

Book review

Nikopoulos, James (2019). *The Stability of Laughter: The Problem of Joy in Modernist Literature*. New York and London: Routledge.

The Stability of Laughter makes statements that may not seem especially paradoxical at first glance. Modernity, at least in its last and most popular iteration, was pessimistic and focused on crisis; at the same time, modernity was just as fascinated by laughter, producing both outstanding comic characters and studies on the comic (p. 51). Considering the many occasions where laughter is interwoven with pain and loss, these observations might initially come across as an invitation to examine laughter in its black or ironic manifestations. However, the argument of this book is that laughter is always a *joyful* phenomenon. In that light, the complexity of what James Nikopoulos terms a paradox (or *problem*)—the interplay between modernism with its ‘misery’ and laughter with its positivity—unfolds.

The book asks some of the questions that have fascinated thinkers for generations: What are the links between play and laughter? Do we laugh because others are doing so? Other questions address the author’s central thesis more directly, including: Why does laughter always sound so similar, even in starkly different situations? How can laughter be both variable and stable? Is it a sign of our individuality or of our malady? And in what ways has our understanding of modernism, so inward-looking and obsessed with its own sense of gloom, and modernity, which “seems to have negativity written into its very name,” coloured our understanding of and approaches to laughter? (p. 49).

The Stability of Laughter is divided into two main parts. The first, composed of four chapters, provides an overview of modernity, modernism, and laughter; specifically, Nikopoulos’s take on laughter as a heuristic and as a necessarily joyful thing. He stands by the multidisciplinary nature of his study, which I think is advantageous: the book relies a great deal on literary texts but will not hesitate to refer to disciplines such as the cognitive sciences (whether referencing Duchenne smiles or the fact that there are supposedly 19 types of smiles). Still, for all that these different fields are evolving, and for all that laughter itself is a (delightful) puzzle, Nikopoulos is able to establish four foundations, or *stabilities*, the last of which is the claim that underlying all the variabilities of laughter is an undeniable positivity.

Part I explains the aforementioned stabilities. These cover a range of topics including the social nature of laughter, its role in communication, its ability to signal many different things, its spontaneity and comprehensibility, and its evolution as we age. One of the author’s notable observations is that, as varied—and sometimes unhumorous—as the occasions that make us laugh are, laughter tends to sound the same. He distinguishes the message behind the laugh from the occasion eliciting it. He also shows how neither benevolence nor happiness should be taken for granted, even while arguing that the ties between laughter and positive emotion are indelible.

Against the affirmation that the baseline meaning of laughter is variable but stable, the rest of Part I delves into modernity, with all its dreariness, resignation, and sense of the dramatic: “Nothing,” states the author, “has done more to alienate laughter from joy than modernity” (p. 44). This point is buttressed by an exploration of some relevant features of modernity, such as historical change and the accompanying sense of loss, the use of antiheroes, and the focus on

cruelty and ambivalence. Part I also cites some accounts of laughter from emblematic scholars such as Bergson, Freud, Pirandello and, of course, Baudelaire, to illustrate the penchant of the criticism of modern literature for proposing joylessness as an attribute of laughter. The text explains the historical reasons for these attitudes. However, given that the 19th and 20th centuries were hardly the only period to experience large-scale difficulties, the author also critiques blanket declarations and assumptions about the relationship between modern literature and laughter (p. 49). That is to say, even if the “fault” lies with modernity for being dismal and with modernist literature for being difficult (p. 51), and if “Modernity may have worked to alienate laughter from joy, it [nonetheless] laboured with almost as much persistence to reunite the two” (p. 63). In addition, this section examines the place of satire in modernity, and, by extension, the place of positivity and healing when malice is at play. It looks at how modern humour will either laugh with or at an object.

These first chapters thus provide a survey of modernity, primitivism, irony, naïveté, and others. Part II is composed of six chapters that delve into classic writers: Baudelaire, Lu Xun and Eliot, Joyce, Nietzsche, Pirandello, Barnes, Beckett, Hughes and Svevo.

“Pathology, in Theory” reads Charles Baudelaire as exploring some fundamental traits of humankind, as well as human progress. Considering Baudelaire’s well-known stance on laughter, the chapter brings up the superiority thesis. For his purposes, Nikopoulos demonstrates how this theory is not merely about laughing at the misfortune of others, as is sometimes stated: “In claiming that laughter results from an *idea* of superiority [not an incontestable superiority], Baudelaire essentially brings out into the open what the superiority theory has always only implied” (p. 113, emphasis in the original). The chapter argues that some of the more famous theories of laughter fit into a tradition that has been read in a restrictive way.

“Pathology, in Practice” reads laughter as a symptom of modernity’s many afflictions—whether neuroses, schizophrenia, or the host of other maladies attributed to it. To show how this situation came to be, the author reverts to some of the previously mentioned attributes of laughter, such as adaptability, stability, or originality. The rest of the chapter offers a reading of Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” and T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. These texts offer insight into what the author refers to as “modernity-as-madness” and “modernity-as-mediocrity” (p. 123), two contrasting manifestations of modernist pathology that are still somehow tied to gelotophobia (i.e. a fear of laughter).

“Individuality, in Theory” begins with the claim that Friedrich Nietzsche’s oeuvre, out of all modernist works, engages the most directly with laughter. The author then shows how the Nietzschean take on laughter, which manages to be apparently simple and mind-bogglingly complex, has influenced a whole slew of writers. Nietzsche’s approach to laughter shows, among other things, that suffering is far from foreign to comedy. Furthermore, this chapter connects Nietzsche’s approach with the author’s own arguments about joy and spontaneity.

“Individuality, in Practice” reads James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, a “big” book whose plot is set over a relatively short period (p. 162). The chapter analyses the characters of Stephen Dedalus and Buck Milligan, noting that the humour of *Ulysses* is often evoked in ways that recall Buck’s. Indeed, Nikopoulos notes that many readers will make “long-term assumptions about the essential natures of these two young men based on their mirth and lack thereof” (p. 164). Yet, the reader discovers that Stephen is not a stranger to laughter, even if that laughter is of a nervous sort. A sort of hermeneutic loop demonstrates how the reader’s growing understanding is reflected in the judgment of Stephen’s laughter. The rest of the chapter describes the meanness of the novel’s humour, the reader’s approval of Joyce and his hero, smiling as opposed to laughing, humour and frivolity, and, of course, *Ulysses*’s infamous complicatedness. It also shows that even when laughter appears completely meaningless, there are ways to demonstrate that it is not straightforward.

“Absurdity, in Theory” unpacks some of Nikopoulos’s observations about the theories on laughter. One claim is that, for incongruity to make us laugh, it must counter our expectations in ways that are harmless. On the other hand, proponents of the superiority thesis consider that laughter is about addressing the threat posed by the foolish. This contradiction, posits the author, was canonised by modernity. The chapter then examines the idea of modern humour as driven by depressing messages. On its tail are other concepts such as absurdity, tragicomedy, dark humour and the meaningless of life, all qualified by the author as modernity’s “babies” (p. 192). Into that discussion is inserted Luigi Pirandello, “one of the quintessential comedians of this modernity’s misery” (p. 192). Pirandello’s *L’Umorismo* answers questions about the relationship between modern art and psychology, tragedy, perceptions of tragedy (versus the comic), and time.

“Absurdity, in Practice” opens by referencing characters from Italo Svevo and Langston Hughes who laugh at awful events. It asks to what extent we can laugh at unhappiness. Is happiness possible in our world, or is it all we have? The chapter also considers Samuel Beckett and his *risus paru*, determining whether it even qualifies as laughter. It then returns to Hughes and contrasts the “believability” of his texts with the “otherworldliness” and confusion of Beckett’s (pp. 217-218, 226). In addition, Djuna Barnes offers an “unexpected” perspective into a “very odd laughter” (p. 219). Reiterating that laughter is inseparable from our expectation that it be positive, the chapter concludes on laughter’s function as a witness to the world, while evoking other roles it does and does not fill.

Even though authors often acknowledge that our ideas on humour are heterogeneous, there are certain familiar theories that many studies on humour and laughter are based on. Certainly, Nikopoulos touches on the better-known ones, providing the reader a refresher on Incongruity, Superiority, and Relief. In so doing, he also nuances or outright criticises those bases. He does not stop at their most obvious limitations—for instance, that although one theory may be expansive, there are many instances that it will not account for. He rather shows how the limitations of these standard theories direct our attention away from joy and positivity.

The Stability of Laughter is a useful addition to studies on literary humour and literary history. I admit to enjoying the “in Practice” chapters more than the denser “in Theory” ones, although the latter are certainly necessary for fleshing out and cementing the central argument of the book. The author himself regularly points to the complexity of his subject, noting that “[s]o much modern humour is baffling,” especially to novices (p. 223). Still, there is something quite refreshing about the matter-of-fact tone, or the “air of assurance” that the author (the self-described “loud-mouth named Nikopoulos”) regularly takes to such a flighty topic as laughter and such an intricate one as modernity (pp. 5, 166).

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