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Author: Lewis, Percy Wyndham (1882-1957)

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THE MEANING OF THE WILD BODY

by Wyndham Lewis

'From man, who is acknowledged to be intelligent, non-intelligent things such as hair and nails originate, and . . . on the other hand, from avowedly non-intelligent matter (such as cow-dung), scorpions and similar animals are produced. But . . . the real cause of the non-intelligent hair and nails is the human body, which is itself non-intelligent, and the non-intelligent dung. Even there there remains a difference . . . in so far as non-intelligent matter (the body) is the abode of an intelligent principle (the scorpion's soul) while other unintelligent matter (the dung) is not.'

Vedānta-Sūtras.
II Adhyāya. 1 Pāda, 6.

1. THE MEANING OF THE WILD BODY

FIRST, to assume the dichotomy of mind and body is necessary here, without arguing it; for it is upon that essential separation that the theory of laughter here proposed is based. The essential us, that is the laughter, is as distinct from the Wild Body as in the Upanisadic account of the souls returned from the paradise of the Moon, which, entering into plants, are yet distinct from them. Or to take the symbolic vedic figure of the two birds, the one watching and passive, the other enjoying its activity, we similarly have to postulate *two* creatures, one that never enters into life, but that travels about in a vessel to whose destiny it is momentarily attached. That is, of course, the laughing observer, and the other is the Wild Body.

To begin to understand the totality of *the absurd*, at all, you have to assume much more than belongs to a social differentiation. There is nothing that is animal (and we as bodies are animals) that is not absurd. This sense of the absurdity, or, if you like, the madness of our life, is at the root of every true philosophy. William James delivers himself on this subject as follows:—

'One need only shut oneself in a closet and begin to think of the fact of one's being there, of one's queer bodily shape in the darkness (a thing to make children scream at, as Stevenson says), of one's fantastic character and all, to have the wonder steal over the detail as much as over the general fact of being, and to see that it is only familiarity that blunts it. Not only that *anything* should be, but that *this* very thing should be, is mysterious. Philosophy stares, but brings no reasoned solution, for from nothing to being there is no logical bridge.'

It is the chasm lying between non-being, over which it is impossible for logic to throw any bridge, that, in certain forms of laughter, we leap. We land plumb in the centre of Nothing. It is easy for us to see, if we are french, that the German is 'absurd,' or if german, that the French is 'ludicrous,' for we are *outside* in that case. But it was Schopenhauer (whom James quotes so aptly in front of the above passage), who also said: 'He who is proud of being "a German," "a Frenchman," "a Jew," can have very little else to be proud of.' (In this connection it may be recalled that his father named him 'Arthur,' because 'Arthur' was the same in all languages. Its possession would not attach him to any country.) So, again, if we have been at Oxford or Cambridge, it is easy to appreciate, from the standpoint acquired at a great university, the absurdity of many manners not purified or intellectualized by such a training. What it is far more difficult to appreciate, with any constancy, is that, whatever his relative social advantages or particular national virtues may be, every man is profoundly open to the same criticism or ridicule from any opponent who is only different enough. Again, it is comparatively easy to see that another man, as an animal, is absurd; but it is far more difficult to observe oneself in that hard and exquisite light. But no man has ever continued to live who has observed himself in that manner for longer than a flash. Such consciousness must be of the nature of a thunderbolt. Laughter is only summer-lightning. But it occasionally takes on the dangerous form of absolute revelation.

This fundamental self-observation, then, can never on the whole be absolute. We are not constructed to be *absolute observers*. Where it does not exist at all, men sink to the level of insects. That does not matter: the 'lord of the past and the future, he who is the same today and tomorrow'—that 'person of the size of a thumb that stands in the middle of the Self'—departs. So the 'Self' ceases, necessarily. The conditions of an insect communism are achieved. There would then no longer be any occasion, once that was completely established, to argue for or against such a dichotomy as we have assumed, for then it could no longer exist.

2. THE ROOT OF THE COMIC

THE root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are all *things*, or physical bodies, behaving as *persons*. It is only when you come to deny that they are 'persons,' or that there is any 'mind' or 'person' there at all, that the world of appearance is accepted as quite natural, and not at all ridiculous. Then, with a denial of 'the person,' life becomes immediately both 'real' and very serious.

To bring vividly to our mind what we mean by 'absurd,' let us turn to the plant, and enquire how the plant could be absurd. Suppose you came upon an orchid or a cabbage reading Flaubert's *Salammbô*, or Plutarch's *Moralia*, you would be very much surprised. But if you found a man or a woman reading it, you would *not* be surprised.

Now in one sense you ought to be just as much surprised at finding a man occupied in this way as if you had found an orchid or a cabbage, or a tomcat, to include the animal world. There is the same physical anomaly. It is just as absurd externally, that is what I mean.—The deepest root of the Comic is to be sought in this anomaly.

The movement or intelligent behaviour of matter, any autonomous movement of matter, is essentially comic. That is what we mean by comic or ludicrous. And we all, as human beings, answer to this description. We are all autonomously and intelligently moving matter. The reason we do not laugh when we observe a man reading a newspaper or trimming a lamp, or smoking a pipe, is because we suppose he 'has a mind,' as we call it, because we are accustomed to this strange sight, and because we do it ourselves. But because when you see a man walking down the street you know why he is doing that (for instance, because he is on his way to lunch, just as the stone rolling down the hillside, you say, is responding to the law of gravitation), that does not make him less ridiculous. But there is nothing essentially ridiculous about the stone. The man is ridiculous fundamentally, he is ridiculous *because he is a man*, instead of a thing.

If you saw (to give another example of intelligence or movement in the 'dead') a sack of potatoes suddenly get up and trundle off down the street (unless you were at once so sceptical as to think that it was some one who had got inside the sack), you would laugh. A couple of trees suddenly tearing themselves free from their roots, and beginning to waltz: a 'cello softly rubbing itself against a kettle-drum: a lamp-post unexpectedly lighting up of its own accord, and then immediately hopping away down to the next lamp-post, which it proceeded to attack: all these things would appear very 'ridiculous,' although your alarm, instead of whetting your humour, might overcome it. These are instances of miraculous absurdities, they do not happen; I have only enumerated them, to enlighten us as regards the things that do happen.

The other day in the underground, as the train was moving out of the station, I and those around me saw a fat but active man run along, and deftly project himself between the sliding doors, which he pushed to behind him. Then he stood leaning against them, as the carriage was full. There was nothing especially funny about his face or general appearance. Yet his running, neat, deliberate, but clumsy embarkation, *combined with the coolness of his eye*, had a ludicrous effect, to which several of us responded. His *eye* I decided was the key to the absurdity of the effect. It was its detachment that was responsible for this. It seemed to say, as he propelled his sack of potatoes—that is himself—along the platform, and as he successfully landed the sack in the carriage:—'I've not much "power," I may just manage it:—yes, *just!*' Then in response to our gazing eyes, 'Yes, that's me! That was not so bad, was it? When you run a line of potatoes like ME, you get the knack of them: but they take a bit of moving.'

It was the detachment, in any case, that gave the episode a comic quality, that his otherwise very usual appearance would not have possessed. I have sometimes seen the same look of whimsical detachment on the face of a taxi-driver when he has taken me somewhere, in a very slow and ineffective conveyance. *His taxi for him stood for his body*. He was quite aware of its shortcomings, but did not associate himself with them. He knew quite well what a taxi ought to be. He did not identify himself with his machine.

Many cases of the comic are caused by the reverse of this—by the *unawareness* of the object of our mirth: though awareness (as in the case of comic actors) is no hindrance to our enjoyment of the ludicrous. But the case described above, of the man catching the train, illustrates my point as to the root of the sensation of the comic. It is because the man's body was not him.

These few notes, coming at the end of my stories, may help to make the angle from which they are written a little clearer, in giving a general rough definition of what 'Comic' means for their author.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

Other than the addition of a missing single quote mark, minor variations in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

[End of *The Meaning of the Wild Body*, by Wyndham Lewis]