd circumstances under which Tristram is circumcised. Lifting the window sash with one hand, for a single moment Susannah asks child Tristram to lift it and the other minute “so, slap came the sash down like lightning upon us.”⁵⁷⁵ The

⁵⁷² *TS*, CXXXIV, 296.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁵⁷⁴ Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Human Understanding, and an Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), I.VIII, 86.

⁵⁷⁵ *TS*, CXXXV, 297.

only nominal explanation for it is that Uncle Shandy's servant Corporal Trim needed lead for fortification and

he had taken the two leaden weights from the nursery-window, and as the sash-pulleys, when the lead was gone, were of no kind of use, he had taken them away also, to make a couple of wheels for one of their carriages.⁵⁷⁶

And this scene perfectly catches the end of another where Tristram cunningly surprises his reader by presenting a historically de-familiarised, a de-historicised account of his father. To put it more correctly, he is so doubtful of a universalist conception of history that he humorously pushes his narrative to the 'ought-to-be' limits of Aristotelian poetics to achieve his own desired end which produces an incongruent contingency in his narrative technique:

As many pictures as have been given of my father, how like him soever in different airs and attitudes,—not one, or all of them, can ever help the reader to any kind of preconception of how my father would think, speak, or act, upon any untried occasion or occurrence of life.—There was that infinitude of oddities in him, and of chances along with it, by which handle he would take a thing,—it baffled, sir, all calculations.⁵⁷⁷

If it is not entirely possible for the reader to form a complete idea of Sir Walter Shandy's character and attitude, to understand why Corporal Trim needlessly pulled out the two lead weights from the window pane, and to digest the inexpressibly slow and inefficacious process of encyclopaedic composition, the seemingly meaningless sequence develops the idea that human nature and actions are vulnerable to "inconstancy" which "fall outside the uniformity which Newtonian science and philosophy demand"⁵⁷⁸ in a familiarly Humean sense. Therefore, it is only ironical that the conscious narrator of *TS* leads us into a

⁵⁷⁶ *TS*, CXXXVII, 299.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, CXLII, 302.

⁵⁷⁸ S.K. Wertz, "Hume, History, and Human Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no.3 (1975): 481-496; 493. Wertz does not completely dismiss the idea that Hume believes that there is a constancy in human nature but considers that "for Hume," it is simply "a methodological principle which makes history possible." *Ibid.*, 491.

rhetorical trap of semantic emptiness when he, in fact, aims at showing the probabilistic frontiers of human experience and action.

It has been maintained by some critics that *TS*'s sceptical humour is the making of "the profound impact that melancholy had on the literary sensibility of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods"⁵⁷⁹ and that its so-called pessimism is the outcome of the novel's sentimentalism which "becomes Tristram's way of dealing with a world that seemingly conspires against him."⁵⁸⁰ More moderate interpretations of it consider the fact that in taking "a moral stand in his fiction which differed hardly at all from that of his sermons" it vouchsafes a mood of writing that swings between a "clerical optimism" and a "humorous pessimism."⁵⁸¹ In a similar regard, Sterne's contemporaries open to question his literary use of humour. In an imaginary conversation that takes place between Jonathan Swift and Henry Fielding, the imaginary Swift is bestowed with the liberty to declare that *TS* is "a hotch potch of technical terms—broken sentences—trite satir—obscenity—low buffoonery, without wit and humour."⁵⁸² In addition, its unconventionality is so much the object of literary and intellectual disdain that it led Thackeray to the conclusion that he is "a great jester," and "not a great humourist."⁵⁸³ And yet, the variety of comments on *TS*'s use of humour—whether pessimistic or optimistic—do not shadow the fact that it propels a particular sense of doubt. It both reveals the irreconcilability between material causation and mental causation and proposes that the dynamic existence of nature holds the power to yield contrary results that are contrary to the expectations of the mechanistic horizons of the rational mind. It in this sense that Tristram complains of "Vain Science" which "assistest us in no case of this kind,—and thou puzzlest us in every one"⁵⁸⁴ when describing the recreation of the Battle of Namur by Corporal Trim and his uncle Sir Toby Shandy. In Melinda Alliker Raab's words, since "the art of miniaturization is another way

⁵⁷⁹ Stuart Sim, *A Philosophy of Pessimism* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2015), 110.

⁵⁸⁰ Sim, *Philosophy of Pessimism*, 111.

⁵⁸¹ Arthur H. Cash, *Sterne's Comedy of Moral Sentiments: The Ethical Dimension of The Journey* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1966), 126.

⁵⁸² Anonymous, "Tristram Shandy's Bon Mots, Repartees, odd Adventures and Humorous Stories...and a New Dialogue of the Dead, between Dean Swift, and Henry Fielding, Esq, June 1760," in *CHLS*, 71.

⁵⁸³ Thackeray, *English Humorists*, 94.

⁵⁸⁴ *TS*, CXC, 362.

of apprehending the familiar in a new and heightened way,”⁵⁸⁵ by bringing together “cognitive and visual theory,”⁵⁸⁶ Tristram carefully tends to the distinction between Uncle Shandy’s “unparalleled modesty of nature,” the “singleness of heart”⁵⁸⁷ and his deep-felt eagerness to recreate sites of war and play games of mock-battle. For, it is a dubious matter that one can be so much interested in re-experiencing and re-living memories of armed fighting when he has a tender heart and is out of the war zone. Our narrator explains the disparity as follows:

There was, madam, in my uncle Toby, a singleness of heart which misled him so far out of the little serpentine tracks in which things of this nature usually go on, you can—you can have no conception of it: with this, there was a plainness and simplicity of thinking, with such an unmistrusting ignorance of the plies and foldings of the heart of woman;—*and so naked and defenceless did he stand before you (when the siege was out of his head),* that you might have stood behind any one of your serpentine walks, and shot my uncle Toby, ten times in a day, through his liver; if nine times in a day, madam, had not served your purpose.⁵⁸⁸

I would like to argue at this point that it is only with great difficulty that we can make an argument for the serpentine track of humour as an enforcement of a particularly optimistic or pessimistic point of view. Tristram does not particularly nurture ideas either of a diabolical entrapment or a sanguine prospect for the future. But he does promote indeed a certain sense of doubt which refuses to “hush before the unknowable and the unnameable.”⁵⁸⁹ By striving for the development of a reformist attitude with regards to the logical explanation of the contingently incongruous, it not only doubts the validity of any logical reasoning which leaves out the probable, the contingent, and the non-necessitated but also

⁵⁸⁵ Melinda Alliker Raab, *Miniature and the English Imagination: Literature, Cognition, and Small-Scale Culture, 1650-1765* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 25.

⁵⁸⁶ Raab, *Miniature and the English Imagination*, 29.

⁵⁸⁷ *TS*, CLXXXIX, 362.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 362. Italics are mine.

⁵⁸⁹ Michael Rosenblum, “Shandean Geometry and the Challenge of Contingency,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 10, no.3 (1977): 237-247; 247.

reflects on the incommensurability of contingency with any mechanically-oriented worldview. Tristram's emphasis on the mechanistic differentiation between contingency and necessity, then, translates itself into an ethical one where the pre-Humean distinction between 'ought-to' and 'is' arguments facilitates the emergence of necessity which "bursts through the well-regulated channel shaped by the norm."⁵⁹⁰ However, our narrator's innovative humour challenges this position by attempting to close the gap between these two arguments instead of widening it. It is a challenge that is very much reminiscent of what was later known as Hume's Law and Hume writes of it in the third book of the *Treatise*:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.⁵⁹¹

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that Hume, by cutting off the necessary bound between what 'is' and what 'ought to be,' "is crusading" against "a religious foundation for morality and putting in its place a foundation in human needs, interests, desires, and happiness."⁵⁹² In this respect, Tristram places Uncle Toby's non-casuistic physicality into a refreshingly ethical context where his

⁵⁹⁰ Christoph Bezemek, "The 'Normative Force of the Factual': A Positivist's Panegyric," in *The Normative Force of the Factual: Legal Philosophy Between Is and Ought*, eds. Nicoletta Bersier Ladavac, Christoph Bezemek, and Frederick Schaaauer, 65-79 (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019), 65.

⁵⁹¹ Hume, *Treatise*, III.I, 469. Original italics.

⁵⁹² A.C. MacIntyre, "Hume on 'is' and 'ought,'" in *The Is-Ought Question: A Collection of Papers on the Central Problem in Moral Philosophy*, edited by W.D. Hudson, 35-51 (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1969), 46.

modesty *is not* the warrant of utterly sane behaviour. It *ought to* be and yet it *is not*. From this point of view, Tristram's objection to causal mechanism gains a new character since his sceptical humour rejects the officiality of reason and its ethical attributes. In consequence, in depicting his uncle's love affair with Widow Wadman, he plays the part of an exhausted narrator when in reality he mimics the thought processes of the mechanic reader with the purpose of exposing her/his shortcomings:

—'TWILL come out, of itself, by and by.—All I contend for is, that I am not obliged to set out with a definition of what love is; and so long as I can go on with my story intelligibly, with the help of the word itself, without any other idea to it than what I have in common with the rest of the world, why should I differ from it a moment before the time?— When I can get on no further,—and find myself entangled on all sides of this mystic labyrinth,—my opinion will then come in, in course,—and lead me out.⁵⁹³

And, it is particularly for this reason that he explains why he would wish to explain that his uncle actually did not 'fall' in love. The ethical problem, in his opinion, arises when we assume that a person *is* in love because he *ought to* (or to provide further clarity, *can*) fall in love when s/he meets a kindred soul, or possibly for no apparent and causally identified reason at all. He continues:

—Not that the phrase is at all to my liking: for to say a man is *fallen* in love,—or that he is *deeply* in love;—or up to the ears in love;—and sometimes even *over head and ears in it*,—carries an idiomatical kind of implication, that love is a thing below a man.—This is recurring again to Plato's opinion, which with all his divinityship,—I hold to be damnable and heretical (...).⁵⁹⁴

In connection with this point, it is only a positivist tragedy that Sir Walter Shandy cannot understand why Uncle Toby *ought to* be or *can* be in love with a desirous widow:

⁵⁹³ TS, CXC VII, 372.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 372.

Now my father was then holding one of his second beds of justice, and was musing within himself about the hardships of matrimony, as my mother broke silence.
 “—My brother Toby,” quoth she, “is going to be married to Mrs. Wadman!”
 —Then he will never, quoth my father, be able to lie *diagonally* in his bed again, as long as he lives.⁵⁹⁵

The contrast between the casuistic metaphysics of Sir Walter Shandy and the contingent poetics of Tristram gains more ground towards the end of the novel when the narrator unfolds to the reader the deterioration of his spiritual well-being. And yet again, he refuses to acknowledge his nearing death as a rational force in human life cycle since he is aware that it comes “in so gay a tone of careless indifference.”⁵⁹⁶ He knows that the average lifespan of a human being cannot rival the speed of his ideas which is why he sighs and says “woe be to truth! and woe be to the vehicle and its tackling.”⁵⁹⁷ But in recognising his own limits as a human being, he also heavily criticises the mechanistic ideology and its eagerness to liken human life to a pre-designed bulk of automatic responses and to create a systematically symbiotic relationship with truth. Thus, he chooses instead to “take the matter coolly” and

consider, that some tag, or rag, or jag, or bolt, or buckle, or buckle’s tongue, will ever be a wanting, or want altering, travel where I will;—so I never chaff, but take the good and the bad as they fall in my road.⁵⁹⁸

This is due to the fact that death, to him, is nothing more than an exercise in humility in a world full of contingencies and hobby-horsical movement. For, if “Reason is, half of it,” “Sense” constitutes the other half since “the measure of Heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions.”⁵⁹⁹

From here on, the tone of the narrative returns back to its sentimentalist origins in the sense that it groups the sentimental with the contingent, the non-

⁵⁹⁵ TS, CC, 374. Original italics.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., CCII, 377.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., CCIX, 384.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 385.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., CCXIV, 389.

casuistic, and the sceptically humorous whereas it aligns the rational with the systematic, the casuistic, and the rigidly orthodox. In its sentimental scepticism, it offers a glimpse at understanding life as a travel and not as a pattern which is also the reason behind his eagerness to go on a journey to France. Initially, the journey turns out to be a tough one much to the dislike of Tristram. At first, he believes that “*something is always wrong in a French post-chaise, upon first setting out.*”⁶⁰⁰ “A rope’s broke!” he thinks to himself, “a knot has slipt!—a staple’s drawn!—a bolt’s to whittle!”⁶⁰¹ But eventually he arrives at the conclusion that this is the price he has to pay for his eccentricity and unconventionality which is the building block of the Shandean universe. He notes:

Now I hate to hear a person, especially if he be a traveller, complain that we do not get on so fast in France as we do in England; whereas we get on much faster, *consideratis considerandis*; thereby always meaning, that if you weigh their vehicles with the mountains of baggage which you lay both before and behind upon them,—and then consider their puny horses, with the very little they give them,—‘tis a wonder they get on at all.⁶⁰²

Personally speaking, he learns to come to terms with this relativity and contingency as does his narrative. For, in the hope of fleeing from Death, Tristram’s travels signify the very fact that he undermines the clockwork standards of Newtonian causality. But also, the journey encapsulates the need to look beyond the limits of England, fiction-wise and technique-wise. For, in getting out of England, he implies that he is no longer willing to play the role of a *camera obscura*, the photographer who captures the dysfunctional epistemology of the island. Deciding to take a trip across the Channel is to get out of the geographical coordinates of the novel which points towards the danger

⁶⁰⁰ TS, CCIX, 385. Original italics.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 385.

⁶⁰² Ibid., CCXXI, 397. Original italics.

that he “might be obscured by the vigorous activity and the emphasis on the plotting of the events.”⁶⁰³ In short, it summarises the fact that

The novel in England needed pointing toward characterization; it needed a re-examination, after Fielding, of the place and technical management of plot structure in relation to characterization. This was Sterne’s contribution.⁶⁰⁴

The *exodus* from England, in the context of travel-writing, represents the fact that it builds up a case for “the coalition-building work done to overcome the so-called ‘limits’ of identity politics.”⁶⁰⁵ In this regard, it is an implication of the fact that Tristram wishes to get out of England to dig a hole in the causal structure. And the hole that he is looking for, he finally finds it in the south of France:

There is nothing more pleasing to a traveller,—or more terrible to travel-writers, than a large rich plain, especially if it is without great rivers or bridges, and presents nothing to the eye but one unvaried picture of plenty.⁶⁰⁶

It is not much of a surprise to witness that only at this point we genuinely hear Tristram the individual’s own voice. He bids farewell to reason in an almost anarchic manner and makes a manifestation of his own feelings concerning truth and reality. He says:

Now, of all things in the world, I understand the least of mechanism;—I have neither genius, or taste, or fancy,—and have a brain so entirely unapt for every thing of that kind, that I solemnly declare I was never yet able to comprehend the principles of a motion of a squirrel-cage, or a common knife-grinder’s wheel,—though I have many an hour of my life looked up with great

⁶⁰³ H.K. Russell, “*Tristram Shandy* and the Technique of the Novel,” *Studies in Philology* 42, no.3 (1945): 581-593; 593.

⁶⁰⁴ Russell, “*Tristram Shandy*,” 593.

⁶⁰⁵ Michael Brown, “Travelling through the Closet,” in *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing*, edited by James Duncan and Derek Gregory, 185-200 (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 189.

⁶⁰⁶ *TS*, CCXLIII, 423.

devotion at the one,—and stood by with as much patience as any Christian ever could do at the other.⁶⁰⁷

And in the following scene, he declares that he will take a look at the “surprising movements of this great clock” with a Gargantuan appetite:

and then I will pay a visit to the great library of the Jesuits, and procure, if possible, a sight of the thirty volumes of the general history of China, wrote (not in the Tartarean, but) in the Chinese language, and in the Chinese character too.

Now, I almost know as little of the Chinese language, as I do of the mechanism of Lippius’s clockwork; so, why these should have jostled themselves into the two first articles of my list,— *I leave to the curious as a problem of Nature. I own, it looks like one of her ladyship’s obliquities; and they who court her are interested in finding out her humour as much as I.*⁶⁰⁸

As a traveller in life, Tristram is hungry for personal experience although he faces a great deal of hardship during his journey; he encounters a bulk of “ups and downs.”⁶⁰⁹ But also, these hardships facilitate a self-evaluation with regards to the consequences of his self-inflicted scepticism. Looking back to his journey, he later remembers a scene from his encounter with a certain Maria in pastoral France where she plays vespers on the flute “with her little goat beside her.”⁶¹⁰ But in this dubiousity-charged scene, Tristram remains a humorous observant as ever:

Maria looked wistfully for some time at me, and then at her goat,—and then at me,—and then at her goat again, and so on, alternately.
—Well, Maria, said I softly, what resemblance do you find?⁶¹¹

Tristram instantly identifies himself with the goat who is easily deceived by a random female wanderer in nature. He gets up “with broken and irregular steps”⁶¹² and walks immediately to his chaise and in the following chapter he

⁶⁰⁷ TS, CCXXXI, 410-411.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 411. Italics are mine.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., CCCII, 499.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., CCCIII, 500.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 501.

⁶¹² Ibid., CCCIV, 502.

explains why he has added two blank chapters and considers this “a lesson to the world, “*to let people tell their stories their own way.*”⁶¹³ He considers the fact that his sceptical humour might make a fool of him in the eyes of his critics, a scapegoat even for portraying the ascendancy of causal probability and plenitude over causal singularity. But it does not deter him from defending his contingent particularity, his accidental existence. After all, “he is an Erasmian holy fool” and “what is absurd in the eyes of the world is unequivocally good in the eyes of Sterne.”⁶¹⁴ Goodness, happiness, and mirth, to put it more correctly, flows from the ‘goatish’ fool’s accidental narrative without much effort which illustriously contrasts his father’s sterile bull that cannot impregnate Obadiah’s cow although the former is kept “as impropiator of the great tithes.”⁶¹⁵ Consequently, the novel invokes a literary version of moral anti-rationalism and ends on a high note which places passions and sentiment in high regard. The repercussions of this position immediately jog our memory and we are reminded of Hume’s ‘anti-rational’ abandonment of the official methods of reasoning:

I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy. For those are my sentiments in that splenetic humour, which governs me at present. I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my sense and understanding; and in this blind submission I shew most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles. But does it follow, that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself, in some measure, from the commerce and society of men, which is so agreeable; (...) If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable. Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance; and will no more be led a wandering into such dreary solitudes, and rough passages, as I have hitherto met with.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹³ TS, CCCIV, 502. Original italics.

⁶¹⁴ A.D. Nuttall, *A Common Sky: Philosophy and the Literary Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 79.

⁶¹⁵ TS, CCCXII, 513.

⁶¹⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, I.IV, 269-270. Original italics.

Sterne's sentimental innovation lies in his understanding of humour which makes his mission of epistemological doubt a transparent one. It definitely makes sense since his humour is both rich in tradition and in innovation so much so that Horace Walpole recounts how Bishop Warburton advised "the bench of bishops" to read Sterne as he looked up to him as "the English Rabelais."⁶¹⁷ In this context, it acquires from one of its most revered literary descendants the sense of "interpretative openness" which "seems more accurately to reflect or reproduce or allow for the multiple realities of the social world."⁶¹⁸ But, in its own eighteenth-century context, it also allows a criticism of rationalism and its causal underpinnings since in a Sternean context

humour seems superior to ordinary, serious discourse which is premised on an implicit denial of the fact that we live in a world of multiple meanings and multiple realities. It seems therefore, that the serious mode is seriously *defective*.⁶¹⁹

The superiority of humour in *TS*'s sentimental context, then, represents the abandonment of causal reasoning that is bound with a necessity-ordained universe. It aligns sentimentalism with the anti-rational powers of sceptical humour that desirously look beyond the habitually causal construction of the human mind. The rational, for Sterne, is a cosmetic and a harmonious design. But does it guarantee a genuine relationship with truth, reality, and nature? Apparently, the answer is 'no'. For *TS*'s artifice of failure stands for the natural contingency which rationality itself can never hope to eradicate or overcome. In this sense, it trades for humour in lieu of a standardised logicism in a manner which overlaps with Chaucer's and Ben Jonson's use of the concept. By doing so, it offers a literary experiment in exploring the idea of semantic possibility which consistently seeks to defeat the purpose of 'rational' metaphysics, *ab ovo*.

⁶¹⁷ Horace Walpole, "Extract from a letter to Sir David Dalrymple, 4 April 1760," in *CHLS*, 56.

⁶¹⁸ Michael Mulkay, *On Humour: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 219.

⁶¹⁹ Mulkay, *On Humour*, 219. Original italics.

CONCLUSION:

QUO VADIS, HUMOUR? ON THE SCEPTICAL POTENTIAL OF ENGLISH HUMOUR AND ITS NOMINALIST FRONTIERS

It is an unfortunate fact that the evaluation of humour does not have a long critical history, nor does it seem that until recently there has been a private chapter devoted to humour in the critical consciousness. For the entrance of humour into the cultural sphere, as Willibald Ruch explains in his *The Sense of Humour*, did not happen until early seventeenth century and it was not until then that the dictionary definition of humour came to represent “the condition of being in a cheerful and amiable mood (...).”⁶²⁰ Not only that but also, it was only the late seventeenth century, he argues, that marked the semantic expansion of humour in which humour “was expanded to include behavior deviating from social norms, or abnormality in general, and thus provided the basis for the term’s entrance into the field of the comic”⁶²¹ thanks to Ben Jonson’s influence. Humour, then, is not only a concept that is constantly overlooked in literary and cultural history but also it has been promoted as a sister concept to comedy which plays only second fiddle to it in its eccentricity and oddity.

There is a two-layered problem with the reception of humour: first, there is the difficulty to tell the difference between comedy and humour as the history of humour generally elapses with the literary and cultural history of comedy. Even current studies on humour tend to assume a natural overlap between them

⁶²⁰ Willibald Ruch, “Sense of humor: A new look at an old concept,” in *The Sense of Humour: Explorations of a Personality Characteristic*, edited by Willibald Ruch, 3-15. (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), 8.

⁶²¹ Ruch, “Sense of humor,” 8.

and use these two concepts interchangeably when they are literary signifiers of distinct cognitive abilities. The result is that a bilobate understanding of comedy facetiously overshadows humour and its uniqueness is unjustly scarred by the forcing hand of generical binarity. In this sense, just as comedy is subjugated by tragedy's superior aesthetic standards, since "comedy has fallen heir to certain middling elements that had been excluded from tragedy,"⁶²² humour is similarly forced to imitate comedy's secondary position. The difficulty to draw a line between comedy and humour, then, results from/in a generalised conceptualisation with regards to any literary endeavour that falls outside the scope of cataclysmic tragicity. Copiously enough, the humorous attains to "some immaterial essence vaguely classified as "the comic,"⁶²³ and as a result it emerges as a literary device which is divorced from the virtuously teleological devices of tragic *mimesis*. From this perspective, the almost invisible history of humour is indicative of the fact that it has been neglected at the expense of generic stratification as humour has been debilitated by the moral and aesthetic force of tragic suffering.⁶²⁴ Or, better put, the difficulties presented by literary categorisation also brings about the difficulty to consider humour as a distinct human capability and as an independent semantic unit which can have a literary and cultural life of its own.

The first problem is connected to the almost innately natural need to identify humour with comedy. By equating or synonymising humour with comedy, we would have to consider the fact that it needs to face the complications born out of comedy's low-mimetics. Eventually, we would have to expect it to inherit those complications. The rivalry, then, is not between humour and the literary devices of tragedy but a 'primeval' one between comedy and tragedy. For, in Harry Levin's words

If tragedy elicits our compassion, comedy appeals to our self-interest. The former confronts life's failures with

⁶²² Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys*, 7.

⁶²³ Ibid., 6.

⁶²⁴ A contemporary rendition of this argument has been recently presented by Mladen Dolar. He writes: "Individuality, the real target of art, is the object of tragedy, whereas comedy doesn't aim at individuality but at types and generalities. It aims at the repeatable, not at the individual and unique. It aims at the generic." See Mladen Dolar, "The Comic Mimesis," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017): 570-589; 585.

noble fortitude, the latter seeks to circumvent them with shrewd nonchalance. The one leaves us momentarily in a mood of resignation, the other in a condition of euphoria.⁶²⁵

If humour is a complementary concept to comedy, then, we would have to accept that humour represents a similarly shrewd ‘condition of euphoria’ that contrasts tragic fragility and seriousness only through its culturally received connection to comedy. From this perspective, it is undeniably true that any literary mission which aims at excavating the history and meaning of humour lays bare before our eyes the very fact that the overall outlook of any philosophical and critical discourse on humour understates, ridicules, and belittles its importance and almost always carelessly defines it as a by-product of comedy. In accordance, it would hardly be a grandiose statement to make that the identification of humour with comedy until the eighteenth-century—a practice which finds more or less its way into contemporary humour criticism—indicates how literary criticism has been persistent in promoting a New-Critical “gemlike hardness of an ‘urn’ or ‘icon’” in the image of humour as an “autotelic and unparaphrasable”⁶²⁶ phenomenon, opposing the other end of literary autotelism that is represented by tragedy. In this context, it is fairly understandable why it is almost undeniably hard to distinguish the history of humour from the history of comedy as the former takes on the guise of the latter or is at least forcefully branded under this bifurcating generalisation. For, it appears that both are united by the evaluative consciousness due to their internal structures that are considered antagonistic to tragedy.

The second difficulty with humour is that even if we would like to present an outline of its history in detail to situate it as a concept that is distinct from comedic discourse, it appears that it has to fight its way through tragic superlativeness. Since, along with comedy, humour has been castigated in critical imagination for its “mad and headstrong humour” (IV.I.195)⁶²⁷ as Petruccio speaks to himself in *The Taming of The Shrew* and is forced to attain

⁶²⁵ Levin, *Playboys and Killjoys*, 14.

⁶²⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: New Left Books, 1986), 49.

⁶²⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Taming of The Shrew*, in *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 44.

to the ideal of “making a sermon of continency” (IV.I.169)⁶²⁸ in Curtis’s words, it looks like it is destined to remain the shrew of literary expression. As a consequence, and owing to the dominant discourse of tragic supremacy, it follows from here that comedy and humour have been adjudicated as impulsive and entropic and need to be counter-balanced by the ethically cathartic force of tragedy. In accordance, where comedy falls victim to the moral pedagogy of tragedy⁶²⁹ humour mirrors this state of victimhood. The literary *cliché* that the tragic hero’s deterministically moral fate is diametrically opposed to the contingently insouciant acts of the comic hero—if heroism can find its way into the comic framework at all—binarises humorous folly’s/foolish humour’s need for textual hiatus that suspends the organic narrative flow of tragic wisdom. In this sense, it becomes perfectly comprehensible why a contemplation on humour would necessitate the aid of com(ed)ic deduction which leads us back again to the first problem of synonymy.

Surely, there is much that humour derives from the preliminary competition between comedy and tragedy. For it acquires from comedy the sense of performativity, playfulness, non-stativity, and generic flexibility as opposed to tragic stativity, seriousness, and generic stiffness. To draw an analogy from painting, the rivalry between the Aristotelian Quattrocento (fifteenth-century) artists in Italy who were gravely interested in the visible universe and the Neoplatonists of the subsequent centuries whose arch representative was Michelangelo and were enraptured by the abstractionist idea of beauty perfectly captures the tension between tragedy and comedy. The competition between these two camps which would later give rise to the hierarchy of genres in figurative art defines the incommensurability between tragic abstraction and universality and comic individuality and particularity. For, the former group of painters took an interest in “the beautiful but in the individual and the characteristic”⁶³⁰ whereas the latter tended to entertain the thought of attaining “to a beauty above that of nature.”⁶³¹ The familiarity of this

⁶²⁸ Shakespeare, *Taming of The Shrew*, 43.

⁶²⁹ For this point especially see Pamela M. Hall, “Limits of the Story: Tragedy in Recent Virtue Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 1 (2004): 1-10.

⁶³⁰ Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 31.

⁶³¹ Blunt, *Artistic Theory*, 62.

rivalry stems from the fact that if the vivacity of the living and the individual body corresponds to comedy and humour, the lethargy of the universal and the abstract corresponds to tragedy's pathetic fallacy. From this perspective, there is hardly a factor which establishes a point of differentiation between literary criticism and figurative art since both of these disciplines hide a peremptory insistence on the superiority of tragedy and tragic devices from Aristotle to contemporary analytical approaches to literature, taking for granted the stipulation that tragedy is far more superior an artistic genre than comedy in terms of narrative structure and significance.⁶³² Hence, it is less surprising than usual to observe that humour has been assigned the role of a handmaiden, an ancillary to the eons old contemplation on poetic decorum since it is traditionally conjoined with comedy whose categorical attributes inform the skeleton of a certain attitude in literary and cultural imagination. But also, it is equally true that humour gains immense benefit from this rivalry since it acquires from the 'hierarchy of genres' the contrastive power of comedy that is defined by an Erasmian frivolity.

By extension, it could be added to a) the synonymy with comedy and b) the tragic dominance that these two factors bear the following outcome: a history that is enshrouded in mystery so much so that a critical approach to humour may sound "somewhat sinister."⁶³³ Or, better put, due to these factors humour becomes the unanalysable frog, in the American writer E.B. White's words, where it "can be dissected, (...) but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."⁶³⁴ On a further note, this mystery, in turn, makes it hard to track humour's cultural development and its own separate literary meaning(s) which is explanatory of the dilemmatic situation of the recent advances in humour criticism. For the entire body of the

⁶³² Matthew Kieran, "Tragedy versus Comedy: On Why Comedy is The Equal of Tragedy," *Ethical Perspectives: Journal of The European Ethics Network* 20, no.2 (2013):427-450.

⁶³³ Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 1.

⁶³⁴ E.B. White, "Some Remarks on Humour," in *The Second Tree from the Corner*, 165-174. (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row Publishers, 1954), 165. Robert Mankoff paraphrases this dictum as follows: "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies of it." See Robert Mankoff, "Foreword," in John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour*, ix-x. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), ix.

relatively new branch of criticism which often goes by the name of humour studies appears to suffer from this intellectual anxiety and dilemma that is symptomatically uneasy by the fact that humour barely has an independent history of its own. In this vein, critics usually feel the urge to produce samples of references to humour in earlier philosophers' discourses from Aristotle to Henri Bergson in the hope of constructing a chronologically and conceptually unified view of humour as a literary and cultural asset and universal constant. However, these critics risk intellectual inorganicism at the expense of an organic understanding of the concept which renders this critical enterprise an almost encyclopaedic endeavour. In accordance, major theories of humour such as superiority, incongruity, and relief theories definitely help us understand the function of humour but the nexus between these theories seems to be missing at large as, individually speaking, they all seem to provide responses to the question "What is the function of humour?" and fail to answer, "What is the meaning of humour?" Likewise, current practices in humour criticism tend to treat humour as a supplementary concept whose cultural history can be constructed through a meticulous inspection of the solemn discourses of philosophers and yet one can retrieve from their texts only little scraps of discussions on humour. Therefore, it is only ironical that by doing so not only do humour critics belittle the sublime object of their ideological orientation but also trivialise the critic herself/himself as the jongleur of minuscule literary affairs. Or, in other words, it is only ironical that bringing together these scattered philosophical references re-asserts the relatively miniscule role that the humour critic has been assigned with, let alone humour itself.

The contention here is that these problems that are unique to humour and humour studies principally stem from humour's reception as a cultural and literary agent that intervenes with philosophical wisdom. In an alleged account of Samuel Johnson's encounter with one of his college friends, we learn that this particular friend of his wished to become a philosopher but had to eventually abandon his dreams since he confesses that sobriety does not fit him and gaiety stands in the way.⁶³⁵ The anecdotal evidence here is telling of how humour is

⁶³⁵ John Morreall presents an account of this instance in his *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*. The story goes that Samuel Johnson "ran into a college friend he had not seen for forty years, and in the course of their conversation they got to comparing their

perceived as a *non-sequitur*, a representative of both logical fallacy and literary absurdity that is intentionally decorated with the errors of circular reasoning so as to produce a comical effect of effervescence that goes against the establishment of intellectual gravity and dignity. This in turn leads us to think that it is a conversational device which is deprived of the powers of logical validity and cannot come to terms with it. For, the central question is as follows: how can we possibly canonise the non-canonical and the logically fallacious when it has already been situated as a literary adjuvant?

It should be acknowledged, then, that there is little cultural and critical sensibility shown towards the intelligibility of humour due to its alleged irrationality, abnormality, and illogicality. It suffers from the rationalist camp's core values which place "too high an estimation of the importance of rational thought in human life"⁶³⁶ supposing in hindsight "that rationality has some ultimate value."⁶³⁷ As a result, humour is viewed as the residue of reason that is incompatible with the cosmic view of the rationalists who cannot face a possible

collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.⁶³⁸

This should not mean that humour cannot be understood under rational terms or that the standards of rationality are necessarily abrasive to humour so much so that we can only understand it as a passion or a feeling that is antagonistic to reason itself. On the contrary, despite the traditional reluctance and inability to acknowledge humour's rational powers, another way to evaluate its claim to rationality could be to perceive it as a cognitive human capability without attaining to the authoritarianism and austerity of reason. In this sense, any study of humour would highly benefit from a Nussbaumian framework since it helps

lives. "You are a philosopher," the man said to Dr. Johnson. "I have tried in my time, too, to be a philosopher, but I don't know how; cheerfulness was always breaking through." See Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 1.

⁶³⁶ John Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor in Western Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 39, no.3 (1989): 243-265; 253.

⁶³⁷ Morreall, "The Rejection of Humor," 254.

⁶³⁸ Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no.20 (1971): 716-727; 718.

us recognise the autonomy of humour as a major component of human functioning and flourishing and owing to that perception humour becomes an intellectual activity, a cognisant enterprise. For, if it should be considered that Nussbaum's categories of ten central human capabilities are contemporary appropriations of Aristotle's ten categories of being, then Nussbaum's ninth capability of laughing, playing, and humourising corresponds to Aristotle's ninth category of acting which denotes more than a mere enjoyment of playful instances. It equates humour with action and if the power to humourise includes the power to act, it can be maintained that to think on humour means to think on the cognitive dimension of it. It is in this sense that humour becomes a *dunamis* (capacity, potential) that is an integral—although not an essential one—part of human nature.

It should be noted with great care that the *dunamic* potential of humour cannot be understood separately from its medical and ontological contexts since its emergence as a term as connotative of a literary and cognitive force appears to be rather late. This does not mean that the late arrival of humour as a mental act into the cultural and literary sphere is entirely due to the dominance of the forerunning medical and ontological contexts. Nor does it mean that to be received as a mental act, it had to wait for its own historical turn. It rather puts at display the development of the idea of humour as a certain force in nature which controls and organises the individual human soul and body. In accordance, Ionian philosophy's prominent emphasis on locating the *archē* (first principle) of nature in water, air, fire, earth, infinity etc. conveys the idea that the humour(s) of individual beings are dependent on the natural forces that surround them. Under this view, one's temperament becomes the making of nature. By looking away from a metaphysical explanation of human temperament, then, the ontological arguments of the Ionians present us with a physical explanation of humour that is not only biometric but also non-theological. Under their proto-philosophical terms, humour reflects the potentials of a natural being that runs parallel to a human being's natural capacities. It takes on the form of a natural explanation where nature is a cosmic, a rational, and a cognisant force holding the power to rationally orchestrate the universe and the individual. Likewise, this early empiricism with regards to humour continues in the writings of the Hippocratic doctors where the

importance of sense-perception is heavily accentuated and the causes of imbalance or balance in bodily humours are revealed in a non-metaphysical, non-theological context. Both Ionian philosophy and Hippocratic medicine, then, consider the human constitution as a matter of empirical consciousness which derives its powers from a rationalistic tradition that favours reason over faith.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that the empirical-rational worldview of the Ionians and the Hippocratic doctors enforce a naïve physicality and impose a limited rationality to nature and humour since there happens to be a weak sense of pre-Newtonian mechanism—and to a certain extent dogmatism—in their evaluation. The cognitivist underpinnings of humour, on the other hand, largely arise from the body of Aristotle's conception of substance where his hylomorphic vision represents the entire terrain of endless potentials of a being that are only defined by nature of that beings' function; an idea that is later developed in Galen's humoralism where there is an explicit emphasis on the continuity between mind and body, matter and form. Taking up from here, Galen professes the fact that a living organism is an organic unit and that the cognitive potential(s) of the body stands for the cognitive potential(s) of the mind. Later, in Avicenna's contemplation of Aristotelian philosophy and Galenic medicine, it becomes most apparent that humoral constitution as a rational force administers the shape and form of the human intellect. Different from the first philosophers and doctors, then, cognitivist attitudes to humour and nature considerably expand the meaning of humoristic rationalism and locate humour's 'nature' in the sphere of cognitive potentials.

The major framework of the present study makes an explicit reference to these Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian contexts through which I maintain that rationality may not be abrasive to humour contrary to widespread belief. For when combined with the idea of humour as a human capability, these contexts assert the logical status of humour as a supreme mental act rather than ruling it out as a literary and cultural concept whose 'nature' is mostly steeped in absurdity or irrationality. In accordance, with this mentalism comes a cognitive potential which ascribes itself to a certain play-function of the human mind. It

“transcends the immediate needs of life” and “imparts meaning to the action,”⁶³⁹ in Johan Huizinga’s words. By way of doing so, humour overcomes its artificially imposed limitations since it renders comedic entertainment avantgarde,⁶⁴⁰ and becomes a cognitive device that aims at a playful inquiry into the differing mental states of the human mind and its thought processes whether they be illogical or logical, irrational or rational. The meta-semiotic sphere of humour⁶⁴¹ that is initiated by its *dunamicism*, then, claims the entirety of cognisant human activity as a property of its own and rejects the *reductio ad absurdum* attributed to humorous meaning-making by annulling the claims that humour involves “a suspension of reason” and that it makes a case for the “non-serious use of reason.”⁶⁴²

The scepticism of humour, I contend, can be considered as one of the most prominent signs of humour’s supremacy as a mental act. Better put, it is the most transparent expression of humour’s cognitive potentials. This is primarily due to the fact that it does not present us with a fantastical or romanticised image of reality but rather looks for ways in which we can hopefully reform our relationship with it. The sceptical element in humour seeks to undermine “limits from inside”⁶⁴³ and in order to do so it does not necessarily seek for popularising a carnivalesque attitude, a transgressive chapter in literary interpretation. But it is certainly critical of human reason as a logical apparatus itself. It breaks with a uniform picture of realism without seeking refuge in fragmentation. Instead, it directs our attention to the individual and looks for a resemblance between separate individual existences. In this sense, it necessarily purports a nominalist agenda where the emphasis is on the particular, the individual, and the singular. Accordingly, the scepticism of humour attracts our attention to the dynamics of individual beings where the *dunamicism* and dynamism of humour derive from a refusal to abide with the universal, the essential, and the abstract since it doubts the functionality and conceptual

⁶³⁹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1.

⁶⁴⁰ Umberto Eco, “The frames of comic ‘freedom,’” in *Carnival!*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, 1-11 (New York and Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 8.

⁶⁴¹ Eco, “Frames of comic ‘freedom,’” 8.

⁶⁴² John Morreall, “Humor and Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 15, no.3 (1984): 305-317; 311.

⁶⁴³ Eco, “Frames of comic ‘freedom,’” 8.

fecundity of an essentialist metaphysics. The sceptical potential of humour, then, makes an 'essential' argument with regards to a particularistic ontology by welcoming an individualistic agenda of literary and philosophical nominalism.

However, given the individualistic overtones of sceptical humour in general, to locate humour's dubiousness in a particularly exceptional literary tradition would rather be a deterministic argument to make. It can be asserted instead that the English tradition of humour triumphs in unfolding a plenitude of individual accounts that provide us with ample evidence to group it with philosophical doubt contrary to, for instance, the French usage of the term since in France, humour "never came to indicate that dimension of reflexive self-awareness which was decisively to shape the English notion of humour."⁶⁴⁴ Similarly, Italian humour has been identified with the "Aristophanic order" and yet has been argued to veer towards "the subject of ejaculations, oaths, and imprecations, of which the Italians have an infinite variety."⁶⁴⁵ To add even further to these points of departure, German humour has been considered a late invention due to the fact that humour requires the cultivation of democracy and that the German have scarcely been successful in building a sufficient sense of culturally and politically democratic environment.⁶⁴⁶ It should not be inferred from here that English humour literature holds an essential role in displaying an essentially sceptical form of humour. Nor should it be concluded that Englishness itself, if there is found to be any, or the English literary culture guarantees a self-explanatory study in sceptical humour. Rather, I contend here that the English literary canon reveals a frequent use of the *dunamic*/dynamic potential of doubtful humour. The cognitive capacity of English humour, or interchangeably speaking the English *dunamis*, displays the fact that it largely prefers scepticism over irreflexive relationality, exclamatory joviality, and stunning stiffness in humour. In this regard, the argument here is that English

⁶⁴⁴ Paul Gifford, "Humour and the French Mind: Towards a Reciprocal Definition," *The Modern Language Review* 76, no.3 (1981): 534-548; 535.

⁶⁴⁵ A. Werner, "Introduction," in *The Humour of Italy*. Trans. A. Werner, xi-xxxi. (London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1892), xxiv-xxv.

⁶⁴⁶ This point is discussed in Dietrich Schwanitz, *Das Shylock-Syndrom, oder Die Dramaturgie der Barbarei* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1997), 242-243. Stephen M. Brockman, however, is critical of this point and believes that Schwanitz's account "is an exercise in national stereotypes." For this point see Stephen M. Brockman, "The Politics of German Comedy," *German Studies Review* 23, no.1 (2000): 33-51; 35.

literary humour distances itself from other traditions of humour literature since it derives its own sense of humorous cognitivism from its emphasis on scepticism.

It can be concurred that the English humour tradition's particular emphasis on doubt synchronically signals at a paradigm shift, or points at the rejection of a certain paradigm which complicates humankind's relationship with truth, reality, and being. For in its usually sceptic mode, English humour usually turns its back on "fundamental epistemological and ontological tenets"⁶⁴⁷ and more than often refuses to comply with any form of universalism that "puts certain inescapable constraints on our ways of perceiving and thinking about reality, and thus 'of necessity'" which "excludes a range of possibilities."⁶⁴⁸ The crisis here, then, appears to be purely epistemological in the sense that English sceptical humour does not particularly volunteer for a systematically inorganic perception of truth. On the contrary, it signs up for a position that is attentive to detail, to particularity, and to the potentially dynamic faces of being and existence. In this sense, it refrains from attaining to pre-determinism and humorously voices its doubt with regards to any sort of fundamentalism. From this perspective, the English literary canon provides a bountiful supply of sceptical humour for the critical eye that points towards an epistemological crisis. Four of the texts that have been selected here (Chaucer's *HF*, Ben Jonson's *EMIH* and *EMOH*, and Laurence Sterne's *TS*) perfectly fit into this specific framework. For, each one of these texts coherently and consistently propel a sense of doubt with regards to metaphysical transcendentalism that causes an unavoidable loss of touch with reality. The humorous tension in them particularly arrests our attention: how can we lay claim to universal truths in the face of an ever-going dynamism?

As a preliminary example of the English humour tradition, Chaucer's *HF* asks exactly the same question. For Chaucer's literary career which had overseen a plentiful of riots, revolts, and rebellions is situated in the midst of political and economic turmoil. But also, and more importantly than that, his

⁶⁴⁷ Hugo Keiper, "A Literary 'Debate over Universals'? New Perspectives on the Relationships between Nominalism, Realism, and Literary Discourse" in *Nominalism and Literary Discourse: New Perspectives*, edited by Hugo Keiper, Christoph Bode, Richard Utz, 1-87. (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1994), 11.

⁶⁴⁸ Keiper, "Literary 'Debate over Universals'?", 11-12.

entire corpus displays “Chaucer’s jab at a virulent orthodoxy that cannot tolerate anything but its own self-image.”⁶⁴⁹ In this respect, *HF* emerges as a text where Chaucer definitively tries his hand at intensifying his prominent sense of scepticism as a trademark of his humorous construction. To achieve this end, it detects a certain problem within the textual politics of the dream vision genre that largely looks up to the spiritual examples of Dante, the French love vision and by extension the Neoplatonists. He shows great agility in recognising the centre of gravity especially in the Dantesque dream as one “which is firmly embedded in structure as well as inherent significance” that “originates from a highly unified visionary perspective and experience.”⁶⁵⁰ Thus, through the image of a hesitant narrator who does not know the causes and semiotic significance of dreams he shares with his reader that he wishes to negate the spiritual significance of dream visions and their internally unified structures by denying his reader both the textual comforts provided by an authoritative poet and a unified structure. The weary narrator makes a promise of trustworthiness and yet we have a hard time putting our faith in him since he constantly disappoints us. Of perennial importance to the poem, then, becomes Chaucer’s intention to reverse readerly expectations that are, in the context of dream vision, shaped by the readerly expectation of a neat and tidy poetic construction which crumbles in the face of a giddy narration. In his scepticism of a clean-cut narrative structure, he feeds on this humorous incongruity between the tenets of medieval literary convention and the off-balance demands of his individual enterprise. For as long as he can elongate the gap that widens between these separate modes of writing, Chaucer ensures that the incongruity between them will elongate the impact of his sceptical humour on the reader’s part.

In its textual inconsistency and hesitancy, the humour of *HF* characteristically directs our attention to a great epistemological crisis between the moderns (*Via Moderna*) and the ancients (*Via Antiqua*). By addressing to the tension between these two camps, he addresses the difficulty to maintain a form of semantic essentialism where meaning can be safeguarded against multiplicity

⁶⁴⁹ Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 78.

⁶⁵⁰ Dino S. Cervigni, “Dante’s Poetry of Dreams,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 17, no.1/2 (1982): 24-30; 28.

and diversity. Our guide in this dream world is a childish one with a potential sleep disorder, a bibliophile, and a guileful Machiavellian who does not bother addressing his reader's concerns with his unforeseen untrustworthiness. He is his *own* meaning and refuses to attain to the conventionally acclaimed standards of a poet-narrator due to the fact that he is a great doubter who wishes to incarcerate the moral essentialism of the dream poet in his own semantic prison. He gravely doubts that he can learn much from his Dantesque *exemplar* and looks instead for new ways to overcome this semantic barrier. For this reason, he makes a provocative selection of tales from Virgil's *Aeneid* and pays particular attention to Dido's story which avouches our suspicions that he had been indeed—just like the unfaithful Aeneas—a carefree, irresponsible, and manipulative narrator from the very beginning. In these respects, he becomes the Ockhamite experimenter with a keen eye for particulars who wishes to experience reality for its own sake and not for the sake of certifying the validity of universal truth-statements about the rules pertaining to proper narration, signification, and literary creation. He adumbrates a picture of a dream-world which is rule-bound only by sense-experience and not by metaphysical contemplation so much so that in the end, his suspicious humour makes a fool of himself as well since as a bookish poet, he cannot help but be amazed by the incongruity between the ideal of eagle-*ness* and the actual Eagle which comes to him by Jove's orders. The disparity is awfully undermining of semantic universals and also it justifies the point of the narrator's humour that is characterised by doubt. For, what is universal semantic signification worth, he asks to himself and to his reader, if one cannot dare to experience individual experiences and come into contact with individual existence itself?

The poem makes it clear that Geoffrey the narrator's transparent disdain for absolutism and abstractionism in *HF* locates the 'nature' of his sceptical humour in a nominalist territory which cannot possibly make peace with a realist tradition in literature. For, truth-statements in the Chaucerian narration are vulnerable to temporality and the dynamic 'law' of existence. They are seemingly safe and indestructible constructions which sit on fragile foundations that resemble the ones the House of Fame is built upon. From this perspective, the sceptical humour of *HF*'s narrator situates him indeed as a whistle blower, a scandalmonger who declares that the realist institution of truth offers in fact a

tricky picture of reality which cannot guarantee an ultimate understanding of it. It announces the fact that epistemic absolutism merely plays the part of a conclusive, finalising agent on whom human beings can lean with their mind at utter peace when, in fact, the narrator certifies that our knowledge of truth and reality is limited to—in an Ockhamite fashion—the individual observer’s individual experiences, a position that close shaves the anti-dynamic method of abstract cognition.

Chaucer’s sceptical humour in *HF* finds itself a kindred soul in two plays of Ben Jonson’s early career, *EMIH* and *EMOH* which trod a remarkably similar path. For, humoristic doubt forms the backbone of Jonson’s writerly intentions and poetic innovation. Despite the fact that Jonson’s “boastful classicism”⁶⁵¹ is a heavy influence upon Jonsonian criticism which often denies him the image of a sceptically innovative poet and playwright, an “intelligent saturation in his work as a whole”⁶⁵² seems to pervade his corpus. For, his classicist impetus which mainly situates him as a translator and imitator of the classic *exemplar* also enables Jonson to bypass the classical standard. Or, better put, his artistic versatility allows him to freely manipulate the classic model to develop his own taste in poetic freedom. In this sense, Jonson’s humour responds to an epistemological crisis between an institutionalised form of poetic authority and the emergent modern individual’s craving for new forms of textual authority. It seemingly claims to be the successor to the Horatian ideal when in fact it uses that ideal to vocalise his scepticism of older poetic forms. In this sense, the surface structure of *EMIH* and *EMOH* imitates the medieval morality play where the method of characterisation follows the form of the four humours. Not only that but also specific characters such as Old Kno’well in *EMIH* and the Grex in *EMOH* emerge as stock characters that Jonson freely incorporates into his plays from Ancient Greek and Roman comedy. Also, as similarly judiciary forces in these plays, both Clement Justice and the shining image of Elizabeth I emerge as Elizabethan/Jacobean reflections upon the ancient *deus ex machina*. But this is exactly the point where Jonson’s antiquary make-believe comes to fruition. For, despite the ancient decorum of these comedies, Jonson skilfully brews an

⁶⁵¹ Kay, *Ben Jonson: A Literary Life*, 206.

⁶⁵² T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), 128.

alchemistic mixture. In both plays, and regardless of the medieval outlook of the characters, there is little stock characterisation. We constantly listen to the inner thoughts of the characters who contemplate on their individual actions and the happenings of the outside world. They are provenly more than medieval automatons who murmur words of quotidian artistry and due to their outspokenly conversationalist behaviour the text becomes a dialogic construct, a conversational piece. By being so, it speaks to the reader and in turn provokes her/him to engage in this lively dialogue. Moreover, in both plays, the sequence of action remains mostly unconnected. In other words, the dramatic action in both comedies turns out to be non-sequential and non-causational. The transitions between acts and scenes are frequently lost upon the reader as there seems to be little dramatic adjustment between them. As an outcome of that point, the narrative scheme becomes a side-product of a literary expedition where Jonson's women and men who are in constant rush go from one point to the other only to find out that they are headed to inconclusiveness and the expedition is swift, volatile, and inconstant just like the witty repartee that takes place between the clownish Sogliardo and the buffoonish Carlo in *EMOH*. It is naturally without a final destination where the final word is never said.

The unconventionality of characterisation and the seemingly non-teleological form of these two comedies point out in Jonson's writing a heartfelt scepticism with regards to the conventions of dramatic composition. They are conventional in the sense that they inherit a certain framework from a bygone period. Their form descends from Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, and the anonymous medieval morality plays. But their content looks up to the early modern English play's individual-oriented scepticism and beyond.⁶⁵³ For, their disharmony, disorganisation, and experimental mode not only establishes a dissident tone which "makes it distasteful or unappealing to an audience" that is "another reflection of the anomaly of Jonson" but also this specific mode

⁶⁵³ Leonie Pawlita's *Staging Doubt* recounts Shakespeare, Pedro Calderón, Lope de Vega, Jean de Rotro, Desfontaines, and Cervantes among the leading figures of scepticism in early modern European drama. Surely, it can be argued that Ben Jonson's scepticism can be read into this tradition. See Leonie Pawlita, *Staging Doubt: Skepticism in Early Modern European Drama* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019).

proposes “a sceptical amelioration concerning *humanitas*.”⁶⁵⁴ Due to a handful of reasons, then, although we would have to be cautious of an argument which would situate him as a natural contender of poetic freedom, it would be hard not to perceive his implementation of the tenets of classicism, or alternatively speaking, his use of the tenets of Horatianism as akin to an emergent individuality. Accordingly, it is exactly at this point where Jonson’s sceptical humour fits perfectly into his unorthodox approach to the humankind and human affairs. For he not only has a keen eye for detecting the problems with the conventions of narration in his classical predecessors but also, he rejects the view that a handful of formulaic expressions can effortlessly explain the reasons and causes behind the actions of seventeenth-century women and men, or humans from a meta-historical point of view. It is sceptical of abstract formulations and intangible prescriptions which attempt at defining the individual and it is dominantly humorous because the cultural construct is not befitting for the dynamic ‘rule’ of existence. Therefore, *EMIH* and *EMOH*’s dubious humour points towards a Hobbesian materialism and nominalism which force their reader to abandon the singularity of an essential humanism and enjoy instead the myriad form of human experience which involves logical error as much as ethical accuracy. Unmistakably, then, the “blackest poison of suspect” directly emanates from the body of Jonson’s suspicious humour which constantly directs our attention to the livelihood and contingency of our growing exercise in individuality.

In this humoristic context, the sense of familiarity in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, it could be argued, arises from the fact that it has close connections with Chaucer’s and Ben Jonson’s dubious humour. But also, there seems to be a slight point of differentiation between *TS* and its intellectual and literary predecessors in the sense that where Chaucer and Ben Jonson depart from a theological ontology, Sterne begs to differ from the dogmatism of an empiricist ontology. In its sentimental compassion, he doubts the verity and integrity of eighteenth-century scepticism. For, the recent advances in the (re)discovery of the material world, nature, and the re-visiting of the centrality

⁶⁵⁴ Constantine J. Gianakaris, “The Humanism of Ben Jonson,” *CLA Journal* 14, no.2 (1970): 115-126; 125. Original italics.

of sense-perception in logical argumentation, considers Sterne, are not only becoming dogmas in their own right but also are rapidly re-modelling the arguments of the empiricist after what can be named a rationalist theology. The humour of *TS*, in accordance, conveys a certain sense of a clash within, or better put, it conveys Sterne's scepticism upon scepticism.

It only makes perfect sense, in this context, that Sterne looks for humorous ways to expand the standards of Enlightenment rationality to the effect of being inclusive of sentiments, non-causality, the anomalous, and the inconsistent. Tristram's entire inability to properly present a unified view of human action and character let alone a unified mode of narration, then, implies that he *does* indeed doubt the efficacy of an empiricist ideal which continues to generate a certain orthodoxy unless "(...) it is able to demonstrate empirically that it itself has, in fact, already become an integral element of social praxis."⁶⁵⁵ He doubts that the interruption of the sexual act is an unnatural one and the Homuncilian offspring is an abomination of nature. He even doubts that his father's encyclopaedic efforts to recover from this trauma will ever bear fruit. Tristram never looks to nature and natural happenings—human beings being a part of that nature—as inherent of an internal uniformity and consistent causality. It is for this reason that the entire narrative is decorated with groin injuries, physical impediments, death, disappointments, and narrative delays. He realises and requires his reader to realise the fact that insisting on necessity and regularity will only result in the production of an inefficient bull which cannot inseminate the cow. Correspondingly, he contends that the empiricist pronouncement of the superiority of sense-perception and human reason only reflects humankind's insecurity in the face of a dynamic world that cannot be effectively explained under the infinite terms of a causal recursion. Thus, he confirms that the mismatch between the patriarch and himself, the Newtonian predilections of the realist novel and his sentimental narrative, and between a Kantian innatism and Humean anti-rationalism is apt to be humorous because patriarchal realism/innatism represents a suspicious case. And eventually, it is

⁶⁵⁵ Axel Honneth, "Enlightenment and Rationality," *The Journal of Philosophy* 84, no.11 (1987): 692-699; 699.

this humorous incongruity which establishes the pre-eminently sceptical tone of the novel.

This is not to say that *Tristram Shandy* is a chaotic composition or that it is a vindication of irrationality. But it certainly deserts any epistemological mode which forsakes “an alternative approach to ethics that focuses on the manifoldness of experience.”⁶⁵⁶ In doing so, its sceptical humour purports a Humean form of anti-rationalism where sentimentalism and contingency take over the realist Chinese box of a narrative construction. For, the ‘manifoldness of experience’ boils over the mechanic frame. In this manner, the energetic force of the individual and the particular urges the frame narrative to alter itself by building “a narrative repertoire” which determines “what is feasible and unfeasible.”⁶⁵⁷ Therefore, in light of its epistemic reformism, *TS* bids farewell to reason in a manner which does not wish to eliminate the tenets of eighteenth-century rationalism and its empiricist methods from the intellectual sphere. It wishes instead to rectify its own banalities by poking fun at its diminutive methods of inquiry that raises a considerable amount of suspicion with regards to its accountability.

Needless to say, a panoptic vision of this sort which pays homage to the sceptic openings in English humour literature needs more elaboration. For, Paul E. Lewis in his *Comic Effects* underlines that humour studies has long been suffering from criticism’s ambition to overgeneralise and attempt “to argue that humour can be easily explained or subsumed under a catchy formula or definition.”⁶⁵⁸ The implication here is that Lewis suspects “the likely success of essentialism in humour theory as elsewhere in aesthetics.”⁶⁵⁹ For the “presupposition that there is some feature common to *all* instances of humour”⁶⁶⁰ risks becoming an absolutist commentary on humour itself. But also, it might mean that Lewis is equally suspicious of the humour critic’s fundamentalist position which inattentively procures a meta-narrative

⁶⁵⁶ Jorge Estrada, *Experiencing Ethics with Sterne and Musil: A Relentless Character Construction* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 5.

⁶⁵⁷ Estrada, *Experiencing Ethics*, 5.

⁶⁵⁸ Paul E. Lewis, *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), x.

⁶⁵⁹ John Lippitt, “Humour,” in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, edited by Stephen Davies, et.al., 334-338. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 337.

⁶⁶⁰ Lippitt, “Humour,” 337. Original italics.

concerning the meaning and function of humour regardless of her/his essentialism or nominalism. He assumes that the need for an epistemological binary which distinguishes universals from particulars already imposes “blinkers upon our theorising about reality.”⁶⁶¹ In this respect, a natural conclusion would be that regardless of the particularist or universalist trajectory of the critic of humour, her/his fundamentalism, whether knowingly or unknowingly, might equally promote a dogmatic take on the subject. Therefore, in a manner of speaking, any philosophy of humour which endorses a general programme and any critic who wishes to further a preliminary framework would risk overreaching the somewhat useful mix of a “realist analysis of the capacity to laugh” and “its compatibility with a particularist or socially constitutive analysis of the things that naturally strike us as funny ha-ha (...).”⁶⁶²

Taking into consideration the cautionary remarks of Lewis, surely it is possible to find a patronising attitude in humour studies; one which “decorates its serious artist with laurel, and its wags with Brussel sprouts”⁶⁶³ as this particular attitude seems to be responsible for creating a divide between the theory of humour and the practice of humour. The serious theorist of humour essentialises it as a ubiquitous, rather than common human attribute and then easily overlooks its possible applications to vernacular cultures. Better put, a position of this sort does not seem to be responsive to the actualisation of humour and carelessly defines it as a universal human trait. Thus, in recognition of the pending danger which awaits any universalist theory of humour, I do not wish to overgeneralise or to provide an essential(ist) framework. Instead, I side with the very notion that humour’s dynamism and its *dunamic* capacities respond to so vast an array of human experience that it can hardly be evaluated from a singular point of view. To argue for this point, I start with the claim that

⁶⁶¹Fraser Macbride, “Universals: the contemporary debate,” in *The Routledge Companion to Metaphysics*, edited by Robin Le Poidevin, et.al., 276-286. (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 284.

⁶⁶²Miguel E. Orellana Benado, “Scepticism, Humour and the Archipelago of Knowledge,” in *Scepticism in The History of Philosophy: A Pan-American Dialogue*, edited by Richard H. Popkin, 235-253. (Springer-Science+Business Media, B.V: Dordrecht, 1996), 243.

⁶⁶³ E.B. White, “Preface,” in *A Subtreasury of American Humour*, edited by E.B. White and Katharine S. White, xi-xxii. (New York: Coward McCann, 1941), xviii.

humour is a cognitive capacity. Simplistically, the deductive form of the argument looks as follows:

- A. Humour is a *dunamis* (capacity).
- B. The English have a sense of humour.
- _____
- C. The English have a *dunamis* (capacity).

To draw on the assumption that humour is a capability solves our problems with regards to the difficulties Lewis suggests at the greatest of ease. It bypasses a possibly universalist discourse since “capabilities belong first and foremost to individual persons, and only derivatively to groups.”⁶⁶⁴ Therefore, humour’s capabilism would allow us the conclusion that its potential function(s) would be predicated upon individual instances of humorous meaning-making. In turn, this does not mean that humour is a universal in itself but that it certainly is a commonality among human beings whose existence and evaluation depends on the actualisation of the humorous capacity in each and every human being. To make an argument for the potentials of English humour, then, denotes a prevalent form of actualisation among separate individuals and not an essential sort of Englishness. Therefore, the argument that English humour tradition’s proclivity for suspicion and mistrust emerges as the actualisation of a specific potential out of humour’s many functions such as identification, clarification, and enforcement⁶⁶⁵ would not become an overgeneralisation but an observation based upon individual cases in the English literary canon, in a broader sense. With respect to this point, it aims at working with a certain aspect of humour, out of many, that is to portray the commonality, or popularity if I may say so, of a sceptical predilection in English humour literature. Therefore, looking at these historically distinct texts, it is possible to observe a common potential that shares a common ground shaped by individual enterprises of doubt which when grouped together verify our suspicion that they unlock the sceptic potentials of

⁶⁶⁴ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 35.

⁶⁶⁵ For this point and humour’s communicative functions, for instance see John C. Meyer, “Humour as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humour in Communication,” *Communication Theory* 10, no.3 (2000): 310-331.

humour as a whole. For, these texts retain a certain family resemblance in the manner that they employ humour as a cognitive capability and make a consistent case for English humour as one which mostly veers towards scepticism.

On a macroscopic level, refraining from any sort of essentialism redeems us from our theoretical tendency to overstate and dogmatise. On a microscopic level, on the other hand, this refrainment and the proposed scheme to acknowledge the capabilistic status of humour turns out to be useful in other ways as well. First, it allows us to understand humour under practical terms which diminishes the gap between theory and practice or vice versa. Second, it allows us to acknowledge the individualistic overtones of English sceptical humour. Since these texts implicitly refer to the idea that “scepticism is motivated by the intuition that human realm is a diversity,”⁶⁶⁶ in turn, the idea of diversity and by association humoristic scepticism create a divide between the general and particular, the collective and the personal, the abstract and the concrete. By pointing at the incommensurability between ancient structuralism(s) and the newly flourishing culture(s) of anti-structuralism in their respective ages, they announce the supremacy of the non-linear, the digressive, and the non-causal. By doing so, they also stand as harbingers of epistemological hope by announcing the nominalist frontiers of English sceptical humour. Consequentially, humour not only enters the spheres of cognition and rationality but also expands and dulcifies their universally acclaimed limits. It becomes the *sui iuris* of the ‘comic business’.

⁶⁶⁶ Benado, “Scepticism, Humour and the Archipelago of Knowledge,” 246.

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